

Life is never easy.

Morgana's day-to-day existence wasn't the kind she had hoped for when she'd traveled to America. Working retail wasn't what she'd had in mind, but the bills needed paying. With her world in a rut, her life going nowhere, she wanted something different. Something more...

Then she received the package.

The past has caught up with her. Now she's being hunted. With only a dark-haired stranger for an ally, she must find a safe haven quickly, or risk losing what she had been entrusted with. It's only a matter of time before her enemies find her...

Change isn't always what you want –

She will lose the life she has built since leaving England. She will learn that even in the mundaness of the mortal world, there is still darkness – and light.

– but it may be just what you need.

What happens in Jacksonville, FL, will be only the tip of a very large iceberg. For those involved, nothing will be the same.

PROLOGUE

1096 A.D.

Rheola Lake in the Neath Valley, Wales

She stood on the shore, listening to the gentle lapping of the water and the stiff breeze that brushed over it. She was a figure of ethereal beauty: long golden hair, bright green eyes, smooth and creamy skin. It was her habit to wear white regardless of the weather or the material, and her garb was always feminine, modest, and simple. Sheathed at her side was a sword. Against the darkening sky, she seemed to glow.

In this world, she was known simply as the Lady. Her name was a vague memory in her mind nowadays. She rarely gave thought to the loss of it, but there were times that she craved the sound of it on someone else's lips. More often lately, she had a need for more than just the sound, more than just the lot she had agreed to. There was a void in her that hadn't been there before, a space that required another to fill it.

The skies above her heralded a storm. It stirred the air above her home, her sanctuary, and rattled through the bushes and trees that grew thick around the lake. It whispered of the turbulent rain and lashing winds that would soon follow. Perhaps she had been too long among the mortals, but she wanted this done before the storm broke.

She lifted filled her mind with the thoughts of the eons, the millennia she had spent watching, waiting, guarding, and yearning. Her face uplifted to the heavens, she raised her arms and called out.

“You have given me my task and I have seen it through up to now. I have never faltered in my duty or devotion, my loyalty has never wavered, and I have asked for little since coming here as I was bidden. Please, Father, I would ask for a boon.”

AND WHAT BOON DO YOU ASK FOR, DAUGHTER?

She turned to see Him standing on the shore behind her, and was stunned. This guise was not one she would have anticipated Him using. Her shock must have shown on her face or in her eyes as He angled His antlered helm and nodded once.

“For everything, there is a purpose, and so this image serves.”

“Of course.” It was not her place to question why He would don the garb of a traitor, or wonder about His designs here. She realigned her thoughts. “Lord, Father, I have watched the mortals here, the lives they live, the things they do. They have as many gifts as they do burdens, and those who have made the best choices they can are a credit to creation. I –” She hesitated, knowing that this was the most difficult part of her rehearsed proposal. “Father, I envy them. Not their gifts, not their role, but for one thing that they all can have if they choose it.”

As ever, His countenance gave away nothing.

“What is this one thing?”

“Love.” She bowed her head and closed her eyes. Her heart trembled in her chest. “I have no wish to cast off my duty, or to fall from grace, but I would ask for love.”

He said nothing for a long moment, merely watching her as the wind tugged at her skirt and hair. Clad in armor and a heavy cloak of pale gray, He stood as if time had frozen. Nothing of the mortal world touched Him unless He allowed it. She remembered this, and knew that she always would – the way He stood, the way He looked, and how He stepped forward to lift her face up so that her eyes could meet His.

“It is in the nature of all but a few to love and to care. What you wish for is not of that spectrum, but of another. This is your desire?”

“It is.” She watched the eyes of glowing white flare.

“There is a price, for this was not to be for you. You will be neither angelic nor mortal, but other, and you must hold true to your task until I call you home. I warn you, daughter, that the love you seek is eternal, but you will face most of your life without it.”

“Is it not better to love, truly and deeply, knowing that in the end there is You and what You have promised us all?” She felt the tears gathering now and willed them away. “Is that not hope?”

“You please me, daughter, as you always have.” He wiped a leaking tear from her cheek. “You will have your love, because you have the need and the hope, and because you have asked.”

As the first fat drops of rain began to fall, He took the wings she no longer used, and gifted her with the boon she had asked for.

CHAPTER 1

1989 A. D.

Jacksonville, FL

There were days when it didn't pay to be mortal.

A mortal could spend years and a great deal of time and money getting a college degree but having it in hand didn't mean that the paycheck would increase in size or a better job was around the corner. As a new citizen of the United States, Morgana Lake had found that the wonderful piece of paper was just that – a piece of paper.

She hated her job. The hours sucked, the pay was minimal, and her boss didn't seem to care about what she thought or did. That degree was supposed to have been her magic ticket to greener pastures, and it hadn't come through. Not yet.

The U.S. of A. hadn't seemed such a harsh place when she'd left England a few years ago.

She'd keep trying. She had to. Morgana wasn't a quitter, and succeeding here meant too much to her. She kept her mind focused on that as she rang up her last customers for the day, gave them the smiles that were expected of her, and counted the minutes until closing. When the last patron walked out two minutes past time, she was quick to lock the doors behind him.

Grimacing, she took a moment to lean against the wall and slip off her shoes for a cursory rub. Her feet ached unbelievably. She didn't dally long, however, knowing that the all-seeing boss would be along shortly. Slipping her protesting feet back into her shoes she began to clean up her register area as she waited. She wasn't left waiting long.

Derek Branch stepped out from between the rows of bookshelves to look down his nose at her. She found the feat amazing as he was nearly a foot shorter than she was, but he somehow managed to pull it off.

“Well, come on then,” he said, gesturing at the register. “The drawer, Morgana.”

Ignoring the tone, she removed the locked cash box containing the till and handed it to him. As he turned to carry it back, she indulged in the childish urge to stick her tongue out at him. He walked to the back to count money without a backwards glance. She shook her head at her juvenile behavior and continued to straighten the merchandise around the checkout area.

When she’d hired on at Books Galore, she had been surprised by the amount of junk the bookstore sold. There were books and plenty of them, but the toys, useless gadgets, gaudy pens, and wacky key chains had baffled and amused her. Now, she found the whole lot of them – save the books – as heinous as reeking pond sludge. Half of them walked out the door without being paid for, and the rest were either broken, misplaced, or used up. She rarely sold any of it, so why carry it in the first place?

“And they call this a book store,” she muttered as she finished putting the last of the ridiculous pens in their display holder. “It’s a tasteless thief’s paradise, is what it is.”

“Morgana, after your done with the registers, I need you to help in children’s,” Derek announced over the intercom. “Halley isn’t feeling well.”

She felt twin surges of sympathy and resentment. The children’s section was the nightmare of the closing staff, and normally assigned to Halley when she manned the customer service desk. She usually tried to cut down the damage as much as possible when it was slow, but she had been ill for most of the shift and Morgana would have sent her home long before this if it had been up to her. The girl had probably gotten sick in a trash can or something. Nothing but that would be deemed as reason enough to let an employee go home before the end of shift.

The man was an ass.

She caught sight of Halley as the girl was walking up to the front and let the resentment go. The girl looked bad.

“Are you well enough to drive home?” she asked, stopping her with a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Do you need someone to take you?”

Halley shook her head.

“I think I’ll be okay.” She gave a weak smile. “I almost got his shoes.”

“Too bad.” She gave a theatrical sigh and was encouraged by the dim sparkle in the girl’s eyes. “That would have made my night if you’d gotten them.”

“Yeah. He expects me back tomorrow.” Now the sparkle and smile died as her eyes began to swim. “Early, to make up for the time I’m losing tonight.”

She knew that she should have expected it from Derek but she still felt the shock of incredulous outrage. What kind of a moron was he?

“You’re sick. What does he think you are, a bloody machine?” Oh, now the ire began to flow in her veins and she could feel power begin to rise with it. “That pompous, short-sighted, pig-headed, braying jackass.”

“Yeah.” She wiped at her eyes and took a deep breath. “I can’t take this anymore, Morgana. Between him and school – I can’t do it. I’m going to talk to my parents tonight and see if they’ll be okay with me quitting. I’ve got enough saved up to take care of stuff until I get another job.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand, sweetheart. It’s times like this that I wish I was still living with my parents.” She thought wistfully of home, then pushed the homesickness aside. Now wasn’t the time. “Go home, talk with them, get better. And for God’s sake, girl, if the next job has another opening give me a call. I want out of here just as much as you do.”

She walked her out, standing at the door until Halley had gotten in her car and driven off before locking it and making her way to the nightmare to assess the damage. What she saw had her grimacing.

There was some kind of slime – from one of the science kits, she was sure – smeared along one shelf, magazines and comics lay scattered everywhere, and she could see several things of the x-rated genre tucked in behind books about girls and their horses and boys and their dogs.

It never ceased to amaze her how those things ended up in children’s. They were kept at the customer service desk, after all.

She worked at it for two solid hours but still wasn’t finished when the jackass finally made an appearance from the back. She pretended not to see him as she shuffled the thin first reader’s books into place. She didn’t need to look at him to know that he was critiquing her work, combing through the department meticulously.

He should have picked up the vacuum and helped.

Once again, she wondered why she hadn’t left before this. Then she remembered: the bills. The college classes. Thank God, those were now over, but she still had to find another job to pay those bills, and that was why she stayed. But the pay barely covered her expenses, and the rent was about to up again.

Halley had the right of it. It’s more than time to leave.

“It’s barely acceptable, Morgana,” he said finally, disapproval in his voice. She restrained a nasty snarl. “But it will have to do. I can’t stay any longer and you haven’t been approved for over-time. Get your things. Let’s go.”

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She made a point of finishing what she was doing first. It may have been petty, but she got some sense of satisfaction from the fact that she was making him wait. Then she fetched her purse from the back and didn't say a word as they walked out and locked up. Then he was in his car and gone before she had even gotten to her vehicle.

"Typical." She yanked her car door open, saw a few sparks of sky blue fly off the handle, and frowned in concentration. Only when she was satisfied that she had her power under control, did she get in and start the journey home.

Temper and power was a bad combination.

She played classical music in the car. It was usually enough to calm her down, relax her nerves, and soothe her mind. It wasn't doing the trick tonight, and, really, hadn't done it in the past week, either. That realization just underscored Halley's words, and left her feeling both irritated and drained.

"Tomorrow. I'll sleep on it tonight, and deal with it tomorrow. Perhaps some brilliant idea will come to me in the morn."

She left the music playing until she pulled into her parking spot at home – or what was passing for home for the moment. The apartments were not the best in the city, and the neighborhood certainly wasn't anything to comment on, but they were affordable for someone of her means. The studio apartment she rented was tiny but serviceable, and would have to do.

Dragging herself up the steps to the third floor, she found herself staring at the door, and the piece of paper stuck on it. Frowning, she plucked it off and scanned it. Was she expecting a UPS package? No...

Maybe it was a care package from back home. The thought cheered her a little.

She let herself inside and dropped the purse by the door as she locked it tight and set the chain. As the delivery notice had indicated that the package would be left on her balcony porch, she skirted the small card table and folding chairs to the sliding glass door. Flipping on the light, she peeked through the vertical blinds. Sure enough, there was a package, a long and narrow box, and it had her puzzling even more.

She thumped the lock and slid the door aside. Stepping out, she picked it up. It was heavier than she'd expected, and there was a tingling in her hands that had her catching her breath. She'd felt that tingle before.

Weariness forgotten, she moved quickly back inside, set the package on the table, and then made a quick round of the apartment to make sure it was secure. With all the locks set, she stood in the middle and stretched out her arms. She murmured a few words in old Welsh, using them as a vehicle for the power that she let flow. It poured out of her, taking its purpose from the words and its shape from the building. It overlaid the walls and pulsed sky blue in her mind's eye.

When the light of her ward began to dim and fade, she turned to the box and checked the shipping label. There was no return address. Her stomach began to knot as she opened it, peeling away the newspaper packing inside to reveal a sword, the blade sheathed in a scabbard.

It wasn't an ornate sword, but its simplicity held its own beauty and practicality. She didn't know what material it was forged from – no one did – but the blade looked like bright steel and the guard and pommel of the hilt looked like burnished brass. The grip seemed to be some kind of mottled brown stone inlaid with a spiral design of the brass-like metal. In the pommel's center was a green jewel. The scabbard was of molded leather with a design and color that matched the sword's grip.

Underneath it was a folded letter. She took it out, saw her name scripted on the front, and knew who had sent the package. Setting it down, she sat heavily in the chair, folded her arms on the table, and buried her face in them.

Her life was difficult enough right now. Now she had to add the legendary Excalibur to the mix. What did it mean? Why her?

And just what am I supposed to do now?

CHAPTER 2

In a hidden abyss

He saw the sword in his dreams.

It shone bright, even in the dark recesses of his prison, a shining promise of hope that rose from the depths of its hiding place to light the world with its presence. He saw it, felt it, yearned for it, and knew with utter certainty that he could never touch it. Nothing so holy would be handled by such as himself.

But there were other ways. So he took his time, planned and plotted, and dreamt of the time when he would be free. For this, he needed to use his tools. There were a few at his disposal, ones that he had influence over and a single entity that he'd taken completely, but they were aged and failing now. They would not be able to do the job as he needed it to be done. Still, he had to try.

They could fail but he could not.

* * *

Jacksonville, FL

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Morgana rolled lazily in the bed, stretching as her brain brought itself online to start the day. She ended up face down on something long, narrow, and uncomfortable. Lifting herself up, she yanked the tangled covers away and stared blearily at the sword in her bed.

Oh.

Memory kicked in and she sighed heavily, sitting up to rub her face. Yes, there was a sword in her bed. She'd put it there so that she would know where it was when she woke – and to remind herself that she now had a new responsibility. Well, she remembered, and she'd been reminded, so now she had to figure out just what it was that she needed to do with it.

“God, and I've got to work today. Where am I going to put it while I'm at work?”

Still muttering over it, she dragged herself out of bed and into the shower. She mulled it over as she washed up and let the heat of the water wake her up a bit more. She couldn't leave it here. Even if the neighborhood was a secured one and in a low-crime area – which it wasn't – she couldn't leave the word behind. There wasn't enough time to build up enough arcane defenses to shield the sword and it wouldn't be long before – things – started to sniff around for it.

“Think, Morgana, think. What can you do?” she asked herself as she stepped out of the shower and dried off. “Can't take it into work...the car? Shield the trunk?”

It wasn't a good option, but the set-up wouldn't take as long. She could get the shields set on the trunk in just a few hours and still be on time for her job. And it was only for the duration of the shift.

She finished dressing and got breakfast in the kitchen as she thought it through. The sword would need more than just shields on the trunk. The scabbard 'dimmed' the presence of the sword for those sensitive enough to pick up on it, but not completely. She hadn't been able to sense it without touching the package when she had first received it because of the additional wards and protections placed on each layer of packing. Her many-times-great grandmother had probably taken weeks in preparing Excalibur for the mail. That was time that she didn't have –

The phone rang. She left the remains of her breakfast on the counter as she picked up the receiver from the wall-mounted cradle.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Lake? This is Sarah Ann up at the front office.” She stifled a sigh and resigned herself to being on the phone for the next little while. The woman was a talker, and as she was the land lord, Morgana was not inclined to get on her bad side by cutting her short.

“Oh, hi, Sarah Ann. What can I do for you?”

“Well, you see now, there this gentleman up at the office here, and he's asking for you. He gives me the creeps, frankly. Said his name was Harold Edison.”

“I’m afraid that I don’t know a Harold Edison.” And his arrival so soon after Excalibur’s had her instinctively on edge. “He asked for me by name? Did he say why he was here?”

“Had your name and knew you’d come to us from England over yonder. Didn’t say what it was that he wanted, though. Did you want to meet him up here or do you want me to see about sending him away?”

“Ah, please, send him away.” And please be careful when you do, she added silently. “If he asks, tell him I’m not in.”

“Alright, Ms. Lake, I’ll do that. You take care now.” The woman disconnected. Apparently, his giving her the creeps was enough of a motivation not to linger and gossip on the phone. It certainly was enough to make Morgana herself nervous.

“I can’t ignore coincidences,” she murmured to herself as she collected her things for work, and whatever else she might need to shield the trunk. Lastly, she grabbed the sword, wrapped it in a towel, and made for the parking lot.

Whoever, and whatever, Edison might be, she couldn’t count on him not driving through the complex after leaving the office. She had to leave now. The shields would have to be done elsewhere.

* * *

The Wood

The figure of Gwynn ap Nudd stood with his back to the crumbling stone throne. Around Him were the trees of winter, arching over the clearing and the cauldron that sat in its middle. Empty but for ash, the cauldron stood still and quiet as ever, though the snow that littered the ground stopped a foot from its base. The air was warm, despite the lingering winter. Breath turned to fog and the chill prickled the skin, but it wasn’t truly cold.

Elsewhere in the Wood it was spring but here, it was always winter. If one listened closely, they could hear the clang of swords and shields, the beats of hooves, and the mad baying of dogs on the scent. The haunting echoes, the strangely fixated season, and the ruined throne behind Him were all that remained of the Wood’s previous owner.

Gwynn never forgot anything, but He always took the time to remember.

As He remembered, He waited. He didn’t have to wait long.

“I’d have thought that You would rather meet at the camp or the lake, rather than this place.”

At the far end of the clearing, the one that He had waited for stepped into view from behind the barren trees. He looked human, clad in black to match his raven hair, and carried with him the bearing of authority and power. As a warrior and mage, Michael Keegan was a formidable asset against the encroaching Dark.

Gwynn had recruited him some two millennia before and neither of them had regretted the changes in their lives that one encounter had brought. Michael had gone from being lost and wretched, to being in control of a destiny he had never imagined, fighting in a war that was largely unseen by others. And that was why he was here today.

“It is good to remember what once was,” He replied, walking forward to greet him. “Welcome back, My son.”

The corner of Michael’s mouth quirked upward and he gazed around idly, then narrowed his deep blue eyes. Gwynn inclined His helmeted head. His son was usually quick on the uptake, and accurate.

“This place was the seat of a usurper,” he murmured, frowning. “One of the Fallen. Another’s come to the surface, then?”

“Yes and no. As he is now, he is a Shade – a mere shadow of what he once was. He wishes freedom, he wishes power, and, ultimately, he wishes to reinstate his liege. The end is already written, Michael, and cannot be changed.” There was a faint note of sadness in His tone as he thought of the final book, then set it aside. “Still, he will try in any way he can – if he can free himself first.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. Gwynn held up a gauntleted hand before he could the voice the questions He sensed welling up in his mind.

“That future is unimportant in the here and now. What is important is the sword, and its new guardian.”

“What sword?”

“Excalibur.” He paused, watching the other’s slow nod as some of the significance of the weapon dawned on him. “Used correctly, it can sever any bond, any binding. It has recently surfaced in the world, changing hands and locations as needed to make its way to where it belongs. But the new guardian is untried. She will need help until she finds her sanctuary.”

“My help.” He sighed. “I’m to – what’s the phrase – babysit her?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of re-educating her.” He placed a hand on Michael’s shoulder. “She knows much of her heritage and the lore of her guardianship, but little of true battle. Theory and instruction will only get you so far. She won’t need much of your time once she’s settled, if that’s any consolation.”

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“Why me?”

“Because.” He tilted His head to one side in a vaguely canine gesture. “You will see in time.”

“One of those...” he muttered. He shook his head in resignation. “And her sanctuary?”

“Don’t look for it and you will find it – and it will find you. Journey to Jacksonville, FL,” He continued. “Find Morgana Lake. And hurry; the sword’s trail is already being followed.”

CHAPTER 3

Jacksonville, FL

She'd gone to the park.

It wasn't a very original idea but she couldn't think of any place else to do it. So she stood on the grass between the paved lot and the picnic tables, and hoped that none of the little kids currently on the swings and merry-go-round would get curious about what she was doing. The trunk had been cleaned as much as possible, and sprinkled with holy-water. The first layer of shields and wards had been set, and she was well into the second now. So far, no one seemed to notice or care.

She chanted in Welsh again, telling her power what form to take, what purpose it had. She could feel the energy leaving her now. There had been little time to prepare herself for this, and as mentally fatigued as she had been before the sword had proverbially landed in her lap, so she wasn't surprised by it. With the power being bled away into the protections, she had to be extra wary; an arcane confrontation would most likely end badly for her at this point.

Still, nothing happened as she finished the work. No strangers approached her, no eddies of power tickled her senses, no traps had been sprung. Knowing that she had evaded at least unknown and possibly dangerous quantity was a bright spot in an already tiring day. Another was placing the sword in the boot of her car and closing the lid. There was only the faintest shimmer of Excalibur's presence to be found.

Morgana heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Leaning against the trunk – *think American, Morgana* – lid, she checked her watch and grimaced. There was only an hour left before her shift started. Sighing, she rubbed at her

temples to ease the headache coming on. It was the result of too much magery and not enough food, she was sure, and would require a bit more than the standard pain relievers she had with her. Well, if she hurried, she could grab a bite to eat on the way to work.

She took one last look around as she got inside the car, then drove off. Not once had she noticed the man watching her from where he sat inside his own vehicle, parked at the curb on the far side of the park.

* * *

A wolf was a superb hunter in his demesne. He used his keen hearing and sensitive nose to augment his sight, identifying and tracking prey across miles if need be. In the city, this was no less true. Today, however, this wolf relied more on his ancestral abilities than primal senses. He had come to Florida for reasons that he couldn't quite remember. He didn't remember much these days, but it didn't bother him. There wasn't much left of him to bother anymore.

Physically, he was whole and hale despite being old for his kind. Mentally, however, all that was left were base instincts. Intellect, cognitive capabilities, and memory had begun the long journey to death some time ago. Wolves might have killed him, or left him for dead in the wild for that reason. The rest of his kindred might have done the same, but he had another use, another purpose.

The mind that controlled him was not lupine. It was nearly as ancient as the world, and was experienced enough to know the tendencies of mortals – and when a body, however good its health, was about to give out. Knowing that, it drove its host, keep apace with the woman's car.

The brush alongside the road hid the wolf from view. This cover would not last long so there was no time for mistakes. The car slowed for a traffic light at a T-intersection and the wolf surged forward with a frantic burst of speed. He sprinted through the trees and bushes, raced over a driveway leading to a recessed house, until it reached a sharp curve in the road. On the shoulder, masked by drooping vines hanging covering half a small tree, he crouched. Waited.

There was the rumble of an engine, the distant sound of tires on asphalt. He waited. The car came into view, approaching the bend with the woman looking harried behind the wheel. Still, He waited. The front fender came within two car lengths of the wolf.

He struck.

* * *

Morgana caught a flash of bared teeth and gray fur just before she slammed on the brakes. The tires screamed, the windshield spider-webbed. She wrenched the wheel, and the nose dove into the vine-covered bushes on the shoulder. The front end hit dirt and vegetation, the momentum slamming her forward. The belt caught her sharply and air whooshed out. The air bag ballooned in her face and left her batting at it as she turned her head to breathe. Heart thudding against her ribs, she listened to the galloping sound with her wits scattered.

The windshield creaked and tinkled continuously. She watched in a kind of detached fascination as it shed a few particles of glass, then jumped as the rear view mirror fell. The jolt snapped her out of the shock.

She fumbled with the seatbelt release, laid a hand on the door handle, then remembered the dog. Dog. It had been a dog, hadn't it? All she'd seen were the vicious teeth, the fur, and mad yellow eyes.

Pain lanced through her skull, causing her to cry out. Bracing herself against the pain, she whipped around in the seat and could see the trunk wards crawling with power, reacting to something outside. Whatever it was, it was strong; she could see everything with the naked and purely physical eye.

Cursing under her breath, she climbed into the back seat, her fingers locating the button on the back dash. She depressed it and pulled a section of the seat back forward to reach into the boot of the car. With the sword in hand, she looked up and into the madly glowing eyes of the wolf.

Wolf. She could see that it was a wolf now and a big one. The fur was bloodied and torn in places from where it had hit the windshield. The lips twisted into a lupine snarl. But it was the eyes that drove terror into her heart. They weren't just mad. The leprous yellow glowed with a kind of powerful decay – what Tolkien might have described as a corpse light.

The teeth flashed once, violently enough to have her shoving away from the back window before it threw itself at the glass. Repeatedly.

Cracks began to bloom with crimson streaks. Frantically, she reached out towards the trunk and summoned the wards to her hand, literally flinging them at the creature mounted on the back of her car. The magic flashed, crackled, and there was a thrum like thunder. The wolf didn't flinch.

The glass began to buckle inward. The snout broke through, the paws scrabbling to make the breach wider. She lashed out with a fist and caught it solidly on the nose. Flame burst from the side somewhere outside, shoving the lupine body over. It slid out of sight, but it didn't stay there.

Leaping up, it launched itself into the air – not at her or the car, but in the direction of the fire. She heard snarls, growls, none of which sounded remotely canine or lupine, and craned her neck trying to see what was happening. Her vision was obscured by cracks, blood, and brush. There were snatches of black, of grey, a flicker of purple and gold.

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The utter stillness descended suddenly. Long moments passed by where the only sound was her breathing. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore and cautiously opened the car door to get out.

"It's relatively safe. The creature is dead."

She jumped at the voice, whirling with the still-sheathed-Excalibur readied to defend. Just coming out of the brush was a man clad in black from head to toe, with a mane to match, and eyes of deepest blue. He was a somewhat strange sight, wearing a coat at the tail-end of summer – and in Florida that meant that the temperatures were still above an average of eighty-five degrees. He moved noiselessly, stopping just out of reach of the blade, and inclined his head. Whether it was in greeting or an acknowledgement of her armed state, she couldn't say.

"Who are you?" Her voice was thankfully steady.

"I am called Michael Keegan. You are Morgana Lake." He cast a glance into the woods behind him as she narrowed her eyes. "That used to be a werewolf. I'm not sure what it was after that, or how it came to be that way. In the end, it doesn't matter. You do." He turned those intense eyes back to her. "You have questions and I will answer, but not here."

"Because wolves hunt in packs? And why should I trust you?"

"Not all wolves hunt in packs. Not in the Dark." He looked past her, frowned at the road. "Someone's coming."

Warily, she followed his gaze, then glanced at her vehicle. She couldn't hear the approaching 'someone' but she wasn't keen on questions being asked of her at the moment – or at losing her car altogether.

"The one I ally myself with knew your ancestress. I can give you my word, my bond, and my Seal that I will not harm you nor compromise your guardianship. You have one minute to decide before others arrive."

She looked into his eyes, saw sincerity, and went with her gut.

"Seal first."

He repeated the promise, sketched a sigil – his personal Seal – in the air. It wafted towards the palm she held up to receive it. The second it touched her, she felt the veracity of his words, got a sense of his power. But before she could do more than blink in surprise, he gestured at the car. It vanished. Then he held a hand out to her.

She could hear the engine. More, she heard the eerie howl of a wolf on the hunt.

Lowering the sword, she took his hand. The world shifted around her and went black.

CHAPTER 4

The hidden abyss

The vessel had perished.

The death was a setback but not an insurmountable one. Another of his tools was searching for a suitable replacement, one with vigor and endurance. It would, of course, also have a strong will. Most of his tools did in the beginning. Given their lineage, how could they not? Still, their resolve wouldn't last. They would break under his power eventually.

At least the loss had proven worth it. The woman had been seen, the sword's presence had been confirmed. Though the eyes he had used had been old, they had also been sharp; he would know her again when he saw her next. The memory of her had been passed to another of his instruments and that one would see to it that all of the kindred would know her as well.

But the man...who was he? What was he? The wolf hadn't seen him clearly through the flame that had burned and seared. One eye had taken damage and the other had been half-blind with blood and smoke. All he had seen had been a dark masculine figure – a glimpse only before gray haze of death crept in.

He would have to be wary of this new adversary and, more, he needed to identify him. With this purpose in mind, he let his thoughts roam towards his tools once again to slide his orders in their minds.

* * *

Black faded to white and then the white gave way to reality. Morgana found herself staring at her savior's back while standing in the middle of a hotel room. It was simple, with a single bed and neutral-toned décor. Her gaze tracked over the surroundings in shock, jerking back to him at the jingling of keys. With a frown, she watched him toss his keys on the bed, then fish a card out of his coat pocket.

"Where are we?" she asked warily.

"The Omni Hotel in downtown Jacksonville." He walked past her to the door and glanced back over his shoulder.

"Downtown." She scanned the dresser and bedside table for an alarm clock. Seeing the time, her heart lurched. She'd never be able to get to work on time now, especially without a vehicle. Derek the ass wouldn't hesitate in firing her for leaving him in dire straits after Hailey's departure. She felt a wave of weariness crash over her as it sank in. No job, no money. No money, no rent. No rent, no home.

How am I supposed to find another job – a better job – with this sword more or less attached at my hip?

"Morgana."

She looked up and into his quiet gaze. There was understanding there, as if he knew what was flickering through her mind. It made her wonder if he really did. She took a deep breath and let it out. There was nothing she could do about the job just yet. She would have to deal with the present – Michael Keegan – first, and then see what was what. As if sensing that resolution, he spoke again.

"Test the protections on the room. I've warded it and it's been Blessed. Your charge will be safe enough here while we talk downstairs."

"Why downstairs?" The mistrust was knee-jerk and she grimaced. She had his Seal – the magic that bound him to uphold the promise made. Should he break it, the possible consequences ranged from a debilitating migraine to a permanent decrease in whatever mage abilities he might have. The more powerful the mage, the more binding his Seal, and, she knew, the more dire the penalty. What more did she need?

He raised an eyebrow.

"You don't know me. I brought you to this room for the sake of convention, as most people don't just appear in public venues, and it's a public venue that may steady you enough to listen."

And she couldn't haul a sword around in a public place. Firming her lips, she concentrated on the nearest wall, narrowing her eyes as she opened her mind to it. It took more effort than she would have thought just to see the protections he'd placed on the room. She stepped closer and laid a palm flat against the moiré wallpaper. Blue sparks lit up around her hand, then they

abruptly changed to purple and gold. A jolt stabbed up her arm. She stumbled back, shaking the appendage as it ached and tingled along the bones, from fingertips to shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes. Just give me a minute.”

She laid the sword on the bed and rubbed at her arm. The ache was slowly fading, leaving only a faint prickling sensation as the nerves recovered. It had been a nasty response for a physical contact probe.

“It reacts proportionally?”

“It does.”

“Well, then.” She nodded once and flexed her hand almost idly. “What public venue did you have in mind?”

“There’s a restaurant and a coffee bar downstairs. You haven’t eaten.”

“No, I haven’t.” She eyes suspiciously. “Have you been spying on me?”

“Only since the park, and I see that doesn’t please you.” He sighed. “You may not be satisfied with my answers, but I can at least feed you.”

Reminding herself of the Sealed oath he’d given, she sighed and shrugged.

“I could use a meal.”

He led her down to the first floor restaurant where they were promptly seated. She scanned the menu and saw with a wisp of nostalgia that fish and chips were among the offerings. After they ordered – the fish for her, and just Earl Grey tea for Michael – she gave him a considering look.

“You said that your ally knew my ancestor.”

“Yes. He is Gwynn to me; I don’t know what name or face He used with her. He was insistent that I come here until you found your Place.”

She arched a brow at the audible capital ‘P.’

“The sword.” He paused as his tea and her lemonade arrived. “It needs a haven and so do you. I’m supposed to help you find it. No, I don’t have any ideas as to what, precisely, we would be looking for.” Grimacing, he checked the tea idly, let it steep a bit longer. “I was told that we would know it when we found it, and we wouldn’t find it if we looked for it – a typical riddle of an answer from Gwynn.”

“She never spoke of a Gwynn. She rarely spoke of anything that wasn’t ordinary.” She sipped. “I’ve no way to verify that your ally knew her, or that she knew him. The sword – well, she had said that once she’d passed it on, so would she.”

“You weren’t close.”

“Not really.” It bothered her a little now, she realized. “We didn’t spend a great deal of time together.”

He nodded as he retrieved the tea bag from his mug and set it on a small plate.

“How did you find me?”

“The sword. The signature of power was muffled for much of its journey into your hands but is still traceable. I lost the scent of it, if you will, during the night, and picked it up again mid-morning.” Stirring in milk, he forwent any sweetener. “The wards you’d put on the trunk were good ones. I couldn’t sense your charge once you had put it inside.”

“You haven’t named it or asked about it.” He shrugged under her stare, saying nothing as he sipped. “What is in this for you?”

“Peace.” The dry word was said with the quick and deliberate firmness of a man who’d been nagged incessantly by his wife. “And the satisfaction of the Dark not getting their hands on it. Do you know the Dark, Morgana?”

“Not personally.” In her experience, one didn’t truly know it unless they were part of it. “Do you?”

“As much as any long-standing adversary of it might. Do you know where it comes from?”

“No.”

“The way it was explained to me was that the roots of it go back to a mythic event called the War of Heaven. Those who were defeated were cast down and cursed, with the more powerful individuals also being imprisoned. In the millennia that passed, the dregs of the defeated – the Fallen – turned on the world they’d been cast down on, and each other. They were the first Dark Lords.” He paused to allow the server time to place the food in front of her and retreat again. “Others learned from their example and emulated them. Some of the Fallen remain loyal to their original masters and seek ways to free them. Apparently, your charge can be used to that effect.”

“Hmm.” She seemed to recall some vague mention of such a War once. A bedtime story when she was young, maybe. She would have to ring up her parents and ask them. “Precisely where do you stand in all of this?”

“I was recruited some time ago by Gwynn. He will not confirm if He dates from the War,” he said with a slight smile. “Nor does He deny it. I was in a bad way when He found me and the

only repayment He wanted for saving my life was for me to stand against the Dark – and follow the occasional order like this one.”

“And the wolf?”

He lost the smile.

“That one concerns me. It was a werewolf. It had the trademark size, physique, and aura, but it didn’t act like one. It didn’t shape-shift,” he murmured. “It should have. It moved more like a mad, feral dog than an intelligent hunter and that is wrong as well.”

“I don’t have any experience with wolves of any kind. I threw the wards at it.” She doused malt vinegar on her fish and splashed it on her fries. “It wasn’t particularly strategic or well thought out, but it should have had some effect and it didn’t.”

“How did it react?”

“It just kept on crashing into the back windshield, as if I hadn’t done anything at all.”

CHAPTER 5

Jacksonville, FL

Despite lingering reservations, she told him the whole story, starting with the previous night at work and ending up with the moment he introduced himself. He let her talk it out at her own pace, then went back over it for more details. She wasn't sure how much more he learned from the questioning. By the time she was finished, she thought longingly of a nap and then remembered all the reasons why she couldn't have one.

"I have to call work." She said it dully, dreading the task. "I should have done it before but..."

He nodded.

"You can use the phone in the room upstairs." He brought out a wallet to pay the tab. "She never told you about the issues that would come with the sword."

"What?" She dragged her mind back from her thoughts of being fired. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention."

"The Lady of the Lake. She never told you about the hardships that you would face with the sword in hand."

"Not exactly, no. She sent a letter with the sword. It said that there would be a time when someone great would use it, but that it wouldn't be as in the books about Arthur's return. I would know him and so would the sword. Until that time came, I had to guard it." She sighed. "It didn't make much sense to me, frankly."

He left the money on the table and together they returned to the room upstairs. She checked on her charge, then picked up the phone and dialed. The conversation went as well as she thought it would. The moment she identified herself, Derek said two words before hanging up.

You're fired.

"Damn." She felt the hot tears prick her eyes and scrubbed at them angrily. She would not cry here, not in front of a man she barely knew. With deliberate care, she replaced the receiver in its cradle. "So much for work."

"Perhaps it is just as well."

Her head snapped around to glare at him. *He* wasn't the one who had to pay her bills. *He* wasn't the one on the verge of homelessness. *He* wasn't the one burdened with a magic blade from an old legend that attracted God-only-knew-what for leagues around –

"It is not that I wish you hardship, Morgana. Those who hunt you, like the wolf, likely know where you work. The man that came to your neighborhood this morning could well have been one of them. You already suspect this."

That was true. The truth didn't make the statement any easier to swallow.

"My role in this is to see you safely to your Place. I will, and I will render whatever aid you need. When is your rent due?"

"Next week. I've enough saved to cover it." She wouldn't have much of anything left over, though.

"Alright." He sat in a chair over by the window. Taking a small book out from within a hidden pocket inside his coat, he began to read. She found herself irritated all over again.

"Just what am I supposed to do now?" she demanded. "Sit here while you read?"

He didn't look up from his book

"Did you have something else in mind?"

"You're the man who's supposed to help – isn't there something that we should be doing?"

Now he did look up and regard her with those serious eyes.

"The next step we take must be up to you. You are the Guardian of Excalibur." He held up a hand to silence her protest. "I know more of the Dark than you, but not the exact reason why they seek the sword. I do not know where to find your Place of sanctuary. I do not know how to resolve the work and financial worries you have. I can help you through them, but any funds I give are a temporary solution. It will only buy you more time to find the true answer yourself."

“I can’t just sit here,” she said after a silent moment. “Sitting does nothing to help resolve this, either.”

“What it does is give you time to think. Set aside the concerns over working for a living, and consider what it is you need as a Guardian. Once you’ve done that, we’ll have a better notion as to what it is we need to do.”

She pulled her legs up to sit cross-legged on the bed and reached over to lay the sword across thighs. Dismissing the worries took some time yet she was finally able to concentrate on the things she knew of the guardianship, the stories her forebears had told. As she mulled over them, he returned his book. For a long time, the room was quiet.

“I need a safe place to stash the sword.”

At her words, Michael closed his book and put it away. Giving her his full attention, he waited for her to continue.

“I can’t look for more work or another place to live with this thing in tow, so I need to hide it somewhere that will cloak it from the Dark. I’ll need to pack up my old apartment, break my lease. By doing that, I leave whoever’s after me another dead end.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll need another place to store my things until...”

“Let me arrange for your storage. There are facilities for that. A short-term storage arrangement is feasible, and it would be best to leave your name out of it for the moment.” He paused, considering. “How much time do you need to pack?”

She laughed humorlessly.

“My stuff? I could probably have most of it packed by tonight if I had boxes to put it in. I don’t own a great deal.”

“Then let us take care of that. You will spend the night here, if that suits you, and we will move your things in the morning. Tomorrow, or the day after, we will break your lease.”

“There’s a penalty fee involved.” She bit her lip. “I don’t have enough to cover it.”

“I can take care of that.”

“Oh, my banking information – ” She had to change that, didn’t she? “And I need a forwarding address – ”

“We can route it to a post office box until this situation is resolved. Meanwhile, we deal with the packing. The rest can wait.”

“Yes. You’re right.” She rubbed her face, wearily. “One thing at a time. Thank you.”

“Thank me when it’s done.”

* * *

He hated the city.

Nothing felt more like a cage without actually being one, than a large, over-crowded human settlement. Jack Rikers much preferred the openness of Montana and the wild expanses of Canada. If he hadn't been ordered here by the Council, he would have been there, hunting with his pack and enjoying freedom. He wouldn't be here, stuck in this madhouse of a bookstore, searching for a woman with an artifact of interest to his pack leaders.

He didn't even know what the artifact was. His alpha hadn't either. Still, whatever the Council wanted, the Council usually got, so Jack stood in Books Galore of Jacksonville, FL, and looked for a woman matching the description he had been given.

The place seemed to be over run with people. More than just people, but children. Human children weren't like the werewolf cubs he knew. They didn't have manners, didn't know the pecking order. These played loudly in a colorful section of the store that was evidently dedicated to them while adults who were presumably the parents perused the shelves elsewhere in the store.

The noise was driving him crazy. Never in his forty-eight years had he heard anything like it.

Thinking to cut his time there short, he approached the customer service desk. A harried looking man stood there, clearly not happy with having to deal with the group of customers around him. As obvious as it was that the man needed help to answer all the questions and look up all the books, it was just as evident that there was no one else who could. He had seen only two other store associates since he'd walked in.

He stood, waiting, scowling impatiently as the man – Derek, according to his name tag – gradually winnowed the crowd down. The better part of an hour passed by the time he got to him.

“Yes, sir, can I help you?”

Jack almost curled his lip at the near-surlly tone.

“I'm looking for someone who works here. Name's Morgana Lake, a brunette from England. Is she around today?”

Derek looked down at his nose at him, taking in the battered jeans, old plaid shirt, and worn jean jacket. He sniffed. It made Jack want to pound him.

“I’m afraid that she no longer works here. Is that all?”

“Yeah.” He snarled at the man, than stalked away. As much he wanted out and away from this place, a werewolf never ran. Never, unless it was after prey.

His prey wasn’t here. He’d have to call his alpha and pass on the news. With his luck, he’d just be given something else to do before he could go home.

CHAPTER 6

Two days later

Jacksonville, FL

Michael had left Morgana to sleep. Much of the last twenty-four hours had been spent packing, moving, and dealing with the hassle of making her disappear. Now she lay curled up in the bed at the hotel, the sword at her side, while he met with the local Guild Hunter.

Hunters went almost as far back as the Fall of Man, or so his mentor had once told him. He had never studied their history in depth. Their Guild had been formed sometime during the height of Egyptian civilization and was now widespread. Their numbers were not what they could be but were respectable enough, allowing at least one or two of their members to oversee the supernatural activity in most cities. No, he corrected mentally, not to oversee. To police. To ensure that the supernatural didn't abuse the ordinary, that the laws that made coexistence with the mundane possible were upheld.

They were very good at their job.

He met with one now. Elijah Howell, a Master Hunter in the Guild, was the current enforcer in the area. He was a middle-aged man, unremarkable in appearance, married with a son in training to follow him on the hunt. He smoked, as well, and indulged in the habit as they nodded to each other. Michael didn't know him personally. He had been directed to Eli by one of his other contacts. So they sat outside a deli on San Marco Blvd. studying each other in the way that men of power did.

"The Guild doesn't have much to say about you," the hunter said at last. "Other than that you were trust-worthy."

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“They said the same of you.” Michael sipped the tea he’d ordered. “Shall we get to the point of this or would you like to continue proverbially dancing around each other a bit more?”

He shrugged.

“The point. The Guild didn’t mention what it was you wanted.”

“I killed a werewolf recently, a sick one gone rogue if I’m any judge. The Council claimed to have no knowledge of it when I spoke with their representative – here in Jacksonville.”

“Here? Jacksonville doesn’t have an ‘in-house’ rep.” Eli frowned, mulling it over. “We don’t have a large enough werewolf population to warrant it. Who did you speak with and when?”

“Jack Rikers, this morning. He’s not at home in the city.”

“Rikers...doesn’t ring a bell for me.”

“I called someone I knew among the Council staff. After saying that they had no rogues on record in this state, they suggested I contact him. The implication was that he was their man in the area.”

“That may be, but he can’t be on permanent assignment here. The Council doesn’t work that way.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“I’ll do some checking, pull a few strings, see what I get.”

“There is something else.”

“There always is.”

“Morgana Lake.”

Michael could see the man flipping through mental files as tried to place the name.

“Brit...bookstore...water and lightning affinity...not involved in anything or with anyone. I’ve run into her a few times.” He gave wry smile. “My wife’s addicted to books and often visits Books Galore, where Morgana works. Nice woman. She’s not in trouble is she?”

“The werewolf I killed had been attacking her. She’s been stalked by several others of unknown identity.”

“Why?” The Hunter took an irritated drag at his cigarette. “What gives?”

“We don’t know.” It was a lie. “This began two days ago.”

“And you’re involved because...?”

“I happened to come upon Morgana as she was attacked. I’m not the kind of person to let this be, Howell.”

They exchanged long steady looks, then let the matter drop.

“Fine, then.” Eli drank. “I’ll see what there is to see.”

“Thank you. And in return?”

“Keep me apprised. If it gets too deep, I’ll step in; it’s my city after all. If there’s anything else, I’ll let you know.”

Michael took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and slid it across the table.

“My contact information. Leave a message. I’ll get back to you.”

With that, he left the man seated in front of the deli.

* * *

Jack watched him leave, eyes narrowed suspiciously. His gaze tracked the man in black as he cut across the road to disappear down a side street. Idly, he flexed his grip on the driver’s wheel of his rental sedan as he considered his next move. The Council wanted to know more about this man’s involvement with the woman. Michael Keegan – that was the name he had given Jack when they’d met. He’d relayed that bit of information to his alpha. When the Council had been told, Skoll, the Council’s Alpha and the oldest werewolf living, had been furious.

The old bastard knows something...

Of course, Skoll wouldn’t tell anyone anything. He never did. He hoarded his secrets, his ambitions, from everyone. The ancient wolf clung to what he considered his with a jealous tenacity that left others wondering what he feared. No one talked about it. To be found speculating was, according to his pack leader, to be found dead soon after.

He glanced over at the palm-sized package in the passenger seat. It had been sent overnight by his alpha, a tool from the Council. From Skoll himself. He had yet to open it. That it came from Skoll was enough to have him questioning whether or not he wanted to. Still...

“Orders are orders, and a bitch all around,” he grumbled, reaching for it. With caution, he tore the brown wrapping paper away, peeled at the tape sealing the box. Opening the flaps, he probed the newspaper scraps that had been used for packing. His finger touched a stone.

He took it out. It was oblong, smooth, and scribed with a series of runes that he couldn't decipher. This was the tool? He curled a lip at it, picking at the newspaper in the box to see if there was anything else. There was. It was a card, with a single line written on it.

Spill one drop of your blood on the stone.

“What is this? Mystic stuff?” He snarled at the card, glared at the rock. “I hate mystic stuff.”

Scowling, he flipped the card over. On the back was a signature, and a large paw print. He sighed heavily. It was the Council's Alpha's handwriting. He sniffed at the print, ignoring the scent of paper and ink. His paw print, too. That left him with little choice in the matter.

He dug into his jeans pocket for his pen knife, one of several knives he always kept with him. It had the smallest blades. Flipping one out, he pricked the tip of his index finger, watched the fresh blood bead. When he judged it large enough, he hung it over the stone. It dropped.

Nothing happened.

Sneering, he tossed the stone back into the box, shoved the debris from the package into a pile around it. Turning back to the wheel, he cranked up the car and pulled out of his parallel parking slot. He would deal with this thing his way. So thinking, he decided to pay Morgana Lake's former land lady a visit.

Buried under the paper scraps, the stone soaked up the blood. The runes began to glow.

CHAPTER 7

That afternoon

Jacksonville, FL

“I wish you’d left it at the hotel. The wards would have concealed it.”

Morgana tore her gaze away from the little magazine listing apartments for rent. Michael’s face was impassive as he drove towards the area of the city called Mandarin.

“You might be certain of that, but I’m not. Look.” She closed the publication in her hands and turned in the seat to face him more fully. “I appreciate the help. I really do. Yet you’ve got to understand that I need to figure out how to protect that bloody sword for myself. What if I have to go out of town on business or something of that nature? I can’t just leave the blade behind. It’s my responsibility to take it with me, to see that it’s secure. I can’t do that if I’m away from it for hours on end while hunting for a new place to live.”

Without a job to pay for it. She tried not to think of that. Soon, she promised herself. She would have one soon.

He nodded absently, eyes flicking to the side view mirror.

“Besides, we both warded the trunk. If that’s not good enough, then what is?”

“The best wards are laid on stable, non-moving objects with conduits built into the structures. A hotel room has metal embedded in the studs, metal pipes, and wiring that serve as contact points and give shape to the ward. The electrical fields generated by the wiring is dampened by its plastic insulation, then dampened further by the nonconductive materials around it. The room doesn’t move so there is very little flux in the natural magnetic fields that interact with a ward.”

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He broke off long enough to point to the magazine. He never took his eyes away from the road or the mirrors.

“Oh, sorry. Turn left onto Baymeadows Rd. and go straight until you reach Old Baymeadows Rd,” She absently drummed her fingers on the page depicting a map of an apartment complex’s location. “That’s basic magic. The wiring in a car is also insulated and it runs only through the sides and lid of the trunk.”

“That trunk is metal. It may be lined with fiberglass and felt on the inside, but it is still metal. In this vehicle, there is more conductive steel making up the structure of that trunk than there is in the two or three of the hotel room walls. And,” he added, “it is moving.”

“Oh...”

“The interference is minimal at the moment. Still, if one knows what to look for, it’s possible to detect.” He glanced in the rear view mirror, then changed lanes. “How big is this complex?”

“Pretty big. I was thinking of the old adage ‘safety in numbers’ when I picked it out.”

“I see. How many exits?”

“Two – ”

Michael braked hard, changed lanes again. He shot the firebird into a plaza parking lot without warning. She was thrown sideways in the seat. Only the safety belt kept her from plowing into him. Behind them, horns blared ferociously. He paid them no heed as he cut across the pavement to exit onto a side road.

“What are – ”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. He sent the car into a sharp U-turn, tires screeching. The turn hadn’t been completed before he made another, equally hard turn. Thanking God for seat belts, Morgana held onto the chicken bar as oaths ran through her mind.

What was he *doing*?

“We won’t be looking at that neighborhood today.” He said it calmly, gunning the engine to race through the second parking lot to another road. He checked the mirrors. “Is there a map of the area in that book?”

“It shows maybe a square mile of the major roads around the apartment complexes.”

“Hmm.” Still flooring the gas pedal, he turned down yet another side road. Ahead lay Baymeadows Rd. and a traffic light. “Hold on.”

“Oh, *God*.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

He blew through the intersection, yanking the wheel hard. They straightened out in the far lane going back in the direction they'd originally come from. Noise from horns and brakes erupted all around them.

“Are you trying to get us killed?”

He said nothing. The vehicle didn't slow. Then she felt something – warm power coiling and stretching. She opened one eye for a peek. Cars were parting before them like the Red Sea. Gaping, it dawned on her that he was ‘encouraging’ the drivers to get out of the way somehow. Then she braced her free hand against the dash as he flew onto another side street at the next intersection. The car fish-tailed. Her elbow slammed painfully into the car-door window.

I'm going to die in this car and I don't even know what we're running from.

“Gray sedan, tinted windows. It's been following us for the last few minutes. When I left the road, so did it.”

In the distance, sirens sounded.

“The police – ”

“Aren't my concern at the moment. Look behind us.”

She chanced letting go on the bar to twist around. At the intersection they'd just left, the sedan was making the turn. It was driving even more recklessly than Michael.

They rounded a bend, Morgana staring back, transfixed. The sedan fell out of view. She took a steadying breath. It caught in her throat when their pursuer raced into sight again. It was gaining at an alarming rate.

“They're coming on fast.”

He cursed.

Reflexively, she turned to look at him. Light flashed out of the corner of her eye, catching her attention. Coming at them in front was a black truck – in their lane. It accelerated.

So did Michael.

Playing chicken? He's crazy!

Then both vehicles veered sharply. In the same direction. Michael floored the gas pedal.

The truck hit their fender at full speed. The car flipped.

Morgana blacked out.

* * *

Sarah Ann was a gossip. She wasn't proud of it, yet wasn't ashamed of it. In fact, she rarely thought of what she was or its impact on others. What she did think of was the hum-drum tedium of the workday, the rent checks that were due, the units that had to be turned over, possible tenants to show around, and the minute entertainment that talking gave her.

Today was a slow day. Unit 3608 had been the only one late with his rent. It was a monthly problem. She knew it was because the man had to be nearly eighty years of age – she'd never seen anyone with so many wrinkles. He was sweet, though, usually bringing the rent by the same day she called to remind him that it was due. He never said much. He did listen with a bemused, amiable smile on his face before saying goodbye when she paused for breath. So far he'd been the only person she'd seen in the office.

With the old man gone, boredom set in. All the paperwork that needed to be done was. She'd straightened and dusted the rooms she worked in, made fresh coffee, fussed with the fake flower arrangements. She'd run through all of her friends, calling them up to exchange the latest news in their lives. She refreshed her makeup a dozen times already, played with her blonde hair more times than she could count, and given herself a manicure. Now she was wishing someone – anyone – would walk through the door.

Then, as she sipped coffee at her desk, someone did.

He was a tall, muscular man with rugged features. His clothing was worn, mostly jean and plaid, yelling 'Red Neck!' to her citified mind. Still, he was company, a break from the mind-numbing mood of the day. He didn't look too bad, either. Edgy, with a scowl on his face, he reminded her of one of those wolves she'd seen on TV. His eyes had that look about them that indicated he had a bad headache. Other than that, they were a nice golden brown. She decided that he would have been quite attractive in better clothes.

She set her mug down, pasting on a bright smile.

"Hi! Welcome to The Oaks. My name is Sarah Ann. How can I help you today?"

"Morgana Lake." His voice matched his face..

"Oh, um." Well, didn't that beat all? The man had come all that way to ask about a tenant who wasn't there anymore – and he hadn't been the only one. It had her gossip radar humming. "Well, I'm really supposed to be handing out information on any of our tenants without their permission."

His face became thunderous. He hadn't liked that one bit.

"However, I can tell you that Ms. Lake is no longer a tenant here. She moved out day before yesterday, I think. An awful lot of people have been asking about her lately." She waited to see

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if he would rise to the bait. His expression responded by going from sullen to snarly. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Did she leave a forwarding address? A mobile number?”

“Did she have a mobile phone? Why, that lucky girl! I’ve been wanting one since they came out but they’re a bit out of my price range –”

He growled, spun on his heel, slammed the door shut. Locked it. Even as this processed through her distracted brain, she saw him left a hand to his temple. He rubbed as if the headache had gotten worse. The poor man was just grouchy with the pain, she thought.

“Um, would you like some Advil? For the headache? I keep some in my desk.” She opened a drawer to look for it.

“What I want is answers.” He turned back to her. There was a strange, yellow gleam in his eyes. She narrowed her own, marshalling all the authority her thirty-seven years of living had given her.

“Are you on drugs? They’ll ruin your life, you know.”

“Not nearly as much as I will ruin yours if you don’t tell me where Morgana Lake is.”

“Well, I can’t. You see she –” She yelped, slinking back in her chair as he grabbed one end of the desk and pulled. It was thrown violently from between them. As papers and pens scattered on the floor he leaned in close. When he spoke, it was growl that seemed a blend of two voices.

“Wrong answer.”

CHAPTER 8

Jacksonville, FL

There was creative cursing in his ears. Very creative, Michael thought, as the woman hanging upside down next to him vented. She was struggling with her seatbelt. He simply reached over, tapped the buckle, focused his mind on the locking mechanism. The belt released. Morgana fell. He waited until she'd gotten herself sorted out before undoing his own.

They had been lucky. He'd had enough wits about him to create a kind of shield around the inside the car before the impact. The body of the Firebird may have been mangled from rolling, yet the metal infrastructure had been prevented from crushing inward. A useful technique, even if he was a bit vague on just how he'd done it, he thought. He would have to try recreating it later.

“Stupid, *stupid* bloody driver! When I get my hands on him, he may well wish he'd never been born.” The dark promise in her voice might have been amusing in another situation. A scraping noise caught his attention.

“Hold still.”

He craned around to see behind them. Crouched on the interior roof of the car, Morgana ceased her rant. Then she heard it, too.

“What is that?”

“The trunk. They're trying to get in.”

“Weren't you saying before this that this car's made of sheet metal or something?”

“Yes.” Movement outside the vehicle drew his attention. Someone was approaching the front. *Trapped and surrounded.* “If you’ve got an idea, now would be the time.”

Even as he said it, he could feel something begin to build. The air thickened. His hair rose. His skin tingled. An unpleasant buzzing hummed in the metal.

SNAP!

Sharp yips and cursing came from the back. A bat struck the driver-side window. The glass spider-webbed.

Michael reacted on instinct. His fist plunged through damaged window, catching hold of the bat as it was pulled away for another swing. Power surged through him. It burst into flame. So did its wielder. Howls and guttural screams erupted. Behind him, Morgana shouted in ancient Welsh as she faced off with an attacker on her side. An electric tang filled the air.

They needed to get out. They wouldn’t last long, otherwise.

He yanked the bat inside the window, absorbed the fiery energy into himself, redirecting it. It spewed out of his window in a torrent. The way cleared temporarily of enemies, he knocked out the rest of the glass. Dragging himself out, he caught sight of his opponent, a dead blackened husk on the ground.

He heard something whistle through the air, hitting solid flesh with a meaty *thunk*. Whirling with the charred metal bat at the ready, he saw a man slide over the trunk to land across another prone figure. Cross bolts stuck out of their chests. The zap of a static charge kept him from wondering just where the bolts had come from.

Three more fought on the passenger side. He charged around, his weapon raised. The man at the car door fell back as a loud crack of electricity struck the air. The other two danced around each other. One had nothing, the other held a short sword.

Michael swung the bat at the skull of the one nearest him. The target stumbled under the blow. He hit him again as the man’s skin began to darken, to crawl, then again. Again. The bone gave way in mid-transformation. The misshapen body fell to the ground.

Turning his attention to the remaining two, he saw one of them had turned tail, morphing as he ran. By the time he was out of range, he was a wolf running at full speed.

Letting him go, he faced the last and was surprised with a respectful salute. The man smiled slightly as he lowered his sword point to the ground. White hair, brown eyes, heavy lines in the face, he was a bit old to be in combat. Unless Michael’s senses were wrong, he was also completely human.

“You’ve got a good arm there. Hate to see it used on me. Name’s Vincent. Vincent Johnson.” He offered his hand. It was taken cautiously. Somewhere in the background, sirens cue up.

“Michael Keegan.” He glanced at the wreckage. He could see his companion moving around inside. “And Morgana Lake.”

“Well, let’s get your lady-friend and get out of the way, hmm? Won’t be long before the cops get here.”

They heard the lady cursing to herself as she crawled over to the driver’s side. Michael went to help her out the rest of the way, then took his first good look around the accident site.

The truck that had hit them was nose-first in a shallow ditch across the street. One headlight and part of the grill was crumpled. The gray sedan was parked on the shoulder nearby. Both were empty. His own vehicle was a mess. It would take some time, and a great deal of arcane work, to get it back in working order again.

“Cops are coming.” Vince plucked his bolts from the bodies. “Be here any minute.”

“I hear them.” He turned back to study what remained of his car. That was something he couldn’t leave here.

“They’ll be tied up with the mess you and the wolves left behind at the intersection. It won’t last, of course,” the old man went on almost cheerfully. “Might have enough time to do something with all this here.”

He glanced at Vince, then the corpses they’d both left on the ground. He muttered under his breath, gesturing as he did so. The deceased lit up like dry tinder.

“You said they were wolves?” Morgana looked at him.

“Yes,” Michael answered, pulling power in from the world around him. “Werewolves.”

“But – ”

“It’s not the time or place, Morgana.”

“He’s right. Look to the left of you, down the road. See something besides businesses there?”

“Yes...”

He lost track of the conversation at that point. The teleportation spell – for lack of a better word – was now being woven around the scrap heap that had once been his Firebird. With the weaving completed, he triggered the spell with a thought. The car vanished.

“Well, now. That’s something you don’t see every day.”

Michael gave Vincent a bland look. Their female companion, however, was less impressed.

“The – ”

“It’s safe enough where it’s at.”

She bit her lip, deflating.

“I was just telling Morgana here that you’d be welcome to weather the storm, so-to-speak, at my place. It’s up that a-way.” Vince pointed. He could see the residential entrance tucked in between two businesses. The sign read, *The Hidden Reaches Apartments*.

Staring at it, he could detect a slight blurriness around the edges of the entryway. In fact, it almost seemed to overlap the neighboring lots...

Intrigued, he nodded, letting their new ally take the lead.

* * *

The headache was getting worse. He hated using drugs, detested them. He’d finally caved. Yet no amount of medication seemed to make it go away.

Jack snarled at the now empty bottle he’d stolen from the girl’s desk. He hurled it across the vacant living room, watched it bounce off the barren wall. The empty apartment had told him nothing save that the woman he sought wasn’t here.

He knew that he wasn’t the only hunter the Council had sent seeking her. He’d gotten the clerk – girl – whatever she’d been – to tell him enough details to confirm that. It galled, though it didn’t surprise him.

His next course of action was to join the main hunt. He hated working with other werewolves, let alone ones from other packs, but pursuing the prey solo wasn’t getting results. Hunting in the city made the bitterness of that course only worse.

He wanted the woods, the wind, the moon. Not the concrete, the fumes, or the noise. Yet that was what he was stuck with until his job was finished here.

My alpha owes me for this...

A chuckle welled up in his mind, a shadow of sound. He was too caught up in the pain, the frustration, the anger, to notice. Yanking the door open violently, he left the apartment.

Behind him, piled in a bloody mess on the carpet, lay what was left of Sarah Anne.

CHAPTER 9

Jacksonville, FL

“Have you by chance heard of the Hunters’ Guild?”

Michael nodded.

The trio sat in the lobby of the Hidden Reaches front office. A platter of cookies sat on the coffee table between the couch, where the newcomers were seated, and Vincent’s armchair. They had come with the iced tea that their host had served them after they’d arrived.

Morgana started to ask what the old man was talking about, then stopped herself. She knew already, didn’t she? Hadn’t her many-times-great grandmother mentioned the guild, or something like it, in some of the stories she’d regaled her when she was little?

“You hunt rogues – the supernatural ones that threaten the harmony between the mundane over-world and preternatural under-world.”

“Yes, broadly speaking. Interesting terms, the over-world and under-world.” Vincent considered them. “Apt, though. The denizens of the over-world – humans, and such like – live alongside the ones of the under-world without taking notice. Magic doesn’t exist for them, while it is pervasive among the others. The under-world has its guardians, if you will, to help maintain the balance from their end. On the human or mundane side, however, there’s only the Guild of Hunters. I’m one of them, though officially I’m retired.”

“I had wondered.”

She looked over at Michael. He seemed a bit more relaxed than he had been previously.

“Michael Keegan.” He gave a slight smile as he drank from his glass. “I’ve heard of you, you know. Knew you were somewhere in the city. Met with Howell, didn’t you?”

“Briefly.”

“I’ve worked with him some. He took over Jacksonville from me. Good man, all in all.” He plucked a cookie from the table. “So can you tell me why a bunch werewolves would be chasing after the two of you?”

“Ah...” Morgana hesitated. “Well...”

“I’m not certain that this is something I wish the Guild to know about,” her companion said slowly. “I mean no offense to you or yours by this. However, there is a marked tendency among the Guild members to take charge of things that do not originate from the mundane over-world. I do not believe it would be wise to allow this.”

“It’s a view that I happen to agree with.” Vince’s expression became serious. “Take this place for instance. The Reaches is not your ordinary apartment complex. It predates the city for one thing, and has altered its appearance and composition to suit the era and the people for another. The buildings never need maintenance, either. If the Guild knew about that, I’m not sure what would happen to it.” He pinned Michael with a look. “I’m only telling you this, mind, because I’m hoping to trade favor for favor. You can turn it down and no harm done, but before I ask, I’d like to know a bit more about the two of you.”

“And if we say no?”

He shrugged.

“You can rest up here for a bit, then move on. Just don’t lead the wolves back this way. I’ve got a community here to think of.”

Community...

She stood up to look out the curtained window. There was no one out on the street. It was an entrance road, she reasoned, so there wouldn’t be. Behind her she could hear Michael and Vincent verbally probe each other. Tuning it out, she tried to think.

The place felt protected. It also felt...dormant? There was hidden strength about the Reaches, the kind she sensed whenever she held Excalibur in her hands. ‘*It predates the city, for one thing...*’ So did the sword. It was older than most things in the world.

She closed her eyes.

Could she trust this place and the man who stood for it?

...You bear the Blade of Eden...

She blinked her eyes open. Had she heard something?

...this is a haven for all of Heaven's creatures...

She had. What was it? Where was it coming from?

...trust the sword...

Behind her the conversation had stopped. She turned to see Michael standing up warily, casting his gaze around the room. Vincent wore a satisfied expression. He nodded at her as he also came to his feet.

“Morgana Lake – or should I say the Lady of the Lake?”

“No, that’s someone else.” She frowned at him. “What’s speaking to me?”

“The Reaches.” He chuckled at her incredulous face. “That’s how I felt the first time I heard it. Seems like a lifetime ago.” Sighing, he picked up her glass of iced tea. Walking over, he handed it to her. “If you are the bearer of Excalibur, then I can see why certain factions would be interested in you. It may not be wise for to return to your home, at least for a little while.”

She looked into her tea.

“Well, that doesn’t seem to be a problem as I don’t have one at the moment.”

No home. No job. No prospects in either.

It was demoralizing. Michael had promised to help with both, but she couldn’t rely on him forever, could she? Nor could she accept his help for any longer than was truly necessary.

“No home?” The hunter pulled at his bottom lip thoughtfully. “Do you have work?”

“Nor that.” She took a sip, doing her best to keep the growing depression from showing. “I got the sword and everything went to hell, so to speak.”

“Hmm.” He wandered away from the sitting area to his desk. Pulling open a file drawer, he began to rummage. “I was in similar straits when I first came here. Just been assigned to the area as a hunter, a bit green around the edges, and thought things would be easy. They weren’t.” He found what he was looking for, pulling it out to place on the desk. It was a manila folder.

“Not many hunters can do the job fulltime anymore. Living’s expensive. I couldn’t find work that had compatible hours. Big hunts – and there were a few at the time – inevitably got me fired. Without a job, I couldn’t pay the rent. Got evicted. I lived out of my car for weeks, doing odd jobs here and there just pay for food and gas. Then one day I drove down this street. I saw the Hidden Reaches sign, and it spoke to me.”

He flipped the folder open.

“Can’t recall the exact words as it’s been years. I thought, ‘well, places like this can use handy men, can’t they?’ So I went to the front office to apply for a job. The property manager looked me over, then asked, ‘What took you so long? I’ve been waiting for months.’” He gave a little laugh as he flipped through the pages in the folder. “Turned out he was retiring and needed a replacement. I was it.” Apparently happy with the pages, he shuffled them together neatly. Walking back to Morgana, he continued.

“It’s my turn. I retired first from hunting, about five years ago. Now I’m retiring from the Reaches. Welcome to your new home, Ms. Lake.” He proffered the papers. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Dumbfounded, she took them. It was a contract, she realized.

“Where will you go?” She looked up. “I can’t just –” Breaking off, she glanced a bit helplessly at Michael. He had a far-away look on his face.

“I’ve got a nice place down south. I can raise some chickens, have a dog, plant a garden.” He said it rather wistfully. “It’s not big. I don’t need it to be. It’s just a quiet place where I can enjoy my winter years. To do that, though, I have to make sure that the Reaches is in good hands first.”

She stared down at the contract.

“I can’t even dodge werewolves without help,” she murmured. “I’m not sure that I’d be the one you need.”

A long, familiar blade slid into her line of vision. Glancing along the length, she saw that it was held by Michael. It surprised her. Hadn’t it been the boot of his wrecked car?

“Trust the sword,” was all he said.

She grasped the hilt, taking it from him. The sword began to glow. It was – a happy glow. Where that description had come from she couldn’t say. She only knew, somehow, that this right.

With a sigh, she lowered Excalibur.

“I guess if I’m really going to do this, I need to get started.”

She went back to her seat on the couch, laid the blade next to her, and began to read.

CHAPTER 10

Jacksonville, FL

Eli Howell came out of the coffee shop, a cup of steaming latte in one hand, a bottle of water in the other, a feeling of something wrong in his gut. It was his second meet of the day. Though he had planned to contact the Werewolf Council to set up a conference, he had not expected to be hailed by their rep on the street. That he had been raised a warning flag.

The wolf was another reason to be wary. He looked ill. Pain lined his face, his eyes held an eerie glint. His skin held a shiny quality that went beyond the sheen of sweat.

Jack took the water he offered and began to drain it. Taking his seat at the outdoor table, Eli noted the bottle of medication next to him. He couldn't see the label but he could see it was empty. No, this wolf wasn't well. He wondered briefly if he should report it to someone, then decided against it. The Werewolf Council did not have a reputation for compassion when it came to its agents.

That's Skoll for you. He's the most inhumane of the lot.

"So you wanted to talk," he prompted.

"Yes." He slammed the plastic bottle, now devoid of liquid, down on the table. "The Council is looking for someone, a woman. Seems she stole something belonging to the Council Alpha. He wants it back."

"All right." Keeping his face impassive, he brought out a notebook. "Name?"

"Morgana Lake."

He jotted it down, that feeling of dread increasing.

“Can you tell me what she stole?”

“A sword. A prized possession of days long past.” Jack’s eyes sparked yellow for a moment. Eli glimpsed the change. He said nothing as he continued.

“Can you describe it?” At the wolf’s suspicious frown, he explained. “If, in the course of our duties, I or another of the Hunters’ Guild comes across this item, we need to be able to verify that it is the stolen property in question.”

“It used to be the sword at the gate east of Eden.” The answer was spoken in a tone unlike the gruff and harsh voice the were had spoken in previously. Perturbed, Eli looked up. The smile his companion wore was obscene. “Given to Adam when he and Eve left. It became lost before the Age of Man truly started and was found by Skoll. He’s looked after it ever since. It glows in the hands of righteous and goes black in the hands of evil.”

With the wolf spinning out the description, the hunter swallowed his unease as he finished the notes. After Jack had left, he remained at the table, staring down at everything he written. Most of it seemed to be lore as opposed to details of the sword’s appearance. How much was truth? He couldn’t say. What he knew was that the wolf he’d met with was perhaps more than a little sick.

Morgana Lake, he thought, you’ve gotten yourself into a right mess.

Eli left the coffee shop to return home. He need to have his Guild call the Council and verify Jack’s story. Then he would tell Michael what had transpired.

* * *

Michael had excused himself from the office as Morgana and Vince went over the transfer of duties together. He wasn’t needed there. Walking down the entrance of the Reaches, he studied the way it sat firmly in the setting, how it looked as if it had always been there. If a mage, a powerful and skilled mage, looked carefully enough, he could see the shimmering lines of magic that marked the seams of this realty that knitted into the fabric of the world outside.

He had seen something similar before, in the Valley of Neath, in the Haven where he had originated. There were probably others.

He paused by the sign proclaiming the complex’s name. The gilt letters were ordinary, the landscaping around the wooden structure typical of neighborhood entry ways. No one who could see it, yet not sense the magic around it, wouldn’t think twice about its existence.

Movement caught his attention. His gaze swung towards the road. There, about the spot where he and the others had fought, were five wolves. They sniffed at the truck, around the sedan, along the grass where his own car had been. They would scent the battle, the blood, the death.

One yipped to its fellows. They gathered around the one, snuffing at the side of the road. As one, they surged over the ground, following a path they couldn't see but could certainly smell. Michael watched they draw closer, steeling himself for conflict. They came to the point where the Reaches' entrance met the asphalt outside. There they circled, noses to the ground. Their organization broke up. Individuals struck out in the surrounding area in an obvious effort to find the track they'd been following. One by one, they came back to the leader, who stood snarling at the spot where the scent vanished. Tails between their legs, ears flat against their skulls, they whined their failure.

Standing only ten feet away, Michael watched the dominant lash out at his subordinates. Then the pack turned back the way they'd come. Morgana, he determined as he left to walk along the street leading to the front office, would be better served lying low for a while.

* * *

The Wood

Gwynn ap Nudd watched the wolves streak away as His son had. Viewing the reflection of events in the world in the sparkling sheen of the lake, He stood on the shore. Beside Him, his great red hound growled low in its throat. He placed a gauntleted hand on the dog's back absently.

"The enemy may have misjudged in this," He murmured, then gestured towards the image. It faded as another slid into view. "That he took this route is interesting, however."

Jack writhed on the floor of a cheap hotel room. The mirror above the dressing table was cracked, the lone chair overturned. The bedding had been mangled, the pillows torn. Droplets and smears of blood marred the carpet. Red moved forward until his nose almost touched the water, then looked up at his master. He whined.

"This one is lost, old friend. It is only a matter of time."

He considered the pain-ridden figure. There were many possibilities for the outcome of this choice. This particular end wasn't written and so could be changed – yet not averted.

"This infection will spread. The maturation of it, however, will be years in coming."

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There was little defense against this tactic. Michael would find out about it eventually, but there was nothing he could do to prevent it from happening now. Choices, free will – they kept the future in flux. The price to be paid could be only the one, or several. With no way to determine who, when, or where, there was little point in passing on the information at this point in time.

Turning from the image, He walked back towards the camp. Behind Him, echoing from the lake to be carried on the wind, the werewolf screamed.

CHAPTER 11

Jacksonville, FL

“This is perfect, Vincent.”

Morgana gazed around the apartment. It was about a thousand square feet, a bit larger than the efficiency studio she'd had. The white-washed walls were clean, the carpet a deep blue. Blue was a bit odd for a rental place, but she loved the color. Situated behind the front office and connected to the building by a breezeway, she'd never be late for work, nor would she have to worry about foul weather. Turning, she graced her companion with a beaming smile.

“It's small,” he replied. “Cozy. One bedroom, a smaller room more fit for a personal office or walk-in closet, and the kitchen's tiny –”

“The kitchen is twice as big as the last one I had. I like it.” She let out a laugh, joy bubbling up from within. “God, it's perfect.” Her eyes stung, tears threatening to spill over. The unexpected reaction had her squeezing them shut. “It's a miracle to have a place, a haven, a bloody job even, when I've lost what I had only days ago.”

She sniffled. Vince handed her a handkerchief.

“Thank you so much.” She dabbed at her eyes. “Where's Michael gone? I'm afraid I was too caught up in things to notice he'd left.”

Vince chuckled.

“Gone to get your things. He said he wouldn't be long.”

She sighed.

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“I would have helped. I should help – they are my things, after all. My luggage, my furniture...” He patted her shoulder and she shook it off. “I suppose I owe him. Again.”

At her grimace, the old hunter changed the subject.

“It’s a bit late in the day, but I can take you around the property, introduce you to some of the residents. They’re a friendly lot, for the most part.”

She let him lead her out of her new home. Stepping out into the breezeway, she paused to see the play of the light on the ornamental pond. Sunset had stained the water with brilliant reds, oranges, and golds, the colors highlighting the plants and river stones lining the shore. It reminded her of the home she’d left in England. There’d been a pond there, too, just outside her parents’ country cottage.

I think this place could be mine. Her lips curved as she hurried to catch up to Vincent. I certainly hope that will be.

* * *

Michael stepped off the elevator, deep in thought. When he had agreed to take on this task, he had not known who was after Morgana or, more accurately, Excalibur. With werewolves sniffing at her trail, he could only wonder as to what it was the Council wanted the sword for. According to Gwynn, it could sever any bond...what bond did the Council want to sever?

Skoll, not the Council.

Skoll ruled his race like a tyrant king. For the governing body of the werewolves to be this interested in something, he had to be driving force behind it.

Still thinking it through, he accessed the room he’d rented. The place was clean, neat. Morgana’s overnight bag and his own single piece of luggage were untouched where they sat by the beds. On the small table flanked by the beds, he noticed a glowing red light on the telephone. Someone had tried to reach him. Frowning, he picked up the receiver, dialed the front desk.

“Yes, this is Michael Keegan in room 623. Do you have any messages for me?”

There was one. After thanking the receptionist, he disconnected, then dialed Eli Howell’s home number. The call was picked up on the third ring.

“Hello, this is Michael Keegan returning your call.” He listened, idly staring out onto the balcony as the man on the other end of the line told him about his meeting with Jack Rikers. The accusation against Morgana was contrived to say the least. He would have expected better from Skoll.

“The interesting thing is that when I followed up on this, the Council said he was rogue.” Eli went on. “Sick. Said he’d gotten infected with a rare contagious illness by another wolf suffering from the same in this area. They had already approached the local Hunters’ Guild office, warning them to be on the lookout for erratic wolves.”

“It’s interesting, isn’t it, that they didn’t mention the sick wolf when I inquired earlier?” He got a cynical snort in response. “Is the Guild hunting him, then?”

“Yeah, we’re hunting him. I don’t like the feel of this.” The muttered sentiment mirrored Michael’s own feelings.

“No, it doesn’t seem right, does it? Do you think he’s ill?”

“I know he is.” He sighed over the phone. “He’d taken a bottle of aspirin like it was candy. Werewolves don’t do that. They loathe modern medication. Was he sick when you met with him?”

“No, he wasn’t.” And the wolf who *had* been ill and crazed had been killed before that meeting. “I’m not sure what to make of this, Eli. Knowing Skoll, the way he operates, Jack did or said something that he wasn’t supposed to. That he’s now sick could be a coincidence, or could be a punishment. Without proof, it’s hard to say which.”

“Well, orders have come down to clean this up. The Council’s claiming that his condition is incurable, and that his fixation with Morgana Lake is symptomatic. You’ve got her tucked away safe?”

“Yes, she’s safe.”

“You think that sword he talked about is part of all this?”

Michael hesitated. He’d known that this would be asked at some point.

“I don’t know,” he lied. “She doesn’t have a sword that I’m aware of.” He paused, debating with himself, then continued. “I’ve seen werewolves tracking in the city. Rikers is a loner. How would you recommend these others be handled?”

“Tracking? Morgana?”

“I can only assume so. They were following a scent trail that followed a path she had taken earlier in the day.”

“Given everything else that’s been going on, I’d have her petition the Guild to take it up with the Council. Make it a formal thing. By their own admission, they don’t have any agents in the area and don’t have anything against the woman. They’ll either have to change their statement, or call of their dogs.”

Michael was willing to bet on the latter.

“Thanks. We’ll do that.”

* * *

The hidden abyss

The new tool was much like the old one. The only difference was the strength of will.

It writhed, screamed, and fought. It wouldn’t be molded. It wouldn’t break. It wouldn’t do as it was told.

That was the problem with werewolves, he sneered in the darkness. They were too much like dogs, or too much like wolves. These remnants of the son he had once sired were not optimal. He would need to find another way to access others for service.

He drifted in the dark, a mind disassociated with a body both wasted and petrified. A tethered spirit with tenuous links to the world beyond his stone prison. He needed to be whole again, to be free. His attempts with werewolves had failed. There was no other venue open to him. At least, not yet.

Blood...it allowed him to make tools of the children descended from his son. If played right, it might yet serve as a bridge to another tool. Skoll had condemned this newest tool, one that the werewolf had used himself for many years. It would be hunted and killed, not by wolves but by humans. Hunters...

As the possibilities ran through his thoughts, he felt anticipation begin to rise. Yes, this tool would perform this one last task.

Then it would die.

CHAPTER 12

Jacksonville, FL

The sun dawned on the Hidden Reaches to find Morgana pacing the breezeway between her new home and the community office. She had awoken in the twilight hour before sunrise with a restless need to start moving. As to what she was moving onto, what she was doing, she trying to work that out.

Michael had brought her things over last night so she was set up in her apartment. There was still some unpacking to be done, though that was minimal. It wasn't pressing. There was only one thing that was.

She expected Vincent to be here soon. He'd told her that he started the day early, that her training as the property manager would start today. It was a miracle to her that she would have a job – a well paying, decent occupation – that didn't just look to be enjoyable but accommodated her guardianship of Excalibur. It was wonderful. It was exciting. Yet that wasn't what was on her mind as Vince opened the back door to the office.

“The Hunters' Guild.” She ceased her aimless pacing to walk up to him. “Isn't there some existing provision or process that I can go through to deal with the werewolves that won't keep their snouts out of my life?”

“Why, Morgana, hello to you, too. It's a beautiful morning and I slept fine. How about you?” He smiled as she blinked blankly, then gave him an apologetic smile.

“I'm sorry. Good morning, Vincent.” She gave a sheepish laugh. “It's been plaguing me since I woke up.”

“Ah. In answer to your question, yes, there is a process. In fact, Michael had called me about an hour ago to ask that I talk with you about it.” He gestured her to follow him as he led the way inside. They wound through the back hallway, past the filing room, to the front the front lobby. “Are you hungry? I brought some breakfast.”

He gestured to his desk. She saw a large bakery box sitting there with a couple of large to-go coffee cups. Noting the name of the bakery, she laughed.

“Donuts for breakfast? I thought you to be the type to have a sensible meal to start off your day.”

“Well, normally, yes. Today, though...” He strode over to flip the box open. The fragrance of freshly made donuts filled the air. “I wanted to celebrate.” He handed her one of the coffees, toasted her with the other. “To new beginnings and new endings.”

“Yes.” She tapped her Styrofoam cup to his, then took a sip of coffee. The bitter brew had no cream or sugar. It was lovely.

“Get yourself a donut. We’ll talk while I make the hospitality coffee. Come with me to the kitchen. We’ve got to start the community coffee.” He paused she used a napkin to pick one. They started toward the kitchenette just off the lobby. “The werewolf issue isn’t a common one. The Guild has limited ‘policing power,’ if you will, due to a treaty the Werewolf Council. So long as they don’t involve humans or other races with whom we have policing agreements, we have to leave them alone. This applies even when they fight amongst each other.” His tone took on a disapproving cast as he stepped into the. “It is what it is.”

“So there’s nothing you can do?” Frustration edged her words. Politics. She hated politics, especially when she was the one who had to pay in the end because of them. She took a bite of donut to keep from cursing.

“Yes, there is.” He stepped into the kitchen. Crossing the linoleum floor, he opened drawers to pull out the filters and scoop. “You’re human.” He hesitated, frowning, then turned to her with an inquiring look. “You are human, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” *For the most part.* There was no need in her mind to tell him of her angelic ancestress. She drank more coffee as he nodded. He began to measure out coffee grounds from a canister on the counter.

“As you are a human being chased after by werewolves, we can lodge a complaint against the Council. That’s polite, political speak for ‘If you don’t call your dogs to heel, we are going to put them down.’” He smiled as she chuckled at his phrasing. “There’s some paper work, of course, and you’ll have to give testimony if necessary.”

“I can do that. However, will this put a stop to it? I don’t want this to abate for a few months, then start up again.”

Vince opened a cabinet for a carafe, placed it underneath basket, then hit the switch on the brewer. She could hear the water begin to percolate as he reached for the canister marked ‘decaf’.

“I believe they’ll think twice about coming back around.” As he scooped grounds into a second filter-lined coffee basket, he motioned for her to fetch another carafe from the cupboard. “While we’re reporting your complaint to the Guild later this afternoon, Michael will be talking directly to the Werewolf Council.”

* * *

Jack panted, crouching on the floor of his hotel room. The carpet beneath his hands was spotted with blood and bile, the stench of both going unnoticed. On one side of him, the bed was a mangled wreck. The sheets were rent, the comforter torn, the frame broken. On the other side were the remains of a chair and end table. The room looked like a war zone.

He was heedless of damage. All he was aware of was the pain.

It felt like every nerve in his head was on fire. Thoughts that were his own crowded in from somewhere – someone – else. They centered on the woman. That damn bitch. It was her fault. This agony, those thoughts – all of it – her fault.

His alpha’s fault. It was his fault for putting him up for this. The Council’s fault for telling him to come. He was just a wolf, just one of the pack. He wouldn’t have come looking for that woman on his own. He’d had orders. Hated, wretch orders...He’d show them what to do with their orders, that woman, this whole deal...

The pounding in his skull intensified. With a whine he collapsed into a fetal position, curling on the floor as his body was racked with dry heaves brought on by the pain. Why? Why did he have to suffer through this? What had he done?

What haven’t you done?

The voice echoed in his mind. He tried to think of who it belonged to. It wasn’t his. It wasn’t him –

Yet I am you. I am a part of you even as you are an extension of me.

He struggled to focus. As he did so, the heaving ebbed away, the leading of the agony dulled. He lay on his side, breathing harshly. What did that mean? Extension?

What haven’t you done?

He hadn't fulfilled his orders. He hadn't found the woman, or the sword... Where had that come from? There had been nothing about a sword. Yet...yet he'd mentioned one to the hunter he'd met with. The words had popped into mind, then out of his mouth. He hadn't thought them, thought about them. He was sure of that.

You did. We did. We're one, child of Fenrir.

Fenrir...not Skoll...

The pain receded as that notion took root. Skoll was not the Alpha. Fenrir was.

Close...

"Is that...you?... Fenrir?" He lifted his head, eyes open yet unseeing.

...enough. There was a sensation like a smile in his mind. Jack's lips curved in response. *Will you acknowledge your Alpha, wolf?*

"Yes." He closed his eyes. The massive headache was easing even more now.

Don't fight what you are, what I am. That is the lesson here, wolf.

"Yes."

Good. There's work still to be done. That woman, the sword she carries – we need it. You need it. I need it.

"Can I...ask why?" He swallowed, bracing for another storm of agony. It didn't come.

You wish to be free. This artifact will make you free...

Free of the city. Free of Skoll. Free of everything that nagged, irritated, or disrupted his world. He bared his teeth in a grin.

The phone rang.

Jolted back into reality, he scrambled onto his knees and took in the devastation around him for the first time. There were holes in the wall, the dresser had been pulled onto its front, the wall mirror thrown across the room, and from somewhere under the rubble that had once been a bed stand there was ringing.

Answer it, wolf.

He got up unsteadily, picking his way over to the pile of broken furniture to paw through it. Unearthing the phone, he put the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?"

“Jack Rikers? This is Eli Howell. We met yesterday.”

“Yes.” He felt that other presence enfold his consciousness into itself. Distracted, he almost didn’t hear the hunter on the other end of the line.

“ – found that sword you mentioned.”

“You did?”

“Ms. Lake will be dealt with by the Guild. As for the sword, we need you to come verify that it’s the one stolen from Skoll. I’m wrapping up some business out by the Intercoastal Waterway right now but I’ve got it with me. Would you like to meet me out this way? The marshes are pretty quiet at this time of day.”

Marshes. People didn’t live in marshes. There would be no car exhaust, no city noise. No witnesses.

“That’s good. You’ll have to give me directions...” He began to sift through the mess around him in an effort to find a notepad and pen.

I will remember. Have no fear of that.

Arrangements were made, the call ended. Jack dropped the phone back into the pile from whence it came. Heading into the bathroom to clean up, he began to make plans of his own.

CHAPTER 13

Somewhere in the wilds of northern Montana

Snow dusted the peak, the ground harsh and semi-frozen. The trees dressing the slopes were dark, haggard looking. The sun shone with a chill light, westering in the sky as the moon ascended in the east. A blood moon. The landscape sat empty.

It was, altogether, a scene as welcoming as pack of hungry feral dogs.

It was a mountain outside of time, occupying a corner of a plane that was, yet was not, a part of the everyday world. It reminded Michael of the Wood, if only in the feel of age, the sense of storied history here. Yet where the Wood depicted a balanced cycle of life, death, and all that lay between, this Place held desolation, fear, and the cruelty of the trophy hunt.

Michael trudged up a slope, the thin frosting of snow crunching beneath his booted feet. There was no true path for him to follow. Instead, there was only a strip of land devoid of trees, strewn with rock, that wound upward. Near the peak, even this rugged trail vanished into the forest that ringed the topmost part of the mount. By the time Michael had reached that point, he could feel eyes watching him from the cover of the vegetation.

They knew he was here. He rounded the last stone outcropping to stop with his back to a large boulder. He waited. A howl went up in the woods. It was answered by lupine throats all around him. Michael listened to the pack song, heard the disharmonic melody that lay underneath the lonesome sound.

Gwynn had warned him of the dangers here. This area had once belonged to a Nordic deity, one who had fallen into ruin. Now it was held by his descendants. Even though the deity was no

longer here, even though his kin had long forsaken his worship, this home of gods still held power. Michael's own magic would be less effective here, Gwynn's influence inconsequential.

So when the wolves crept out of from the trees to encircle him, he didn't respond with a magical out-lashing to give himself room. He merely vanished.

The wolves yelped, whined, and growled. Michael watched them from where he'd teleported to inside the tree line. They snuffled at the spot where he'd stood, then scattered to find his scent. As they began their search of the surrounding area, he set off ahead of them, using his teleporting ability to jump yards away periodically to confuse the trail.

* * *

In the marches of the Intercoastal Waterway, between Jacksonville, FL, and Mayport, FL

Eli trudged through the marsh, ignoring the stink of mud. His thirteen year-old son, Drake, followed in behind. All around them was the long grass of the marsh, the Florida muck, egrets, a few herons. Bracken water scented the air. Cypress dotted the landscape, a few of the hardier shrubs. Ahead lay a small oasis of firmer ground, with a thick stand of trees. The grass there wasn't as high, either. That was their goal.

The sun was peeking over the horizon now. The wolf Jack would be there already, scoping the territory, becoming familiar with it. Though place may have Eli's choice for a meet, it would not give them the advantage.

He stopped by a tree, motioned his son closer.

"This is not a hunt to take lightly, Drake. Werewolves – the lone ones especially – play dirty. They're even worse when they're sick, like this one is."

"I know, Dad, you told me." The boy rolled his eyes.

He was smart kid, his son, and smart-mouthed. He took after his mother, both in that. He also had her looks. Blonde, blue-eyed, the kid would have looks that'll attract girls like bees to honey when he grew older. Still, he'd learned well, Eli thought. He'd trained Drake himself, knew he was capable of a serious hunt. He had a ways to go before he could hunt on his own. He needed experience; this would help with that. If his boy were to achieve his dream of being a great hunter in the Guild, he would need all the experience he could get.

"Follow the plan we discussed. Sit here." Eli indicated a fallen log next to the tree. "Let him see you, then slink off."

“Dad, I got it. We practiced it last night, remember?”

“This isn’t just a training program, Drake. This for real.” Eli gave his son a long somber stare that had the boy’s cockiness fading. “Either of us could hurt or killed here. Don’t make me go home and explain to your momma that we’ve got to bury our son because he didn’t pay attention.”

Chastised, he mumbled an apology as he planted his rear on the log. His father nodded in approval, then disappeared into the tall marsh grass. They waited.

* * *

Jack breathed the air in deep. The stench of muck, rotting vegetation, and salt was perfume after the exhaust of the city. Traveling in the marsh meant that he was filthy, though. Drenched. He’d foregone renting a boat or canoe in favor of his wolf shape. He’d swum the streams, the creeks, sunk his paws into the mud. He’d taken his time, enjoying it. Then he’d come to Crying Child Island, a marshy place with only one copse of trees at the northern end.

He changed into a man to take it all in from a high vantage point. It was open, lonely. A spot of calm wilderness bracketed on either side by the bustle of humanity. He reveled in it, jerking visibly as the other mind prodded him. He had a job to do.

He scanned the area, looking for the landmarks the hunter had described. The wind ruffled the grasses. A seagull called to another above him. He looked up at it as it veered close. His eyes met the bird’s. With a cry, the gull flapped away. The gulls were annoying, obnoxious, so he was glad to have frightened one off. Yet he couldn’t help wondering if the bird had seen him, or what was inside him.

The ultimate Alpha.

Dismissing the bird, his gaze dropped to spot the dead tree that was the marker he’d been looking for. Jack resumed his trek through the marsh, rounding the grayed trunk. As he walked, the ground firmed, went watery, then firmed again. He spied his destination: that spit of land sporting cypress and pine.

As he neared it, he saw a child sitting on a log. The boy watched him coming for a moment, then slid off the log. He ran into the trees. Jack’s eyes narrowed. Should the child be here? Who was he? More important, *what* was he? The hunter’s son?

He could feel Fenrir considering the same thing as he stopped walking, thinking things over. Could this be a trap?

The boy is of use to me.

Jack blinked as the thought drifted into his consciousness. Was that right? Well, then. He couldn't let the child get away, could he? What the Alpha wanted, the Alpha got.

That's right, wolf. Now fetch.

Baring his teeth in feral ascent, he launched into a run. He dashed into the woods, branches and shrubs whipping at his legs, his arms. The wind picked up, blowing past his face to race off behind him. The air smelled of marsh, of wood, of the child.

In the depths of his soul, Jack felt Fenrir dig his claws into him, spurring him on. Their minds enmeshed. Flashes of greed, hunger, desire were fed into him, each centered around one thing: freedom. If the sword was lost, if this was a trap, then...there would be another way...

There was a faint cry as the boy stumbled, losing his footing in the brush. Jack poured on speed, felt his muscles bunch as he surged into a small clearing and saw his prey. He sprang.

His side was pierced, shock shooting through his torso, then out through the other side. The world became detached from him. He felt his body land next to the child, felt his lungs begin to clog, saw the boy scramble up. Predatory instinct took over. Jack lashed out a hand, caught the prey's ankle. Something else shot into his body, through his back, as he hauled the kicking boy closer. His teeth elongated, sharpened.

Bite!

Coughing up a little blood from his lungs, he sank his teeth into the boy's leg, piercing the demin. Fenrir laughed, exultant. Jack barely felt it when a third something crashed through his skull.

CHAPTER 14

Lake City, FL

“Why do they call it Lake City if there’s no lake, do you suppose?”

Morgana stared out the truck’s passenger window, doing her best to quell jittery nerves. Excalibur haunted the edges of her mind. Her palm itched to feel the reassuring length of the sword’s hilt. She felt at once bereft and naked without her charge, hidden away in the depths of Hidden Reaches as it was.

“Couldn’t say, though I’m sure that there’s a lake around here somewhere.” Vincent reached over to fiddle with the radio setting as static began to overtake the music playing. “You’re sure you don’t want to mention the sword?”

“The fewer who know about it, the better.” She sighed, leaning back. Staring up at the roof, she asked, “How much longer?”

“We’ll be there in a minute or two. There’s the meeting place.” He nodded towards the roadside diner as they approached. The old Ford hit a pot hole. The dash shook a bit.

“Your lorry’s ancient, Vince,” she muttered, bracing a hand on the dash to stop the rattle as he steered the truck into diner’s parking lot. “Have you thought about getting a new one?”

“Lorry?”

“Truck.” She gave a wan smile. “It’s the Brit in me, I’m afraid.”

“Ah. Well, let’s get this done, shall we?” he replied, getting out.

They entered the diner a moment later. The walls were covered with black, white, and gray tile. Chromed barstools lined the bar, a cash register perching on the end closest to the entrance. The dining area was rimmed with booths done up in blue vinyl. Rock music was playing over the speakers. A sign hung off the countertop by the register: "Breakfast served all day. Pay here." There seemed to be only one person making up the wait-staff, an older woman dressed in a white button-down, a black skirt. Over the outfit was a blue apron. She tottered around on four inch black heels, blowing bubblegum as she took orders.

Morgana thought it was the clichéd diner of the fifties or sixties.

Their contact spotted them first, waving them to a back corner booth where he was already drinking coffee. As they moved to join him, Morgana puzzled over his appearance. He didn't look like any official she'd seen. He wore jeans, a blue T-shirt, sneakers. His brown, shoulder-length hair was shaggy. Where was the suit, the office-style haircut? At the least he should have been wearing a button down shirt and slacks, shouldn't he?

The man stood up as they reached him, extended his hand in greeting.

"Hello, Vincent, Morgana. I'm Roger Bamberg. The Tallahassee GH office sent me. Have a seat." He gestured towards the bench opposite his, then signaled the waitress. "Coffee's not bad for diner coffee."

"How did you know it was us?" she asked.

"Oh, I've worked with Vince a time or two before. Odds were good that you were you since I expected you to be with him." He shrugged. "Bear with me here. I don't usually meet plaintiffs for the Guild."

"Roger's a hunter in the field, with his own territory to look after," Vincent added. He paused as the waitress hurried over to the table. She popped chewing gum as they ordered coffee and a late breakfast. They watched her teeter off.

"She reminds me of those waitresses you find in the Hollywood version of a '50s diner," he said. Roger grunted in agreement. He fished inside his back pocket to pull out a pad and pen as the older hunter turned back to him. "So how'd you get to be errand boy for Tallahassee office?"

"I made a wise-crack." Roger graced them with a lopsided smile. "Just can't keep my mouth shut. So, you want to fill me in on what's been going on?"

Morgana straightened in her seat.

"Well, it started with a man I didn't know coming to the main office of my apartment complex to ask about me a few days ago..."

* * *

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Crying Child Island, FL

Eli finished wrapping the gauze around his son's calf. The bite was a shallow one, though it had bled like anything. Drake sat on the ground in a bit of a daze, watching his father secure the end of the bandage so it wouldn't unravel. Then Eli grabbed a plastic shopping bag, then began to clean up the discarded white padding he'd use to sop up the blood. His son rolled his pant leg over the wound and offered a weak grin.

"At least I won't turn into a werewolf, right, Dad?" Still sitting down, he reached over to help pick up wrappers from the stuff they'd taken out of the first aid kit.

"Very true." Though the boy's mother wouldn't be happy to hear about his close call or subsequent injury. Eli winced inwardly. His wife's understanding of a hunter's duty and acceptable risks only went so far when it came to their son. Ah, well, he thought. There was nothing to be done about it now.

"You did very well," he told his son as he held out a bag for the trash Drake had collected. The answering smile was huge, making him chuckle. "Think you can put enough weight on that leg to help me with the body?"

"I think so. It doesn't hurt very much." The youngster scrambled to his feet. He tested the injured leg gingerly at first, then did little hops from one leg to the other. "I'm okay. What are you going to do with him?"

They both looked over at the corpse of Jack Rikers. He lay face down a few feet away, three crossbow quarrels sticking out of him. Eli took out a handkerchief to mop his brow. The day was beginning to heat up.

"We'll stash him in the shrubs. The Werewolf Council will send someone over to collect him," he said. He went over to pull the bolts out, tossing them next to the first aid kit. "You grab his feet."

Together, they hefted Jack off the ground and began to make their way to a nearby clump of bushes.

"How come they don't take care of this kind of thing themselves, Dad?"

"They do if they're in their own territory, but this isn't werewolf country. They aren't only policing entities in town here, so if the wolf in question proves to be a danger to others, like this one did, taking him down goes to whoever is closest. In this case, that was me."

They stopped talking as they hid the body in the vegetation. Once Eli was satisfied with the concealment, they went back for the gear they'd left in the middle of the clearing. Drake, his

father noted with some relief, seemed to be unaffected by the bite. He moved easily, no trace of a limp in sight.

They left the woods for the open marshes that comprised the rest of the island. The trek back was uneventful. Elijah made certain that his son kept out boggy areas. He didn't want any marsh mud contaminating the wound on his leg. It wasn't until they had their small skiff in sight that they noticed the wolves.

Three large, lupine brutes slunk out of the long grass to stare at them. If their size and sheer muscularity hadn't tipped the hunters off as to what they were, the human intelligence in their eyes would have. Eli laid a reassuring hand on his boy's shoulder. Not meeting their gazes in any way, he gave his report.

"It's done. He's stashed in the wood at the north end of the island. We made it as quick as we could."

The largest wolf nodded. All three of them loped off, leaving the two humans to climb into their boat. As they pushed off into deeper water, Drake looked back, a thoughtful expression on his young face.

"They're so free, aren't they? Werewolves," he added. He rubbed at his calf absently.

"Not really," Eli returned, thinking of the Werewolf Council's Alpha of Alphas. "No, not really at all."

They let the subject fall away as they entered the river proper. Tilting the boat motor into the water, they started it up and went home.

* * *

Somewhere in the wilds of northern Montana

Michael stepped out of the woods, hearing the howling in the distance. There had been several packs out patrolling. Only one had caught his trail but he'd managed to muddle it enough to lose his pursuers halfway up the mount. Now, near the top, he was at his goal.

It was an old log cabin, longer in the body than it was wide. Once, long, long ago, it had been the meeting place of gods. Now, it was the headquarters of Werewolf Council, housing the proverbial throne of the race.

He stepped up onto the porch. It was barren, save for a few scattered bones. Old leavings, he surmised, noting the teeth marks and discoloration on them. He carefully tested the latch on the door, sweeping his awareness in quickly before retracting it back behind his shields. There was only one mind inside.

He opened the door, then walked in.

Skoll glared at him from the far end of the room. His black mane of hair was pulled back, his face scarred from past battles. His eyes glowed like twin suns, though it was clear that he could see with just one. The left eye was clouded over, bisected by a scar that ran diagonally from his hair line to his jaw.

“Who dares?” he spat, rising to his full height of seven and a half feet.

This is no mere werewolf. Michael remembered Gwynn’s warnings.

“Michael Keegan, a son of Wales. I bear a message.”

Skoll’s eyes narrowed.

“From whom?”

“The pantheon of my country.” That was, technically, correct. “Will you hear it, Skoll, son of Fenrir, scion of Loki?”

Skoll grunted assent, scowling. “Speak.”

“Excalibur is lost to you, hidden beyond your reach. It would not serve your purpose in any case. The bonds the sword is meant to sever are not your sire’s. The solution for dilemma may be found in the lore of your own mythos.”

Michael watched carefully as Skoll absorbed the message. The wolf’s expression didn’t change.

“I never stated that I was after Excalibur.” His lips curved in a sly, sharp smile. “So you are here without reason, Michael Keegan, son of Wales.”

“Some things do not have to be said, to be true.” He inclined his head slightly, a token sign of respect. “Take heed of the message, Skoll, son of Fenrir.”

With that, Michael took the calculated risk of turning his back and exiting the cabin. As the door latched behind him, he concentrated, thought of Jacksonville. He vanished.

CHAPTER 15

Lake City, FL

“...so now I’m here, talking to you.”

Morgana sipped her coffee, then took a dainty bite of her rye toast. Their meals had come during her explanation of recent events. Roger and Vincent finished their food, drinking their coffee as they’d listened. She, however, still had half her plate left to eat.

“But you don’t know what it was that the werewolves wanted from you?” Roger flipped to yet another page in the pad. He’d filled almost half of it with notes. “Seems weird.”

“They seemed to think that I had a sword of some kind. I don’t know what sword or why they would think I have it.” She had stated as much already. Vince hadn’t said a word as she’d told the tale. She hoped that he’d support her version – with Excalibur edited out – should he be put on the spot.

“It doesn’t make sense, though. I mean, these are wolves. They care about their territory and pack,” Roger went on, waving his coffee mug in an expansive gesture. “Not things like weaponry. They’ll use them on occasion, though I’ve never seen one using a sword. They tend to stick to tooth and claw, maybe a gun if they have to.”

“For what it’s worth, I know that there’s a sick wolf in the city right now.” Vincent slid the information in smoothly. “Elijah Howell’s just been given orders to put him down.”

“What, like a dog with rabies?” Morgana couldn’t help feeling appalled. “He’s sick so he has to die instead of being treated?”

“A sick wolf is a danger to everyone.” The Guild rep sighed. “In some ways it really is like a dog with rabies. We’re not talking about the flu. We’re talking about a werewolf that has taken ill in both body and mind. The longer they live, the crazier they get. The crazier they get, the more violent they are. They’re also more likely to spread the contagion to other wolves. The Werewolf Council would rather have them put down than to risk any loners or packs that might be in the area.”

“I don’t know if this one has anything to do with Morgana’s situation. I just wanted it out there.” Vince drank the last of his coffee.

“Now that I think about it, there might have been some buzz in the office about wolf activity in Jacksonville.” Roger frowned, considering. Then he shrugged. “We’ll look into it. It might be connected. I guess I’ll be off then – unless either of you have something else to add?”

They shook their heads.

“Okay. Do me a favor and ask Michael Keegan to give the office a call when you see him next. Need to tie up the loose ends. I’ll give you both a call to follow up later.”

The three of them shook hands. As Roger walked away, Vincent turned to Morgana.

“It’s pretty much over at this point, I think. Are you ready to head back?”

She smiled.

“Yes, I think I am.”

As they paid and made their way back to the old pickup, she thought of her life. She’d had a dead end job, a shoe-box sized apartment, no prospects. She’d wanted a change. Now she had one. She’d make the most of it.

* * *

In the hidden abyss

This little act was over. His old puppets had proven faulty. Yet now he had a new tool, a new avenue to try. It would need maturation, time to learn, time to grow strong. Meanwhile, he would seed himself deep inside it, make this implement his in a way that the wolves he’d used for so many eons could never be.

The sword may not be lost. Certainly, his cause was not.

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So he would wait, as patient as a spider on its web, until this newest option was ready. He would plan for the day when this investment came to fruition and he walked upon the earth once again. A forgotten god no longer, a general seeking his liege lord, ready serve up the world on a platter to his master.

He would savor the rewards.

EPILOGUE

The Wood

In that secret place between worlds, was a lake. Clear as crystal, it was surrounded by a vast forest of trees. Beyond that were the mountains, their snow-capped peaks rising to challenge the sky. That sky was cloudy today, turning dark as it neared the mountains in the distance.

At the lake shore, Gwynn ap Nudd watched a glowing patch of water, the play of light reflecting the image of a boat. In the skiff were a man and a boy. They appeared ordinary, as mundanely human as could be. They weren't. Especially the child.

"Must he be sacrificed, Father? Is there no redemption available to him?"

Gwynn did not turn from His scrying. Lifting a gauntleted hand, He motioned His daughter forward. The woman who had been known as the Lady of the Lake came up beside Him to gaze in the water.

"Redemption lies in the choices he makes, Daughter. It has ever been thus." He waved at the image. The lake shallows rippled, the picture broke apart. Bits of light and color danced, then coalesced. What the water showed now was a battered truck on a highway. "She has made her choices. The echoes of them will linger for some time."

"I shall miss her." The Lady's voice was wistful. "I shall miss all of them, my children, my legacy. Morgana especially was a joy to teach and watch grow." She sighed. "She will be safe there, in America?"

"Yes. The sword as well." He waved at the picture again. This time it showed them Michael Keegan. He was packing his things at the hotel, preparing to leave. "He will ensure it."

“The wolves cannot be so easily deterred by single man,” she protested. “Nothing of the Dark is.”

“Werewolves are not wholly Dark, regardless of their origin. Even Skoll is not completely evil, though he is sunk so deep in his own greed, his own ambitions, that he might as well be.”

Gwynn let the glow on the water go out and turned away from the lake. The Lady followed Him as He walked from the shore into the forest. Thunder rumbled, echoing from the horizon. They looked up, seeing the clouds gradually turn black.

“It will storm,” she murmured, thinking of the future ahead. “They will have to weather it.”

“So they shall.”

“And Excalibur?”

Gwynn’s white eyes flared within the shadows of his helm.

“Will sleep. It’s time has not yet come. There are others who will see to the Chained One’s next bid for freedom.”