



North Star (Yule Lads #2)

Author: TA Moore

Category: LGBT+

Description: Dylan Hollie saved Christmas, not that he can tell anyone about it.

Now all he has to worry about is finding out who killed the previous Santa and set everything in motion.

It should be easy enough. Hes got plenty of suspects. Between Santas ambitious relatives, who all think they could do a better job of filling out the red suit, and the impenetrable mire of Winter Court politics there were more people who wanted the jolly man dead than alive.

Right now the prime suspects are the Yule Lads. Santas magically contracted bodyguards; the Lads have been at this too many centuries to fail so comprehensively all at once.

Dropped into the middle of this, in a world hed never believed in, Dylan has to try and work out who to trust, and that maybe the answer is no-one.

Hed also like to know if Santas ever retire. The benefits are good, and the health insurance is insane, but he definitely doesnt want to be Santa this year!

Total Pages (Source): 15

Chapter One

“Just to be clear, it’s not a Christmas party,” the dark-haired man said as he ushered the two paramedics off the lift and onto the floor belonging to Demre and Hill Finances. “It’s an end-of-year celebration.”

Nobody had asked.

Dylan hefted his jump bag up onto his shoulder and cocked his head to one side as he looked the man up and down.

“Huh,” he said.

Normally he would be all for a non-denominational December. Not everything had to be about Christmas. In fact, right now, the less he heard about it the better. That said, it seemed a little disingenuous to make that claim on the twenty-first of December while wearing a Santa suit.

The man was self-aware enough to look awkward as he adjusted the fur-lined collar of his suit. He flushed and pulled the fake beard down under his chin. The elastic dug into his ears.

“This was...for the children,” he said.

Dylan glanced at his watch. The second hand ticked along inexorably as the date on the face quivered a minute away from clicking over to the twenty-second.

“Really?” he asked.

Alice stepped past him

“You’ve made his day,” she said cheerfully. “He hates Christmas.”

The man preened just a little under her attention. Alice tended to have that effect on people. Sometimes Dylan wondered what the fact they’d been made partners said about him.

“I don’t hate Christmas,” Dylan responded on autopilot. “It just shouldn’t start in—”

“August. I know,” Alice said. She gave the not-Santa a megawatt smile and rolled her eyes in mock-exasperation. “That’s how long he’s been complaining about the Dollar Store having reindeer dog toys in stock. So what’s the problem? Your call said someone had an accident?”

The man started to answer, stopped himself, and pulled a dubious face.

“I guess?” he said. “You kind of have to see for yourself.”

He gestured for them to follow him and headed across the lobby toward the smoked glass doors that led the way into the Demre and Hill’s offices. Dylan leaned over to mutter to Alice as they started after him.

“You don’t see Easter eggs in October.”

She jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow. “Give it a rest.”

Fine. Dylan gestured his surrender and stretched his legs to catch up with Not-Santa as the man held the doors open for them. The speaker-distorted sound of the latest

poppy Christmas hit spilled out through the gap, saccharine sweet and quick paced.

“It’s Spotify,” Not-Santa said defensively before Dylan could even hitch an eyebrow.

It might be. That wasn’t enough to help his case, though. Maybe he could pass the colored paper chains off as a craft project, but the six-foot decorated spruce in the middle of the office would be hard to pass off as anything but Christmas.

If Not-Santa wanted to live in denial, though...far be it from Dylan to burst his bubble.

“Can you give us any idea what happened?” he prodded instead.

As they headed through the office, the deflated-looking partygoers shuffled awkwardly out of their way. One of them caught a glare from Not-Santa and quickly pulled the paper crown off his head to stuff in his pocket .

Paper-chain garlands had been torn down and trampled into the thin office carpet, along with the crushed ice and salty meats from a flight of shellfish. Empty champagne bottles had been kicked under tables, and the smell of booze fought with that of seafood.

There was another tree, an artificial one with the slightly lacklustre air of corporate addition to the season. Someone had knocked it into the wall. and it listed crookedly against the millennial gray paint. There were no decorations, but it had been strung with fairy lights. They must have shorted out during the scuffle, with smoke stains bubbled into the paint.

“It’s really nothing to do with us,” Not-Santa said huffily. “They were party crashers. I don’t see why we should be responsible for anything that’s happened.”

Dylan sighed to himself. It was going to be a weird call, wasn't it. He could feel it.

"That's not really our remit," he said. "We just patch people up."

"Yes, well," Not-Santa muttered. "I'm just saying. This is nothing to do with us, and you can tell the Pole that from me."

Dylan stumbled. He caught himself and gave Not-Santa a quick, searching look as he tried to work out if he'd misheard or not. Maybe he had. Not-Santa didn't look as if he knew he'd said anything out of the ordinary. In fact, he didn't even look at Dylan as he stopped at the door to an office and rapped his knuckles pointedly on it.

"The paramedics are here," he said. "Can we come in?"

There was a loud groan that sounded like a sheet of linen being ripped and a muffled answer. It must have sounded like "Yes" to Not-Santa, because he pushed the door open and gestured dramatically at the room on the other side.

Dylan stepped forward and cocked his head to look in.

A stocky man in a torn shirt stood awkwardly in the middle of the room next to the heavily pregnant woman slumped in what looked like a designer chair someone had dragged in from another room. She clutched one of his hands in hers, his fingers cramped and white-looking, while she held her belly with the other. Her head was hung forward, brown hair swung in a curtain to hide her face, as she panted raggedly.

"About time," the stocky man grumbled as he looked up. "We could have had the babe named already—"

"No!" the woman blurted out. She tightened her grip on the man's hand, her nails dug into his skin. "She's not coming. I'm not ready. We were supposed to have another

week.”

“Christmas baby,” Alice said as she started into the room. “That’s so cool.”

“Everyone thinks that,” Dylan said. “Trust me, it’s not always.”

Alice gave him a startled look. Before she could say anything, the woman took a ragged breath as the spasm passed. She loosened her grip on the man’s fingers and looked up. Festive silver makeup was smudged around her eyes, and there was a bruise on her cheek, that precise shade of livid blue that would darken to purple in the next few hours.

“You!” the woman blurted out. Her face twisted with anger as she let go of the man’s hand and tried to push herself up out of the chair. It was a thickly cushioned, slanted cube that didn’t lend itself to easy exit. so she struggled. “What are you doing here?”

Dylan stretched his legs to get her to sit back down. As he reached her she freed one hand from the arm of the chair and slapped him across the face. Her palm hit his cheek hard enough to jerk Dylan’s head to the side and grate the inside of his cheek against his teeth. He tasted blood—hot and salt-fresh—before he felt the sharp itch of pain.

“This is your fault!” the woman said furiously. Her body shook with a mixture of adrenaline and temper as she jabbed a finger at him. “This is all your fault.”

The man in the torn shirt got over his surprise at the outburst and stepped in front of the woman. He glared at Dylan and raised his hand to ward him off.

“Back off,” he ordered, his brow furrowed in a scowl.

Dylan fell back a step and let Alice jump in instead. Whatever was going on, it

wouldn't help to escalate the tension. As Alice helped the woman back down into the chair and distracted the protective friend with a request for water, Dylan turned to Not-Santa, who gave him a judgmental look over his beard.

Yeah, Dylan supposed he could guess why. The "your fault" statement was suggestive, and some people didn't have gaydar. Understandable or not, though, he didn't appreciate the attitude from a hypocrite in a Santa suit.

"So, you said that this woman crashed your Christmas party?" he asked in a deliberately mild voice.

Not-Santa flushed and yanked his beard off.

Alice gave the woman's knee a reassuring pat and then pushed herself to her feet. She jerked her head for Dylan to follow her out of the room .

"She really doesn't want you there," she said apologetically as she pulled her gloves off with a snap. The blue nitrile dangled from one hand as she used the other to smooth her hair back from her face, strands of blond stuck to her sweaty forehead. "It's nothing to do with you, not really, but she's adamant."

Dylan took the gloves from her. He absently tied them into a ball and stuck them into his pocket to dispose of when they got outside.

"She doesn't like men?" he guessed.

He wouldn't have said it was common. Emergency medicine wasn't like obstetrics, where the patient usually had the opportunity to vet their doctor. By the time EMS turned up at a scene, the patients usually only cared about getting whatever was happening to them to stop happening to them. It did happen sometimes, but it wasn't personal.

Alice wrinkled her nose in a worried expression and then shook her head.

“No,” she said and tapped her finger against his chest. “She just...doesn’t like you .”

“Oh,” Dylan said, taken aback. He rubbed the back of his neck as he took that in. “I mean, OK. I suppose it doesn’t change anything, but...why? Do I smell weird to her or something?”

”No,” Alice said quickly. “The cookie cologne is a bit weird, but it’s nice.”

...

Good to know. He should smell of ambergris, cedar and sea salt according to the clerk who’d sold him the aftershave and the label. Instead he smelled like a granny’s handbag.

Probably not his granny. Dylan thought briefly of the woman he’d met last year, her sour humor and her unfortunately probably technically edible stew. Even after that brief meeting he could guess that any bag of hers would smell like animals, blood, and char.

She was the exception that proved the rule, though, and the point was that warm cookies wasn’t the signature scent he’d been going for.

Although he should have known better , a cool, blunt part of his brain he’d been trying to ignore for the best part of December noted, the hair dye didn’t stick either.

Dylan reached up absently to touch the gray streak that had taken root at his temple. That was nothing to do with Yule, he reminded himself; it had shown up back in September.

Same time as the Christmas decorations in Target , that dispassionate part of his brain pointed out, and gray is what we call white now?

That was...not something he wanted to deal with right now. He tossed a mental weighted blanket over the topic and got back to the situation at hand .

“So what is it?” he asked. “Do I know her?”

Alice puffed her cheeks out on a sigh. “Sort of?” she said. “Remember last Christmas, just before you and tall, blond, and chilly got together?”

Not the most flattering description of Dylan’s....of Somerset, but not inaccurate. There had been a lot that happened “just before” their first kiss, though. Quite a lot after it, too. It had been an eventful few days.

Most of it, though, Alice either didn’t know about, or if she had been part of it, she didn’t remember. Not accurately, at least. Not the parts of it with magic and wolves. Sometimes Dylan envied that.

Not all of the time, but...

He pulled his mind out of the what-ifs and tried to focus. What that meant for her was that the “before” was probably...

“The fight we got called out to?” he said. “At the Just-as-High ?”

Alice nodded and waited expectantly for him to catch up. It was exactly fair, since she’d gotten a CliffsNotes version from their patient. There hadn’t been any women in the bachelor’s party, and the sexy Mrs. Claus had no reason to be angry with him.

So that only left...

“The bride?” he said. He stalled briefly as he racked his brain for the name. It had been old-fashioned, something that sounded a poor fit with her fiancé’s bar brawl. Something that started with...

“Irene,” Alice provided for him before he could put his finger on it. “Irene Daly. Her fiancé nearly killed her when he had that psychotic break at the hospital, remember?”

Blond hair straggled over the woman’s face as she slid to the ground. She touched her face with one hand. It came away bloody, and she held it out in a mute “look what you’ve done” to the man.

“I remember,” Dylan said. There was a thready edge to his voice, but Alice didn’t seem to notice. She put her hands in her pockets and bounced nervously on the balls of her feet.

“Anyhow, it turns out that was all your fault,” she said.

“How?” Dylan asked indignantly.

Alice shrugged her agreement with him. “I know,” she sympathized. “But to her, all her troubles started with you...a year ago. So the last face she wanted to see...”

She trailed off, and Dylan filled in the gap.

“Mine,” he said. It was understandable, he supposed. He took a second to think through the logistics and then shrugged. “I’ll call med control and see if we can get anyone to take over here. If not...would she be OK with me driving as long as I don’t touch her?”

Alice didn’t look confident about that, but nodded slowly.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said. “I don’t think we’re in any danger of delivering the baby just yet, but I want to get her in a bed and on a fetal monitor just to be safe. Preferably without her boyfriend in there with her so we can find out what happened.”

Dylan glanced over her shoulder to where the “boyfriend” hovered uncomfortably with a plastic cup of water. He paused with his hand halfway to the radio clipped to his chest.

“From what End-of-Year Nick over there told me,” he said, with a tilt of his head toward the man who’d turned out to be Demre and Hill’s COO. He had shed the red jacket now, at least, and was arguing with another member of staff about something. “That’s not her boyfriend. She arrived with someone else.”

Between the eggnog and covering his ass, Nick hadn’t been too clear on the details of who. It had sounded like he’d know who they were, even if they hadn’t gotten an invite.

Alice looked surprised. “Was her face like that when she got here?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” Dylan said. “Probably not, though. Nick said she didn’t want to be here at first...”

“She’s definitely not dressed for a party,” Alice said.

“I hadn’t noticed.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t,” she muttered under her breath.

Dylan ignored that.

“Things got worse when they were asked to leave, Irene refused to go with him—the man who brought her—and that’s when he got rough with her. And when her new admirer stepped in.”

Alice grimaced, the corners of her mouth turned down. “Now I feel bad for having an attitude with him,” she said. “And for Irene. Even if she’s not being fair to you, she’s had the worst Christmas two years in a row.”

There might be some who could argue with that. Not Dylan. He might not be too happy about being roped into the family business, and he was definitely in over his head, but there were...some perks.

Dylan’s lips tingled at the memory of frost-chilled kisses and hunger. He had to cough to clear his suddenly dry throat before he could get back to the problem in hand.

“Go check on Irene,” he said. “See if she’ll get in the ambulance if I’m driving. I’ll get on Med Control.”

Alice nodded and turned to go. She stopped after a few steps and spun back around.

“Oh, and happy birthday,” she said with a grin. “In advance, since I probably won’t see you on the day.”

“No one ever does,” Dylan said. It was meant to be a joke, but the problem with inside jokes was that...sometimes...they just sounded unnecessarily dark. Especially when you’d grown up in foster care and the only one “inside” the joke was you. Alice looked as if Dylan’s throwaway line had knocked the wind out of her. Dylan racked his brain quickly for a takeback. He chuckled awkwardly and went with, “Now you know why I hate Christmas.”

That did not work. Alice just creased her face up like she'd seen a sick puppy.

"I never thought of that," she said.

Oh, this was going to follow him. Dylan held up his hand to stem the wave of sympathy headed his way.

"It was a joke," he said. "It's fine. Go."

Alice hesitated, but finally did as she was told. As she walked away, Dylan sighed to himself and rubbed the back of his neck.

He couldn't even pull off "jolly." One year in and the whole Santa gig still didn't come naturally to him, bloodline or not.

It was one of those sour-grape thoughts that came and went. This time, though, the bad taste lingered as it occurred to Dylan that Irene might have a point. Just because he'd not done anything to her, didn't mean her problems hadn't started because of him.

He could try and pass the buck to the person who'd murdered Dylan's estranged grandfather, the incumbent Santa Claus. It was usually easy to pin things on someone who'd commit violence against the most beloved of seasonal avatars. The time, though, it didn't work. The killer might have set the ball rolling when he...did whatever he did...but it was Dylan who'd brought it into Irene's life.

Not on purpose, but if he'd not been at the Just-as-High that night then maybe she'd have been happily married.

Or , Dylan thought dryly as he remembered the unprepossessing drunk whose head he'd stitched up, married, at least.

One way or another.

It was a mean enough thought that Dylan felt awkwardly exposed .

“Dispatch, this is medic eighteen,” he said. “We’ve had a soft refusal here based on previous contact. Can you free up any other team to transport an expectant woman to Belling General?”

They could not, as it turned out.

Between brawls, car accidents, and alcohol poisoning, the Belling paramedics were all occupied. Either Irene got in the bus with Dylan or she signed a waiver that she was refusing the ride against medical advice.

It had been a close-run thing, but Alice’s concern over the baby had swayed Irene to agree. On condition that Dylan didn’t go anywhere near her. She’d clutched Alice’s hand the whole ride down in the elevator, as if whatever bad luck she thought Dylan brought with him would jump out to bite her.

She needn’t have worried.

The North Pole might not be thrilled with their new Santa, but they weren’t going to try and get rid of him. Not with only three days until Christmas Eve, at least. They had cut it close enough last year to know they didn’t want to risk what happens to Yule with no Santa at the reins of the Sleigh.

Dylan turned onto Wild Avenue, past the strings of fairy lights strung from the holly bedecked lampposts. In the plate glass window of Wick’s Furniture Store, an animatronic Santa raised a plastic cookie halfway to his mouth and dropped it again on repeat.

“Dylan?” Alice said as she leaned in from the back. She put her hand on his shoulder. “The baby has started to show signs of distress. We need to get to the hospital.”

Shit.

“On it,” Dylan said.

He flicked the sirens on and put his foot down. Alice patted his shoulder and disappeared into the back of the ambulance to check on the patient. The traffic lights on the intersection ahead flickered to red. Dylan put off radioing in the upgraded code to the hospital long enough to hit the pre-empt switch on the dash.

Ahead of him the light turned green. Dylan glanced down briefly as he reached for the radio .

His fingers had just touched the dial when the glare of lights through the side window made him look up. He didn’t have time to brake. He had just long enough to wish he’d fucked Somerset more and listened to him less. The last year would have been a lot more fun. Then the Jeep slammed into the side of the ambulance.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:07 am

Chapter Two

The coffee in a dive bar wasn't any better than the whiskey.

Somerset downed it anyhow—it was his dive bar, he couldn't really complain—and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He put the empty cup down on the desk and fixed his visitor with a hard look. The myrkálfar visibly shrunk down in the chair and squirmed uncomfortably.

“Nothing?” Somerset said.

“I can't find what isn't there,” Enid said, as she spread her hands in a helpless gesture.

She'd scrubbed them recently, from the raw knuckles and smell of Irish Spring soap, but her nails were already rimed with black. They were born to the forges, her kind, and even a decade spent among mortals couldn't wash the stain of it away. To the Courts, it was a badge of honor. For the unCourté...either they got into manual labor or they spent a lot on soap.

Enid spent a lot on soap. She was a loan officer at the Belling National Bank, which was why Somerset thought she might be able to chase something up .

The Courts were hidebound by choice, but even they had to adapt to the mortal world's economic discipline. Plumbers didn't accept enchanted apples as payment. For that matter, neither did most of the fey. Fairy gold was all well and good, but there was always a chance it would turn into acorns in your pocket. A bank transfer

didn't have that problem. Not after the first time a highborn of the Courts had their assets frozen for wire fraud.

Wolves didn't have pockets, of course, but a plot to overthrow the Winter Court's most powerful vassal had to involve people who did. Someone out there had been bribed, bought, or bullied into their part in it. That meant money had changed hands, and that should leave a trail of some sort.

Yet here Enid was to tell him there was nothing.

Somerset leaned forward and braced his elbows on the table. He cocked his head to the side.

"My brothers still bank there?" he asked.

Enid ran her finger around the collar of her shirt. Her eyes darted around the room shiftily, as if something might jump off the walls to get her out of this.

"I...I could lose my job over this," she muttered. "There are rules. A lot of rules."

Somerset raised an eyebrow. "Tell me," he said. "Any of those rules about using forged credentials to get a job?"

Hot color flushed Enid's face for a moment and then, just as quickly, drained back out of it. She was left pallid and queasy-looking.

"That's not..." She stopped and twisted her hands together in her lap. Her knuckles pushed, white and bony, against scrubbed raw skin. "I paid for those. Fair and square. You can't hold them over me forever."

"Paid for," Somerset agreed, "but not paid off. But that's beside the point, because

you're talking about a debt. I was threatening you. Do you see the difference?"

He waited, and Enid glared at him, her mouth pinched tight shut to keep the words in. The deadlock didn't last long, and Enid was the one who folded. Her shoulders slumped, and she looked down at her hands.

"Your brothers are still some of the bank's 'special clients,'" she admitted in a low, sour voice as she picked at her dirty nails. "Nothing has changed there, but there was none of the activity you asked me to look for. No large transactions, no regular withdrawals, and no new payees on the accounts."

Somerset scowled. It wasn't what he'd wanted to hear .

"Nothing out of the ordinary?" he pushed.

Enid choked out a not-that-amused laugh. "Plenty by my standards," she said. "All I deal with are business loans and people losing their house, not arms dealers and payoffs. But nothing your brothers hadn't paid for before."

The coffee hadn't cut it. Somerset leaned back and reached for the drawer where he kept the whiskey. He pulled a bottle out, twisted the cap off, and poured a generous shot into his cup. The smell that seeped out of the bottle was of snow, hot milk, and frost-slow honey.

Enid licked her lips and swallowed. Her throat made a dry click as she did so.

Somerset didn't offer her a drink.

"We all have hobbies," he said as he put the bottle away. He pushed the drawer shut with his knee. "What about Jars? What transactions went through for him?"

He took a swig of the whiskey. Enid watched him with a thirst that went beyond the physical. The taste of home—stews brewed with fey meat, whiskey touched with blood magic and bee magic, fabrics stitched together with magic and silver—was an expensive indulgence in the mortal world. Somerset should know, since he was one of the people who set the price. Most of the unCourté couldn't afford it. Enid certainly couldn't.

"I am not supposed to even have access to these accounts," she said after she cleared her throat. "I didn't note down every penny handed out. Just, like you said, anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing."

"There's something," Somerset said. "You've just not found it yet. Look deeper. Find out what the Pole spent its money on last year."

Dismay weighed on Enid like chains. She shrunk down in the chair.

"If I'm caught, I'll lose my job. If I'm caught, I'll have your brothers after me," she pointed out. "I'd be better off if I just let you ruin me now."

Somerset smirked at her. "Trust me," he said. "You're wrong. I—"

Before he could finish what he was about to say, someone rapped their knuckles on the door. They didn't wait for a response before they pushed it open and stuck their head in. Dark red hair stuck up in unruly tangles around a sharp, bony face.

"Boss?" Gull said.

He didn't look like the words tasted like shit in his mouth. Like everything else since Gull had been discharged from Belling Memorial, it rang true. He didn't remember his name, his brothers, or even what he was. By all accounts, both Courts were desperate to find out why, in case it wasn't a geas or a curse but just some sort

of...infectious mortality he'd picked up in the ward.

So far Jars had been a diplomatic barrier between Gull and the sharp-fingered scholars of the Courts. Whether he remembered it or not, he was a Yule Lad, and they were the only ones who got to kill their own. That was why Gull had a job at the Just-as-High, despite being a shit barman. If anyone refused to accept Jars's soft refusal, they'd have to deal with Somerset's more direct approach.

That and it let Somerset keep an eye on Gull, just in case his brother was more patient than anyone had given him credit for...or remembered something useful in time for Christmas.

"What?" Somerset snapped in annoyance.

Gull looked apologetic, but that didn't unbreak the tension that Somerset had built up with Enid. He hesitated to either come or go, until Somerset growled under his breath in annoyance and gestured for Gull to come on in.

Gull pushed the door open, but stayed on the threshold. He stuck both hands in the pockets of his jeans and shifted his weight absently from one foot to the other.

"There's someone outside for you," he said finally, after a glance at Enid.

"Who?"

Gull shrugged. "Short guy, motorbike leathers," he said. "Seems like a dick."

It was a shorthand of a description, but it still worked.

Stúfur. Who else.

Somerset pushed back from the desk and stood up. He pulled his jacket off the back of the chair in one absent movement and shrugged it on.

“What does he want?” he asked.

Gull looked caught off guard by the question. He widened his eyes and then shook his head. “I don’t know. He just said to...um...get off your ass?”

Twelve. That was how many brothers Somerset had. Thirteen Yule Lads. And yet none of the ones he liked could be trusted not to have broken their oath to Yule and betrayed Santa.

Name the ones you like , a stray voice in the back of his brain nudged him, go on, I’ll wait.

Somerset ignored that.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” he said. “Tell him to wait. ”

Gull looked uncertain, but nodded and stepped back out of the room. He left the door open as he headed back into the bar. Somerset ran a finger around his neck to adjust the collar of his coat and looked at Enid.

“Where were we?” he asked.

“You were going to threaten me,” she said with a shard of bitter defiance in her voice.

He had been. Maybe he needed to reconsider his approach.

“Do I need to? You know I make a bad enemy,” he said. There was no reason to reinvent the wheel, after all. “But a fair enough friend. You might want to think about

which is going to benefit you more.”

He reached down and opened the drawer with the whiskey in it. The bottle was over three-quarters empty. That was, Somerset judged as he lifted it out, about the right amount for a gesture. He unscrewed the cap and poured it into the cup, then pushed it over the desk.

“Someone in Yule has to have paid someone off,” he said. “Find it.”

Enid had the good sense to hesitate, but she’d been away from home a long time. The smell of blood and liquor wore her down, and she reached greedily for the cup.

“I can’t promise anything,” she said as she wrapped her hands around the glazed white sides. Her fingers left smudges of grease on it, and her nails were visibly dirtier. Grease bloomed in the creases of her knuckles. “But I’ll look...as soon as I can.”

“Before Christmas Eve,” Somerset told her.

Enid’s face fell, and she spluttered out the start of an objection. Somerset didn’t bother to wait to hear what it was. He could probably guess if he had to. Instead he left her to her whiskey and closed the door of the office behind him.

It turned out that when Gull had said “outside” he’d meant on the street.

Stúfur was parked at the curb. He straddled his matte-black bike—an almost identical replacement to the one destroyed last Christmas—with one booted foot braced on the road and his helmet between his thighs.

“We have a problem,” he said as Somerset joined him .

The chill wind pinched Somerset's cheeks affectionately and tangled his coattails around his legs. He put his hands in his pockets and glanced around casually to see if there was any sign of their other brothers.

"Just one?" Somerset said dryly. "What are you doing here? I thought you were scheduled for duty tonight."

Before he could get an answer, Gull came out of the bar and tossed a bottle of water to Stúfur, who caught it out of the air in a gloved hand. Somerset turned to give Gull a level look, which made the man swallow hard and disappear back inside. Irritating as his memory loss was in the search for who'd killed the previous Santa, an intact Gull would never be so accommodating. Stúfur ignored the interaction as he dug his nails into the plastic and pulled the top off the bottle, spilling water over his hands and knees. He took a swig and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"I am," he said. "So by rights, I'm on Jars's time. You rather I went to him?"

He cocked an eyebrow as he took another drink and waited for an answer. Somerset grabbed the end of the bottle and squeezed until the plastic crumpled in his hand. Stúfur choked and spluttered as the water shot into his mouth and sprayed out of his mouth. He slapped Somerset's hand out of his face as he doubled over and coughed the liquid back up.

"If you're on duty," Somerset said, "where the fuck is Dylan?"

Stúfur pulled his T-shirt up to wipe his face, material balled up in his hand as he pulled it over his mouth. He sat back and gave Somerset a mocking look.

"See, that sounds like personal, not professional, concern," he said. "I thought we'd agreed to put that on the back burner."

Somerset choked down his knee-jerk insult. They had. There was a good reason for it, as well. Yule was the Winter Court's most powerful vassal, but that alliance wasn't always free of friction. Santa was mortal. Yule wouldn't accept less. That had always been a hard pill to swallow for the hidebound and highborn, especially when the mortal was a wild card like Dylan Hollie.

It would not help for them to find out that he shared Somerset's bed. He'd gotten his hands dirty on their behalf far too often for them to want him whispering sweet nothings in Santa's ear.

Somerset mentally grabbed his attention by the scruff of the neck to stop it from wandering off after that mental image. He acknowledged Stúfur's point as much as he was going to with one small correction.

"Where the fuck is Santa."

Stúfur pulled his helmet from between his thighs and pulled it back on. From behind the polarized visor, his voice was grim.

"Demre and Hill," he said, "the Winter Court's bankers."

"Shit," Somerset gritted out between clenched teeth. "Why the hell did you let him—"

"You can't even stop him riding your cock," Stúfur said. "How am I supposed to stop him doing whatever he wants? Are you coming?"

Somerset gritted his teeth. They didn't have time to fight. It would take too long for Stúfur's legs to mend. He reached into his pocket and grabbed the keys to his pickup.

"Lead the way," he said.

“It wasn’t a Christmas party,” Lucas Underhill, the COO of the firm and adopted son of the founder, said dismissively as he turned his back on Somerset. Lucas was human...enough, a changeling reared by the Courts to serve as a go-between with what they needed of the mortal world. Finance. Trade. Property. The Courts had always kept them. Lucas brushed a tangled ball of paper strips onto the floor and shut a drawer. “We just had an end of year celebration. Not that I should have to answer to the likes of you. You’re unCourtied. You’re nothing.”

“That’s under review,” Somerset said. He looked around the offices. Not that he really needed to. Office Christmas parties were just another ritual—with drink and effigies and the sacrifice of the occasional marriage. He could smell the Yule magic in the air as it seeped from the hastily denuded fir tree in the middle of the office and curdled in the half-drained shot glasses of eggnog. The point was to see how hard Demre and Hill tried to sell the lie. He ran his gaze over the wrapping paper shoved into waste baskets around the room and the single crumpled paper crown left on a chair.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” he asked with interest as he prowled along through the office after the man.

Dismissive or not, Lucas had enough sense to know that was a dangerous question. He stopped his half-hearted tidy and turned around to face Somerset.

“That’s...I...we are under the Winter Court’s protection.” He tried to visibly puff himself up with the change of subject, but Somerset didn’t know who the display was for. It didn’t fool him. Even Lucas looked like he could feel how thin his bluster was. “It’s a violation of our treaties for Yule to set foot on our territory without—”

Somerset leaned over and plucked the sprig of mistletoe from the lapel of the Santa coat. He twiddled it idly between his fingers as he said, “Invitation?”

Lucas pressed his mouth together, his lips pinched together in a thin, unhappy line.

Somerset flicked the sprig away.

“Where did he go?” he asked.

There was a pause, and then Lucas took a deep breath and visibly tried a different approach.

“The wolf is not our problem,” he said. “It wasn’t invited—who would?—and we might have broken the rules with—”

“Laws,” Somerset corrected mildly. It was a much bigger word than rules, and came from a less flexible time. The Winter Court might benefit from Yule, but it didn’t bend the knee to it or its trappings. That had been enshrined between them almost as long as the Yule Lads’ service to Santa had been.

“Laws,” Lucas conceded. His confidence slipped a little with the interruption. It took him a second to pull it back together. When he had he brushed a speck of something off his sleeve and shrugged. “But technically the party was for the mortal employees, not for those of us with other loyalties. It was all fine until the wolf got here. Once it saw the decorations, it kicked over the buffet table and started to threaten us. It had a pregnant woman with it and left her behind, so we had to deal with her as well. Why was the wolf even on this side? Who called it—”

“We can come back to the wolf,” Somerset interrupted him, and they would. “You called the paramedics?”

Lucas heaved an annoyed sigh and smoothed his hair back from his face. “Someone did, and then I had to deal with them.”

“Where are they?”

“I...what?” Lucas spluttered. He wrinkled his nose as he huffed, “I don’t know. I don’t care . They got the woman and left. That’s all I wanted. Are we done here? I feel Yule’s invitation is running thin.”

“Good thing I’m still uncourtied then,” Somerset said and grabbed the collar of the man’s jacket.

He dragged him over to what was left of the buffet.

“We saw them come in,” he said. “We didn’t see them leave. ”

Lucas flailed around inelegantly inside his coat. He tried to grab at Somerset’s wrist and claw at his fingers.

“Get off me!” he said. “How dare you, what do you think—”

Somerset dunked him face first in a platter of seafood. He held him there as the man coughed and choked on the salt and spiced flesh. A shrimp fell off the edge of the plate, and Somerset grabbed it with his free hand and tossed it in his mouth.

He’d missed dinner.

As he chewed on the tender flesh he pulled the COO upright again.

“What way—”

“They took the other exit.”

It wasn’t Lucas, oysters jammed in his nostrils and eyes streaming from the sting of

lemon, who answered. Somerset turned his head to look at the heavy-set man with the scarred knuckles who'd come out of the back office.

"There's another exit?" he said.

The man nodded as he pulled a cap out of the pocket of his coat and pulled it on over his close-cropped hair. The red brim of it came down past his ears.

"I can show you."

Somerset let Lucas go. The man staggered back, hit the table, and slid to the ground. He spat out some parsley and picked the meat from his nose.

"I'm going to kill them," Somerset muttered under his breath. He looked at the redcap. "Lead the way."

Lucas threw a chunk of raw fish across the floor. It skipped on the flat carpet tiles and rolled under someone's chair. "Why do you care?" he demanded. "They're just mortals. A dime a dozen, for fuck's sake. Easily replaced if they're your pets."

Somerset held up a finger at the redcap to buy himself a moment. Then he bent over and grabbed the front of Lucas' shirt to haul him back to his toes. They were nose to nose as Somerset leaned in.

"Piss me off more," he warned, "and we'll see how long it takes your patron to replace you."

Lucas curled his mouth into a sneer. "You wouldn't dare," he said confidently. "My mother would never allow it."

"Who's going to tell her?" Somerset said. He let go of Lucas with a shove that sent

the other man staggering into the buffet table. “People disappear into the cold all the time. They always have. ”

Lucas caught himself, his hand in a plate of eggs, and glared at Somerset.

“I have friends,” he said. “Important friends.”

Somerset smirked as he turned to go. “Liar,” he tossed over his shoulder as he followed the redcap toward the fire escape.

“The wolf came with the woman?” he asked as they headed down the narrow, bare concrete stairwell.

The redcap looked over his shoulder for a second and then nodded. “It didn’t want to leave without her either,” he said and frowned. “What would a wolf want with a pregnant woman? It’s not like they have a taste for mortal meat.”

Somerset grimaced.

“I don’t think they were here for her,” he said. “The paramedic who came for her—”

“He’s one of Yule’s,” the redcap interrupted. “You can smell it on him.”

“He is Yule,” Somerset corrected him grimly. “That was Santa, St. Nick himself.”

The redcap took a moment to absorb that.

“I should have told him what I wanted for Christmas,” he wisecracked eventually.

“Why?” Somerset asked skeptically. “You been good?”

“Doing pretty good tonight,” the redcap pointed out.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:07 am

Chapter Three

The Jeep smashed into the side of the ambulance. The impact threw Dylan to the side and snapped him back, half-throttled by the seatbelt as it cut into his collarbone. Glass chunks showered him from the smashed side window. Instinct kept his hands on the wheel as he tried to straighten the ambulance out. Behind him he heard Irene scream and the distinct, meaty slap of a body hitting metal.

Alice hadn't been buckled in.

The weight of the ambulance meant it kept going, just jarred off course as it slid over the icy roads toward the sidewalk. The Jeep came along for the ride, front end jammed against the ambulance as it scraped along the road.

Dylan swallowed, his mouth dry and throat raw, as he yanked the steering wheel around as hard as he could. It didn't make enough of a difference. The back end fishtailed out from under him as they bounced up the curb. It clipped an icy street light and knocked it out of the ground, chunks of concrete sent bouncing over the sidewalk. The Jeep finally pulled free and slid over the road until it came to a stop against a parked truck .

"What's going on!" Irene screamed from the back. She started to sob in heaving, panicked whoops. "I should have gone home. I told you I wanted to go home!"

She might be right.

Dylan braced himself as the ambulance crashed into the window of a coffee shop.

The awning ripped off on top of the cab as the glass shattered. Broken metal bars from the window panes scraped gouges into the paintwork. One jabbed through the windshield, fracture patterns shattered out, and clipped the side of Dylan's head.

Tables and chairs were sent flying across the room or crushed under the tires.

It finally slid to a stop.

The engine died with a dry cough, the smell of hot metal sour as it hung in the air. Dylan let out a shaky breath and peeled his hands off the steering wheel. They left sweaty prints on the pleather.

"It's OK," he said. It didn't sound like he was convinced, so he tried again. "We're OK. Irene?"

She just cried, a low, hopeless whimper that put Dylan's teeth on edge. Dylan felt blood run down the side of his face and wiped it away on his sleeve. Head wounds bled excessively. He didn't think it was serious. It was probably best not to check though, just in case.

"Alice?" he tried again as he reached down to unclip his seatbelt. It jammed. The strap dug into his chest as he struggled with the release.

There was no answer.

Dylan lost his patience and grabbed the strap near his hip. He yanked at it as hard he could a couple of times. That didn't do much.

"Alice!" Dylan raised his voice as he repeated her name. "You there?"

There was nothing for a long, worrying wait. Then he heard someone choke and

Alice groggily answered.

“What jus’ happ’d?”

That could wait. Dylan finally fumbled the seatbelt free with adrenaline-numb fingers. The nylon strap hung slack over his chest instead of retracting, and he shrugged himself out from under it.

“Just stay with Irene,” he said. “I need to check on the driver.”

The door was caved in. Dylan tried it anyhow, but it was stuck in place. He crawled over onto the passenger seat and let himself out that side. His legs nearly folded under him as they hit the scarred floor, muscles turned to rubber and knees to jelly as the adrenaline hit subsided.

Things hurt. He registered the various twinges and aches—the hot scrape of bruised ribs, the frayed pull of insulted muscles in his neck as he looked around—as he hung onto the side of the door and tried to remember how to lock his knees.

On the street a slick of oil leaked out from under the Jeep. It was dark and greasy on the grimy slick of slush and ice that covered the roads. The overheated metal parts ticked softly as they cooled down in the snow.

Dylan took a deep breath, cold air prickly in his throat, and slapped the side of the ambulance.

“Stay put,” he said. “I need to check on the other guy.”

He pushed himself upright and limped across the road, one hand tucked under his coat to cradle his ribs. His breath smoked from his lips.

The lights had changed, he told himself. At his side his fingers twitched absently as he replayed the moment he'd flicked the switch, the pressure of the lever against his finger. He'd seen the light react to the pre-empt.

As he got closer to the Jeep his steps faltered. It looked like the vehicle version of "ridden hard and put away wet," and not just from the recent collision. That could be held responsible for the fender that lay sideways on the road, ripped from its moorings, and the crushed hood. Not the deep gouges that decorated the side, down through the faded red paint to dent the metalwork underneath. The windshield looked as if it had been broken for a while too, branches and bits of greenery stuck in the cracks.

Something wasn't right.

No, that wasn't it. Something was wrong.

Before the realization could take root, the door of the Jeep slammed open with enough force to warp the hinges. It hung crookedly in the frame as the driver pulled himself out.

Dylan stopped in his tracks.

Wild blond hair hung lank around a grubby, wind-burned face that was half-hidden behind a matted gingery beard. A heavy duster hung from bony shoulders, the waxed cotton worn threadbare in places and greasily moldy in others. None of that did enough to hide the sickly gray lengths of briar that poked through his skin and pushed out of his nose and ears.

Fear locked Dylan's feet in place. He guessed that since "flight" hadn't done him much good last time, his body had decided "freeze" was worth a go .

The last time he'd seen Winter's Wolves had been a year ago, almost to the day. He'd double-crossed them. It hadn't been intentional, but he didn't know if that would do him any good.

"You?" the wolf said. Its voice sounded harsh, as if it had to force the words out. "You...aren't meant to be here. Our hunt is soon, but not yet."

Dylan swallowed the dry lump in his throat.

It didn't seem to remember him. Or maybe they weren't the same wolves. That would teach Dylan to be wolf-racist.

The absurdity of that thought almost startled him into a laugh. Not quite. His ribs hurt too much, for a start.

"Then what are you here for?" he asked.

The wolf cocked its head to the side. It had the same expression on its face as a confused golden retriever on TikTok...just pointier and bloodier.

When the wolf continued to draw a blank, someone else answered for him.

"For our ticket," a low, rough voice said from behind him.

Dylan jerked around.

Two thorn-wrapped wolves stood on the road behind him. Unlike the driver of the Jeep, who still looked...more or less...a twisted human, these looked like twisted wolves. Ice-crusting briars and thorny runners twisted around the original person to bulk and reshape it. They crouched on the road on paws made of dark burls and cracked the concrete of the road with frost-gray claws. Boughs of holly bulked out

their shoulders and ruff, red berries splattered over them like blood.

The man who'd spoken stood between them. He had a black eye and a backpack slung over his shoulder.

"What?" Dylan said. It probably wasn't the best question to ask, but it was the best that Dylan could come up with under the circumstances.

The man started to answer, stopped, and coughed into his elbow. It was a surprisingly polite move for a monster. When he straightened up, he wiped dirty slush from the corner of his mouth.

"Our ticket," he repeated. "We need it to go home. So we're going to take it."

He waited like he expected Dylan to object. So it probably wasn't a lost stub from Amtrak he'd dropped.

"I don't think we've got it," Dylan said .

The man's face twisted with quick, inhuman rage as something sharp and dark writhed under his skin... and then it was gone. He grinned instead, his teeth very white and his gums very red, and tapped his finger against his nose.

"That's right," he said. "If the eye doesn't see then hearts won't feel. Turn your cheek, Sainted. We won't tell."

Something scraped behind Dylan, and he remembered the driver of the Jeep. He looked over his shoulder and saw the blond wolf had gotten closer.

Its coat flapped open in the wind, as much as it could with the thorns woven through it, and Dylan saw the T-shirt. It was faded and greasy, the wear of a good year on

cheap cotton and cheaper print, but it was still just about legible.

It was the same Wolf Pack T-shirt a man had worn to his friend's bachelor party at the Just-as-High a year ago, before Winter's wolves claimed him. The same wolves, which meant the same pack leader.

The man who, a year ago, had been going to marry the woman in the back of Dylan's ambulance. That probably wasn't a coincidence.

"Don't do this," Dylan said, and he took a wary step backward as he glanced back and forth between the wolves. "I can help you."

The blond wolf snorted, snotty and wet, and feinted a charge in Dylan's direction. Dylan flinched and nearly tripped over his own feet.

"You can't even help yourself," the groom said with contempt.

Something creaked behind Dylan. He looked around to see the back of the ambulance swing open and Alice scramble out. She hung on to the door for balance as she looked around. There was a goose-egg bump on her temple, the bruising visible through her tangled hair, and blood smeared over her mouth and nose.

"Wha'...what's going on?" she asked. "Dylan. We gotta get her to the...to the hospital. She's—"

The groom jerked his head at one of the wolves that flanked him. It shook itself, shedding a cloud of frost, and started forward.

"Wait!" Dylan blurted.

They did. That was more than he'd expected, and he drew a blank for a second on

what to say next. He closed his mouth, swallowed hard, and tried again.

“Wait,” he repeated. “Irene needs to go to the hospital. She’s hurt.”

That wasn’t bad, for something off the cuff .

A ticket had to be in fairly good condition to be accepted, after all. Except...Dylan had been part of the otherworld for a year now. Even part-time, you picked things up. One of which was that it was never that easy

The other wolves looked at the groom. Out of the corner of his eye Dylan saw Alice wipe her face on her sleeve and pull herself up onto her feet. He thought she was going to run, but instead she leaned back into the ambulance and gestured with her hands.

That wasn’t going to work, but Dylan supposed he couldn’t fault her for it. He tried very hard not to look directly at her as she helped the heavily pregnant Irene climb clumsily down onto the road.

The groom stared at Dylan for a moment and then smiled. His mouth stretched so wide that it looked like it had to hurt, the skin pulled tight and raw at the corners.

What a big smile you have... Dylan thought absently.

“Then we take both women, and yours can care for mine,” he said and jerked his head at the wolf. “Get them.”

Oh good, Dylan thought, he’d made it worse. That was...not helpful.

Sometimes, at times like this, he wondered if his grandfather had really thought it through before he made Dylan the heir to Yule. So far he was coming down on the

side of probably not thoroughly...maybe the whole “seat of the pants” thing was genetic.

Dylan took a deep breath and felt his lungs cramp as the cold night air filled them.

“Alice! Run!” he yelled and threw himself into the path of the wolf.

He grabbed hold of a thick, thorn-strung “tendon” with one hand. The hooked spurs, the ends capped in black ice, ripped his fingers and jabbed into his palms. Blood dripped from between his knuckles and ran sluggishly down his wrist. The jolt of pain slammed up his arm and caught in his throat, but it was chased by a cold, heavy numbness that sunk through muscle and down into bone.

Dylan staggered over his own feet as the wolf dragged him across the road. He swore under his breath as he tightened his grip and reached over the wolf’s shoulder to grab a fistful of holly ruff.

The wolves had come for him a year ago. Back then he’d been in over his head. That wasn’t the case anymore. Dylan was part of the Line of Nick, and he wore the watch, he’d cracked the whip, and he’d driven the Sleigh.

He was Yule. The magic was his to command...

...theoretically .

Dylan could remember what it had felt like on Christmas Eve, like he was the eye of the storm as time pulled apart and the reindeer fucking flew . It had filled his chest like a storm. Tonight all he had was the pain in his hand and a sinking feeling in his chest.

What if, the idea occurred to him queasily, last year had just been a trial run. He’d not

made the grade and Yule had just cut him off. Like Somerset at the Just-as-High before he tossed a drunk out on the street.

Great timing , Dylan thought as he tossed a frantic glance toward the ambulance, couldn't have thought of that two minutes ago?

Alice had an arm around Irene as she tried to lead the heavily pregnant woman away from the crashed vehicle. It would have been easier if Irene had cooperated, but she fought Alice every step of the way, tears and snot slick on her face.

"I won't go!" she yelled. "He promised it would be OK!"

Just a bit , Dylan begged as he tried to scrape up some leftover power from inside him, just for a minute.

Nothing.

Just a hollow so deep he could hear it whistle.

Dylan gave up with a ragged "Fuck" and just let his legs go from under him. He dangled from the wolf's neck, and it made it stagger. Not enough to slow it down, but enough that it swung its woven basket muzzle around to look at him. It snorted, and its breath was cold, fogged with ice.

All he was going to do was buy Alice a few moments to get nowhere. It seemed pointless, but Dylan still pulled his hand off the wolf's leg and grabbed its ear instead. Blood smeared everywhere as he dug his fingers into the gaps in the latticework and yanked as hard as he could.

Long strands of holly ripped free, unraveling from around the wolf's dead-stick bones. It dragged the thing's head around, and it staggered as it tripped over its feet.

Dylan's blood dripped down the twisted thorns. It splattered over the dry, cracked face of what used to be a man whose worst sin was being a lout on a night out.

The wolf threw its hard back. Its scream sounded like the wind in a storm. Dylan was yanked off his feet and whipped from side to side as the wolf shook its head. He hung on for a second, but the blood and ice made his handholds slippery.

First one hand lost its grip and then the other. Dylan was flung through the air and then smacked down into the road. The impact knocked the breath out of him. He sprawled there on his back for a shocked moment, until his lungs remembered they needed to refill and cramped behind his ribs.

He rolled over onto his side as he tried to choke down air. Heat seeped through his body despite the snowmelt that puddled under him.

A booted foot rolled Dylan over onto his back, and the groom looked down at him. His eyes were leaf-green, with blood-red stains in his tear ducts.

It could still get worse. Good to know. Dylan kicked at the ground as he tried to squirm away. It didn't work. He gave up and let his head drop back onto the ground.

"Let them go, take me instead," he said. "Whatever you want, Yule will get it for you in return for me."

If only so Somerset could yell at him for this mess.

The groom grinned, still too wide. The corners of his mouth were cracked. Frayed, almost. He crouched down next to Dylan and took his jaw in hard, cold fingers. They dug into Dylan's skin as the groom shook his head back and forth in a parody of good humor. Then he let go.

“We don’t need you or Yule,” the groom said. His grin split his face, the skin of his cheeks peeling apart like old bark to reveal thorn-sharp teeth and a wet black tongue. Drool dripped down his jaw and splattered on the concrete, frozen into silver dollar-sized patches of hoarfrost as it landed. His words slurred, thick and chewed on, as he forced the rest of the sentence out. “Not all of you anyhow. Since you’re here...we’ll take what you offered last time.”

He grabbed Dylan’s arm and dragged the sleeve back to reveal a bony wrist and the battered old watch that started all this. Dylan made a noise that sounded a lot thinner and more panicked than he’d expected.

He yanked desperately on his arm and flailed at the groom with his free arm. His fist caught the edge of the groom’s cheekbone and tore the already loose skin. His knuckles scraped along the rough twisted gums and grated the skin off.

In the background he heard Alice scream something. He didn’t know if it was from horror or for help. There wasn’t much he could do either way.

The groom hauled Dylan up by the arm and closed rough frost-capped teeth around his arm. Dylan screwed his face up and grabbed for the tiny, faded hope that this could, maybe , still be a very detailed coma dream .

Pain crushed down on his arm, and he howled in shock. He’d seen the wolf’s teeth, but the bite didn’t feel sharp. It was blunt pressure that punched through skin and bent bone. Dylan writhed in pain as he tried to scream.

Before the bone could snap, someone reached over the wolf’s head and grabbed his snout. Gloved fingers hooked into the peeled-back nose and yanked to force the wolf to open its jaw. Dylan yanked his arm free and scrambled backward, his heels leaving divots in the rime of frost that had settled on the road.

Somerset gave him an annoyed look over the wolf's head.

“Learn to duck,” he said in an irritated voice. “That's all I've ever asked.”

That wasn't even true, but Dylan didn't feel like it was time to argue.

Chapter Four

Blood on the snow was nothing new to Somerset.

He'd spent his life doing what Yule needed done but couldn't be seen to do. It couldn't all be candy canes and reindeer, after all. It was usually blood he was responsible for shedding, but blood was blood in the end.

So he didn't know what it was about the splatter of blood on the grimy frost that coated the road that bothered him so much. Liar, the annoying voice in the back of his mind accused mildly. He turned a deaf ear as he hauled the wolf back, blood and snot bubbling out of its nose and between his fingers. Whatever it was that had unsettled him, he'd feel better once he took it out on someone else.

The wolf managed to twist free and staggered away a couple of steps. He snorted out a spray of blood and reached up to push the knotty muzzle back in with one hand. His face slid back into place, caught on the wood-bones underneath.

"You should have let me take the hand," the wolf said. "I was going to let you keep the rest."

Somerset wiped slime off his hand on the long tail of his coat. A very small, practical part of him knew he should take that win and run with it. Yule Lad or not, there were three—he caught a glimpse of a bulky form as it came around the side of the crashed ambulance and corrected himself—four of Winter's wolves here. That wasn't a fight he'd walk away from.

Of course—he heard the low growl of the other Lads’ bikes behind him as they finally caught up—he wasn’t alone either.

That made the odds better.

They were still going to bleed for it, though.

Somerset stepped between the wolf and Dylan. He glanced around briefly to locate the rest of the pack, but then kept his attention on the leader.

“Why come back?” he asked. “Did they send you to finish the job they started last year?”

The wolf just grinned. Behind him, one of the other wolves—one of the two who’d remodeled the host into something akin to the form they wore on the other side—stepped almost delicately through the smashed window of the Starbucks. It slapped a flimsy table with a cheap metal base out of the way with a gnarled paw. The table flew into the wall, the edge of it buried in the plaster like a discus, and someone screamed.

“Yule thinks too much of itself,” the wolf said, contempt in his voice. “It always has.”

“The Courts would disagree,” Somerset said.

Stúfur prowled out of the dark to stand next to Somerset, the semiautomatic he’d drawn held low and against his thigh in one hand. A step behind came Ket, who fell in at Somerset’s other side. He rested his hand on the hook at his hip but didn’t free it yet.

The wolf looked disinterested. “The Courts think too much of themselves,” he said.

There was no need for a signal. The wolves just attacked as one. Somerset was thrown as the pack leader slammed into him. He landed on his back and skidded over the slick road for a few feet, the wolf on top of him as it tore chunks of his arms and shoulders with thorn-tipped fingers. Tufts of cashmere caught in the ragged claws and felted together with blood.

He'd liked that coat, too.

Somerset bared his teeth in a snarl and managed to free one arm enough to close his fingers around the wolf's throat. The outside of it gave like flesh, but he could feel the other, stiffer structures underneath.

"You should have run," the wolf said.

Somerset still half-expected Yule to give him a cold shoulder when he reached for its power. After all, he'd not done any of the requisite groveling or asking to see his status at the Winter Court reinstated. Apparently it didn't matter. He was a Yule Lad, like it or not, and as long as he upheld his oath, then Yule would give him what he asked for.

Heat filled him, painful enough to scald, and scalded its way up his arm. Surprise widened the wolf's eyes a second before he burst into flames, filling the air with the crackle of dry wood as it caught light. Fire licked at Somerset's hair and singed the collar of his coat.

The wolf snarled and threw himself off Somerset. He rolled in the bloody snow to put himself out, bare hands lightly charred as it slapped at stray embers and sparks.

Somerset scrambled to his feet. He reached into his coat and pulled out his knives, the weight of them heavy and familiar in his hand. The biggest of the wolves saw him and tossed Ket aside. One half of its face had been harvested at Ket's hook, branches

hacked apart and ivy yanked from its moorings, It didn't slow it down as it dropped its mutilated head and charged at Somerset.

The storm surged ahead of it on a cloud of ice splinters and a cold so deep even Somerset felt the bite of it. He squinted against it, prickles of blood drawn on his hands and lips, and braced himself. Before the wolf could hit him, Stúfur spun away from the mostly-human wolf he tussled with in an elegant turn. He swung the gun up in one smooth movement and fired.

The splutter of a semiautomatic should have echoed off the nearby buildings, but it dropped into the muffled still between the seconds. The bullets stitched viciously along the wolf's side, splinters of wood and shredded greenery torn out of it, and knocked it off its feet.

It nearly did the same to Somerset as a stray bullet punched through his thigh.

The jolt of pain shot up into his groin and made him stagger, his leg suddenly weak under him. Somerset caught his balance, weight shifted to the other leg as he waited for the wound to knit, and shot an irritated look toward his brother.

"You can't shoot the broadside of a barn!" he yelled at Stúfur. "Use a fucking knife."

Stúfur gave him the finger, flipped the gun around to grab it by the barrel, and turned to pistol-whip the wolf as it tried to lunge past him to get to Dylan.

The raw pain in Somerset's leg had died down to a hot ache. When he tested his weight on it, it held. That was good, because the wolves were neither down nor out. The pack leader was back on his feet as he slapped out the last of the charred patches on his shirt. He grabbed the stunned wolf on the ground by the frosted scruff of its neck and hauled it back up onto all its paws.

Ket threw his hook in the air. The sickle blade caught the unsteady light from one of the few streetlights that Dylan hadn't taken out. He caught as it came down, cocked his hand back over his shoulder, and threw it in one smooth motion. The pack leader caught it out of the air and turned it casually in his hand as he tested the weight. Before he could do anything with it, Ket pursed his lips to whistle. The hook yanked the pack leader off his feet and dragged him behind it as it headed back to its owner. It surprised the wolf enough that he didn't let go for a second, and when he did, he went rolling over the road.

“Somerset!”

The voice was thin, a bit breathy as it cut through the noise. It still yanked Somerset's focus out of the fight as he turned to find the speaker. Dylan was slumped against a crooked streetlight, one arm hugged to his chest with his free hand clutched over the wound.

“It wasn't me,” Dylan yelled. He pointed clumsily with bloody fingers past the fight and toward the Starbucks. “They want her .”

Somerset looked in the direction that Dylan had pointed. The big wolf had ripped the counter out of the Starbucks, water pissing over the floor around its feet. Two women were huddled behind the counter, one of them with her body wrapped protectively around the other to block the debris.

It was Dylan's partner—the one that always put Somerset's back up—and the...pregnant woman from Demre and Hill?

Somerset hesitated for a second as he tried to make sense of that. He'd been sure the woman was just a lure, an injured bird on the trail to catch a Santa soft-hearted even by the standards of the job. That made sense.

“ Skellir !” Ket yelled, his voice sharp with warning.

Somerset turned just in time to drop his knife and grab the wolf’s jaws before they snapped shut on his head. Sharp, cold teeth sliced through leather and into his fingers as he held the wolf’s mouth open and braced himself against it. It snarled, and its breath smelled like fear and the sourness on an animal’s breath when it was run to death. The wolf reared onto its back legs and swung its head back and forth to try and dislodge him. Somerset hung on grimly as his feet scraped over the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the wolf in the Starbucks unstitch itself. The connective strands of briar and holly pulled apart, and the hooked “bones” of its rib cage creaked as they splayed out. The blonde one yelled and grabbed a broken length of metal to swing at it; the metal gouged a chunk out of the wolf and bent.

Somerset lost sight of them as the wolf dragged him around again. He set his shoulders, muscles clenched tight under his skin, and forced its jaws closed, fingers wrapped around the wickerwork muzzle.

He’d never done this before. It might work, but it might not.

This was his own magic, the one whispered in his ear along with his name before his ma put him in the cradle. Somerset didn’t have to ask for it, it was already at his heels. He tightened his grip and sealed the wolf’s jaws shut like it was a door. The hard mask of the wolf’s face wasn’t made to be expressive, but it still managed to look surprised as it tried, and failed, to open its mouth.

It staggered away from Somerset as it pawed at its face desperately. Claws split the wands of rowan used for its nose and pulled out raw, green chunks of holly bough. While that wolf tried to break Somerset’s seal, he turned his attention back to the pack leader. He peeled his shredded gloves off his hands, the leather wet and lightly frosted, and stalked toward the more or less still intact host.

Before he could get there the pack leader picked up Ket, swung him in a half-circle, and smashed him against a streetlight. It was one of the few that'd been unscathed by the crash, until now. The hollow metal caved in around Ket's body and hung him there as the wolf let go.

"Enough," the pack leader snapped as he backed away from the fight. "We have what we came for tonight. Santa and his watch can wait. We know where to find him."

The big wolf shouldered the ambulance out of the way and climbed out through the broken window. It shook itself, shedding chunks of ice and frost. The women inside screamed and clung to each other as they were thrown around. It threw a snarl toward Somerset and then turned to disappear into the dark. The other wolves followed.

Somerset bent down to scoop the knife he'd dropped up off the ground. He started after the pack leader, but the wind rallied and pushed him back, hard enough to make him stagger. That was a betrayal he hadn't expected, and it left him back-footed. Literally.

A quick, ugly smile twisted the pack leader's face. He pointed over Somerset's shoulder with his chin.

"Your oath yanks your chain, Yule Lad," he said. "Time to answer. Last time I tasted Saint-blood, it ended badly for you. "

He sketched a bow, a clumsy mock at Court courtesies, and Somerset didn't wait to see him leave. Dread clutched, damp and strangling, at his chest as he turned around.

Dylan sprawled on the ground, his injured arm flung out to the side. A puddle of blood, dark and hot, surrounded it. He was very still.

Not dead, though, Somerset told himself. He'd know.

You didn't last time , the cold thought eeled through his mind, Why this one?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Stúfur raise his gun. He turned and slapped it down with the flat of his knife.

“Let them leave,” he said. “We’ve more important things to deal with than wolves.”

Stúfur spluttered indignantly. “They attacked Santa ,” he said. “Right under our nose. Bad enough we lost one, but another—”

“He’s not dead,” Somerset said, the words clipped as he wrestled back the urge to hurt Stúfur for being the one to put that into words. Except he wasn’t...and it would take too damn long to do the job right. “And humans don’t get back up from a bullet.”

“So?” Ket said as he held his hand out expectantly.

A second later the handle of the hook smacked into his palm. He spun it around and hung it back off his belt. Something that might have been sap or blood, sticky and pink-tinted, coated the sickle curve of the blade.

The callousness of the question caught Somerset off-guard. He wasn’t sure why. It was a good question. The Lads owed their fealty to the Line of Nick and to Yule, and that was it. Why would they care about anything else?

Somerset supposed he’d spent too much time in the mortal world. He’d picked up some patterns of speech to make that time easier. Most mortals wouldn’t need to ask “so,” they’d just know. Even the ones who didn’t actually care about the answer.

Luckily, Somerset didn’t have to explain that to his brothers. He had an answer to “so” that wasn’t based on sentiment or morality.

“Because the wolves want them,” Somerset said. “And I want to know why.”

Stúfur and Ket glanced at each other and then shrugged their agreement.

“You could have just said that,” Stúfur grumbled as he re-holstered his gun. He turned around to head through the snow toward Dylan’s sprawled body. “And look on the bright side. If he does die, at least this time we’ll have the Watch to anoint the next—”

This time Somerset didn’t resist the rise of his cold, black temper. He grabbed Stúfur by the back of the neck as they passed the Jeep and smacked his head against the side of it. The crack of bone on metal dented the car—just another ding to add to the collection—but barely fazed Stúfur. He just staggered, caught himself, and gave Somerset the finger.

“Today or a hundred years from now,” Stúfur pointed out as he backed out of reach. “He’s still gonna leave—”

Ket grabbed Somerset’s arm and pulled him back. “Why not make sure it’s not today.”

That was...a good idea. Somerset stretched his legs into an easy lope and crouched next to Dylan. The thin skin of snow on the road soaked through the knee of his jeans. He reached and pressed his fingers under Dylan’s jaw.

The soft pulse of warmth fluttered against his touch. Something in Somerset’s chest that had been strung so tight it was about to snap loosened, and he let out his breath.

“He’s alive,” he said.

“Doesn’t look it,” Stúfur noted as he leaned over Somerset’s shoulder. “It’s never

good when they go that color.”

“Will he make it to the Pole?” Ket asked.

Somerset didn’t know. Alive or not was about as far as his knowledge of the mortal condition stretched. He took his coat off and draped it over Dylan. It covered the smaller man like a blanket, and maybe it was Somerset’s imagination but Dylan’s face seemed to relax.

Even if he made it to the Pole...what healer could he trust? Even if they weren’t already murderers, they could still be ambitious.

“We take him to the hospital,” he decided abruptly as he reached over Dylan’s body to grab his arm. The ripped sleeve of the paramedic’s jacket squelched under his fingers and blood oozed out. “They can patch him up.”

There was a pause Somerset could feel as his brother’s exchanged looks over the top of his head.

You say it.

Fuck off. You.

“They didn’t do such a good job with Gull,” Stúfur said. “And what if it’s not...you know...up and running for Christmas Eve? We’re right back to where we started last year.”

Somerset’s fingers brushed over the face of the watch sealed around Dylan’s wrist. It never kept good time, always stopped at a minute to midnight on Christmas Eve, but Santa’s power ticked along behind the glass.

If it stopped ...

To hell with all of them , Somerset thought bleakly. He closed his hand over Dylan's arm and pulled his own power up out of his bones. Frost crackled in the blood on Dylan's sleeve as the ice sank down into his arm to slow the blood. I'll smash the watch myself this time, make sure it's done right.

Somerset half-expected some sort of otherworldly reaction to that, but there was nothing. He got his arms under Dylan and stood up. Dylan groaned softly at being moved, and his eyelids fluttered, but other than that he didn't stir as his head lolled on Somerset's shoulder.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," he said. "Go back to the Pole and tell Jars..."

He paused as he tried to weigh how little they could get away with telling their older brother. It was stupid that it mattered, with how they'd all lived since then, but someone it always did. Even now when they thought he might well be a traitor.

"We have to tell him something happened," Ket noted. "Our shift ends in a few hours. Nik's lined up to relieve us and...he might not be the brightest, but even he's going to notice something is wrong."

"Not only that," Stúfur said. "He's going to tell. "

"Tell Jars it was an accident on the road," he said after a glance at the ambulance. "Nothing else."

He held Dylan tight to his chest as he headed over the road to where he'd left the pickup. Ket and Stúfur followed along behind him. Their feet were silent on the ice.

"What if he doesn't believe us?" Ket asked.

Somerset hitched up Dylan's weight in one arm as he reached for the handle of the door with the other. He got the door open with the help of his knee and gently lowered Dylan, still wrapped in stained wool, into the passenger seat.

"Tell him to come and find me," he said and slammed the door.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:07 am

Chapter Five

The sound of Christmas music and someone yelling woke Dylan up from a dream about a cold house and the sound of a car slowly coming closer. He could taste peppermint on his tongue as he woke up and, out of decades of muscle memory, tried to slap the clock radio he'd had on his bedside table as a little kid.

It wasn't there.

Instead he hit his forearm off a metal pole, and he felt the jag of something sharp yank at his arm. He peeled his sticky eyes open and rolled his head to the side to blink at the IV drip plugged into a vein. For a moment he'd no idea what had happened, and then his brain reluctantly drip-fed him the context.

Blood on Alice's face.

Wolves.

Broken glass on his lap.

Teeth in his arm.

The memory of pain woke up the real thing as a dull, hot ache in Dylan's other arm. He gingerly turned his head to look at it. His forearm was heavily bandaged and strapped down with crooked strips of skin-toned tape. The yelling, and the Christmas music, came from outside.

Dylan grimaced as he tried to lift his arm. It felt like it weighed three times what it should, and his elbow was made of Jell-O, but his grandfather's watch was still strapped to his wrist. He exhaled in... Relief? Disappointment? It could be either and Dylan definitely had too many painkillers in his system to work it out right now.

He let his arm drop back down onto the bed...

That was a mistake. Dylan bit his lip as he rode out the wet gouge of pain that fired from his wrist to his armpit. When it subsided, he raised his gaze to...not Somerset.

In place of Dylan's walking "it's complicated" relationship status, otherwise known as Somerset, the cheap plastic chair next to the bed was occupied by Somerset's oldest brother and the head of North Pole security.

That was such a weird string of words that Dylan had to take a second to consider the choices that had led him here. When he was done, he braced his elbows on the bed and squirmed up into a sitting position, with the paper-thin pillows balled up behind his back.

"What happened?" he asked. Because he might have most of the memory—except where pain or blood loss blurred the details—but he didn't know the version they'd given Jars.

Jars bent down and picked up a Starbucks cup from the floor. He took a drink and then balanced it on the arm of the chair. Dylan watched the process with the same fascination he would a bear with a salmon at the zoo. It was just so mundane for someone that Dylan had never seen outside the North Pole.

"You were in a car accident," Jars said. He glanced at Dylan's bandaged arm, and his mouth twitched into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Apparently."

Dylan nodded slowly and then said, “OK.” He waited to see what he was going to say next, but nothing came to him. His mind was so blank he could almost hear the echoes in there. After a long, tense moment of silence he managed to scrape together. “Wow.”

Irritation flashed over Jars’s face and then was gone. He took another drink of coffee and then leaned forward to set the cup on the overbed table.

“You don’t trust me,” he said

“You don’t like me. ”

Jars paused for a moment and raised an eyebrow. For a second Dylan didn’t know why, and then he replayed the last few moments and... Yeah, that explained the look. Dylan hadn’t meant for that to be an out-loud thought.

He was surprised when Jars answered him.

“My oath is to protect Santa and to serve Yule,” he said. “Nobody said I had to like it, or you.”

It was probably strange that that made Dylan more , not less, inclined to trust Jars. He resisted the urge. Somerset didn’t trust him, and he knew Jars better than anyone. Dylan had decided to follow Somerset’s lead in this twelve months ago, and he didn’t exactly have a fallback plan.

“No one said I had to trust you,” he pointed out.

“Yule did,” Jars said. He reached for his crutches, propped against the bottom of the bed, and levered himself up out of the chair. The muscles in his forearms, exposed by his pushed-back sleeves, stood out like cords as he put his weight on his hands. He

looked down at Dylan. “But it doesn’t say I have to protect you from yourself. Whatever you did last year to get your seat on the Sleigh, I hope you enjoyed the ride. It doesn’t look like you’ll be back.”

He gave Dylan a stiff nod, turned with a squeak of his rubber crutch tips on the tiles, and headed out of the room. As the tall Yule Lad shouldered the door open, Dylan felt the air in the room shift. He could taste snow on his tongue, crisp and faintly floral .

Then the door closed behind Jars and it was gone—all Dylan could taste was dry spit and his own teeth—and the machines he was hooked up to started to beep urgently. A second later the door opened back up and one of the hospital’s nurse-practitioners stuck her head in. He knew her. A bit anyhow. She didn’t work the ER often, and that was the department Dylan interacted with the most. She was...neurology? Gwen something.

Her eyes flicked to the machines and then back to Dylan.

“Dylan,” she said, in the sort of very gentle voice that meant bad news was on the way. “You woke up. We’ve been worried.”

That was the sort of thing people said to patients who’d missed out on months. Dylan frowned, reached up to tug on his hair. If it turned out he had been in a coma, but hadn’t daydreamed all of this, he’d be annoyed. His hair didn’t feel any longer, though, and if he’d missed Christmas, he was sure Jars would have thrown that information in his face.

“How long was I out for?” he asked.

“Just overnight,” Gwen said as she came into the room. She pulled a penlight out of her pocket and flicked it on. She played the beam across Dylan’s eyes as he tried not

to squint. “Do you remember what happened?”

Dylan shook his head. “No,” he said. “Where’s Alice?”

The question made her hesitate for a moment. She recovered quickly and flicked the flashlight off so she could drop it back into her pocket. “That’s—”

“What we all want to know,” someone interrupted from the doorway. Dylan didn’t recognize the voice. When he looked over, he didn’t recognize the face either. Not until Gwen went to shoo her out and the tall, grim-faced woman bundled up in a snow-damp jacket and beanie flashed her badge to forestall the objection. “Detective Asma Lund. Mr. Hollie and I have met before.”

“I’ve already told you what happened,” Dylan said. Most of it... Enough.

Asma Lund knew about the otherworld and the creatures that came from it. She knew that Dylan knew too, but not how he was part of it. Dylan wasn’t about to try and explain.

Goblins and ghouls were one thing, but asking someone to believe in Santa was different. When was that going to work outside of a Hallmark Christmas movie?

Dylan bent over to grab a spare pair of jeans from the bottom of his locker. Dizziness washed over him, and he had to brace his hand against the edge of the door to steady himself. He closed his eyes briefly as he waited for it to pass and then scrambled clumsily into his jeans.

“If you leave, you know it’s against medical advice,” Lund said. She stood with her back turned as she pulled her gloves off with her teeth. “And some people might think it makes you look like you have something to hide.”

Dylan snorted as he pulled denim up over his cold backside. “Then they haven’t seen me in a hospital gown.”

Speaking of which...

He stripped it off, the papery fabric noisy as it crumpled in his hands, and looked down as he buttoned up his fly. His fingers were stiff, still numb from the painkillers. It was harder than usual, but easier than it should have been .

Skin split, blood running down his arm like water, and pain ran hot and liquid through Dylan. Teeth scraped meat and nerves away from the bone, and the cold had sunk into his marrow...

Dylan tightened his mouth and swallowed the bile the memory had conjured up. He cleared his throat and flexed his fingers. They all responded with a full range of motion. That would have been a good result after surgery, not just being patched up and bandaged. He curled his fingers into his palm until it hurt, but==

“You might want to think about that attitude,” Lund said as she turned around to face him. “Two women are missing, and right now you’re the only lead we’ve got. That makes me the only friend you’ve got.”

Dylan grabbed the hospital-issued Belling Memorial hoodie that had been in his locker for over a year. He pulled it on, the sleeve tight around his bandaged forearm, and zipped it up.

“Last year you sold me out to the Wolves,” Dylan pointed out.

Lund didn’t look amused.

“I thought I was doing the right thing.” She reached down and pulled the hem of her

sweater up to show her stomach. The scar ran vertically up from under her jeans, curved around her belly button, and was still pink and raw looking after twelve months. Lund waited a beat and then yanked the fabric back down. "I already paid the price for that. Now it's time they did the same."

What happened to Lund hadn't been Dylan's fault. Apparently that didn't stop him feeling guilty about it, though. That didn't seem fair. He sat down heavily on one of the bench seats, the cold of the tiles seeping into his bare feet, and looked up at Lund.

"And I don't have anything else to tell you," he said. "I don't know why the wolves are back or why they took my partner and our patient."

"If you did, would you tell me?" Lund asked.

"Yes," Dylan said quickly. He would. Maybe it would have been after he told Somerset, but he'd have told her. "Alice is my friend. Irene was our responsibility. I'll take whatever help I can get if it gets them both home safe for Christmas."

Lund considered that. She finally nodded. "OK. You keep me in the loop of what's happening on Somerset's side of the fence, and I'll do my best to keep your face off the evening news. Deal?"

She raised her dark, bar-straight eyebrows expectantly and waited. Dylan let her as he weighed up his options. It didn't take long, to be fair. He didn't have many .

"I'll do what I can," Dylan hedged. "Somerset doesn't always tell me everything."

Make that Somerset didn't tell Dylan anything that he didn't have to. There was apparently a lot that Dylan was safer not knowing, and the Yule Lads rarely bothered to ask if he was willing to take the risk.

One day Dylan was going to look into what all the different Santas that came before him had died of. He was sure “frustration” would be a contributing factor.

Lund pulled her gloves back out of her pocket and put them on. She laced her fingers together and flexed them to bed the fabric into place.

“Fair enough,” she said. “There’s only so much I can do to keep the spotlight off you, anyhow. The COO of Demre and Hill didn’t exactly help your case when he told us that Irene tried to refuse treatment rather than let you anywhere near her.”

“She changed her mind.”

“You talked her into it, and now she’s missing.” Lund paused for a moment and then scrunched her nose up. “It doesn’t look good. I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I’m about the only one. So if I was you? I’d tell Somerset that if he wants to protect you, he should tell you the full story. Before something else incriminating turns up and my co-workers and I have to piece it all together ourselves. Have a good day, Mr. Hollie.”

She dipped her chin in a mock polite nod and left, zipping her coat up as she went out the door.

As the door swung shut again behind her, Dylan scrubbed both hands over his face and up into his hair. His fingers tangled in the dark curls and pulled them back from his temples. He took a deep breath and let it out raggedly, then turned to grab an old pair of Vans from the back of his locker.

Sure, Dylan thought as he pulled the shoes on, he could try that. Why not?

The cab dropped Dylan off at the Just-as-High with a warning from the driver that it wasn’t open yet.

That was OK. One of the perks of being the owner's...boss? boyfriend? burden? whatever they were...was that you got a key. Dylan ignored the Closed sign on the main doors and let himself into the bar. The wind picked up as he fumbled with the lock and blew him and a handful of candy wrappers into the hall. Dylan tripped down the step, and the door slammed behind him, loud enough to make him jump.

It felt pointed.

Dylan couldn't be sure it wasn't.

Magic was weird that way, and he wasn't used to it yet. He wasn't sure he'd ever be used to it.

Behind the bar, Gull glanced up from his bag in surprise, a handful of popcorn halfway to his mouth. The lanky bartender relaxed when he recognized Dylan. He shoved the snack into his mouth and wiped his hand on his jeans, just out of sight under the counter.

"Hey, Dylan," Gull said. "Haven't seen you for a while."

That was a sore spot. It was nothing to do with Gull, though, so Dylan tried to keep his feelings off his face. He did that a lot with Gull anyhow. It was...hard, sometimes to know more about who Gull was— what Gull was—than Gull did.

"Yeah, well, I guess things have been quiet around here, then," Dylan said as he walked over. "Not a bad thing."

Gull pulled a face like he didn't entirely agree. He held the bag out and rustled it expectantly.

"Want some?" he asked.

Experience had taught Dylan to be cautious. All the fairy stories said not to accept hospitality from the fey. What they left out was that it wasn't anything to do with magic; the food was just bad. Yule Lads would eat anything, even ones who didn't remember who they were.

Dylan hesitated. Before he could refuse, his stomach rumbled loudly to remind him a man couldn't live on vending machine granola bars alone.

"Is it just popcorn?" he checked.

Gull looked confused. "Yeah," he said and tilted the bag back toward him to look in. "Popcorn. Some pickles. A bit of curry powder..."

Yeah. That sounded about right. He should have gone with his first instincts.

Dylan pulled his hand back. "I'll grab something from the kitchen. Later," he said. "Is Somerset in?"

"Yeah," Gull said. He tilted his head toward the door on the other side of the bar and raised a rusty red eyebrow. "He's in the office. Want me to let him know you're looking for him?"

"No need," Dylan said as he turned to head that way. "He'll work it out."

He'd got as far the pool table when a quick "Hey" from behind him made him look back. Gull scrubbed one hand through his hair and frowned.

"You OK?" he asked. "The boss was pretty worried about you last night."

Dylan could believe that. Sort of. The question was whether he'd been more concerned about Dylan or Santa. Despite what the Yule Lads thought, they weren't

the same.

Yule obviously got that from the way it had left him hanging last night.

“I’ll live,” Dylan reassured Gull. He lifted his arm slightly, the sleeve of the hoodie tight around the tape-and-gauze dressing on his forearm. “I might even be able to play piano again, which is great, because I never knew how before.”

The joke didn’t deserve much. It got a laugh anyhow. The flash of amusement distracted Gull from his concern, and he waved Dylan off as he turned back to his popcorn and stock take.

The sign on the door said Staff Only. Dylan ignored it as he pushed the door open and walked on through.

Behind the battered desk, Somerset dropped his phone and pulled a knife from under the desk. The Yule Boy in the desk opposite him scrambled to his feet and turned around, the brutally practical curve of his hook already in one hand.

“Busy?” Dylan asked.

Ket made the hook disappear again. He frowned as he glanced over his shoulder at Somerset. “I thought ,” he said pointedly, “we’d agreed that we were going to keep our distance from him until this was over.”

Dylan scowled. “Agreed” was a strong word. He would have said he was “told,” but he’d already discussed that with Somerset. It hadn’t gotten him anywhere.

Somerset put the knife down. He pushed his chair back from the desk and reached down to pick up his phone. Frost-blue eyes stayed focused on Dylan as Somerset lifted the phone to his ear.

“Call off the dogs,” he said to whoever was on the other end, without giving them a chance to ask anything. “He’s here.”

There was a pause as Somerset listened. Then he shifted the phone back from his mouth and looked expectantly at Dylan.

“How did you get here?” he asked.

It felt like a trap, but Dylan didn’t think it was for him. He thought about it briefly and then answered, “Uber. ”

Somerset grimaced and repeated the word into the phone. The next bit of the conversation was loud enough that Dylan could hear the other end of the call. He didn’t really understand most of it, it was Icelandic, but from the few swear words he caught he figured he could guess the gist of it.

“Because it was your job to keep track of him,” Somerset told whoever it was shortly. He hung up and tossed the phone down on the desk. It landed on the thick layer of neglected invoices and order forms that covered it. Somerset left it there as he got up out of the chair, fastidiously adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, and pointedly didn’t look at Ket. “Do you have somewhere to be, brother?”

There was a hint of winter ice in Somerset’s voice. It rolled off Ket’s leather-clad shoulders like water off a duck’s back. He shrugged crookedly, visibly disinterested in the topic already.

“Not really,” he said.

Somerset’s nostrils flared as he took a deep, visibly annoyed breath.

“You need to spend less time with Stúfur,” Somerset said. “You used to be the smart

one.”

Dylan looked at Ket

“I think he means—”

“What I mean,” Somerset cut in, his voice a low, rough growl that made the hair on the back of Dylan’s neck stand on end, “is go and do something fucking useful.”

“Oh,” Ket said. He unlocked the door and pushed himself up out of his slouch against the wall. “You should have just said that. Stúfur is already on Demre, so I’ll see what the word on the street is about Wolves.”

The dark man sketched a quick sort-of bow to Dylan and then let himself out. The door clicked shut behind him and...Dylan was alone with Somerset. The thought made Dylan take a quick, ragged breath as he shifted in place.

Guilt poked at him at how easy he was to distract. It wasn’t the time. There were wolves on the streets, and his friend was missing.

But...it had been weeks since Somerset managed to find time to come to Dylan’s bed. Long enough that for a second all Dylan wanted to do was crawl over the desk—bar paperwork and North Pole parchment crumpled under his knees—and kiss the stern off the Yule Lad’s mouth.

“You should have stayed at the hospital,” Somerset said, his voice starchy with disapproval .

Dylan supposed that he wasn’t even really surprised. Bodyguards weren’t keen on you going places without them, even if it was just going for pizza instead of catching a lift with a random stranger. It was the difference in their first impulses on finding

themselves alone. Dylan saw an opportunity for sex, and Somerset for a dressing-down. It left Dylan a bit off balance.

Maybe absence only made the heart grow fonder if you were human?

Dylan cleared his throat and tried to think of a response as he scraped the dregs of his self-confidence together.

“I feel OK,” he said. It was true—more than it had been when he left the hospital, at least—and Dylan glanced down at his arm. He tightened his hand into a fist and watched the tendons in his wrist stand out against the dark strap of his watch. “Surprisingly so.”

“You’re welcome,” Somerset said.

He had a point. If he’d not gotten there when he did...

Dylan might not be 100 percent sold on being Santa...and apparently Yule had its reservations too. He wasn’t quite ready to trade a hand for his out. That didn’t mean he was going to be gracious about it.

“Yule appreciates your service,” Dylan said, his hurt feelings making the words snide...not that he’d really wanted them to be anything else.

The jab at what Dylan knew was a sore spot made Somerset’s expression darken and his eyes narrow. He stalked forward.

Dylan only realized he’d backed away when his shoulders hit the door. He might know he could trust Somerset, but the atavistic part of his brain in charge of being scared of things that went bump in the night wasn’t so sure.

“I didn’t—”

Somerset braced his hand on the door. His fingers were long and elegant under the calluses and scars of hard use, and the shadow they cast on the wood twisted as it sank into the grain. Dylan felt the magic against his eardrums, like air pressure. When he took a breath, it tasted like old stone and grease on his tongue.

Somerset’s own power, not the frost and peppermint tang of Yule. Until he broke the seal, the door wouldn’t open. They were not just alone, but in private.

The smart thing to do would be shut up. Of course, if Dylan was prone to making the smart choice, he’d have walked away from all of this a year ago. Back when it wouldn’t have hurt .

“Locked doors,” Dylan said as he tilted his head back to look up at Somerset. “Careful, people are going to get the wrong idea.”

“No,” Somerset said. He put his thumb under Dylan’s chin and tipped his head back. Something shadowy darkened his eyes as his gaze dropped to Dylan’s mouth. “They aren’t.”

He leaned down and claimed Dylan’s mouth in a hard, hungry kiss.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:07 am

Chapter Six

Give Somerset enough time and he could probably come up with an explanation for why this—Santa shoved up against a door and Somerset's hand twisted in his hair—wasn't stupid.

Probably.

After all, it wasn't like he'd throw away a year of careful political maneuvers and ruthless self-control a handful of days before Christmas Eve in exchange for immediate, eager gratification. That would be stupid. Even Stúfur would know better than that.

That explanation would have to wait, though. Right now all Somerset had was Dylan's mouth under his and the hollow, aching cavity in his chest that had cracked open last night when he'd thought...

He shied away from the raw edges of that memory before he slid back down into the dark, salt-sharp space. His kind weren't meant to feel like that. It was better to focus on the present, on the lean, willing body pressed against him and the dull ache of hunger that tugged at Somerset's balls like a cold hand.

This was his.

Maybe fuck-all else could be, but this , here and now, was his.

Dylan groaned around Somerset's tongue as he returned the kiss. He curled one hand

over Somerset's hip, his thumb warm as it grazed over the tight skin exposed where Somerset's T-shirt had ridden up, and pulled him closer. Somerset could have ignored the insistent tug, but instead he complied. The nudge of Dylan's cock, hard under well-worn denim, against his thigh scattered any sensible thoughts about "that's enough" or "you've made your point" to the winds.

After all, the remnants of the rough boy who'd come down from the mountain to bend his knee to the first Nick asked, what the fuck was wrong with taking whatever you wanted? Whenever and wherever you wanted it.

Somerset knew he could answer that, but fuck it. He didn't want to.

He caught Dylan's lower lip between his teeth and bit down on it. Not quite hard enough to split the skin, but enough to make Dylan squirm. Somerset laved the spot with his tongue before he broke the kiss and trailed his mouth down. He ran his lips along the sharp, stubbled line of Dylan's jaw and down to the pale, tight column of his throat. Blood pulsed against his lips.

Dylan's skin tasted like the hospital, a bitter, antiseptic taste layered over the Yule magic and mortal flavor that Somerset was used to. Like candy dipped in hand sanitizer. Somerset cupped the back of Dylan's head in his hand as he worked to scrape the taste off him with tongue and teeth.

"Somerset," Dylan croaked out. His hands tightened on Somerset's hips, fingers pinched around the bone as he tilted his head to the side. Somerset could feel the heat of the bruise he'd worked into pale skin against his lips as he lingered there. He pressed a wet kiss on the spot and then pursed his lips to breathe on it. Frost sparkled as it turned spit to ice, fractured crystalline fingers spreading out across the flushed red boundaries of the hickey. Dylan sucked in a startled breath as the cold pinched at him and let it out on a ragged, "Skellir."

The sound of that name on Dylan's mouth gave Somerset pause.

Until last year he'd not heard that name in decades. He'd heard it often enough in the months since—the Courts weren't keen on change or kindness—but not from Dylan. It didn't put Somerset's back up the same way it did when his brothers mouthed it

Maybe because Dylan wasn't trying to be an asshole .

Or maybe—Somerset skimmed his lips over the patch of frost, already half melted against warm skin—it was because Dylan sounded on the raw edge of coming. That took the edge off his mood. He chased a drop of water down Dylan's throat with his mouth. It lingered on the sharp jut of a collarbone before slipping down under the soft cotton of the hoodie.

Somerset caught the metal tag between thumb and forefinger and slowly pulled it down. The zip peeled apart to reveal bare skin, pale where it wasn't dappled with faded bruises. Somerset's breath hitched under his rib cage, a tight knot of eager anticipation.

“This is—”

Whatever Dylan was about to say was interrupted by the rattle of the door handle. It jabbed against Dylan's hip, and he moved away out of instinct. Somerset caught his arm and pulled him into his body, tucked under Somerset's arm. He then shushed him with the tap of a finger to his mouth.

The door didn't shift. Somerset could feel his magic flex as it absorbed the force applied against it. It hurt strangely, a dull ache down deep in the gray matter of his brain. He pressed his finger more firmly against Dylan's mouth.

“I told you,” Gull said from the other side of the door. He sounded uneasy. As if he'd

be scared if he was just a little bit more sure of himself. “Mr. North isn’t in. If you want to leave a message, I’ll pass it on.”

Whoever was on the other side didn’t answer right away. Somerset felt the pressure as whoever it was shoved at the door again. This time it wasn’t physical. He dug his mental feet in, down somewhere rocky and cold where his mother had planted their magic, and weathered it.

There was something distinctly annoyed about the pause that followed. After a breath, whoever it was gave the door a petty kick. It was hard enough to crack the wood.

“Tell him to keep his nose out of other people’s business,” the visitor said in a soft, rough voice. “And off their sons.”

“I’d rather not,” Gull said. Apparently he didn’t need to remember who he was to know that wouldn’t go over well. “Maybe you could write that bit down instead?”

“ Changeling ,” the visitor spat with contempt. “At your age.”

The sound of a brief scuffle filtered through the door. Somerset swore under his breath and set Dylan aside at a safe distance. Like it or not—whether he was a traitor or not—right now Gull was his responsibility. Never mind the fact that it would look bad for some Winter Court lackey to get away with roughing up a Yule Lad .

They were the Court’s muscle, after all.

He broke the seal on the door with a swipe of his thumb, the edge of the crack deep enough to draw blood. Before he could open the door, however, he heard someone spit a short, archaic curse and then a door slam.

Somerset cursed under his breath and yanked the door open.

There was an overturned table tipped against the wall and bloodstains on broken glass. Broken plaster lay in chunks on the polished wooden floor where it had come away from the wall. Gull wiped a bloody hand on his jeans and then looked at it as if he'd not seen it before.

"That was weird," he said as he flexed his fingers slowly. There was blood on his mouth as well as his knuckles.

"You think?" Somerset grabbed Gull's lip between finger and thumb and pulled it down to check out the damage. It wasn't even split. Gull had just gouged the inside open when it grated against his teeth. "What happened?"

Gull batted Somerset's hand away with a scowl. He stepped back and poked at his lip himself. "I don't know," he said. "The guy with him grabbed him, and the one who was talking threw a punch. So I threw the first guy into him and they hit the wall. Do I know how to fight? How do I know how to fight?"

It was a good question. Somerset wanted to know the answer too, but not right now.

"I've a better question," he said as he toed a chunk of plaster with the toe of his boot. "You know how to replaster a wall?"

It turned out that Gull did not.

He did, however, know how to sweep up. So Somerset gave him a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a brush and left him to clean up. It was up to him what he started with.

Somerset headed back to his office. He scowled briefly at the hairline crack in the door before he let himself back in. Dylan was perched on the corner of his desk, one

leg dangling and the other braced on the floor. He frowned at his phone as he read something.

Even if Somerset had been able to justify being stupid a while longer, the moment had passed.

“What is it?” he asked .

Dylan didn’t look up as he frowned and tapped his thumbs over the screen. “I’ve been suspended,” he said. “Pending an investigation into what happened the other night.”

“Good,” Somerset said as he headed over to the desk.

That terse comment made Dylan look up sharply. He narrowed his eyes as he glared at Somerset.

“What?”

It was the sort of “what” that wasn’t actually a question. It was an opportunity to recant whatever had been said before there was a fight. That was never going to work on a Yule Lad, even one who’d left the fold for a while. If they’d been born with consciences, they’d never have made it down off the mountain.

“Maybe now you’ll stay out of trouble.” Somerset brushed a lock of gray hair off Dylan’s forehead and ignored the scowl directed at him. “You’re Santa. You don’t need a side hustle.”

Dylan snorted. “Being Santa doesn’t come with a wage, or health insurance,” he said. “What am I going to pay my rent with? Candy canes?”

“I think that might be racist.”

“It’s not,” Dylan said. He started to say something else and then stopped himself. His knuckles poked, white and bony, through the skin as he wrung his hands around the phone. “And it doesn’t matter anyhow. I’m just trying to... Where’s Alice? What happened?”

It was Somerset’s turn to hesitate.

When he’d sworn himself to serve Yule with his brothers, no one had bound them to be honest. The Winter Court had known that it would be better if they weren’t always. Because Somerset’s job was to keep Santa, and by extension the Line of Nick, safe, and what they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

Somerset already knew what lie to tell to keep Dylan out of whatever Winter Court intrigue had fallen apart on them. Winter’s wolves had killed Alice, and the Yule Lads had killed the wolves. With no one to save and revenge already meted out, all that left was grief. And that was a manageable emotion.

Skellir would have told the lie. He had told the lie, in one form or another, to other Santas.

If he told this lie, though, Dylan would never forgive him. Not if he believed it, and definitely not if he didn’t.

Skellir would pay that price, Somerset didn’t fucking want to .

“The wolves—”

The oath dug magic into his tongue, the lie he knew he should say coming up his throat like vomit. He clenched his teeth and choked it back down.

The geas had no wit of its own. It drew its compulsion from what Somerset believed.

So all he had to do was convince himself that the truth was what would keep Dylan safe.

It was a shame he didn't believe that.

"Was she hurt?" Dylan pushed at him. His voice was tight and thready with anxiety. "Are they...? I didn't see what happened, but Detective Lund said they were missing. I need to know what happened. It was my fault. Did the wolves take them or...?"

Dylan's voice cracked as he got to that question, and he had to stop. He clenched his teeth, and the muscles bulged in his jaw.

It would eat at him. Somerset could recognize that, even if he didn't understand it. Dylan had only ever agreed to be Santa on sufferance. If they gave him a reason to go sour on Yule, he might still change his mind. It shouldn't be possible, but his grandfather had pulled it off. Yule couldn't afford to assume it wasn't bloodline related.

That was enough to make the two opposed impulses fall into step. The oath relaxed its grip on Somerset's tongue. He rubbed his jaw with one hand.

"The wolves took them."

"Where?" Dylan asked. Then the more interesting question, "Why?"

"I don't know," Somerset said. He shrugged when Dylan glared at him. "They're wolves, not lords of the courts. They don't take prisoners—"

"She wasn't a prisoner," Dylan interrupted him. "They said she was a...a ticket."

Somerset dug his thumb into the hinge of his jaw to work the ache out of the muscle.

He frowned as he took in that information.

“A ticket where?”

Dylan paused. He closed his eyes for a second before he finally answered. “Home? I don’t where that is.”

“They’re called Winter’s wolves,” Somerset pointed out. “Guess.”

Dylan flushed. The color didn’t last in his face. “Well, I don’t know where that is,” he pointed out. “It could be a cave or it could be a country.”

“It is,” Somerset said. He chewed absently on the inside of his lower lip as he turned that over in his head. “They weren’t after you?”

Dylan shook his head. The hair that Somerset had tidied back fell over his face. “I don’t think so. They wanted Irene. It was just bad luck that I got the call. ”

Luck, good or bad, was always suspicious.

Somerset nodded at Dylan’s arm, the gray fabric stretched over a bulky bandage. “And that?”

“Gift with purchase?” Dylan said.

It didn’t make sense. Their kind loved babies—whether to rock or roast depended on the individual—but there was never a shortage of them. Mortals were careless with their offspring. For every infant won back by a savvy parent with wits and violence, there were a dozen whose disappearance went unnoticed.

Or sometimes, just unmissed.

There was no reason that someone would rather have a baby than the head of one of the Winter Court's most important fiefdoms. Unless it was an...unusual baby.

"Where would they take them?" Dylan asked. He got off the desk and stepped toward Somerset. The bruise on his neck was still wet, darkened to purple around the edges. "How do we find them?"

The "we" made the hair on the back of Somerset's neck stand on end. He caught Dylan's chin in between his fingers and tilted his head back to get eye contact.

"That's my job," Somerset said. "Not yours."

Dylan's mouth twisted. "She's my friend," he said. "I have to—"

"Do you trust me?" Somerset asked.

There was a pause, and Dylan's eyes shifted away from Somerset's for a breath. A man less aware of what he was might have been offended.

"When the wolves took them," Dylan said, "did you try to save them?"

Somerset let go of his face and stepped back. "No," he admitted. "I saved you."

"That's your job," Dylan said. "I—"

Dylan cut himself off before he could finish and lifted both hands in a frustrated "enough" gesture. He turned his back on Somerset and took a few steps away. His shoulders were tight, hunched up toward his ears, and Somerset had to resist the urge to reach out and smooth them back down.

"I get that, I do," Dylan finally turned around as he finished the interrupted statement.

“But for the last year everything in my life has been dictated by the need to keep me safe.”

Somerset crossed his arms and frowned at him.

“I let you keep your job,” he pointed out. “Which might have been a mistake, since last night proved that our escort wasn’t enough to keep you safe.”

Dylan’s eyebrows shot up. “Let?” he said. “No, I just didn’t listen to you. Something I should do more often...at least then I’d not be sleeping alone so much.”

That stung oddly. Somerset shifted his shoulders to try and loosen the twinge between his ribs.

“If Yule or the Winter Court found out about us—” he said.

“I know!” Dylan interrupted. He turned on his heel and stalked over to the door, throwing the rest of his comment over his shoulder as he went. “I just don’t care anymore. If they don’t want me to be Santa...well, they aren’t the only ones.”

He yanked the door open to leave.

“Wait,” Somerset said.

For a second it looked like Dylan wasn’t going to listen. Then he turned around, the door propped open with his shoulder, and looked at Somerset.

“What?” he said.

“You are Santa, like it or not,” Somerset said. “That means that when you wake up in the hospital and there’s no one there to protect you, you call me. You don’t get an

Uber. Whoever killed—”

Dylan interrupted him. “I know,” he said. “Whoever killed my grandfather is still out there, but I wasn’t alone when I woke up. Jars was there.”

The taste of old suspicion was sour in the back of Somerset’s throat, like fresh skyr and just as unpleasant.

“Did you tell him anything?”

“No,” Dylan said. “But he told me he didn’t like me, and that he already had my replacement ready to go. Then he left. If he was behind the coup on Christmas, he’s really bad at making himself look innocent.”

That...was a good point. Somerset hesitated for a second, but in the end it didn’t matter. It was too late to trust him; they would have to admit they hadn’t until now. That would go over poorly. Jars had always been quick to take offense, and none of the Yule Lads were exactly slow at it.

Besides...

“He would be,” Somerset parried Dylan’s point with a shrug. “So would I. Guilty is much more in our wheelhouse.”

Dylan smiled, a tight twist of his mouth that didn’t have much humor in it. You need to care about doing something wrong to feel guilty.”

“I didn’t say we felt it,” Somerset countered smoothly. “Just that we are it. ”

Dylan folded his lower lip between his teeth, snorted, and walked out. The door swung shut behind him. Light from the bar glowed in a thin, reedy line through the

crack their visitors had left. Somerset frowned at the damage as he walked around the desk to grab his coat from the back of his chair.

Only to close his fingers on empty air instead of cashmere. He curled them into his palm and let his hand drop back to his side. Last time he'd seen his coat it had been in a plastic bag on the floor of the hospital room, blood smeared wet over the plastic. It was probably in a dumpster now.

He needed a new coat, but the inconvenience was worth the reminder. A resentful Santa was better than a dead one.

For some reason just the idea of that made Somerset's chest creak with sudden, painful tightness. He rolled his shoulders impatiently as he tried to shrug it off. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen dead Santas before. In fact, he'd seen them all until the latest one.

That didn't help.

Somerset made an annoyed sound under his breath.

He braced his feet on the floor and reached through . Ice bit down through his shirt and muscle, straight down to the bone. He'd been born on a mountain, weaned on snow melt, and he rarely felt the cold. This was different; it felt hostile in a way that true winter would never turn on one of its get. It scraped Somerset's skin raw and hardened the meat.

It was Yule magic, but the old kind. Back when it was cruel and the wolves ran with the Sleigh instead of behind it.

Somerset gritted his teeth and focused on want. The smell of fresh wool, with the hint of blood that the dry cleaners could never get out. The weight of the coattails around

his legs and the... warmth against his chest when Dylan squirmed into it...

No. Focus on the itch of cuffs against his wrist and the smooth, round discs of old horn or bone, same difference, that served as buttons.

His hand closed on something. In the cold he couldn't tell what it was, if it was soft or hard...or bloody. There was a reason that Yule rarely used the sack for its old purposes anymore. Mistakes had been made.

Not by him, though.

Somerset pulled his hand out. His coat, or the closest to it his memory could draw, came with it. Frost matted on the collar and dropped from the sleeves in chunks onto the floor as the heavy length of fabric dropped back into the world.

It smoked from the cold, the collar and cuffs darkened as it smoldered .

Somerset gave it a quick shake and a slap to dislodge most of the ice. Once it was clean enough, he pulled it on. It felt the same. He ran his fingers down the row of buttons until he found the nick taken out of the edge of one. All the details were there.

It would do. He didn't really need a coat, but it gave him somewhere to keep his things.

He took the knife off the desk and sheathed it under his coat. Then he grabbed his keys.

It was best this way. There were only days until Christmas Eve. It was no time for Santa to take any sort of risk. That was what the Yule Lads were for, to do what Yule either couldn't or wouldn't. Somerset had sent Dylan away for his own good.

That had worked last year...

Chapter Seven

Dylan did his best to hunch down into his hoodie as he loitered in the stoop of the Just-as-High and endured the flat crackle of on-hold Muzak through his phone. His dramatic exit from Somerset's office had gotten him this far before he remembered he'd still not replaced his car, and his pride wouldn't let him go back in. Not yet, anyhow. It might have to throw in the towel soon, though, since Dylan wasn't dressed for the weather. Hopefully the person he'd called in the hospital's billing department would pick up soon.

The season had turned harsh overnight, with storms predicted to hammer the region up until Christmas Day.

Dylan would have felt guilty, but he doubted it was down to him. So far he'd failed miserably to achieve anything with the power of Yule other than his duties on Christmas Eve...which had more to do with the tools of trade than anything he did. More likely the wolves had brought winter with them. It had been a rough year last year too.

The instrumental version of some ten-year-old pop classic cut off into a human voice. Dylan tuned back in long enough to learn his "call was important" and then let his mind drift again.

At least no one would expect him to fix the weather. That was something the city was prepared for. It was always a white Christmas in Belling—the city boasted about it—so they were ready for it. Most people put it down to freak weather patterns due to unique geographic features...but they probably didn't know it was the anchor point

for the North Pole in the real world.

Dylan's brain caught on that for a moment, but it couldn't hang onto it. It was one thing to pretend that it was all a dream when he was the only one caught up in it. That wouldn't work now that other people had been dragged in, because the consequences to them if he couldn't fix this would be very real.

It was the mortal world, he reminded himself grimly as he rubbed his arm, and with the wolves involved it could get very mortal.

The recording of a slightly out-of-tune piano cut off into a bored monotone of someone's voice. It took Dylan a second to realize it wasn't another taped interjection, it was who he'd wanted to talk to.

"What can I do for you?"

"Joe?" Dylan checked.

There was a long pause, and the click of absentminded data entry stopped as the person on the other end shifted out of autopilot. A roughly indrawn breath rasped down the line, and then, "You bastard. I'm going to fucking kill you."

Good. Dylan had gotten the right number.

"I didn't do—"

"Oh yeah? Then why are the cops asking questions about you?" Joe interrupted him to ask. "Why do they want to know what your 'relationship' with my wife is?"

"Ex-wife," Dylan corrected him.

His brain almost immediately caught up with his mouth, and he winced. It had just been habit to parrot the correction he'd heard from Alice every time her ex came up in conversation. After three years of marriage, and a move from California to his native city, she liked to be clear about that change in status. This probably wasn't the time to point that out to Joe, though.

"Fuck you," Joe spat at him. "You don't get to be a smartass when I can't tell my kid where mommy is. "

"That's fair," Dylan said.

"Like I fucking care what you think?" Joe said. "If you did something to Alice..."

"I didn't."

"Then why do you sound so fucking nervous?"

Dylan hadn't realized he did. Then he paid attention to the tremor in his hands and the way his teeth chattered together.

"I'm just cold," he said. "Joe, I swear that I didn't have anything to do with what happened. But I need your help."

Joe snorted. "Why the hell would I want to do that?" he asked. "Even if I believe you—and I don't—I never liked you. You always thought you were better than me, out there saving lives when I'm generating bills for cancer patients."

That was true. Dylan hadn't thought it had been that obvious, though.

He took a breath of cold, sour air to try and argue his case, and it filled his lungs until they hurt. Icy fingers pinched at the seams of his skull and cramped his ribs. The taste

of burnt grease and the bitter tang of charcoal filled his mouth, thick enough he could feel it coat his teeth.

“Joseph Breslin,” Dylan’s mouth said. He bit his tongue and the inside of his cheeks as he tried to keep pace with the words coming out before he knew they were there. The words hurt as they came out; the voice was his, but it stung and itched in his throat like papercuts. “When you were fifteen, you used to spy on your neighbor, Mrs. Watkins, when she had a shower.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dylan wished he knew. It wasn’t helping , whatever it was. Joe didn’t care about what he’d done as a child. He thought Dylan had killed his wife. That needed something more recent to use as leverage—

“When you were thirty-one, you billed Medicare for \$30,000 dollars worth of cancer treatments for indigents who were not patients at the hospital,” Dylan said. He nearly choked on that one as he tried to shut himself up before he made it worse. It didn’t work. “You’ve thought about doing it again, but you worry your boss suspects you did something. She does.”

Dylan finally realized he still had control of the rest of his body. He slapped his hand over his mouth and dug his fingers into his cheeks to shut himself up. Joe breathed raggedly in his ear .

“How do you—” he started to ask, then interrupted himself with a justification. “I had to. That was... They threatened to hurt... Is that what this is about? Do you work for them? She’d nothing to do with this.”

Anger cracked Joe’s voice as he came to that conclusion.

A bit more detail would help , Dylan thought frantically. It had worked the first time, after all, but this time his tongue stayed his own. He held his breath and flicked through a mental hand of cards to play next, trying to decide which one would get him what he wanted.

“I know Alice isn’t involved in this,” Dylan said. “Neither am I. Right now, though, the police don’t know that. They’re looking at me, and not at who they need to look at. Because they don’t know about that, do they?”

Silence on the other end.

Joe took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I could tell them,” he said, his voice low and defeated. “I should tell them. If this is down to what I did—”

“Not yet,” Dylan said. Guilt tried to shoulder its way in as he said that, since confession probably was the right thing to do. It just wouldn’t be useful, since there was almost no chance Joe’s little bit of fraud had anything to do with Yule. “This is what’s going to happen. You get me what I need and I’ll get Alice back. After that...it’s your conscience. OK?”

That got him a snort. “What the fuck are you going to do?” he asked. “You’re a paramedic. You don’t have the money to pay them or the muscle to scare them off.”

Dylan clenched his teeth to hold in the exasperated noise that wanted to get out. It wasn’t like Joe was wrong after all. If this had been a mortal issue, Dylan wouldn’t have been much use against criminals. He couldn’t exactly explain the leverage he did have, though.

I’m Santa Claus —that would end with him back in the hospital under an involuntary hold. Somerset would probably be thrilled, as long as he could break Dylan out on Christmas Eve.

“Maybe not,” Dylan said. He didn’t actually have a “but” prepared, but he hoped that once he started talking it would come to him. It didn’t. He hesitated as he groped for something ...and the door behind him opened.

Somerset stopped in the doorway, one hand up to pop the collar on his coat. He raised one sandy eyebrow as he looked down at Dylan.

“And here I thought I’d have to come find you,” he said .

It galled, but...it would work. Dylan stepped out of Somerset’s way and made a quick “give me a minute” gesture as he focused on the phone. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Somerset’s expression go from miffed to amused as he finished adjusting his coat.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not dating someone who has both,” Dylan said. “Joe. Trust me. Like you said, I always thought I was better because I helped people. Let me help Alice.”

Joe laughed. There wasn’t a lot of humor in the cracked noise...but there was a little.

“At least you admit,” Joe muttered. He took a breath and then let it hiss out through his teeth. “OK. OK, what do you want?”

“I need an address for Irene...” Dylan drew a blank on the name. It had been Alice who’d taken her details last night, since she’d reacted so negatively to him. A hand on the small of his back nudged him out of the Just-as-High’s door and onto the street. He absently cooperated with the guidance as he focused on the call.

“There’s a lot of those,” Joe said. “And I can’t do that. I’m not allowed to share that sort of information.”

“You’re not allowed to commit Medicare fraud either,” Dylan pointed out. “Irene was the patient we picked up last night. She was at the hospital last year too, the woman whose husband-to-be attacked her in the stairwell. I’m sure her surname is in—”

“In the settlement paperwork,” Joe said. He sniffed hard, a wet, muffled sound, and cleared his throat. “OK. I’ll see what I can do. Is that it?”

It seemed like a wasted opportunity, but Dylan couldn’t think of anything else.

“Yes, that’s all. Just the address.”

Joe grunted his agreement and hung up. Dylan listened to the dead line as if it was going to tell him something before he finally lowered the phone. On its way down he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the flat black glass of the screen. Except Dylan’s reflection didn’t usually boast horns and the glimpse of sharp teeth behind his lips.

Krampus. That made sense, if anyone had knowledge of the Naughty List it would be him.

The back of Dylan’s neck itched, and his shoulders tensed as he resisted the urge to look around. He already knew that Santa’s dark shadow wasn’t there. There was a flicker of a wink from the phone screen, and then it was just Dylan caught in the glass again.

He looked like...someone who’d been run off the road by a truck the night before. So it could be worse.

Dylan stuck his phone into his pocket and finally looked up to acknowledge Somerset .

“I—”

“Let me guess,” Somerset interrupted. “You didn’t listen to me and you aren’t going to stay out of my way to let me do my job?”

That did, pretty much, cover it, Dylan supposed.

“Are you going to try and stop me?” he asked.

“No,” Somerset said. He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket as they walked, the snow globe fob dangling from his fingers, and hit the Unlock button. Ahead of them the lights on a silver-gray sedan parked on the side of the road flashed twice. “I’m going to make sure that if you’re going to do anything stupid, I’m there to make sure you don’t get hurt. Again.”

He stepped in front of Dylan and pulled the door of the sedan open. Dylan paused on the sidewalk despite the cold that pinched his toes. He chafed his hands together as he tilted his head to peer into the car. It was all charcoal leather and dash, with a reindeer-shaped air freshener dangled from the mirror.

Dylan recognized it as one of the ones from the North Pole’s fleet. He’d driven one for a couple of weeks, until he realized the convenience didn’t make up for giving Jars the opportunity to jerk him around.

“What happened to your truck?” he asked.

Somerset looked at him and raised his eyebrow a notch. “You bled all over it,” he said mildly. There was nothing mild about the look in his eyes. “Get in.”

Dylan swallowed the excuse on the tip of his tongue—that really hadn’t been his fault, but he’d probably pushed his luck enough for today—and did what he was told.

The leather seats were warm and comfortable. Dylan shifted uncomfortably as he

sank into them.

“Where are we—”

Somerset closed the door before he could find out.

It felt like High School all over again.

Dylan, wedged into the back seat of the sedan as he stripped out of his jeans, snorted to himself at that thought. High School on the TV maybe. Foster kids with a chip on their shoulder tended to have a very different experience .

He kicked the ball of damp denim under the seat and bent forward to pull the hoodie up over his head. When he looked up, he caught Somerset’s gaze in the rearview mirror. Heat flushed up from his chest and stung his ears. He wasn’t sure why; it wasn’t as if Somerset hadn’t seen it all before.

“I thought we were back to pretending we don’t know each other,” Dylan said.

The corners of Somerset’s eyes crinkled. Dylan didn’t need to see his face to imagine, in detail, the quick flash of a smile.

“I don’t need to know you to enjoy the view.”

Dylan snorted and reached into the bag Somerset had handed him. He pulled out...

Santa’s clothes.

Sexy Santa, apparently, in starched white shirts and waxed denim. It wasn’t what Dylan had expected. He wasn’t sure what he had expected. His own clothes, maybe, or a Santa suit like he had moonlit at a mall.

“Don’t tell me,” Dylan grouched as he pulled the shirt on and buttoned it up. The light cotton felt warm against his skin, as if it had been hung in front of the fire instead of stashed in the trunk of a car. It wasn’t a spell, exactly. Things made in the North Pole just tended to be cozy, to be comfortable. “Another of my grandfather’s hand-me-downs?”

Somerset snorted. “If I’m caught going through any of Santa’s drawers, it won’t be your grandfather’s,” he said. “You have your own wardrobe.”

That felt... Dylan paused halfway through buttoning his cuffs and tried to decide what exactly it did feel like.

Convenient, he supposed. But it did raise one question.

“How did they get my size?” he asked.

Somerset reached up and adjusted the mirror. Instead of his eyes, the only reflection was the street, the sidewalk wet and gritty with salt and snowmelt. A homeless man huddled on the steps of a building, bundled up in a ratty old coat, and two women with coffee cups in their hands gave him a wide berth as they walked by.

“Jars probably sent brownies to measure you in your sleep,” he said.

“What!” Dylan sputtered. That was not ... OK, he didn’t know what answer he had expected, but it wasn’t that. “Are you serious?”

Rather than answer, Somerset just got out of the car. He slammed the door behind him.

The women had nearly reached the car, arm in arm now as they put their heads together. Even with the heavily tinted windows to protect his modesty, Dylan still

flushed as he grabbed the jeans to put them on. He wasn't sure if it was the situation or Somerset's joke that made him feel exposed.

"It better be a joke," Dylan muttered under his breath as he hurriedly pulled thick socks on and shoved his feet into black leather ankle boots. He'd just finished and moved on the coat when the back door opened and Somerset bent over to look in.

"Ready?" Somerset asked expectantly.

Dylan shrugged to settle the black denim on his shoulders and glanced down at himself. Brownie measurements or not, the clothes fit him like a glove, and the warmth soaked down into his cold bones. He supposed that he was as ready as he was going to get, although...

"Ready for what?" he asked as he slid over the leather seat to the door. "Where are we, and how will they help get Alice back?"

Somerset held out his hand. "You'll see."

Dylan stared at it. He wanted to take it and feel the press of Somerset's cool, callused fingers against his palm. Except then he'd have to let go, back to pretending that Somerset was just his bodyguard.

"What if someone sees?" Dylan asked dryly. "Is this appropriate for a bodyguard and his boss?"

Somerset ducked down to look into the car. "You're not my boss," he corrected firmly. "And yes, it is. Move."

Dylan groused under his breath and grabbed Somerset's hand. It turned out that it wasn't actually that intimate a moment. Somerset just unceremoniously yanked him

out of the car and slammed the door. He put his hand on Dylan's shoulder and turned him around so he could see...

...the North Pole. Which was still a strip club.

Dylan scowled and tried to back up. "Oh no," he said. "I told you. I'm not getting locked up out of the way—"

"That's not why we're here," Somerset said as he caught Dylan's elbow. "We need to talk to whoever paid us a visit at the Just-as-High , and since we don't have time to do it the fun way...that means we go through the proper channels."

It sounded reasonable. Dylan still dug his heels in as he tried to think up an excuse. He'd not dodged every summons, appointment, and meeting set here for the last year just to walk in now without protest. It wasn't even the threat that the last Santa's killer might be under the same roof as him. At least, not entirely .

His reluctance was more to do with the flashing neon stripper pole and member's only sign on the door. If he was Santa, if Yule really belonged to him, then it would be a reflection of him.

The traditional Santa's workshop or some sort of Christmas first-aid tent. Instead it was a tittybar, because it didn't matter what watch he wore or whip he cracked.

He didn't belong, and somehow Yule knew it.

"We don't have time for the proper channels either," he said. "Why don't you deal with this, and I'll—"

Somerset gave him a shove into the road. Dylan staggered as he tried not to trip over his own feet.

“Don’t worry,” Somerset said as he crossed under his own steam. “The proper channels aren’t going to take long. The Winter Court is probably already on their way here.”

Chapter Eight

S omerset had been wrong.

The Winter Court was already there.

And not just a handful of minor dignitaries either. Winter had sent one of their dukes to Belling, and he'd come all the way to Yule's domain to express his displeasure. The slender man, dressed all in charcoal gray leathers, sat flanked by four of his court, two at either shoulder, at one end of a long, scarred oak table. At the other end Jars sat stiffly in an ornate carved chair. He only had Stúfur to back him up, the Yule Lad's shoulder propped against the chair as he leaned on it.

The scene put Somerset's hackles up. It looked easy, familiar. Somerset thought he could trust Stúfur, but he'd thought the same of all his brothers at one point and been proven wrong.

"Is this a bad time?" Somerset asked as the door swung shut behind him. He stripped his coat off and tossed it into a nearby booth. "We could come back."

Belling's new duke turned to look Somerset up and down. Apparently it didn't impress, because he curled his lip before he turned back to Jars.

"Are your servants always so free with their tongues?" he asked.

The jab made Stúfur snort, and one of the duke's advisors leaned in and muttered something to him. It could have been that the duke had just called one of the Yule

Lads a servant —Somerset didn't care, but some of his brothers were more conscious of their dignity — or that he'd turned his back to one of Winter's most feted killers. Whatever it was, the duke didn't care for it. He stiffened and hunched his shoulders up toward his ears, then stood up in one graceful, flowing movement.

"I see I am mistaken," he said smoothly as he sketched a brusque bow in Somerset's direction. "It's no mere servant, it's the Saintmaker himself. The most selfless of Yule's retainers."

The title was new, the insult wasn't.

Winter had never believed that Somerset had raised one Santa to office with no hidden motives. The fact they couldn't see what his angle was had only convinced them it was even more mercenary than they'd thought.

It looked like doing it twice hadn't changed Winter's mind about him.

That, more than anything else, was why no one could know about him and Dylan. Somerset might wear his own feelings on his sleeve where the newest Santa was concerned, but it would be dangerous if they knew Dylan returned them.

"I prefer Somerset, and if I—" he started, but Jars's voice interrupted him before he could finish.

"And not alone," he said. He reached for his crutches and levered himself clumsily to his feet as he dipped his head toward Dylan. "Santa. We're honored that you were able to finally make it. After all, as Duke Caolán pointed out, the Yule Lads simply serve Yule. It's Santa Claus who rules it."

Dylan was suddenly the focus of everyone's attention.

“That’s OK. Please don’t get up.” Dylan gestured clumsily for Jars to stay where he was. “I can’t stay long.”

Jars sighed and lowered himself stiffly into the chair. He propped his crutches against the table and leaned back.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m sure there’s a lot left to do for you to get ready for the Eve. How fare the reindeer? Are they in good condition for the night’s work?”

There was a pause, just long enough for Jars to look pleased with himself .

“I think they’re enjoying their reindeer games,” Dylan said. “Which is important, after last year. We don’t want to run over anyone else’s grandma.”

He laughed. So did Stúfur. No one else had spent enough time in the mortal world to get the reference. There was a flash of stiff, restrained horror in Jars’s eyes, although he controlled his expression enough that it didn’t show on his face.

Still enough of a servant of Yule to care about that, then.

“That was—” Dylan started to explain.

Somerset nudged him to shut him up. It probably wouldn’t help them find Alice, or uncover the traitor, but the idea of giving Jars an ulcer was funny.

“ That’s Santa?” Duke Caolán said. He sounded as offended as a child who’d seen a department store Santa take his beard off. “He doesn’t look much like Santa.”

The advisor on his left chuckled from behind unparted, dark red lips. He patted Caolán’s arm.

“Witty as always,” he said. A sharp glance made the other three advisors nod and murmur in agreement.

Caolán’s mouth twitched at the corner, and he moved his arm away. It seemed the young duke had enough about him to not enjoy being pandered to.

“They promised me I wouldn’t have to grow a beard,” Dylan said. “I specifically asked about that beforehand.”

Jars raised a sandy eyebrow in response to that. “I don’t believe that was a binding condition,” he muttered.

His jab was ignored as Caolán cracked an actual smile at Dylan’s remark. He gestured across the table to some empty chairs.

“Sit,” he said. “Even if you can’t stay long, you should know why we are here. It does involve you.”

Dylan glanced at Somerset. That would do nothing to quell the “Saintmaker” murmurs, but Somerset could live with them. He nodded slightly and followed Dylan over to the table.

He pulled a chair out for Dylan and held it for him. Then he pulled another for himself. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jars’s mouth crimp in annoyance.

“What the fuck?” Stúfur objected. “He can sit down, but I have to stand here like I’ve got piles?”

“You sit like a slut,” Jars said .

Stúfur screwed his face up in confusion. “What the fuck does that mean?” he asked.

“I sit like a normal person.”

Somerset leaned back and hung his arm over the back of his chair. “No,” he said. “Jars is right.”

That got him an offended look from Stúfur. He smirked back. It was good for Stúfur to remember that he wasn’t the only asshole in the family.

“Enough,” Dylan said, the edges of the word clipped with irritation. It caught the corners of the empty room with a soft, authoritative echo.

It shut all three of them up. Stúfur thought better of whatever he’d been about to say so thoroughly that his teeth clicked audibly as he shut his mouth.

At their end of the table, Winter’s representatives looked...the range ran from taken back to angry. With the scale weighted more at anger. Oddly enough, when Somerset glanced at Jars, his brother looked...pleased.

“Enough indeed,” one of the courtiers said abruptly. She was lush-bodied for the Courts, with feathery blond hair and muted ink coloring in her forearms and throat. Her shirt gaped open as she leaned forward, revealing the upper slopes of her breasts and just how far down the ink ran. Pale eyes snapped as she glared at Somerset and then jabbed a finger at him. “When you walk in here with your attack dog unleashed. You forget your place , Yule’s man.”

It was an insult, a very old one from back when Yule only needed a mortal man for one short, bloody run. The history was probably lost on Dylan, but from the way his eyes narrowed, the tone wasn’t.

“Which is?” Dylan asked.

The woman peeled her upper lip back from her teeth like a dog. Her gums were freckled like a dog's, too. "Under the dirt," she said. "It's where mortal men spend the longest."

Caolán held up a hand to quiet her.

"Merula might be harsh, but she isn't wrong. We're here because of Yule's interference in one of our—"

The woman shoved herself to her feet. Her fingers dug into the table, long, perfectly manicured nails sharp enough to gouge splinters out of the seasoned wood.

"Interference?" she spat. "That witch's bastard violated every treaty and agreement forged between Yule and Winter when he walked into my fort. Or has Yule written new laws and we, now, are the supplicants? "

She looked around as if she expected someone to answer, her face twisted into an ugly approximation of innocence.

Somerset leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms. He caught the quick sidelong look that Dylan gave him, the flicker of his gaze from Somerset's shoulders down to his chest. It probably wasn't the ideal time, but Somerset still let himself appreciate that, since this meeting was about to get ugly.

"Is this about the changeling?" he asked.

Merula's mouth twisted, her lips folded in as they caught on her teeth. Her hands, still braced on the table, clenched, and the skin split. It was her eyes that gave her away, though. The quick, shifty glance at Caolán that clearly didn't want him to hear the answer.

“He is valued,” she said. “Useful. How long were you gone, Saintmaker, and what catastrophe fell on us in those times?”

It was Dylan who flinched at that, with his soft, mortal heart.

“That is—”

Somerset twisted the corner of his mouth up as he interrupted. “Santa did die,” he pointed out, then glanced up the table at his brothers. “No offense.”

It was Stúfur who snarled and lunged at him, Jars who grabbed his sleeve and dragged him back.

“Not in front of the nice people,” Jars said.

Stúfur yanked his arm away, ripping the seam of his shirt open, and stepped back

“And I didn’t break any treaty,” Somerset said once he was sure he wasn’t about to get sucker-punched. “I had every right to be at Demre and Hill’s. I had an invite.”

The Court representative with the lush red lips leaned forward. When he blinked, a sliver of a membrane flicked sideways across his eyes. He didn’t look much like Enid, but he hailed from the same place. His fingers were soot-black too, the nails cracked and red from the forge, but the stain ran all the way up under his sleeves.

No Irish Spring soap for him.

“Just because you bank there,” he said. The words were crisply enunciated, even though the red lips never parted. “Doesn’t mean you are welcome.”

“Demre?” Somerset asked.

“Hill.”

“Ah.” Somerset paused for a second as he considered his next words. He’d told Dylan he didn’t have time for a war, but what he was about to do could start one if he phrased it wrong. “They flew Yule’s standard and raised our regalia. By the treaty between Summer and Winter, where the wreath is hung and the effigy laid out is Yule’s.”

Hill’s mouth parted briefly. The tongue that poked out briefly was blackened and pocked.

“He lies,” Merula scoffed. She threw her bloody hands up in exasperation. “And if about this, about what else. He was the one who brought news of the red man’s death, and had his suckling pig replacement on a leash.”

Her eyes flashed to Dylan, and she smiled.

“No offense,” she mocked with cloying sweetness.

Dylan shrugged. “I’ve been called worse,” he said.

Somerset went to touch his knee, to remind him of their standing agreement not to smart mouth the wrong people, but quickly stalled the gesture when he caught Jars watching. He curled his fingers into his palm, nails sharp against calloused skin, and hoped he’d picked the right threat to fend off. While he did that Dylan turned to Caolán.

“I don’t know what all that means,” he said. “But it was a Christmas party. There were decorations, a tree, and some guy dressed like...well...me, I guess. Why does that matter?”

Caolán looked grim. He bit his thumbnail, caught himself, and pulled his hand away from his mouth.

“Merula,” he said as he turned to look at her. “Did you know about this?”

“I... That’s...” Merula stumbled awkwardly over her words. She stopped and pulled herself up to her full height, her shoulders back and chin up. “I knew nothing of that, but so what if there was? It was a prank, and one amongst mortals as mortals are prone to do. What harm is there?”

Caolán slammed his fist on the table. “Do not try to play the innocent. You know well enough what harm,” he snapped. “Your representative overstepped, and thanks to him, now so has Winter in coming here to demand recourse for what turns out to be our own wrongdoing.”

“There were our kind there,” Somerset said. No one was happy with that news. “A redcap. A wolf.”

The other three dignitaries looked at each other in almost perfectly synchronized shock and then leaned forward to mutter insistently at their duke. He tried to listen to them, but the overlapped advice finally made him shrug them off.

“Enough,” he snapped. “Hold your tongues, in your laps if need be. Stekkjarstaur, we acted in ignorance of all the facts, but as Merula says, no harm was done. ”

Jars rubbed his jaw. His thumb audibly rasped on stubble. His lean, tanned face was pulled into an expression of practiced diplomacy, but his eyes glittered with enjoyment. Yule served Winter; that arrangement had benefited them all over the years. But just as Winter chafed, sometimes, to be beholden to the human’s love of a holiday; so did Yule to wear that yoke.

“A bold claim,” he said. “When a woman under Yule’s protection was taken, and it was one of Winter’s wolves who drew Sainted blood in the street. The same wolf, Santa?”

Everyone looked at Dylan. He shrank back in the chair and rubbed his arm absently.

“I—” he started to say, then caught himself. “I’m not sure I should answer that without talking to—”

“Answer enough,” Caolán said. “What gelt does Yule ask?”

Jars mugged uncertainty as he leaned back in the heavy carved chair. He rubbed his chin in thought as he glanced from Somerset to Stúfur.

“We—”

Before he could tell them, Merula made a strangled sound of rage and lunged over the table. The skin flayed back from her fingers to reveal bony claws, and her mouth split at the corners to reveal the wet red interior and flat spade teeth.

Somerset unceremoniously shoved Dylan out of the way. The man and chair toppled over and hit the ground with a yelp and a crack. At the head of the table, Jars lurched to his feet—easily enough this time, Somerset noted with a mental snort—and braced one hand on the table.

“You fucking dare ?” he demanded. Angry red color flushed his cheekbones, and the muscles in his shoulders clenched under his shirt. “In our own halls?”

He gritted his teeth and flipped the table lengthwise. Bottles and glasses shattered on the floor, one of the Winter Court dignitaries gave an undignified yelp, and Merula smacked face first into the wooden surface. She went flying and hit one of the

neglected stripper poles with a smack. The troll-rated bar caught her right in the middle of the back, and she was the one who folded.

Her face twisted more around the bony jut of her shifted skull as she screamed and slid down onto the ground, her limbs twitching jerkily.

The rest of the Winter Court delegation scattered as the table crashed down where they'd been. Caolán swore furiously at his people as they dragged him backward. None of them paid him any attention .

Somerset bent down, grabbed Dylan by the collar of his coat, and hauled him back onto his feet.

“You OK?” he asked.

He didn't get an answer right away. Dylan just looked dazed as he blinked at the chaos around him. Blood dripped from his nose. He must have cracked it on the floor as he went down.

“Did you hit your head?” Somerset asked. He palmed the back of Dylan's skull and worked his fingers through tangled brown hair in search of a head injury.

“What? No. I didn't,” Dylan protested. He tried to squirm away, but Somerset ignored that.

Stúfur joined them, his knives already out. He gave Dylan a once-over and then Somerset a hard look.

“In the middle of a fight?” he said. “Can you keep your hands off him for five minutes?”

The jibe made Somerset twitch. It didn't look like anyone had heard, but that was just luck.

"Not the time," he said as he shoved Dylan at his brother. "Get him somewhere safe."

"Done," Stúfur said as he scruffed Dylan by the collar before he could squirm away. Then he hesitated a beat as he glanced toward Jars as their eldest brother smacked a bottle out of his way with the butt of his crutch. "Maybe he's not—"

"Go."

Stúfur acknowledged the order. He tightened his grip on Dylan's collar.

"Come on," he said. "You don't want to see this anyhow. You can't even cope with a Sunday roast. This will turn your stomach."

"We just talked about this," Dylan protested as he tried to wriggle out of the coat. "You can't just shove me somewhere and let me out once a year."

He managed to get one arm out. Before he could get any further, Stúfur stooped slightly and hoisted him up over his shoulder. The strangled noise that came out of Dylan as his head dangled around Stúfur's knees was probably a curse, but it was hard to tell.

"Don't tempt us," Stúfur said as he hooked his fingers into the back pocket of Dylan's jeans. "Human rights are a really recent thing for us."

He hefted Dylan up into a better position on his shoulder and ignored the attempt to punch him in the kidneys.

"Watch your hands," Somerset growled at him sourly as he turned back to the fight.

He only got a low, dirty laugh from Stúfur in response.

Asshole.

The closed-lip courtier raised his stained hands. The floor cracked open, the polished wooden planks splintering as they broke, and smoke belched up through the crevices. It was thick and greasy, sour with the smell of metal and stone, and it clotted into the shape of thick-shouldered goblins with blank faces and broad spade-like hands. Sparks dripped off them like sweat as they raced forward, barely visible in the smog their creator had raised.

One latched onto Somerset's leg, and he swore. It was hot enough to scald through his jeans, and it dug at his stomach with blunt, hard fingers. Somewhere in the smoke he heard Jars spit out an old, ear-burning oath that had enough power behind it to make the smoke eddy.

Somerset gritted his teeth and grabbed the construct by the nape of the neck, scorching his fingers, and let his magic run down its arm into it. Frost cooled the burn on his palm and soaked into the thing through its skin. The sparks died as it cooled, and it slowed as its limbs hardened and went rigid.

Dead it was just slime and char. It crumbled to gritty dust in Somerset's grip.

He wiped his hand on his hip. Habit made him reach for the wind, but it was too far away. It liked the Yule Lads well enough, but not enough to come inside. Damn. That just left the hard way.

Smoke caught in his lungs as he took a deep breath, sticky enough to cling. He spat the taste out of his mouth along with his brother's name.

"Jars," he yelled. "If I hold them off, can you clear the room?"

There was a grunt from the smoke, and the dense body of a construct flew past Somerset and cracked in half against a wall. Viscera made of liquid metal and coal dropped out to cool in a ghoulish pile on the floor.

“I wasn’t the one who had to retire,” Jars shouted back. “You just do your best.”

Somerset made a guttural, annoyed noise in the back of his throat as he stalked into the smoke. Until last year—when a missing Santa, the threat of a lost Christmas, and Dylan’s inability to keep his mortal ass out of trouble had dragged him back in—he’d thought his days of watching his brothers’ backs were done.

Even the ones he liked got on his nerves, and Jars...well, he was still pretty sure Jars was a traitor. So Somerset had to keep him alive, just to put a knife to his throat once he could prove it.

He stooped down, grabbed the back of a knocked-over chair, and swung it up to bat a lunging construct out of the air. It went flying. Another one took its place. Hot pincers grabbed the back of Somerset’s thigh, the smell of burned denim and meat as it crisped sickly sweet as it rose up around him. The chair broke on its next swing. He was left holding a splintered rod as thick as his wrist, and threw it like a spear at the next sickly gray shape he saw.

The close-mouthed Winter courtier who’d called the smoke out made a choked noise of surprise as the roughly made projectile went into his throat. He clutched at it with both hands, the dark blood that oozed up scorching the wood as he staggered back.

Somerset paused for a breath to see if the summoner being injured dissuaded his creatures at all. It didn’t. He flicked his hold-out knife out of the wrist sheath and reached back to jab into the creature attached to his leg. The blade punched easily through the thing’s skull, but then got stuck in the sticky morass of cooling goo in there.

Somewhere in the smoke, Jars said something and cold struck like a nail through Somerset's bones. It was the first bite of a winter storm, the bitterness before the blow.

He tossed the dead construct and knife away together. They went rattling over the floor.

Jars said the second word and the smoke started to sink toward the ground under the weight of what was to come. The cold had splinters in it. A static squawk came from the speakers, and a sped-up, throaty vocal cover of "Deck the Halls" blasted out.

Somerset braced himself.

It wasn't a word that came next, just the smack of Jars's crutch against the floor. The ground underfoot shook again as thick fingers of ice splintered out from Jars's feet. Steam hissed from the crevices the courtier had opened as the ice packed them. The smoke froze and fell to the ground as smuts of soot.

The ice crawled on, thick frost-crusts of it that bunched and twisted as they formed a hedge around the Court's delegation. Or maybe it was more of a cage.

"You couldn't just yell?" Somerset asked, voice pitched to carry over the music. That had been Jars's gift from their ma, a yell that could level a herd of sheep or rattle the rocks off a mountain. The ice was old magic, Yule magic, from books that only he'd ever bothered to crack open. "You had to break out the big guns?"

Jars, weight tilted to the side as he braced himself on one crutch, gave Somerset a sour look and spat out a mouthful of splintered ice and blood.

"I wanted to make a point," he said.

“What? That you could read? ”

Jars’s crutch was frozen to the ground in front of him, the butt of it encased in a thick chunk of milky ice where it had first burst up through the ground. He grabbed the shaft just under the worn cuff and yanked. The ice held, the crutch buckled and broke. Jars twisted it free and swung the truncated length up onto his shoulder.

“That just because Christmas got cute, doesn’t mean we did,” he said.

“Oh, I think they know that,” Somerset said. He reached back to check the burn on his thigh. The scorched denim felt crispy, the skin underneath wet. “They’ve met you, after all.”

Jars ignored that as he limped across the ice-patched floor, weight listed heavily to the side onto his remaining crutch.

Behind the thicket of ice, Caolán shrugged off the last two retainers. He pulled himself up straight and glowered at the Yule Lads.

“What is this?” he demanded. “Has Yule forsworn itself?”

Somerset traded an annoyed look with Jars, momentarily in agreement despite their differences. Elves. This was why no one liked them.

“You started it,” Jars pointed out. “If it is to be war, it was Winter’s duke who violated guest-right and all our treaties.”

The weight of that accusation was enough to make the last two members of Caolán’s entourage blanch. They traded worried looks and picked at Caolán’s sleeve for a word. He shrugged them off and crossed his arms.

“I don’t see your blood on my hands,” he said. “Can you say the same?”

Cocky little sod.

Before either Yule Lad could respond, the more persistent of the two retainers—a seal-eyed woman with freckles the size of dollar coins—tugged on Caolán’s arm hard enough to make him stagger. He flushed and turned on her in annoyance.

“What ?” he snapped.

She blinked at him, unfazed, and then turned liquid black eyes toward the bent stripper pole.

“Where has Lady Demre gone?” she asked.

Everyone turned to look. The myrkálfar lay where he had fallen, in a puddle of dark blood, but the broken body of the woman was gone.

“Fuck,” the two Yule Lads and a Duke of the Winter Court said at the same time.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:07 am

Chapter Nine

Blood had turned the makeshift bandage of napkins and what might have been a G-string into a thick paper-maché scab. That wasn't a Christmas craft that was going to catch on. Dylan soaked the edges of it with warm water until he could peel it away from the broken chair leg it had been packed around.

Habit shifted Dylan's brain back into work mode as he categorized the injury in his mind as if he'd need to write it up later.

Maybe he would. When Jars had produced the first-aid kit that was all Dylan had to work with, he'd explained it with a shrug and a "health and safety." So who knew.

The man—or what had Somerset called him...a mirk elf?—laid out on the righted table had an impalement injury to the throat. The makeshift weapon had punctured his throat on the left-hand side and continued at a downward angle until it hit his collarbone. From the deformation, it had broken it as well. Dylan pressed carefully at the injury with gloved fingers and felt the bones shift and grate .

Pain made the man...elf, whatever, Dylan had picked up his name was Hill, that would do...writhe on the table he was laid out on. Somerset put a hand on his chest and pinned him flat, like a bug on a board.

"Can you fix him?" he said.

"I'm a paramedic, not a doctor," Dylan said. When he felt his way along the elf's throat, he felt the bubble-wrap crackle of crepitus under the skin. "He...he needs a

hospital. I mean, I guess. If he was mortal he would, but... Why isn't he healing? I've seen you shrug off worse than this."

The question made Somerset scowl. A petty part of Dylan that wasn't over being hauled out of the room over Stúfur's shoulder like a sack of old clothes was glad about that.

Not like you'd care if it had been Somerset with his hand on your ass, some ruthlessly fair-minded part of himself pointed out. Dylan didn't appreciate it being right—not entirely right, but close—so he ignored it.

"He should have," Somerset said. "Some of our kind you can end with wood easier than steel, but not him. It could be a geas. They can be oddly prescient."

This time it was the young Duke of Winter who shook his head. He stood to the side of the table, out of the way, with Stúfur stationed pointedly but politely at his shoulder. Dylan didn't get the politics of it exactly—at all—but he assumed the intent was to convey the duke was very much not a prisoner...until he needed to be.

"We vet for that," Caolán said. His mouth ticked up in not-quite-a-smile, and he fiddled absently with a green holly pin on his lapel. "Do you know many perfectly good parties have been ruined because someone can't refuse a boon, like 'break out the good liquor' or 'steal me away.' Never mind the High Kings toppled because they insulted the wrong witch by turning down a meal. He had none."

"In future," Stúfur said as he craned his head to look over Caolán's shoulder, "might be an idea to vet for treachery, as well."

Caolán gave the Yule Lad an unfriendly look. He took half a step aside to put some distance between them. "As far as I am aware, Hill served the Court loyally for centuries, as did Demre. They held positions of responsibility and regard. If they

meant us harm, it could have been done much easier than...this.”

He gestured at Hill’s sprawled body with obvious disdain .

“He’s been poisoned,” Jars said. He stepped forward and ran his finger down the shaft before he lifted it to show the rusty mark on his finger. “Mortal blood. Saint blood. His blood.”

Dylan lifted his hand toward his nose as he remembered the jolt of pain and the taste of iron in the back of his throat.

“We don’t mix well, the Sainted and the Soulless,” Jars continued. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and fastidiously wiped the stain off his skin. A dry-as-salt smile tucked the corners of his mouth as he glanced at Somerset. “It’s a good thing one of us can read, isn’t it?”

The need to make this—all of this—abide by some sort of observable natural law pricked at the tip of Dylan’s tongue. It made no sense that blood was a poison, but other bodily fluids could be introduced with no ill effects. That wasn’t exactly something he could ask about without...explanations of things he wasn’t supposed to talk about.

So...

When he was out on a call, he took the word of friends and family if they said the patient was on something. This was the same principle. And if he believed Jars...he should probably take the needle out of the vein.

Dylan stepped back and grabbed a handful of gauze pads out of the first-aid kit. He ripped them open and layered them on top of each other.

“Somerset?” he said. “When I tell you, pull the chair leg out of his throat.”

He boosted himself up onto the table and straddled Hill’s lean body. If he’d gotten this wrong, he would have another thing to add to his conscience. He wondered if it was a bad sign that he’d find Hill’s death a lot lighter than Alice...than whatever had happened to Alice.

“Now,” he said.

Somerset kept his hand braced on Hill’s chest. He grabbed the chair leg with the other and yanked. It didn’t come out clean. Fresh tendrils of green growth and thin, hairy roots had sprouted from the dead wood; they pulled out chunks of flesh and snapped off around bone. Hill arched up off the table, his mouth open in a soundless scream.

“That explains what didn’t agree with him,” Stúfur remarked.

Blood spurted out of the wound. Dylan stemmed it by slapping the gauze over the hole and pressing it down into place. He could feel the heat of Hill’s raw flesh as it stung through the layers of cotton. He gritted his teeth and pressed down on the dressing to hold it in place .

“Someone toss me the tape,” he said, his free hand stuck out blindly. The roll smacked against his palm, and he grunted not-quite-a-thanks as he pulled it around. He ripped off a length of it with his teeth and slapped it into place. Then another to secure the other side of it. The raw edges of the dressing frayed and crisped as the blood scorched into them, but didn’t catch.

It wasn’t exactly tidy, but it would do.

Under him, Hill made a ragged, gasping sound. His eyes, black beads in a flushed face, opened wide and then sagged shut again. The long, lanky body went limp.

Dylan hissed with relief as he pulled his hand away and leaned back. His palm was sunburn red, and a handful of seed blisters had started to form in the creases.

“Ow.”

Somerset grabbed him by the waist and lifted him off the table.

That was just starting to get undignified. Dylan bit his tongue on a protest—not in front of the Winter Court, after all—and wondered if that was why so many Santas were depicted as fat. Self-defense against being picked up and put somewhere safe.

“I don’t know if I made that better or worse,” he admitted. “The anatomy is the same, mostly. but...”

He trailed off with a shrug.

“We don’t need him to live a full life,” Jars said. “Just to answer our questions.”

Dylan glanced at Hill’s limp body.

“He’s not going to do that for a while.”

“No?” Jars said. He used his broken crutch to drag a chair over and lowered himself into it. “Then his master will answer for him.”

It was a nicely veiled threat, but if Dylan had caught it...everyone had. Caolán stiffened and reached for his hip, presumably to where a weapon would usually hang. Since his belt was empty, he ended up with his hand awkwardly tucked behind his back instead.

“I admit that you were...offended...by my retinue,” Caolán said, visibly careful with

the words he used. “So for now I’ll forgive you for overstepping, Yule Lad, and take my reminder in the same spirit. You don’t speak for Yule.”

There was a pause, and then Jars skinned his teeth back in a shark’s smile.

“Don’t I?”

Dylan felt the tension pull wire-taut in Somerset’s body. He stepped forward before Somerset could do anything and cleared his throat. Everyone looked at him. He let a brief, wistful thought about telling them to sort it out for themselves drift through his head, but then banished it. That ship had sailed when he took up the whip last Christmas, and it had sunk to the bottom of the ocean when the wolves had taken his friend.

“So far he’s not said anything I disagree with,” he said. “Last night the wolves attacked me and stole my friend. Today your servants tried to finish the job. I’d like to know why.”

For a second, as Caolán set his jaw stubbornly, Dylan thought it wasn’t going to work. Then Caolán grimaced and his shoulders sagged.

“That’s the problem,” the duke said. “So would I.”

Hill had been taken away by the Yule Lads, to be kept under guard until he regained consciousness. The other two members of Caolán’s retinue were being made comfortable while they conferred. Dylan had expected that to cause some sort of complaint, but if anything Caolán seemed relieved that it was only Dylan and the two Yule Lads who sat around the bloodstained table with him... Stúfur having excused himself because it was about to get boring.

“I was sent here to be a figurehead,” Caolán admitted stiffly. He frowned into the

glass of whiskey he'd been given, then shrugged off his misgiving and downed the shot in one. It didn't even make him blink. "The Winter Court wanted to make a good show for the new Santa, but they didn't want to overexert themselves, since they don't expect him to last."

That was... Actually, Dylan wasn't sure if that was news or not. Between juggling his mortal life and the investigation into who killed Santa, he'd not thought much about the Winter Court.

And since you only got a new Santa when the old Santa died...they didn't think much about him either.

"So you weren't expected to uncover any wrongdoing," Somerset said.

"Don't paint me the hero," Caolán said. "I didn't want to uncover anything. I wanted to while away the duration of my appointment drunk and well-fucked. I mean—"

He stopped and flashed Dylan an embarrassed look. Red crawled up his cheeks and into his slightly pointed ears.

"Um, sorry, Santa," he muttered as he rubbed his nose .

"I've heard worse," Dylan said. He could feel Somerset shake with silent repressed laughter beside him, and he kicked the other man under the table. "So what changed?"

"Nothing," Caolán said after taking a breath to compose himself. "They continued with business as usual, so openly that eventually even I had to acknowledge something was amiss."

"So you knew Demre and Hill were traitors?" Jars asked, a hint of silky annoyance in

his voice.

Caolán warded off that accusation with an upraised palm. “No. Something amiss, that I suspected. But something of this scale? No, I had no idea it went that far. Or that Hill and Demre were involved in anything. Like I said earlier, if they wished to harm the Court, they could have done much worse than this without ever getting their hands dirty. They had the purse strings of the treasury. All it would take would be a few bad trades and that would be gone. They probably wouldn’t even get caught. Who here last checked if they were overdrawn?”

Dylan put his hand up. No one else did. He looked around the table.

“Really?” he asked. “Nobody?”

Somerset shrugged casually. “I pay someone for that.”

Jars rubbed his chin. “I just realized that we pay them for that,” he said, with a nod toward Caolán. “An audit might be in order.”

Caolán curled his lip in a smile that didn’t even try not to look fake.

“Very funny,” he said.

“Most people don’t enjoy mine and my brothers’ sense of humor,” Jars noted. “So if you didn’t suspect Hill and Demre and it wasn’t money—”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t money,” Caolán corrected him.

Jars and Somerset traded a look. It was one of the “known each other for centuries so it doesn’t matter if we like each other” moments of silent understanding. Dylan didn’t know what it meant, but he’d learned to recognize it.

He cleared his throat to catch Caolán's attention.

"Time is running short," he said. "So just tell us who it was and what they did, and we won't use it against you."

He closed his mouth harder than he'd meant as he finished the sentence, and he felt a snap of something in the back of his mind. It felt more...weighted than he'd planned. From the scowl Jars gave him, he'd done something.

Dylan decided to worry about what in the New Year .

For now it had worked on Caolán, who relaxed his shoulders and nodded quickly. "Money went missing," he said, and shot Jars a scowl before the Yule Lad could interrupt him. "But not a lot. It was petty fraud, pennies in the grand scheme of the Winter Court. A payoff here, a car bought there, or money transferred into an account. They paid property taxes on a house out in Stillwater County. I doubt he even had to pay off my predecessors. Most of Winter's nobles would consider the amounts beneath their notice, if they didn't consider skimming off the top a perk of the job."

"But not you?" Somerset asked skeptically. "You're...what...different?"

"Bored," Caolán corrected him. "And eager to accomplish something in my post other than warm a cushion or someone's bed."

"And you thought catching someone with their hand in the petty cash would do it?" Jars mocked.

"I thought—"

Dylan interrupted. "Who?"

“What?”

“You already said you didn’t suspect Demre or Hill until today,” Dylan pointed out. “But you just said ‘he,’ so you know who did it.”

Caolán tugged at his earlobe absently. “I do,” he said. “There’s also a reason he thought he’d get away with it. He’s protected by someone much higher in the pecking order than me. Or you.”

Not like the latter would be hard, Dylan thought dryly.

“I don’t think—”

“He means the changeling,” Somerset said. He snapped his fingers as he paused to think. “The one at the Christmas party. Luke...”

Caolán reluctantly corrected him. “Lucas,” he said. “He’s my brother, by fosterage, and by far our mother’s golden child. I thought that was why Demre and Hill turned a blind eye to it, to stay on her good side. Even my mother’s favor, however, wouldn’t protect them from the open treason they committed today. It might not even protect Lucas.”

“It won’t,” Somerset said as he got up from the table. The edge to his voice was as sharp and brittle as the first frost of winter. “Not from us.”

Dylan had to give it to the Brownies, their clothes did a good job of cutting the wind. He stood on the curb outside the North Pole, the flicker of neon colors splattered over the pavement and his shoes, and watched the Yule Lads get ready for a fight.

It was all black leather and the oily growl of motorbikes. The setting sun flashed off oiled blades as they were sheathed, knives and swords and a few long-shafted axes

slung across broad backs.

“He’ll tell us what happened to Alice,” Somerset said, his voice low enough to be muffled by the wind, as he zipped up a leather jacket he’d dragged out of some cupboard. He stood close to Dylan, a windbreak of muscle and broad shoulders, but didn’t touch him. “It will be OK.”

Dylan stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them out of temptation’s way.

“What if that isn’t in Yule’s interest?” he asked. “What happens then?”

Somerset snugged the zip up to his collar and then gave Dylan a crooked, short-lived smile.

“There’s no Yule without Santa,” he said. “That makes getting Alice back in Yule’s best interest, since otherwise you won’t drive the Sleigh.”

“Good point.”

Somerset put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. It wasn’t quite an intimate gesture, but the weight of it was still enough to make Dylan’s stomach fill with butterflies.

“I know you want to come,” he said. “But you’d just distract us. Just this once, let me keep you out of trouble. I’ll send word as soon as we know anything.”

He was right. Dylan knew that. It didn’t mean he liked it.

“I’ll try,” he said. “And if anyone tries to hit you? Duck.”

It was the same advice Somerset had given Dylan once. It made the Yule Lad grin

and ruffle his hair with one hand in quick, careless affection.

“If I let them get that close,” he said, “they deserve the shot.”

Over by the bikes, Jars tightened the last strap around his thigh and twisted to look their way.

“Skellir,” he said, his voice thinned out by the wind. “Are you coming, or do you need to take another few decades to rest?”

Somerset gave the usual grimace at the use of his old name, but took a step back from Dylan. He nodded quickly to him and then turned to head for the bike, still parked on the road, swinging one long leg over it and starting the engine .

Once Somerset was ready, Jars pulled on a pair of leather gloves and drove forward. He slowed to a crawl as he passed Dylan.

“Whatever is going on,” Jars warned, “I will find out, and some consequences even Santa can’t escape.”

Point made, he gunned the engine and took off down the road. The rest of the Yule Lads followed after him in a crooked tail.

Dylan watched them until the twilight and the light fall of snow obscured them. Then he scoffed under his breath as he turned to go back into the North Pole.

“With my luck,” he muttered, “it’s going to turn out he’s not the traitor...and I’ll be stuck with him.”

The polo mint lay in the flat of Dylan’s palm, white and round and slightly fluffy, as he extended his hand gingerly into the stall.

He'd not really expected for the strip club version of the North Pole to have stables, but they did. Thankfully the stalls had escaped being themed.

The reindeer that Dylan had approached looked at him with surprisingly easy-to-read disgust. It twitched a fuzzy ear, and shoved its nose back into the hay net strung off a hook on the side of its stall.

"I could get new reindeer, you know," Dylan told it. "I know a guy."

The reindeer side-eyed him with a glossy black eye and snorted into the dusty mix of vegetation that it preferred to a perfectly good mint. It showed what it knew; Dylan could do it. He didn't know if any of his grandmother's reindeer could fly, but she'd made a pot take off, so she could probably make it work.

"It's a reindeer," someone said behind him. "Not a horse. "

Dylan turned around and saw one of the Saintborn. The tall, dark-haired man was supposedly a cousin a few times removed, or an uncle. Dylan couldn't remember which off the top of his head.

"I just wanted to...check on them," Dylan said. He closed his fingers around the mint and stuck the betraying hand into his pocket. "Maybe try and make an impression. I don't think they thought much of me last year."

The cousin, or uncle, shook out a tangle of belled straps and then slung them over his shoulder. "That's OK," he said. "None of us did."

He said something to the reindeer in a language that sounded like the one Somerset swore in. The reindeer responded by stamping its foot and shaking its head, the heavy antlers noisy as they scraped against the wood of the stall.

The Saintborn chuckled and swung his attention back to Dylan.

“Don’t worry,” he said. His voice had warmed up to something almost friendly. If you trusted that sort of thing. “If the Winter Court gets rid of you after one year, they probably won’t even put your name in the annals. No one will know we even had a Santa that couldn’t tell the difference between his reindeer and one that a stripper rides onto the stage.”

He sketched a mock little bow and left. Every step he took jingled, just slightly off-key. Dylan watched him go and then rolled his eyes. He’d grown up in foster care. If the Saintborn wanted to make him feel unwelcome, they’d have to up their game. Right now they were trailing the five-year-old who’d cut her own ponytail off and blamed him.

“Seriously, though,” he said as he turned to look at the reindeer. “You couldn’t have given me a heads-up?”

The reindeer rolled its eye back at him. Then it lifted its head from its meal and stuck it over the gate to lip at Dylan’s arm. It smelled of sweaty animal, and it left green slobber on his sleeve from whatever it had been eating.

“Now you want it?” Dylan asked. He pulled his hand out and offered the mint again. This time the reindeer took it and crunched it up with every sign of enjoyment. It let Dylan reach over the steel-shod top of the gate and pet its nose. “Great. At least the stripper’s reindeer likes me. That’s almost like progress.”

He fed the reindeer another mint and then turned to go. His hands were coated with a film of reddish-brown hair, and he peeled the felted pads off as he walked. Halfway to the door he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. It caught him off guard; he’d not been sure he could even get calls here. It was technically in Belling, but it was also the North Pole... And if Santa took phone orders, how come everyone still wrote

letters?

Dylan fished his phone out of his pocket to answer it.

“I found her,” Joe said. “Do you have a pen?”

“No,” Dylan said. “Can't you just text me?”

“I don't want any record of this,” Joe said. “I could lose my job. Get a pen. ”

Dylan tucked the phone between his ear and shoulder as he turned to hunt for something to write with. It didn't take him as long as he'd expected. Someone had left the world's tackiest Christmas pen, with a Mrs. Claus whose clothes slid off if you turned the barrel upside down, lying next to a dented bucket on a table.

It would do.

Dylan picked it up, clicked the top of it a couple of times, and tested the ink against his hand. It took a couple of dry starts but eventually scrawled an overlapping circle on the heel of his palm.

“OK,” he said, once he was sure it still worked. “Tell me Irene's address.”

Joe cleared his throat and hemmed and hawed for a second. The dithery act ran long enough that Dylan was worried the ink was going to dry up again. Then Joe recited the address in a quick, low voice.

23 Adelaide and North. Apt. 14 C.

The C bled into the creases around Dylan's knuckles, but it was still legible enough. He clicked the pen closed and set it back down where he'd got it, propped up against

the barrel to give Mrs. Claus her dignity back.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Wait,” Joe blurted, and Dylan hesitated before lowering the phone from his ear. “If you find Alice, tell her I’m sorry. Fuck. Only good thing I ever gave her was the kid.”

Dylan didn’t want to feel any sympathy for Joe...a thief, a peeping tom, and a bad husband. Somehow he still did. Maybe it was the shared guilt.

“Alice will be home for Christmas,” Dylan said. “Tell them not to worry.”

Joe sniffed and then blew his nose on something. “You shouldn’t lie to a kid about this sort of thing,” he said. “They don’t need false hope.”

“I know. Tell them Santa promised.”

Dylan hung up mid-‘Wah?’ and turned to look at the reindeer. Not one of his team or not, it was still a reindeer at the North Pole.

“Any chance you can fly?” he asked.

Chapter Ten

The resistance at Demre and Hill folded quickly under the Yule Lads' assault.

To be fair to the security detail who'd taken the brunt of it, they had come to work expecting to deal with a disgruntled banker or pushy cop. Not thirteen—Ket had caught up with them halfway there—heavily armed assholes who didn't get a chance to cut loose like this often these days.

Somerset blocked a knuckleduster-weighted roundhouse aimed at his head, the impact of metal and bone against his forearm a dull, spreading ache, and grabbed the redcap by the throat. The brutal fey's deep-set eyes bulged, and his face reddened to nearly the color of his cap as Somerset lifted him off the ground.

"We don't have an appointment," Somerset said mildly. He tightened his grip on the redcap's throat until he felt the structures underneath creak. "But I hope your COO can still fit us in."

The redcap squeezed a wet croak out of his crushed throat as he thrashed. His steel-toed boots cracked painfully against Somerset's shins and knees. Thin lips peeled back from uneven teeth as the redcap sucked in a breath through his flattened nose—although the Yule Lads couldn't claim credit for that one.

"You—"

The world went dark before the redcap could either give Lucas up or tell Somerset to fuck off again. It was a solid, featureless black, so heavy it felt like it had weight as it

dropped over them. It sucked out even the splutter of color from the backs of your eyes. The sort of disorienting absence that people only experienced in deep, deep caves or nightmares.

A night so total there was no way to tell what monsters hid in it.

It was a good trick. Most of the time.

There was just one problem.

Somerset was the monster in the dark.

Really ? That sounded like something an elf would come out with. Maybe Jars had a point about Somerset being gone too long.

The redcap used Somerset's moment of self-reflection to grab a handful of his hair. He yanked on it viciously, and Somerset snarled silently as he heard the sickly crackle of his scalp being pulled away from his skull for a second before the hair ripped free. The hot scrape of pain jabbed down into his jaw and the back of his neck. He left the redcap to clutch his trophy and snapped his head forward in a short, vicious headbutt.

Not many things could win a "whose head is hardest" contest with a redcap, but Somerset was giant-kin. Or mountain goat. It wasn't like their mother kept their dads around once she tired of them, and things had been different back then. Either way, the top of Somerset's skull cracked against the redcap's forehead, hard enough to make his ears ring.

He would probably have seen stars too, for that matter, if it wasn't for the cloying darkness.

The redcap made a strangled noise and sagged in Somerset's grip. He was still conscious, more or less, but was reduced to twitching instead of thrashing. Somerset smacked him against a wall for good measure and then chucked him to the side.

"Nik," Somerset yelled. "You trying to get someone killed?"

A laugh trickled in from somewhere in the pitch-black. It could have been to the left or right, or up or down for that matter. The dark was so heavy it made it hard to orient yourself. Somerset heard the distinct whistle of Nik's halberd and then a shocked yelp from one of the redcaps.

"Isn't that the point?" his little brother taunted him .

The snap of Jars's voice, tight with irritation, cut through the blanket of black that hung over them. "Not. Everyone. Turn it back up."

Light flashed back into the world like a torch. It was just the yellowish glow of overhead lights, but it jabbed into Somerset's eyes like he'd looked directly at the sun. He squinted through the glare and pulled a knife out of the scabbard holstered to his thigh. The reflections that bounced off the blade dazzled as he brought it up in a quick arc. He caught the baton as it descended, sparks thrown off as metal scraped on metal.

On the other side of the baton, a draugr snarled at him, face twisted with the stigmata of rot. Its breath smelled even worse, rancid as it hissed through cracked brown teeth.

"Oath-breakers," the not-dead thing spat at him. "You'll rot for this. Worse than me."

Somerset grunted and kicked the thing's knee out from under it. It broke like a stick, not a leg, and it went down like a puppet with its strings cut. The jerky, unnatural movement caught Somerset off-guard, and he didn't react quickly enough. As it

dropped, the draugr flicked the length of the baton down and drove the butt end of it into Somerset's elbow.

He felt it pop out of place, and his fingers went numb. The knife slipped from his grip and clattered to the ground. The draugr peeled thin, split lips back from its teeth in a satisfied grin and wound its arm back for another blow.

Ket's hook pierced it through the bones of its arm, shreds of jerky flesh and leathery skin caught on the point of it. It slid up, ripping through the flesh, until it caught on the heel of the draugr's hand. It had time to look surprised, jaundice-yellowed eyes wide, and then Ket yanked hard enough that the thing's arm popped out of its shoulder like an overcooked chicken.

"Can't even blame it on getting distracted this time," Ket pointed out. The draugr's fingers curled and clawed as it blindly looked for purchase. Ket flicked the hook to get rid of it, and the whole arm went flying into the melee. "He's not even here."

"Mind your tongue," Somerset warned him. He shook the feeling back into his hand and stooped to grab his knife off the ground. The edge of it was chipped, but it would still work. He rolled his wrist around to check the balance while he scrubbed the heel of his other hand over his eyes. "Any sign of our changeling?"

Ket pulled a sour face and spat on the ground. "He can hide, but he can't run," he said. "We'll get him."

They better .

Somerset wiped his nose on the back of his hand and then his hand on his T-shirt as he looked around. The skirmish was over. All they had left was to mop up the dregs and straighten the furniture for morning.

“If you were a changeling who’d just realized how far in over his head he was,” Somerset said, “where would you—”

Before he could finish the question, Stúfur was thrown through one of the plate glass conference room windows. Hexagonal chunks of glass sprayed the room as he crashed into—and then through—someone’s desk. A fist-sized ball of rubber bands bounced off the table and rolled across the floor.

“This do?” Stúfur asked from a prone position. He lifted his hand up over his head. The trophy dangled from his fingers, a bright red Santa hat. “Skellir said he was in costume, right?”

“Somerset.”

The correction went ignored as Gat grabbed the hat out of Stúfur’s hand. No, to be fair, once he wasn’t holding his prize, Stúfur did give Somerset a single upraised finger.

Gat lifted the bedraggled pompom to his face and sniffed at it, nostrils flared and lips parted. People had described him as catlike before, but it really gave the wrong impression. He was , but not in the sleek, graceful black cat way that sprang to mind when they heard the word. Gat looked like a back-alley tomcat, with scruffy fever-coat gray hair, one eye, and scars from old scraps.

“Smells right,” he said and stuffed the hat into the front of his jacket. “I’ll find him. Someone time me.”

The kelpie that had just drop-kicked Stúfur through the wall pushed her way into the room. On her way through, her head and the breadth of her oddly set shoulders took out what fragments of glass had stayed in the frame.

“You won’t get away with this,” she warned. Her skin had shaded toward a murky brown, her teeth square and yellow, as she worked. It clashed with the lipstick she’d chosen for the day. “I’ve hit the silent alarm. The Hunt will be here soon.”

Decades of using his common sense instead of his fists...or at least in conjunction with them...and Somerset still felt an eager shiver of excitement at that idea. It would be good to finally know—for sure—which of them was best.

Jars braced one leg against the hip of the redcap he’d pinned to the floor, the struts of his leg brace making a soft clank, and yanked his spear free. The redcap clenched his teeth to avoid making any noise as blood leaked out of its leg. Jars glanced over at Gat .

“Call that your timer,” he said.

Gat flashed a sharp grin at that and loped off to get to work.

The kelpie snorted, the inside of her nostrils red and froth-white, and dropped her head. Her hair escaped the ponytail it had been in to bristle aggressively down the back of her neck. She charged at Jars.

Somerset sheathed his knife and watched the fight intently. Was there any sign of recognition in the kelpie’s black-on-black eyes as she snaked her head out, skin pulled so tight over her bones it looked skeletal? Or a second of hesitation from Jars as he punched her between the eyes?

If there was, Somerset had been away too long to read the tells. It looked like an honest fight to him. Short, but honest. The kelpie’s eyes crossed as Jars knuckles cracked into her skull and she dropped like a rock. Her body twitched and thrashed on the ground, bloody froth on her flat, saw-edged teeth, as her brain tried to reset from the insult.

Jars braced his weight on the spear, the tip dug into the carpet tile, and bent from the waist to grab the kelpie's mane and drag her out of his way so he could step by her.

"Aegir, help me find our mouse's laptop," he said. "The rest of you, find his hole."

Stúfur, halfway back to his feet, gave a dirty snort of a laugh.

"That's what he said," he cracked. The rest of the Yule Lads burst out laughing as they snorted and elbowed each other.

Jars looked annoyed for a moment, his jaw set in that familiar way it had when he thought they should take something seriously. Then it relaxed into a smirk.

"Enough," he said. "It's not Skellir talking to Santa, so get to work."

Somerset hesitated as he tried to pull up a disarming response on the fly. Before he could, Jars grabbed hold of Aegir's shoulder and headed into the office.

"Well," Ket muttered at his shoulder. "Shit."

Nik glanced at Somerset as he slung his halberd over his shoulder to sheath it. He took in the expression on Somerset's face and then jabbed his elbow into another Lad's ribs.

"Shit, Kerr, he really thought we didn't know," he crowed. "Like he doesn't look like a dog in front of a plate of sausages every time Santa breathes in the same room as him."

Kerr grabbed Nik's shoulder and gave him a shove forward to get him moving. "Don't be a dick," he said. Then he shrugged at Somerset. "But he's not wrong. If you wanted it to be a secret, you shouldn't have grabbed so much ass when you

thought no one was looking.”

He pushed Nik ahead of him as he headed off .

Nobody said anything for a long moment, and then Ket said, “I mean, I told you that.”

They found Lucas two floors down, wedged under an IT desk in a tangle of cables. He cut Gat’s hand to the bone, the nasty little knife he pulled splitting it from the heel to knuckles. It didn’t do him much good. Gat might have one eye, but he had two hands.

“This is...this is—” the changeling spluttered as he dangled from Gat’s grip, his feet a couple of inches off the ground. “My sponsor will end you for this. She’ll make you crawl the length of the Court and feed you glass when you get to the end of it. She’ll—”

Gat shook him. Lucas shut up as his teeth clattered and he bit his tongue. He was bound, plastic ties zipped tight around his wrists, and dragged out of the building by a couple of Somerset’s brothers. He protested==briefly—as they slapped the red hat back on his head, but no one listened.

“Must be nice,” Stúfur remarked. There was a bowl of candy on whoever’s desk it was. Gat had dripped blood all over it. Stúfur grabbed a handful and then tipped the rest out to confuse the scene.

“What would?” Somerset asked.

“Having a mother who’d go to bat for you,” Stúfur said. “We went whining to ours, she’d give us a cuff and tell us we deserved it for getting caught.”

“She’d not be wrong.”

“I know,” Stúfur said. “Still. You gotta sometimes wonder what it’s like to be soft.”

Somerset thought briefly of Dylan, who was still mortal and had gotten dragged into all of this because he’d not been able to leave a stranger to die alone.

“Dangerous,” he said. “Go back with the others and check on Dylan. I’m going to talk to Jars.”

That plan made Stúfur raise an eyebrow. He tossed a bloody jelly bean into his mouth. “You sure?” he said. “He’s played that card close to his chest until now. There’s probably a reason he decided he didn’t need it anymore.”

“Yes,” Somerset said. He slapped Stúfur on the shoulder as he headed out of the office. “And I need to know what it is.”

It didn’t take him long to track down his oldest brother. Jars was in the damp, sporadically lit parking lot under the building, strapping Lucas’s laptop into a saddlebag on his bike. Somerset hesitated for a second, one foot in the elevator doors to stop them closing again, as he watched him. Then he stepped out and walked over.

“How long have you known?” Somerset asked as he stopped just out of spear’s reach.

Jars yanked a buckle tight. He gripped the back of the saddle to help him turn, his weight on one heel. His eyes looked like match smoke in the dim fluorescent light.

“That you’re fucking Santa?” he asked. “You weren’t subtle, Skellir.”

The correction was on the tip of Somerset’s tongue. It was habit. This time he swallowed it.

“Why show your hand now?” he asked.

Jars raised his eyebrows and chuckled. “My hand? Everyone in that room already knew you had been death-struck, or were too distracted to pay attention.”

The word made Somerset flinch. “Don’t call it that.”

“It’s what it is,” Jars said bluntly. “To love a mortal is to love a grave. Every day you’re you, and he’s someone a little closer to death.”

“You should know.”

There had been a time that would have made Somerset feel better, to see someone hurt more than he did. Not today. Dylan was a bad influence.

Jars grimaced. “Still the asshole.” He walked toward Somerset, the click of the stirrups looped under his foot loud as they echoed off the wall. “You run away, you come back, you fuck Santa—and you’re still self-righteous. This is why I made you eat goat shit when we were children.”

“And you’re a stiff-necked cod-head,” Somerset said. “That’s why I put coals in your boots.”

“It kept my toes warm on our way down the mountain,” Jars said. “And I get that. We weren’t made to be nice, after all. Why you tried so hard to hide that you were fucking the figurehead, I don’t get.”

Somerset had his next jibe already queued up. He pulled it back as the question knocked him out of the old rhythmic patter of insults.

“I...it’s forbidden,” he said.

“So was the apple. Who did that ever stop?”

Somerset put his hand in his pocket and pulled his magic out of his bones in slow, ice-needed threads. Magic would give Jars an advantage in what would be a short fight, but only if he could open his mouth to get the words out.

It had worked on the wolf .

“Because I think you killed Santa,” Somerset said. “And tried to kill Gull.”

It would be stupid to expect honesty from Jars. If he was anything, Somerset’s brother was a political thing. He knew how to act, and to whom, to get what he wanted. Still, even with that in mind, the look of total bewilderment on Jar’s face was...convincing?

“I... You think I betrayed Yule?”

Somerset opened his mouth to answer, but before he could get the words out Jars suddenly shoved Somerset with both hands. The blow made Somerset stagger back a couple of steps before he could catch himself. He always forgot that Jars’s lean build was deceptive; he was stronger than most of them. The magic he’d painstakingly, and pain fully , twisted through his fingers faded away to nothing again.

“You think you’re going to pin your sins on me?” Jars demanded. “When I already have your fucking responsibilities?”

He threw a punch, his knuckles already split and battered from the fight upstairs. Somerset swayed back to dodge it and tried to grab Jars’s arm to pin it. Somehow that turned into a grapple, and next thing he knew the two of them were on the ground, punching and swearing at each other as they rolled around on the oil-stained concrete.

It wasn't a short fight. Somerset bit Jars's ear until he tasted blood, and Jars got a handful of Somerset's hair and smacked the back of his head against the ground. An elbow to the temple made Somerset's vision bleed red and cracked divots in the concrete, and he knelt on Jars's leg and bent the struts in the brace.

The scuffle ended with Somerset in a headlock, Jars's elbow dug into the nape of his neck for leverage. Reluctantly, Somerset slapped his hand against the concrete to tap out. Jars took the opportunity to throttle him harder, then let go. He gave Somerset's head a shove as he scooted backward until he could grab a car mirror to pull himself back up onto his feet.

Somerset rolled over and lay there as he caught his breath.

"You think I did it?" Jars demanded. He wiped the his hand over his mouth and then wiped his hand on his shirt. "You're the one that turned up with a new Santa out of nowhere, you anointed him with the missing Watch, and then fucked him stupid enough to do whatever you said."

"I wish it was that easy," Somerset muttered as he sat up. "I know I didn't do it, and if you thought I did, why didn't you say anything?"

Jars curled his lip. "I didn't care," he said. "Santa's dead, long live Santa. It's not the first time we've replaced the red man. "

"You're telling me you wouldn't rather have put the Whip in Kris's hands?"

Jars took a breath and let it out before he answered. "If you're going to play these games, Somerset, you need to keep your information up to date. Kris doesn't want to be Santa, and he doesn't want me. So what do I care who wears the Watch? But I do care if the current shitstorm, that threatens centuries of peaceful alliance with the Winter Court is your fault too."

“It’s not,” Somerset said.

“That’s what a traitor would say.”

Somerset smiled thinly. “I was thinking the same thing while you were talking.”

“Yeah? Because you didn’t say it.”

Silence hung in the air as they contemplated the impasse they’d just come to. Somerset rubbed his hand through his hair, with a wince as his fingers found a patch of raw, bald scalp. He couldn’t afford to trust Jars, and he assumed Jars felt the same way. That left...

“You know what they say,” Jars said, as if he could listen to Somerset’s thoughts.

“Keep your enemies close...”

“And your brothers closer,” Somerset said. “If it helps, I know someone who’s good with money who could help us look through that laptop.”

Chapter Eleven

The world stopped. Dylan lay flat on the broad, warm span of hair and muscle under him and remembered how much he hated reindeer. It probably hadn't been a good idea to remind himself two days before the big night.

He peeled one eye open to look at the sky. It was dark, but not as dark as it had been. They were on the other side of midnight, which meant there was one day left. One day until there were twelve of the hairy brutes surfing the wind while he flapped along behind them and the world spun in two different directions around them.

Maybe he should get some of those travel bands that were supposed to work through acupuncture.

Dylan forced his cold, stiff fingers open and slid-fell down the side of the reindeer. His legs felt raw where the half-frozen denim had chafed. He stiffened his knees and staggered backward a couple of steps.

The frozen vomit on the reindeer's shoulder had started to melt. Chunks of it slid down the thick fur and splattered on the roof. The reindeer fastidiously stepped away from it.

"Stay here," Dylan told it.

It gave him a blank, placid look that could have been obedience, confusion, or "fuck you, I do what I want." Dylan thought better of trusting it and stepped forward to try and grab the reins to tie it up to...an aerial or something. The reindeer rolled a big

dark eye as it watched him get closer and then bounced away with a flip of its tail.

Dylan stopped, took a deep, icy breath, and said, “Fine, but if you end up in the pound? I’m not going to come get you.”

The reindeer seemed unconcerned by the threat. Dylan left it to whatever it was going to do as he headed over to the door down into the building. Someone had been careless enough to leave the door wedged open, so Dylan was able to just push it, step over the bucket of old butts, and head down the stairs.

Irene’s apartment was three floors down.

Dylan tried the door—locked—and then knocked. There was no answer. He glanced over his shoulder at the seemingly empty corridor and then checked for a spare key. There was nothing under the mat. He stretched up on his tiptoes—this was one of those times it would have been handy to have Somerset here—to feel along the top of the door. His fingertips had just brushed against something metal and pointy when the door opened.

Dylan dropped back onto his heels and stepped back. A rangy woman, chestnut hair pinned back from her face and sports gear under her winter jacket, scowled at him.

“If you’re here to rob me,” she said, “all the Christmas presents are already at my boyfriend’s. So...”

The boyfriend had gotten her diamond earrings for Christmas, and she wasn’t going to like them. She’d wanted a key to his apartment.

Dylan hesitated as that certainty settled like a weight in his brain. OK, so that was either his imagination running wild or Christmas was close enough that Yule had decided to throw him some sort of bone.

He'd have rather had something he could use in a fight, but he'd take it.

The woman rolled her eyes in annoyance as she waited for him to respond. "What?"

"Umm..." Dylan shuffled his thoughts back together. "I was looking for Irene?"

"You and everyone else," the woman said. "Look, whatever trouble she's got herself into? I can't help you. I told her not to get back together with that loser who'd left her at the altar, but she wouldn't listen. So...whatever has happened, it's her own fault. And... You know what?"

She stepped back into the apartment. Dylan started to follow her, but before he could she appeared again with a box full of stuff.

"Take it." She shoved it into Dylan's arms. He looked down into it, some clothes and photos, envelopes, mugs, and a dog-eared calendar.

"Sorry," he said as he scrambled to get a grip on it. "What's this?"

"She moved," the woman said. The tartness in her voice was just a bit bitter. "Her and her boyfriend were leaving the city for a fresh start. Nice for some, but I'm not keeping her things forever."

She stepped out into the hall, forcing Dylan back a step, and turned to lock the door behind her.

"Moved to where?"

"Don't know," the woman said. "Don't care."

She flipped her hair and started to stalk away. Her indignation got her halfway down

the corridor and she stopped, shoulders sinking as she sighed. She turned around to look at Dylan.

“I don’t know, I didn’t approve,” she said. “And I didn’t know her that well. We only met last year after her wedding was called off and she needed a roommate. I’m sorry if she was your friend, I know she cut a lot of you off after that, but I can’t help you. And I couldn’t help her either, so now I have to focus on me. So if that’s all...?”

She trailed off and raised her eyebrows. When Dylan nodded, she turned and headed on toward the stairs. Once he was alone, Dylan braced the box on his hip to free up one hand to sort through it.

There was a photo of Irene and the wolf, back when he was just a man with bad choices, as they sat in front of a cafe and grinned at the camera. They looked happy. At the bottom of the box, tied together with a couple of brittle rubber bands, were letters.

Dylan pulled them out. The first, on top, was dated from the the first of December, and the return address on the envelope read “Demre and Hill.” He slid his thumb under the elastic band but before he could snap it off his phone rang.

It took a second for Dylan to work out how to juggle everything in his hands. He dropped the box onto the ground, stuck the letters into his pocket, and pulled out his phone. The number on the screen wasn’t familiar. He swiped to pick up the call and lifted it to his ear .

“What did I tell you, Mr. Hollie,” Lund said in a tight, angry voice. “There’s only so much I can do, especially when you keep things from me.”

Dylan wasn’t sure what she meant, but he had a feeling it wasn’t the Santa thing.

“What are you talking about?” he asked as he tucked the phone against his ear and bent down to pick the box back up. He let it dangle from one hand as he headed toward the stairs.

“Bury.”

“Who?”

“Where,” Lund corrected. “Bury, Montana. Sound familiar?”

“No. Should it?”

Dylan pushed the door to the stairwell open and braced it with his foot as he angled the box through the narrow gap. He heard the sound of typing on the other end of the call.

“It’s two hundred miles away,” Lund said. “An old lumber town, although the mill closed about a decade ago. The Jeep that caused the accident was stolen from a ranch out there earlier this year.”

Dylan’s feet scuffed off the stairs as he climbed. “Do you think they went back there?”

“Do you?”

“I don’t...” Dylan stopped. He balanced the box on the rail and frowned as he adjusted the phone against his ear. “You think this matters. I don’t see how.”

“No?” Lund said. “You don’t think it’s interesting that Bury is your hometown?”

Surprise nearly made Dylan drop the box into the stairwell. He steadied it as he

considered that bit of information.

“I...”

“Mr. Hollie, please don’t try and pretend you didn’t know where you grew up.”

“I suppose I did,” Dylan said. It was probably written down in a bunch of places, but he’d never thought to look for it. Most of the time he tried not to think too much about his childhood. Even last year, when he’d racked his brain for any sliver of memory about his grandfather being Santa, he’d not thought about the place he’d been in. “It’s just been a long time.”

Lund made an annoyed sound through her teeth and then took a drink of something.

“It’s also your third strike,” she said. “I have too many reasons to bring you in and no excuse for not doing it. So if you want to help your friend, do it fast.”

She hung up .

Dylan stood there for a second and then loped the rest of the way up the stairs. He hooked the door open with his foot and ducked through back onto the roof. The reindeer lay snoozing there, a halo of melted snow around it, with its legs folded under it. It snorted softly with every breath, mist eddying around its nostrils.

There was a space near the door, under some pipes, and Dylan stashed the box there. Then he headed back over to the reindeer and slapped it on the broad, solid rump, startling it awake as it scrambled gracelessly to its feet. The broad rack of its antlers nearly clipped Dylan as it swung its head around.

“Time to go,” Dylan told it as he zipped his jacket up. The bulk of the letters nudged against his stomach under the fabric. “Back to the North Pole.”

The reindeer swung its head around to look at him. Then it walked away and turned its ass toward him.

“Don’t be a dick,” Dylan warned it. He glanced at the sky. It was still dark, but he could see the faint stain of dawn on the horizon. “You serve Yule, remember? Otherwise you’d be walking home.”

The reindeer broke into a frisky trot as it circled the roof. Its hooves clunked off the surface as it flicked up chunks of snow, and the bells strung on its reins rattled.

Dylan rubbed his hand over his eyes.

“Fine,” he said. “Extra...whatever you fancy. I’ll ask someone what that is.”

The reindeer snorted, made a tight turn around a metal strut, and pranced back over. Dylan fastidiously brushed off the last chunks of puke from its shoulder, grabbed the saddle pad, and dragged himself up clumsily.

“Let’s go home,” he said. “And if you can fly smoother, I’ll try not to puke.”

Somerset was waiting for Dylan outside the North Pole . He stood on the curb with his arms crossed, his leathers now scuffed and stained, and watched with a studiously impassive face as the reindeer walked down the road. It stopped in front of the club, and Dylan finally breathed out. He untangled his fingers from the reins—the imprint of leather and bells grooved into his palm—and swung his leg up and over so he could slide off .

“What part of ‘stay out of trouble’ is so hard to go along with?” Somerset asked as he hitched one eyebrow toward his hairline.

“Once I screw up the stay, the trouble sort of follows on its own,” Dylan said. “I

found something weird.”

“It can wait.”

Somerset took two long strides forward, grabbed a handful of Dylan’s jacket, and pulled him into a hungry kiss. It caught Dylan off-guard, and he just dangled there for a moment, until his libido shoved his brain out of his way and dragged him into the kiss. He put his hands on Somerset’s lean hips and stretched up onto his tiptoes as he savored the coolness of Somerset’s tongue in his mouth.

Pleasure tweaked along his nerve endings and tightened his muscles, mixed through with a year-long itch of paranoia. After a breathless stretch, Dylan pulled back from Somerset and glanced past him at the North Pole.

“What if someone sees?” he said.

Somerset took Dylan’s chin between his finger and thumb and moved his head back. He bent down to bite the next kiss lightly across Dylan’s mouth.

“Turns out, that ship has sailed,” he said as he lifted his head. “They know.”

That was...good news. Or bad news. Dylan wasn’t sure which. It was definitely news, and he wasn’t sure how he should feel about it.

“So that means...”

“No more sneaking around,” Somerset said. He ran the pad of his thumb along Dylan’s lower lip, tracking the bruises of his teeth, in a gentle caress. “If that’s what you want.”

It was Dylan’s turn to grab Somerset’s jacket by the lapels. He dragged the bigger

man down into a kiss, or tried to. It turned out Somerset was about as hard to shift as he looked.

“Come down here,” Dylan told him impatiently.

“Is that an order?” Somerset asked.

“Yeah.”

A soft smile flickered over Somerset’s mouth and then was gone, replaced with the usual stern set of his lips. He did as he was told, though, and leaned down into Dylan’s kiss. His mouth tasted of fresh whiskey and fresh-enough blood. Dylan didn’t care, and even if he had, he supposed his mouth didn’t taste great either.

He really hated flying.

Finally Somerset broke the kiss and leaned back. He grabbed Dylan’s wrists and pulled his hands away from his jacket.

“Where did you go?” he asked.

“Irene’s,” Dylan said.

Somerset looked blank, so Dylan filled in some details.

“The pregnant woman they took with Alice. I got her address, or...at least...where she used to live. Apparently she’d moved recently, but her roommate gave me some of her things, and there were a bunch of letters.”

“To Santa?”

“No,” Dylan said. “To her, from Demre and Hill.”

Somerset grimaced. “The rot in that place ran deep,” he said. “We’ve no idea how much damage they’ve already done.”

“I’ll leave that part to you,” Dylan said. “What we do know is that Demre and Hill had a connection with Irene before the Christmas Party, and that probably means the wolf did too. So why did he lie about it?”

Somerset still had hold of Dylan’s hands. He pulled one up and pressed a frosty kiss to his palm. Someone from inside the North Pole yelled ‘get a room,’ and Dylan had to squash the urge to jump back and pretend he’d just...had jam on him or something.

“It’s a good question,” Somerset said as he turned to head back inside, towing Dylan behind him. “But I’m not the one to ask.”

Dylan tried to hang back as he looked over his shoulder at the reindeer. “What about...”

“I’ll get someone to take her back to the stables.”

Lucas Carlisle had a black eye, a split lip, and an attitude.

The latter was impressive from a man cuffed to a bent stripper pole. He sat on the podium in a stained suit that probably cost more than Dylan’s rent and glared as Dylan and Somerset walked back into the room with Jars.

“You know you’re over, right?” he said. He shifted, and the cuff rattled against the pole. “The Winter Court will raze you, salt the ground, and take Santa for their own.”

Jars walked over and put the butt of his crutch under Lucas’s chin. He tipped the

man's head back.

"Over you?"

"My mother— "

"Will disown you the minute we prove you attempted to subvert the succession of Yule," Jars said. Then he paused and smiled thinly. "More specifically, that you failed to do it."

He stepped back, weight still tilted to the left, and gestured for Dylan to come forward.

Dylan hesitated as he wondered exactly how Santa would act. In the end, since he'd no examples to draw from, it was going to have to be like him. He grabbed a chair and pulled it over to the podium, the legs scraping over the floor.

"I know you," Lucas said. He narrowed his eyes. "You're that paramedic. The one that came to the...end-of-year party."

Dylan sat down.

"Christmas party," he said. "You might as well admit it, the ship's sailed on that one."

Lucas gave a close-lipped smile and shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. He glanced toward Jars and added pointedly, "Any of it. I manage Demre and Hill's portfolio, that's all—"

"But you knew Irene," Dylan said. For the second time he had to provide context, as Lucas just shrugged at him. "The pregnant woman at the party?"

There was something nervous in the way Lucas's eyes shifted away from Dylan. Or maybe it was how he leaned back.

"Her and her boyfriend gatecrashed," he said. "I was being a Good Samaritan to call an ambulance instead of the cops. Or the Hunt."

Dylan reached into his jacket and pulled out the letters. There hadn't been time to go through them all, but even a cursory read had been enough.

"Demre and Hill brokered a deal with her to be a surrogate," he said as he held the contract out to Lucas. "Except the deal was with the Winter's wolf dressed as her boyfriend. Right?"

Lucas licked his lips and shrugged. "It's nothing to do with me," he said. "I just deal with money, Mr. Paramedic, not babies."

Somerset grabbed a chair and turned it around to sit down. "You can call him Santa."

A gray cast spread under Lucas's face at that correction, but Dylan ignored it as he shuffled the papers.

"That's right," he said. "This is your name right here, isn't it? On the breakdown of the payment schedule. Lucas Collins."

This time Lucas just shut his mouth. He visibly chewed on his lower lip as Dylan waited a heartbeat before he pressed on.

"She changed her mind, and legally you couldn't do anything about that."

"Legally? You think the Winter Court cares about that?" Lucas scoffed. He glanced toward Jars and Somerset and then shifted forward so he could make eye contact with

Dylan. “Look, I didn’t know who she was. I’d never met her. All I do is money, OK? If someone tells me to make money happen for them, that’s what I do. It’s not my job to try and decide if it’s a moral purchase or not. I work for the Winter fucking Court. Sometimes you buy a baby. Sometimes two. You know what you don’t do? Ask about it.”

He sagged back against the bent pole, his head tilted back to rest against it. It felt like the truth. Dylan could feel the balance on Lucas’s account shift from...naughty to nice. Not a lot, the man wouldn’t be getting a visit from Dylan anytime soon, but just a hair.

“You didn’t send the wolves to take her?” he asked. “Make sure your people got what you paid for?”

Lucas just shook his head. “No,” he gritted out. Then he lifted his head to look at them. “And what the fuck does that have to do with a plot against Yule anyhow? The old man, the last one, knew all about it.”

Chapter Twelve

Enid rubbed hand sanitizer onto her hands with nervous efficiency. Her cuticles were chapped and red, but clean. Once she was done, she set the bottle back down next to the laptop.

“This is not...this isn’t legal,” she muttered. “I...I think it might be industrial espionage.”

Stúfur leaned over her shoulder.

“We won’t tell if you don’t,” he said with a wink.

Enid shied away from him, the chair rolling to the side. She braced her hands against the desk and half-started to her feet.

“This isn’t a good idea,” she said. “I have to go—”

Somerset reached over and put his hand on her shoulder to push her back down. “Bit late for that,” he said. “You already have your fingerprints all over this.”

Enid checked her hands, front and back, with what was obviously a nervous tic. “I washed them—”

“Digitally,” Somerset corrected her. “This isn’t Law and Order , Enid. We won’t need to testify to what you found. We just need you to find it.”

He pushed the chair back over until she was squarely in front of the computer. She stared at it, her sallow complexion sickly in the glow from the screen, and then her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Babies?” she said.

Somerset nodded. “Anything baby related that ties back to Lucas...or Yule.”

Her hands were halfway to the keys when he said that. She paused, took a deep breath, and started to type. As she worked, she leaned closer to the screen, occasionally grabbing a pen to scrawl down a note on a bit of paper.

Somerset watched briefly and then glanced over at Stúfur. The look, and a nod from Stúfur, was enough to convey the request to make sure their accountant didn’t become a flight risk. While Stúfur made himself comfortable in the corner of the room, Somerset left them to it and headed out to find Dylan.

It took him a few false starts, but he finally tracked the wayward Santa down in the stables. He leaned on the half-door, arms crossed, as he watched his pet reindeer eat.

Somerset paused in the doorway to watch for a moment.

“Shift change?” Ket asked. He was in a chair on the other side of the door, tilted onto the back legs to rest against the wall. “Or are we dropping that now everyone knows you’re doing something other than guarding his body.”

“I just like to work up close,” Somerset told him. “Go. Get something to eat. If you’re looking for Stúfur, he’s keeping an eye on the accountant.”

Ket tugged a mock forelock and rocked forward, the chair’s legs loud as they hit the floor. He rose easily to his feet and stepped around Somerset. Before he could head

through the door, Somerset caught his arm to stop him.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask,” he said. “Was there any word on the street about the wolves?”

Ket paused and shook his head. “Not in Belling,” he said. “Some people claimed there had been sightings out in the country, but nothing solid. Why?”

“Because they had to be somewhere,” Somerset said, “and that means they had to be with someone. Wolves weren’t made to pump gas or go to Walmart.”

Ket shrugged. “Well, wherever it was, it wasn’t around here.”

He took his arm back and left, his footsteps echoing off the half-decorated walls .

Somerset supposed that would have been too easy. He turned to look for Dylan and found the other man had turned around, arms crooked up behind him onto the door, to watch him. The stubborn tilt of his chin suggested that he expected them to end up at odds over something.

Again.

“You were right,” Dylan said.

Somerset paused mid-step as he raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

“Go on,” he said.

Dylan snorted and pushed himself off the door. “I should have given it up. My job. My apartment. My...life, I guess. If I was going to do this, that’s the price I was

supposed to pay. Instead I tried to have it all, and Alice is the one who is going to pay. Alice and Irene.”

There was a note of grim resignation in his voice.

“We’re going to find them,” Somerset said.

Dylan’s mouth twisted into a not-quite-a-smile.

“Are wolves better at keeping people alive than they are at pumping gas?” Dylan asked. “Because they’ve got three of them, and only care about one.”

“Alice will survive a wolf’s indifference better than its attention,” Somerset said. “And the wolves won’t survive me. Not this time.”

Dylan didn’t look convinced. Before he could argue himself into more guilt, Somerset took him by the arms and pulled him into a kiss. The plan was to be gentle, to console him, but the aftertaste of violence and recently shed blood was too close to the surface. It made Somerset’s grip tighten on Dylan’s arms, fingers dug in hard enough to bruise, and roughened the kiss.

The thought that he should rein himself in occurred to him. Before he could Dylan made a low sound in the back of his throat and met the kiss with the same pitch of hungry desperation. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of Somerset’s jeans, his knuckles warm as they grazed against the flat of Somerset’s stomach, and pulled him closer.

As far as reasons not to think went it was as good as any, and better than most.

Somerset pushed Dylan back into the wall of the stable. The bridle strung up on a hook next to the door rattled with the impact, the strung bells ringing softly. Dylan

gasped and then tilted his head back as Somerset chewed his way along his jaw, the scruff of stubble rough against his lips, and down his throat .

For twelve months Somerset had been careful not to leave any marks. None where they could be seen, anyhow. Now it didn't matter. He worked livid bruises onto Dylan's pale skin with teeth and tongue.

Dylan tilted his head back, throat pulled tight, for easier access. His hand grazed up over Somerset's lean leather-clad thigh and under his shirt. Warm fingers against cool skin left a trail of prickling heat in their wake, until Somerset tightened his grip on Dylan's biceps to limit their range.

"Please?" Dylan protested, in a borderline whine he'd deny when he wasn't half-drunk with lust.

Somerset lifted his head from Dylan's throat and kissed the plea off his mouth.

"Wait," he said as he leaned back. Dylan looked at him with dark, dazed eyes and swallowed hard. He flicked the pink tip of his tongue over flushed, bruised lips.

"I did," he pointed out.

"So you know how," Somerset teased, as he brushed a featherlight kiss to the corner of Dylan's lips. He lifted one of Dylan's arms over his head and pinned it to the wall. The well-oiled supple reins of the bridle made a good makeshift cuff. Dylan's eyes widened in surprise as Somerset tugged the strap tight, but his fingers remained loose and relaxed. The leather looked very dark against his skin, the tarnished glitter of the bells right. Somerset slid his hand down the other arm, from bicep to wrist, and then paused. "I'll stop if you want me to do that. If you don't want me to do this. All you have to do is say it."

Dylan, very deliberately, tilted his head back against the wall and bit his lips together.

The right hand joined the left, mired in a web of leather and metal fittings. Dylan tightened both hands around the straps. the tendons in his wrists pulled into tight wires under his skin.

Once it was secure, Somerset stepped back. He ran a finger down Dylan's cheek to his jaw, tracing the damp path of his own spit. Ice bloomed under his touch, short-lived fingerlings of frost that just as quickly faded to a blush on the skin.

The new shirt fit Dylan like it had been sewed on him. Somerset adjusted the collar and then ran his finger down to flick one of the little coal buttons. He had never actually watched the brownies work, so that might well be how they did it. It was almost a shame to ruin such nice work.

Or, if you looked at it another way, it was an early Christmas present for the North Pole staff .

He gripped the front of the shirt and ripped it open with a harsh, almost organic sound. The buttons pinged off the floor and the wall as they went flying. Dylan caught his breath and gave Somerset a wry look.

"I hope the brownies made me a spare shirt," he said. "Otherwise this year Santa will be bare-chested when he comes down the chimney."

Somerset kissed the sass away with a rough, quick buss that crushed Dylan's lips under his. Then he dipped his head to lick a shiver over Dylan's collarbone.

"I'd buy that calendar," he said.

Dylan laughed and then choked the sound off into a whimper as Somerset, one hand

braced against the wall, worked his way down from shoulder to chest. The muscles in Dylan's chest, pulled long and tight by his upstretched arms, tightened under his skin as Somerset placed a wet openmouthed kiss against one of Dylan's nipples. He scraped with teeth and tongue until the flat pink bud puckered enough he could wrap his lips around it. The attention made Dylan's chest hitch, his breath ragged as it caught between his ribs.

His hands tightened around the tangle of straps that cuffed him, and the bells jingled gently.

"God," he muttered raggedly. "Please?"

Somerset chuckled and slid lower. He bit bruises along Dylan's lean stomach and across the taut span of skin between his hip bones. The ragged hitch in Dylan's breathing, the quiver of his stomach muscles, got more pronounced the lower Somerset went.

"This isn't going to make it easier," Somerset said. "You and me. I won't be kinder or more tolerant or less...who and what I am. If anything, it'll be harder because I'll be in all your life, not just the bits I can steal."

Dylan sucked in a breath, his stomach moving under Somerset's mouth.

"Is this you giving me an out?" he asked.

Somerset flicked his tongue around the dip of Dylan's navel, the faint musky, salty taste of skin sweet in his mouth, and then looked up. It was a good view, the sprawl of Dylan's body splayed out against the wall made Somerset's cock tighten with aching impatience. The splatter of half-healed bruises, on ribs and curled around his shoulder, made something darker fill in his chest. Close enough to the same, though, connected.

Dark gray-streaked curls cast shadows over Dylan's face as he looked down, his mouth well-kissed and parted and his eyes dazed. Whatever he saw on Somerset's face made him twist his hands tighter in the leather straps .

"No. It's far too late for that," Somerset said. He slid down onto his knees and flicked the button of Dylan's jeans open. Goose bumps bloomed on Dylan's stomach as he squirmed in place. "Just letting you know."

He pushed the trousers down just enough to free Dylan's cock, already warm and heavy for Somerset's touch. It had been...fuck, he couldn't remember dates...too long. The idea that after tonight Somerset could have Dylan tomorrow as well—in a bed, on a chair, bent over the kitchen table—made everything from Somerset's balls to his asshole clench almost painfully tight.

"Are you—"

Whatever Dylan had been about to say was strangled by a groan as Somerset wrapped his mouth around the half-hard length of his cock. The heat of it in his mouth spread through his jaw and down his throat, like honey and summer. Somerset swirled his tongue around the shaft as it thickened, the pulse of warm mortal blood almost overwhelming as it filled his head.

Dylan moaned and rolled his hips forward. His fully erect cock slid over Somerset's tongue and bumped the back of his throat. As he pulled his head back the sticky glaze of pre-come was sharp and salty as it smeared his lips.

"Somerset," Dylan begged him with the name. The muscles in his arms stood out like wires as he gripped the reins tight enough to lift him up onto his tiptoes. Then again, as if he needed to try them both on for size, "Skellir."

It didn't matter.

For once the schism formed by Somerset's decision to leave Yule didn't matter. Somerset or Skellir, they both wanted to be here.

Somerset gripped Dylan's hip with one hand, thumb hooked over his hip bone and fingers spread over the curve of his ass, and pinned him against the wall. He ran his other hand up the back of Dylan's thigh, waxed cotton rough against his palm and skin smooth.

He worked his mouth around Dylan's cock, hard and wet and warm as a heart. The pulse of it tangled with the throb of Somerset's blood. Eventually Dylan's pleas were worn down to just breathless, wordless need.

Before he came, Somerset pulled back. He gave the head of Dylan's cock one last lick to savor the taste and then rose to his feet in one easy movement. Dylan pulled enough syllables together to swear, a low, strangled noise, and dropped his head back against the wall. His attention was on the ache dammed up in his balls and not on Somerset .

He could fix that. Somerset slid his hand around the back of Dylan's neck and lifted his head back up, then kissed him. The taste of his own cock on Somerset's tongue pulled Dylan's focus back to where it was supposed to be. As he explored Dylan's mouth, Somerset reached down and unfastened his jeans. He reached into them and pulled out his cock, already hard and aching.

When Somerset pulled back, Dylan craned after the kiss, until the cuffs pulled tight.

"I'm yours," Somerset told him, his mouth close to but not touching Dylan's ear. "Like it or not."

He cuffed their cocks together, fingers wrapped around the hard shafts. If Dylan wanted to argue he'd have to wait until later. Somerset fucked his hand roughly, the

underside of his cock rubbing against Dylan's. Pre-come and spit slicked his palm and smeared along his cock. It dripped from between his fingers.

Pleasure built in Somerset's balls like snowslip, that building feeling about something ready to give. Dylan gasped under his attention, sweat shiny on his chest and flushed throat. He chewed his lower lip, already bruised from Somerset's kisses, as he thrust up against the cup of Somerset's hand.

He came first, his spend dripping onto Somerset's knuckles and jeans. Dylan sagged back against the wall, his weight hung from leather straps, and breathed raggedly. His throat worked as he swallowed.

Somerset jerked his hand down his cock a few more times, threads of ice caught back into his balls, then stepped forward. He pressed his body against Dylan's, sweat-slick skin to sweat-slick skin shoulder to balls, and thrust roughly against the tight, flat span of his stomach. He leaned forward to grab a kiss from salty lips as he spilled himself over both of them, sticky and wet.

They stood there for a minute, breathing each other's breath, and then Somerset reached up to untangle Dylan's hands. Dylan sagged into him, limp and loose, until he pulled himself together and straightened up.

He leaned back against the wall and reached down to pull his jeans up with clumsy hands.

"It's not...what happens if Yule finds someone else to be Santa?" he asked. When Somerset gave him a curious look, Dylan shrugged. He dropped his hands from his jeans, leaving the waistband agape to flash come-smeared skin and hair. "It's not like anyone picked me. Not even you, Saintmaker. "

OK. Skellir or Somerset he could accept from Dylan's mouth. Saintmaker still left a

bad taste.

Dylan hadn't noticed.

"And after a year, I still can't feel like I'm what Yule wants for the job," he said as he looked down at his hands. His wrists were red, rubbed raw by the leather. "I...when the wolves took Irene and Alice, I was useless."

Somerset put his finger under Dylan's chin and tipped his head back up. He leaned in and dropped a quick, salted kiss onto his bruised mouth.

"You are Yule," he said. "And we'll find the wolves. We're getting closer. We'll have Irene and Alice back before you crack the Whip."

There was still something worried at the corners of Dylan's eyes, but he nodded reluctant acceptance of the reassurance. Before Somerset could push more, the door to the stables swung open and cracked against the wall.

"Well, now I have to learn to knock," Stúfur said as he turned his back. The nape of his neck was bright red.

Somerset looked down at himself. "You've seen it before," Somerset said dryly.

"Yours," Stúfur said. "Not his. That's Santa. I don't want to see that. "

Somerset scoffed at that as he tucked his cock away and buttoned his jeans. Then he waited until Dylan made himself decent.

"What is it?" he asked.

Stúfur half turned, one eye squinted open. Once he was reassured that he wasn't

going to see anything he turned the rest of the way around.

“They’ve found something,” he said.

Somerset swore under his breath as he crossed the stables in two long strides. “Next time,” he growled as he pushed past Stúfur and out the door, “lead with that.”

“I am still going through the accounts,” Enid said. She absently unpinned some of her hair and then pinned it back down, more severely, again. “Based on what Lucas said, he’s had almost nothing to do the changeling brokering. That was all Demre. The only fingerprint he put on it was to approve the pay-out schedule, which was standard procedure for everything. ”

She stopped as she pulled one of the stacks of paper toward her. Her hands were so clean they glistened, but her nails were flaky and her cuticles raw.

“What I did find,” she said, “is the petty fraud that the Duke of Belling mentioned. It didn’t just go unnoticed because most of our kind still struggle with modern economics, but because most of what he skimmed was from the Yule coffers.”

She pulled a sheet from the stack and held it out.

Dylan took it from her. He read it twice, to double check, and finally raised his eyebrows.

“That would definitely put me into my overdraft,” he noted.

Jars plucked the paper out of his hand and frowned at him. The crease between his eyes slowly deepened until, in a fit of pique, he just handed it to Somerset.

“How did he have access?” Jars asked

Enid shrugged. “An accomplice?” she said. “Convenience? Someone approved him, as Demre and Hill’s representative, to be on the account and then didn’t remember to rescind it? It could be any of those.”

Somerset looked up at Jars and raised his eyebrows. “Any of that sound familiar?”

“They handled our finances when you were here too,” Jars said stiffly. “Money was just simpler then. It couldn’t do tricks.”

That was true, Somerset supposed. Back then he’d had the vague idea that their money was just kept in some vault, and Demre fetched it when they needed some. It was only when he’d opened his own business, he’d gotten more interested in how it worked.

Not that he was going to admit that to Jars. They might have struck a tentative alliance, but that didn’t mean Somerset liked him.

“Stúfur told me you found something,” he said. “It better be more important than Jars needs to change our password more often. I was...occupied.”

Enid looked sympathetic. “At the toilet?” she asked.

The snigger from Stúfur earned him a look. Once that had quelled his brother, Somerset delivered a dry-as-rice “No” and waited. After glancing around the room, Enid reached for the hand sanitizer again. She had to give the bottle a good shake to dislodge enough to squeeze into her hand.

“Some of the money just went into his pocket,” Enid said. “ He says that was payment, but either way...everything else seems to involve one place. A house. Donations to the local sheriff’s department and mayor. Rental cars dropped off at a depot in a nearby city. They’re all in or near— ”

She paused to give the moment a little bit of drama.

“Bury,” Dylan interrupted in a flat, resigned voice. “Bury, Montana. That's right, isn't it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Dylan stood under the shower in what Jars had informed him were his quarters. The water was turned up as hot as strong as it would go, but it still couldn't wash the lingering chill of Somerset's fingerprints off Dylan's hips or cock. He leaned one arm against the slick tile and tilted his head forward, the stream of water beating against the back of his neck.

The frost-kissed traces didn't have anything to do with why he was here and Skellir was there. In Bury, where the Wolves came from and where, hopefully, they'd gone to close the deal with Irene's baby. Dylan still felt guilty, though.

At least he'd had time for a shower.

He flicked the tap, cutting the water off, and stepped out of the cubicle. The bandage had peeled off his arm, sodden and dripping. He stripped it off the rest of the way, half-planning how to redress it, and then realized he didn't have to. Black stitches stood out in loose squiggles, and the injury had knit itself together. It wasn't pretty, the scar tissue was lumpy and tender, but it was healed .

Maybe Yule didn't hate him that much...or it just didn't want to deal with a subpar Santa before the big night.

A robe hung on the back of the door, white and almost ludicrously fluffy. Dylan left it there. It was probably, like his clothes, freshly made for him, but until he knew for sure he'd rather not. He might have inherited a watch and a job from his grandfather, but he drew the line at the old man's robe.

It had been the only option. A year's worth of arguments about not needing to be kept out on a shelf aside, it was Christmas Eve. The Yule Lads would never agree to let him leave town, never mind go to a fight.

Either he stayed behind or there was no rescue. As it was, they'd still had to negotiate over who went to Bury and who stayed to guard Dylan.

It had made sense to agree, but that didn't make Dylan feel less useless.

Someone had laid out clothes on the bed. The ripped shirt he'd slung over the back of a chair was gone. That was...something to get used to.

"Thanks," he said, slightly dubious, to the room at large. Nothing changed. He eyed the walls suspiciously, in search of an eyeball or a camera, but he supposed if there was something watching they'd already gotten an eyeful.

He got dressed quickly. The clothes fit his mood, black and severe. Before he got on the Sleigh tonight—if he got on the Sleigh—he'd don the rest of the regalia. Being Santa, Dylan thought wryly as he tucked his shirt into his jeans and laced the belt through the loops, was getting to be a habit.

Someone knocked on the door. That was progress. It would have been more progress if the Lad had waited for an answer before he opened the door. Nik leaned into the room. The youngest of the Yule Lads scowled at Dylan. He wasn't impressed with either Jars and Somerset's currently detente or being left out of the fight.

"Your food's here," he said. "It smells like shit."

Considering what the Yule Lads considered a home-cooked meal, that boded well.

It had been over a day since Dylan had last eaten anything, other than a handful of

trail mix or a couple of peppermints. He was three slices of pizza in and it hadn't even touched the sides yet. Cheese scalded the roof of his mouth as he took a bite, and he soothed it with a swig of lemonade from a wet paper cup.

"Someone here could have made you pizza," Nik pointed out.

"You'd put pineapple on it," Dylan accused, one hand over his mouth as he chewed. "Or use ketchup for sauce."

Nik rolled his eyes. "As long as it's a tomato, what's the difference?"

Before Dylan could argue with that point, the door to the hall opened and the nervous accountant Somerset had left with the incriminating laptop stumbled into the room. She froze when she saw Nik and Dylan, her hands tightening on the folder she clutched. Her chest rose and fell quickly as she stared at them.

"I was looking for you," she said and thrust the folder toward them. "You have to see this."

Dylan wasn't sure of the first part of that statement—he had the strong impression that if they'd not been there Enid would have made a break for the door—but the second part seemed compelling. He dropped the half-eaten slice of pizza into the box and grabbed a napkin to wipe the grease off his hands as he slid out of the booth.

"Stay there," Nik told him sternly as he stepped in front of Dylan. He took the folder from Enid, flicked through the pages, and then escorted her over to the table. "Sit."

She did. Her hands were folded in her lap, fingers tucked into her palms and out of view.

"What is it?" Dylan asked as he took the folder. There were soot stains on the manilla

cardboard that smudged over his fingers as he touched them. When he opened the cover, he found copies of a dozen—more, he realized as he flipped through, contracts. “The babies?”

Enid took a deep breath and nodded. “I noticed something, when I was going through them,” she said. “They all have the same dates. Look.”

She reached out and pressed a finger to the top of the page, underlining a passage with a smear of grease. Then she flicked a few pages down and repeated the process, her fingers stained and shaky.

“OK,” Dylan said. “What does it mean?”

Enid glanced at the pizza, then almost visibly shook off the distraction. “I don’t know,” she said. “But it’s not consistent with a changeling brokerage. They’d want a steady stream, not a glut.”

So, nothing good .

Dylan pushed the pizza absently toward Enid as he flicked through the papers. All the dates were noted down within a few days of each other. The only difference was the year.

“That’s a lot of Christmas babies,” he noted absently.

“What?” Nik said.

Dylan looked up and waved the papers. “Based on the dates, they’d all be due around Christmas,” he said. “Irene’s baby was.”

Nik’s face creased into a scowl as he snatched a handful of pages from the folder. He

checked the dates and started to count it out on his fingers. Dylan would have judged him, but he'd only made the connection because of his conversation with Irene.

"Christmas babies," Nik said.

"Yeah," Dylan said. "It sounds more fun than it is. What is it?"

Nik grimaced and tossed the pages down. The corner of one went into the pot of garlic mayo open on the table.

"We need to talk to Hill," he said and then leveled a finger at Dylan. "That means you need to wake him up."

It turned out that it wasn't hard to get Hill to turn on his partner.

There was no honor among thieves or, as it turned out, those who bartered babies.

Getting him to talk, however, was another matter.

Behind Hill's lush, placid lips were teeth burned to cinders and a tongue charred to jerky. The inside of his cheeks and the back of his throat cracked and flaked as he breathed, the flesh underneath cherry red and poisoned.

He gave them a good view of the ruin and then closed his mouth, his lips set in that serene smile.

"Did my blood do that to you?" Dylan asked, taken aback.

Hill blinked in clear contempt and shook his head. He picked up the pen they had set on the table in front of him and scrawled in a spiky, hard to read hand.

To Assure.

It took two passes at that thought before Dylan was convinced he had it right. “You agreed to let them do that?” he asked. “As insurance?”

The pen scratched over the paper again. A little price .

Dylan couldn’t agree with that. He ran his tongue over the back of his teeth to feel the smooth enamel and ridges of them, intact and solid.

“But you can write the answers?”

Hill started to write something, but as a letter that was either a K or an F left the pen his fingers started to smoke. His nails split, and before he could finish he dropped the pen and shook his hand like he’d just nipped it in a drawer.

Nik reached over the table and ripped the page out of the notebook. He screwed it up in his hand until it was in a tight, compressed ball.

“All I need you to do is nod,” he said. “Kallikantzaroi.”

Hill drew back slightly at the name, his neck creased around the bandage that covered his collarbone. Then he dipped his chin in a nod. The two of them glared at each other while Dylan looked from one to the other.

“What does that mean?” he asked. “Who are the Kallik—”

“Monsters,” Nik said flatly. He dragged himself away from Hill and frowned at Dylan as if he’d just noticed him. “And not your problem.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb here,” Dylan said. “It kind of sounds like they are.

Who are they? Why do they want Irene's baby?"

He waited.

"Don't make me play twenty questions," Dylan said.

Nik pulled his hand down his face, stretching the skin out as he debated whether to answer. He probably would have refused to, except Dylan turned toward Hill.

"They're traitors," Nik said shortly. "Once they were part of Yule, but they turned on us and tried to destroy us. One of their misdeeds was to steal infants to replenish their ranks, but only those born on Christmas. It's bad luck to speak of them, and no reason to since they're all dead. Or that's what we believed."

"Don't tell me," Dylan said. "You were wrong?"

Nik waved his hand in a broad, jerky gesture at Hill. "I didn't say it, he did."

"Technically he nodded it," Dylan pointed out. The joke flopped as both of the fey stared at him with disdain. Dylan supposed it hadn't been that funny. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "So...what? I'm not a fan of the baby trafficking, but they don't sound any worse than Winter's wolves."

"They were," Nik said. Then he grimly corrected himself. "Are. We can fight the wolves, but the Kallikantzaroi...our oath won't let us end the Line of Nick, no matter how corrupted. Once my brothers realize who has been buying babies out there, they'll either be forsworn or dead. And there's nothing I can do about it for the same reason. To keep my oath I have to stay here and babysit you."

He shook his head in frustration and stalked out of the room. The door slammed behind him. As babysitting gigs went, Dylan thought nonsensically, leaving your

charge alone with a dangerous stranger probably wasn't best practice.

It did give him a chance to ask...

"Lucas said that my...predecessor..." Dylan caught himself before the "grandfather" slipped out. "That he knew about the babies."

Hill just stared. There was something disturbingly intense in his expression. It hadn't, Dylan supposed, been a question.

"Did he know who was buying them?"

This time he got a nod.

"He knew it was the Kalli... Calli—"

In a surprising bit of generosity, Hill didn't make Dylan finish the sentence. He just nodded and waited.

"How long has it been going on for?" Dylan asked. "How many babies have they bought?"

Instead of answering, Hill just smiled, the charred ruin of his tongue rattling around his mouth like a pebble as he laughed. Not exactly precise, but answer enough.

Dylan bolted up out of the chair and out of the room. The troll left on guard duty yelled something after him, but Dylan ignored it. He fished his phone out of his pocket and flicked through it as he walked. Demre and Hill might belong to the Winter Court, but to function as a financial entity it needed to be part of the mortal world.

It might not have a website, but...no, it had a website.

He caught up with Nik in the hall. The Yule Lad had slumped to the ground outside Jars's office, his head buried in his hands. He didn't look up as Dylan reached him.

"I can't even tell anyone, can't send help," Nik said. He clenched his hand in his hair, tufts of it sticking up through his knuckles, and sniffed wetly. "The Kallikantzaroi are supposed to be gone, pruned branch and root."

"Get up," Dylan said.

Nik spat on Dylan's boot instead. "Fuck you," he said. "Your weakness, your fondness, did this. A Santa that cares more about some fucking mortal than Yule. I hope they—"

It wasn't a good idea for Nik to finish that thought. Dylan crouched down and grabbed Nik's jacket, leather thick and clumsy between his fingers .

"You can get up," he said, "or you can stay here, but I'm going."

He shoved Nik back against the wall and stalked off down the corridor. After a second he heard boots scuff the ground behind him. Nik grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"You can't," he said, his voice cracked through with resentment. "I can't. It's Christmas Eve. You have to be here to take the Whip and drive the Sleigh. We'll just have to hope that my brothers are smart enough to find a way out without violence."

Dylan pulled away from him. "That's not really their strong suit," he pointed out. Then he held his phone up in front of Nik's face. The glare made Nik blink and lean back as he squinted at the screen. "Nineteen fifty-one. That's when Demre and Hill

were founded. Nearly a hundred years, Nik. How many babies do you think that adds up to? The Kallikantzaroi aren't in Bury, they are Bury."

Something that Santa had known all about before he was killed, but the repercussions of that bit of knowledge would have to wait. Nik's face had blanched as the information sank in.

"Six of us gone," he said raggedly. " Six. The Winter Court will eat us alive."

Dylan turned on his heel and struck out again. "No one is going to die today."

Never make any promises. That was one of the first things that Dylan had learned as a paramedic. No "You'll be OK" or "We can save the leg," and absolutely never promise that someone is going to make it. Right now, Dylan didn't care.

"What are you going to do?" Nik protested. He sounded bitter, but he was still at Dylan's shoulder. "I can't let you leave the North Pole. It'll be bad for Yule to lose my brothers, but worse if the Sleigh stands empty on Christmas Eve."

That was it. Up until now the closest to a plan Dylan had was that he wasn't going to let anyone die for him, but that worked.

"I am Yule," Dylan said, the memory of Somerset's words almost making him believe it. "And don't worry about the Sleigh, we're taking it with us."

The arguments against taking the Sleigh—argued grimly by the remaining Yule Lads or indignantly by the Saint-blood as they clustered around the Sleigh—mostly boiled down to "No one has ever done it before " and "If you die, we won't have the Sleigh for the new Santa."

Dylan had only been able to come up with one argument for , which was that he

wasn't asking. So far that was carrying the day. It had gotten his regalia fetched, the Sleigh dragged out, and the reindeer harnessed.

He pulled on the heavy fur-lined jacket and black leather gloves and braced one foot against the Sleigh's running board as he went to boost himself up. The bells on the harnesses chimed as the reindeer snorted and tossed their impressively-horned heads. The sound made Dylan's skin prickle with the memory of cold hands and rough kisses. His throat tightened at the thought that might have been the last time, but he squashed that fear down with the blunt weapon of his promise.

No one is going to die.

Although, Dylan thought bleakly as he hesitated, that didn't mean that Somerset would want anything to do with him after this was over. As far as Santas went, Dylan's appointment hadn't been plain sailing.

One of the Saint-blood—Kris, Dylan thought, from his beard and gray-blond hair—shoved his way to the front of the crowd. He grabbed Dylan's arm and dug his fingers into the down-padded sleeve.

"Bring them home," he said. "Yule can survive anything else."

The support caught Dylan by surprise. Not just that one person had said it, but that he saw a few other Saint-born in the crowd nod in agreement. It wasn't even close to half, but more than he'd expected.

"I will," he said.

Kris nodded as if it was an agreement, let go, and stepped back. He grabbed one of the other Saint-born and pulled them back.

“We serve him,” he reminded them gruffly. “Not the other way around.”

The Saint-blood curled his lip. “Maybe it’s time we asked more questions about who we serve,” he said, his voice pitched to carry. “What does anyone even know about him? What line is he from? He’s not one of us.”

Someone threw a punch. Dylan wasn’t sure if it was one of his unexpected supporters or not. It didn’t really matter, as the gathering quickly turned into a brawl.

Nik grabbed hold of the edge of the Sleigh, one foot braced on the polished runner. The other Yule Lads followed suit. As they grabbed on, Nik looked at Dylan .

“What are you waiting for?” he said as he reached back with his free hand to absently check his axe. “If you are going to do it, do it now.”

He was right.

Dylan took a deep breath and grabbed the handle of the Whip. He lifted it out of the holder and shook it to let the braided lash untangle. The metal tip on it tapped against the ground. Dylan cocked it back over his shoulder and cracked it.

He’d practiced since last year—in secret, feeling like an idiot—but he still wasn’t that good with it. It didn’t matter. The snap of the Whip still made Dylan’s teeth rattle and the reindeer surged forward against their harnesses as one. One of the Saint-blood grabbed one of the reindeer by the bridle. It threw its head up and dragged him off his feet. He hung on grimly.

Dylan hoped he had a good grip. He cracked the Whip a second time. The glittering metal tip of the lash slipped through the seconds and fractured time. It blew out in a slow-motion explosion of moments, a thousand years of today split into wafer-thin slivers.

As the road opened, the reindeer surged forward. Furry split-toed hooves found purchase on the minutes as they labored upward and through the world until they were out the other side. The Sleigh lurched and bounced behind them. The Saint-blood hung on for a second and then let go at the last minute, he rolled back into the mundane world.

“Is this...normal?” Nik asked through gritted teeth as he tightened his grip. “I always imagined it...smoother.”

Dylan dropped the Whip between his feet and untangled the reins into both hands. The Saint-blood who’d come along for the ride hooked his arm through the reindeer’s harness and buried his face against its throat.

“You and me both,” Dylan said through gritted teeth.

“Do you even know where Belling is?” Nik asked. The words were stripped from his lips and thinned out, sped up or slowed down depending on what eddies caught them.

“Bit late to worry about that,” Dylan said. “But don’t worry. They do. They know where everything is.”

And just for fucking once he hoped they’d take him straight there instead of jerking him around, crisscrossing the globe to end up one street over from where he’d started.

Chapter Fourteen

A slap put Merula Demre on her ass in the town hall. The woman sprawled on the floor for a minute and then pulled herself up. Blood dripped from her split lip and splattered over her tattooed cleavage and unbuttoned white shirt.

“Stay down,” the short older woman who’d put her on the floor in the first place told her. “You forget yourself. Perhaps this will help remind you of your place.”

Demre wiped her mouth on the back of her arm.

“I’ve endured more for our people than this,” she said.

The older woman’s head swiveled so she could glare at Demre. She raised perfectly tweezed eyebrows and smiled thinly.

“Go on,” she said in a dangerously sweet voice. “Remind us what you’ve done for our people... lately .”

Demre got up onto her knees. “This wasn’t my fault!” she protested. “I didn’t bring them here. That fool Lucas caused this, him and his stupid party, and he wasn’t mine.”

Somerset shifted position. It hurt. Someone had given the town forewarning that the Yule Lads were coming. When they’d ridden into town, the Kallikantzaroi had been waiting and had driven a dump truck into them. Somerset had been grabbed before he could extricate himself from the mangled mess of his bike.

Jars had covered for the others so they could scatter. So far they were the only two in chains, but it wouldn't take long. The whole town was looking for them.

"So what happened?" Somerset asked. "I know Irene had backed out of your deal. She wanted to keep her baby..."

The old woman gave a sour look over her shoulder at the pickup-sized wolf curled up in the back of the hall. Its briar ribs were distended, dry leaves falling from wizened branches, and the two women were still huddled together in its gut.

"It was a contract," she corrected Somerset. "And what happened was that the wolf was supposed to...impress on her that it was for her own good to hold up her end of that contract. Except when he got there, he couldn't tell the difference between an office Christmas party and a Yule raiding party and panicked."

The wolf she was talking about—still mostly human, except for his dry leaf eyes—looked sour at the accusation.

"We want to go back to Winter," he said. "Not fight your battles with Yule."

Demre made a furious noise from the ground and yanked in frustration at her hair. "Yule wasn't there!" she said. "You brought them down on us when you went after Santa!"

"He had the ticket home," the wolf said. "We needed it."

The pregnant woman, grubby and tired in torn leggings and matted hair, made a strangled sound at that dispassionate description. She buried her head in Alice's shoulder, one arm locked around her stomach and the other clutching the other woman close to her. The paramedic looked gray and tired, the bruise on her forehead livid and raised, but she muttered something comforting as she patted the other

woman's shoulder. She pulled herself away and crawled to the front of their cage.

"He needs treatment." She pointed at Somerset. "He could be bleeding internally—"

"I definitely am," Somerset confirmed. It was not a feeling you'd mistake after the first time. His stomach felt like he'd eaten a whole pot of their mother's stew, and his legs felt like overstuffed sausages. It wouldn't kill him, but that didn't make it pleasant.

"Good," the old woman snapped. She jabbed a finger at Demre, the nail painted a neutral beige. "And your whining disgusts me. However it started, you should have stopped it. "

Demre looked down, hidden behind the gray-brown fall of her hair. Her hand lifted to her face to poke at her lip.

"What are you going to do now?" Jars asked. He leaned back against one of the long benches, arms extended along the seat. "Even if you kill us, the Court will know you're here, and they have no compunctions about killing you."

Somerset snorted. "Neither do I," he pointed out. "It's only the oath that thinks they're worth our time."

Something squirmed under the woman's face, oily hair pushed against her cheek from the inside. Bristles poked through her pores, and a beady black eye tried to bulge out of her eye socket. She reached up and pushed it back in with the heel of her hand.

"The Court won't come looking for us," she said. " You didn't. They're looking for her, and they can take their pound of flesh from her."

Demre's head snapped up. "No!" She lurched to her feet, and her fingers crooked. Black nails split the skin at the end of her fingertips and poked out. Her lips peeled back from her teeth and kept peeling as her fangs showed. "You can't do that. You said...you said once we were done I could come home."

The woman spread her hands. "And you did," she said. "Now put those away. I don't want to fight with my daughter on Christmas Eve...but I will."

Demre folded her lips back down over her muzzle, as much as she could. The woman waited until she was sure that Demre was cowed and then turned to go.

The wolf crossed the hall to cut her off. "And our deal?" he asked.

There was a pause as the Kallikantzaroi looked at him and then primped her lips in a smile.

"A deal is a deal," she said. "Get your pet to give us the child and we'll get you home. But not until after we have the others. So either help find them or get out of my way."

The wolf stepped to the side and the woman left. He let her.

Jars turned his head to watch her go and then tilted his head back. He stared at the ceiling for a long while and then snorted softly to himself. It turned into a choked snickering laugh.

"What's so funny?" Demre snarled as she pulled the hem of her shirt up to wipe her face.

Jars leaned forward and braced his hands against his thighs. He used his chin to gesture to the hall .

“What’s it been?” he asked. “Centuries of the Kallikantzaroi surviving paw to mouth, hiding in the gutters. Decades here, building yourselves back up with stolen babies—”

Demre barked out a humorless laugh. “And where do you think the Winter Court gets their changelings?” she asked. “At least we pay for them.”

Jars ignored that. “Infiltrating the Winter Court with...what are you?”

She glared at him. “Smarter than you,” she said. “Like that baby, something that the Courts will accept as their own. And all these years under your nose, but you Yule Lads were too far up your own asses to sniff us out.”

“All that,” Jars said. “And it all fell apart when the wolf got scared because someone pulled a cracker.”

He burst out laughing again, doubled over as he slapped his hand against his thigh. Somerset snorted his own contribution at the farce of it. The wolf snarled at them.

Demre lunged across the room and kicked Jars in the chest. The bench behind him broke on impact, snapped in half, and he landed on his back with a grunt. Demre pinned him to the ground with one foot as she leaned down.

“Laugh at us all you like.” She enunciated the words through snagged fangs. Thick, stringy drool dripped from her jaws onto his face. “But we did all that and you saw nothing. You have no idea how close we came to having everything .”

Jars turned his face to the side and wiped it on his shoulder.

“So you failed all on your own?” he said.

Demre's face contorted, and her jaw cracked open, almost all the way back to her ears.

"The Old Man wanted to keep you alive until we caught the others," she said. "But the other one will do well enough as bait."

Somerset tensed his arms to test the cuffs. The iron burned his skin, a hot itch that numbed his fingers and spread a slow, dull ache up toward his armpit.

"I hate to break it to you," Somerset said. "But I'm not that well-liked."

Jars snorted out another laugh at that. The sound of humor made Demre scream with fury, and she grabbed him by the throat. Her claws punched through his throat as she tightened her grip. Blood splattered from Jars's lips as he choked and struggled for air.

The wolf at the back of the hall growled as it lurched to its feet. Inside its woven guts, the women cried out in alarm as they were thrown about. They grabbed the braided ribs for balance as the bars contracted around them. One of them yelped as their foot got caught, twisted awkwardly as the thorns dug into it .

"Enough," the pack leader snapped at Demre as he stalked over to her. He grabbed her shoulder. "Challenge the old bitch if you want to lead...but do it once my pack and I are home."

Demre didn't loosen her grip on Jars's throat as she backhanded the pack leader through a wall. Someone outside yelped in surprise as the wolf landed in the street. Second thoughts visibly dawned on Demre's face as she dropped Jars and turned to the back of the hall.

"Don't you—" she started the warning, but didn't get to finish it.

The wolf threw its head back and howled. The sound rattled through the sticks of its throat in a keening moan that jabbed through Somerset's ears in an attempt to find that atavistic fear of being hunted. It didn't work, Yule Lads made for stringy meat, but it was a good try.

Demre flinched and raised one hand to press against her ear.

From somewhere in the town, the Winter's wolves answered. Demre jerked her head up and toward the sound, her face worried.

"You said the others were gone," she accused him.

The wolf snapped thorny teeth at her and then bulled through the part of the wall that had survived the pack leader. Broken planks of wood and plaster scraped along its hide. Demre cursed and threw Jars down as she ran over to peer out the hole.

Somerset forced himself to his feet. Resilient as his body was, it still protested that decision. Cracked bones ground together, and freshly healed tendons frayed as they stretched. Somerset ignored it as he wrapped the chain they'd tethered him with around one hand.

Frost bloomed on the metal in delicate, crisp lines. It clustered around Somerset's fingers, thickening into a crust, and then raced down the length of the metal. Iron didn't, in general, like magic, but all Somerset had done was dump cold on it. That was just physics. Probably.

Ice-cold metal burned Somerset's palm. He gritted his teeth and braced his foot against the bolt in the floor. The first yank ripped a chunk of skin out of his palm and cracked one of the links. The second snapped the tether, chunks of frozen metal thrown over the floor.

He gathered the short length still attached to his wrist up into his fist and stalked toward Demre. Her back was turned to him as she watched the wolves outside. Somerset cocked his fist back to punch her, and the oath dug hot, disapproving pincers into his brain. He choked, the noise thick and strangled in his throat, and staggered as his knees seized up.

Demre turned to look at him. “Pathetic,” she said. “I don’t know why we were ever worried about you.”

Somerset tightened his fingers around the chain. He could push through the pain. An oath was nothing if you couldn’t break it, but the sour magic that clotted his brain was a precursor of what the price would be.

He dropped his arm, his weighted fist hanging loose at his side. Then he shoulder-barged her through the hole and into the dirt outside. She squalled in surprise as she thrashed in the frozen mud.

“We can’t kill you,” Somerset said through gritted teeth as he braced his arm against her throat. “But we can still hurt you.”

Demre thrashed as she gasped for air. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide and bulging. She managed to get her legs up between them, her feet twisted into bony clubbed hooves, and kicked him off her.

Before he could recover, she’d scrambled back to her feet and made a run for it. The element of surprise wasn’t going to last for long.

Somerset turned and stepped back through the hole into the building. He shook his bloody hand, the torn skin stinging, and walked over to check on Jars. His brother held up a hand for an assist back onto his feet. Somerset grabbed it and hauled him up.

“You know we aren’t going to make it out of here,” Jars said. “There are too many of them, and we can’t thin the herd. They can just throw bodies at us until they bury us.”

He was right. Somerset wiped his bloody hand on his leg and thought about that.

It had been hundreds of years since he’d thought to start counting them, and plenty before that. All the blood he’d shed and fun he’d had, and if he had to keep just one of those years it would be this one.

It could have been an even better year if he’d realized everyone knew he was fucking Santa, but he’d still take it. So what if it brought him here.

“How about we don’t die liars,” Somerset said. “We told Dylan we could save his friends, and we can still do that.”

“ You told him that,” Jars corrected him.

“Close enough.”

Jars snorted, and then, after thinking about it, nodded. “At least we can kill the wolves,” he said.

A storm followed the wolves through town. Snow piled high against cars and the sides of buildings, and ice cracked the windows with brittle gunshot retorts. It worked in the Yule Lads’ favor, since they’d grown up ankle deep in fresh fall. The Kallikantzaroi were less accustomed to it, and as they shed their mortal glamor for their true forms, their hooves didn’t have much purchase.

But there were still too many of them.

Somerset clenched his teeth against the nagging pain in his head as he put the stocky

Kallikantzaroi in a butcher's apron into a chokehold. The man kicked and swore, but eventually his body went limp.

Somerset let him drop into the snow and reached up to pull the butcher's knife out of his shoulder. He wiped the knife on his jeans and looked at Jars.

"Could have helped."

"Didn't want to."

Jars leaned on the cracked ax he'd taken away from another Kallikantzaroi as he leaned over to look for tracks. He brushed away the fresh fall of snow with the side of his foot to uncover the crushed pawprint.

"We're close," he said.

Somerset grabbed a handful of snow and shoved it under his jacket, the crust of ice packed against the shoulder wound.

"Not close enough."

They started out of the alley and had to stop, frozen in place, as they heard the crunch of hooves on snow.

"This way!" a voice yelled, thin and nasal. "I saw them."

"They went down Main Street!" someone countered.

The mob dithered for a moment as they tried to decide and then split. A handful of them went left, and the rest ran straight on.

Somerset and Jars looked at each other, shrugged, and fell in behind them.

It turned out that the “they” wasn’t the other Yule Lads. It was the wolves. The two of them were at bay in front of the town’s bank...but the wolves had no problem with killing the Kallikantzaroi. Bodies lay scattered on the ground, twisted from the transformation, their blood staining the snow like grease. The pack leader snapped the neck of the last of them and tossed him aside, the limp body taking out a snowman constructed on the bank lawn.

“I can smell you,” the pack leader noted as he wiped his hands on his shirt. “Peppermint and blood. Yule Lads.”

“You know,” Somerset said as he walked forward, “we don’t need to fight. The Kallikantzaroi aren’t your friends...you can see that now.”

The pack leader just shook his head. He looked worn down, weary in a way something born from storm winds and fear shouldn’t be capable of.

“Wolves don’t have friends,” he said. “We have the pack and the hunt and the kill. To be more ? It hurts.”

Somerset wrapped the loose links of the chain around his hand. “So will this.”

The wolf showed his teeth, thorns twisted through enamel, and lunged forward. Somerset caught him, and they tussled, their footing uneven in the snow that turned to slush and mud as they staggered back and forth. Both of them fell into a parked car and crushed the door. The alarm went off on impact, lights flashing as the horn blared.

The wolf picked Somerset up by the shirt and tossed him into the road. Somerset hit the snow-covered concrete and skidded on the ice. He rolled over and scrambled back

to his feet. The wolf hit him before he could get his balance. They both hit the dirt again, rolling around and rabbit-punching each other like the sort of idiots Somerset had to throw out of the bar at the end of the night.

It was undignified, but it kept the wolf's attention where Somerset wanted it.

At least it did until Jars's shout rattled the street. Windows shattered, and the sudden cacophony of a dozen car alarms filled the air. The snow seemed to stop for a moment as it was blown back into the storm.

It sent Somerset and the wolf tumbling down the street like a couple of fallen leaves. Somerset grabbed a streetlight on the way past, while the wolf crashed through a plate glass window into a toy shop.

Somerset shook his head to clear the ringing and looked around to check on his brother. The wolf was on the ground, ribs twisted and splintered from the impact. The wizened body of the person it had been tied to originally lay half out of the wolf on the ground. Jars grabbed at the broken ribs and hacked at them, ripping the connective tissue of ivy apart to get at what was inside.

“No! ”

Somerset turned to see the pack leader leap back through the broken window. Chunks of glass were embedded in him, glittering in the net of roots and tendrils that stitched him back together. He shook himself, powdered bits of glass shed into the snow, and bolted across the street. Somerset intercepted him before he got there. They tore into each other in the middle of the road, brutal and desperate.

For a second, as Somerset twisted the wolf's arm until he heard green wood tear, he thought he had the upper hand. Then he felt the wind tug at his hair and blow cold across the back of his neck to make him hackle. He looked as the last two wolves

raced silently out of the snow.

“Fuck—”

A sudden crack interrupted Somerset’s disgusted profanity. One of the wolves’ front legs exploded in a shower of charred splinters and half-dead foliage. The wolf, Somerset’s seal still wrapped around its muzzle, pitched forward at the unexpected mess and tumbled tail over ears down the road.

The last wolf skidded to a stop, legs spraddled as it looked around. Unlike the others, it looked like it had thrived, draped with boughs of fir and mistletoe.

A second crack blew a hole the size of a child’s head through its shoulder.

From the top of a sedan, Stúfur whooped as he lowered his gun. He looked over at Somerset and gave him the finger.

“Just needed better bullets,” he yelled over the storm.

An elbow to the chin snapped Somerset’s attention back to the job at hand. He spat out a bit of his tongue and grabbed the back of the wolf’s head to grind it into the road.

All he needed was a...few...more...minutes.

Jars snapped the last ribs just as the wolf started to stir, the strings of briar pulled tight as the husk of its host was pulled back inside it. He reached in and unceremoniously yanked both women out by the scruff of their collars.

As the wolf scrambled back to its feet, still unsteady and clumsy, Ket and Gat came out of the storm to grab the woman. They threw them over their shoulders and took

off at a run as the snow dropped behind them.

The wolf under Somerset screamed in raw, inchoate rage and hammered at the road with bark-thickened hands. He threw Somerset off and clawed himself along the road until he could stagger to his feet .

“Why?” he demanded as he turned on Somerset. “You’ve gained nothing . All you’ve done is make yourself weak. I’ll find them. I’ll give them to the Kallikantzaroi in return for a way home. What have you gotten from this?”

Somerset shrugged. “Pissed you off,” he said.

The wolf wrinkled his lips back and took a step forward. Then it stopped and looked up. Dark, wiry figures with rodent heads and cloven hooves appeared on rooftops along the streets. More horns joined the slowly going flat blare of car alarms, and the sound of a mob eddied through the snow.

“Let them have you,” the wolf said. “And when you die, know that I’ll find your brothers and kill them too.”

The pack leader ripped out of his human skin, briars and withies knit together into the bulk of a huge, heavy-boned wolf. The snow clotted on exposed, wet wood and hardened, frost thickened on its nails. He dropped onto all fours, showed one last fang to Somerset, and disappeared into the storm.

As he did so the other wolves pulled themselves back together and lurched after him, on half-formed legs and broken branches.

This time it was Stúfur who offered a hand up. Somerset regarded it dubiously but accepted the yank up onto his feet.

“Admit it,” Stúfur said. “The gun’s a good idea.”

“No,” Somerset said.

They backed up across the road until they met Jars at the steps of the bank. The three of them stood shoulder to shoulder as the Kallikantzaroi came running out of the storm toward them.

“If I have to die,” Somerset said, “I suppose I always assumed you’d be there.”

“Really?” Stúfur asked. “I’m touched.”

Somerset licked blood off his lip. “I mean, I assumed you’d be killing me,” he said.

“Fair,” Jars noted. “And same.”

The wave of Kallikantzaroi were nearly on them. Somerset braced himself. He hoped that at least one of them would trip over his corpse and break its neck.

The sound of bells broke through the storm. Somerset thought it was his imagination at first, but then he heard it again. A second later he saw a dark shadow look out of the misty veil of snow and Santa’s Sleigh broke back onto this side of reality right on top of the Kallikantzaroi. The reindeer swung their massive horned heads like hammers and sent the goat-rat bodies of the twisted Saint-blood flying. They were the lucky ones. The rest were trampled under dinnerplate-sized hooves and run over by the sharp metal runners of the Sleigh.

Dylan stood up in the Sleigh, legs braced and reins gripped tight in both hands.

“Get on!” he yelled as he snapped the reins. The Sleigh veered toward them. Somerset gawped at it for a second and then laughed in delight. He dodged to the side

and jumped up onto the running board as it passed. Habit made him stick out a hand to grab Jars's arm and drag him up behind him. Stúfur grabbed a harness strap and hauled himself up onto one of the reindeer's broad, furry backs.

Nik was squeezed into the corner of one of the Sleigh's seats, one hand white-knuckled around a leather strap. He gave Somerset a wild look.

"We can't fight them!" he blurted out. "They're Kallikantzaroi. All the babies they bought, they were all Christmas births. They—"

Jars dropped into the seat next to him and grabbed the back of his neck in one hand. He gave their little brother a friendly shake. "We got that," he said.

Dylan snapped the reins again, and the reindeer threw themselves against their harnesses as they picked up their pace. Snow was flung up behind them, cool on Somerset's face as it sprayed over them.

"Well I don't plan to stop," Dylan yelled over the wind. "The reindeer don't seem bothered by your oaths."

Somerset laughed again, sweet and heady as mead, as he grabbed Dylan and dragged him into a kiss. It was salty and rough, lips scraped, and their teeth jarred together. He didn't care.

Nik apparently did.

"Eyes on the road!" he yelled. "Eyes on the road, for fuck's sake!"

Somerset snorted, but dragged himself away from Dylan. True to his word, Dylan didn't stop as they raced through the streets of Bury. Although he did slow the reindeer down to a trot long enough for Ket and Gat to throw the two women into the

Sleigh before they scrambled up onto the backboard.

Santa had saved the day.

Dylan would be his tomorrow. For as many tomorrows as they could get.

Epilogue

It was nearly Christmas Day when Dylan finally made it back to Bury. He'd left Alice and Irene at a nearby hospital and the Yule Lads back at the North Pole. There had been a long stretch of Christmas Eve between then and now, the second before midnight pulled out like taffy as Santa worked.

Dylan parked the Sleigh on Main Street and climbed down. He winced as his feet hit the road. It might have only been a few hours in the mortal world, but his ass knew how long it had been on that hard wooden seat in practical time.

He stopped to strip off the regalia and folded it up on the bench seat.

"If someone takes this for a joyride," Krampus remarked over his shoulder, "you get to explain it."

Dylan turned to look at his dark twin. "I'll add it to the list," he said.

Krampus made an unhappy noise in his throat. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked. "You can't unknow something. Trust me, I'd rather not have a memory of sucking Somerset's—"

"I'm sick of being in the dark," Dylan said. "My whole life, people have kept things from me, and I'm done going along with it."

Krampus sighed and gave a resigned dip of his horned head.

“I’ll tell the Yule Lads you stopped for ice cream if they wonder where you are,” he said. “Don’t trust him.”

Then he was gone in a wisp of coal-sharp smoke.

Dylan wished Krampus had tried to argue more. He was still going to go in, but he’d have appreciated a reason to delay a bit longer. In the absence of that he took a deep breath, the taste of snow clean on his tongue, and walked over to the toy shop. He’d seen it as he’d driven the Sleigh through town, over the rutted bodies of those who’d not been smart enough to run. What he didn’t know was if he’d been looking for it, or had he somehow remembered it.

The front door was locked, but the window had been smashed. Dylan just climbed through, into the middle of a diorama of a nutcracker-based nativity. He watched his feet around the hand-painted magi as he climbed down.

Behind the counter was an old man—although he actually wasn’t that old. He looked a hard-done-by fifty or a spry sixty. Certainly no more than that. It wasn’t what Dylan had expected.

The not-that-old man looked up from the little dog on wheels in his hands. He didn’t look surprised to see Dylan and gestured with a paintbrush at a wooden chair.

“About time,” he said. “Make yourself at home.”

Dylan sat down. The cushion was threadbare tapestry and what felt like rocks. It wasn’t much more comfortable than the Sleigh’s bench.

“I am sorry the girls were scared,” the not-so-old man said. He licked the brush, a line of blue on his lower lip, and dabbed the doll. “It was never meant to be like that. No one was meant to be forced to give up their child, or—God knows—be kidnapped. Whatever price you have Ms. Demre pay, she deserves it. What will she face? If you

don't mind me asking."

Dylan watched the doll take shape with interest. "The police are going to arrest her for trafficking and kidnapping," he said. "We have a friend on the force who'll be able to make it stick with only a little bit of finessing. It's what she did, after all. I don't know about what the Winter Court will do to her."

The not-so-old man nodded. "I imagine she'll take a few people down with her too," he said. "Not me. She knows better. "

Dylan leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

"Am I one of them? A Kallikantzaroi?" He got it right this time. He'd had time to practice.

This time the not-so-old man fumbled his brush stroke in surprise. He set the toy down and wiped his hands on his apron as he looked at Dylan.

"Why would you—" he started to ask, then grimaced. He wiped the blue off his lip onto his thumb. "I suppose I can see your reasoning...but no. You're not one of them—not that there would be anything wrong with that if you were. You're my grandson, Dylan, from the unbroken Line of Nick. Although I never wanted you to be part of that world."

"Why not?"

That wasn't one of the questions that Dylan had planned. It was the question of the little boy who'd woken up on Christmas Day to an empty house and a social worker at the door. Why had they all left him behind?

His grandfather made a disgusted noise in his throat as he turned around to get a bottle of turps and a rag from the shelf. He soaked the rag and carefully started to

wipe the paint off the toy.

“The Line of Nick has spoiled,” he said. “The Saint-born are rapacious, power-hungry, and selfish. All they care about is pleasure and self-indulgence. I didn’t want that for you.”

“You thought foster care was better?”

“Kinder, no,” his grandfather said. “But you put your life at risk to rescue your friend. Do you think any of them would do that? I don’t. I don’t think any of them would put their heart first in their questions either. Ask me what you need to, Dylan, not what you want to.”

They looked at each other in silence. Dylan finally got up and walked over to lean on the glass counter. Up close his grandfather looked more like the spry sixty-year-old, with deep wrinkles and thinning hair at his temples.

“Why did you make me Santa when you did so much to keep me away?” he asked.

His grandfather clucked his tongue. “That’s still want,” he said. “But I didn’t. The plan was never to burden you in my place, it was to destroy the institution. I staged an attack and sent Gull with a decoy watch to Skellir, knowing he would try and save Yule. He was meant to fail, and this—” He reached over and tapped a wet finger against the watch face. “—would just have been a memento from the family you’d lost. More family than you ever knew.”

Dylan closed his eyes. The smell of turps was sickly as he breathed it in .

“I fucked that up,” he said.

His grandfather grinned. For the first time Dylan could see Santa in him, the way his eyes twinkled and dimples grooved into creased cheeks.

“Christmas isn’t so easy to derail,” he said. “But you live and you learn, and you try again. Last chance, Dylan. Ask me what you need.”

The temptation not to, just to annoy him, was strong. His grandfather was right though, Dylan needed to know.

“Why?” he said.

And there was the old man. He set the toy down and leaned over the counter. His hands were dry and warm as they cupped over Dylan’s.

“Because they killed my son,” he said. “Someone found out I’d polluted the Line of Nick with a monster bride, and they killed your father to clean it up. That’s the other reason I had to send you away. To keep you safe.”

Of course. Dylan pulled his hands out from under his grandfather’s. It couldn’t just be that his grandfather had wanted to defraud an insurance company or something. No. It had to be something that would throw Dylan’s life, weird as it was, for a loop.

“I assume that if I come back here on Christmas Day...”

“I’ll be gone,” his grandfather confirmed. That twinkly smile came back. “All of us will who matter. I might not be Santa anymore, but I have a few tricks.”

Dylan nodded and turned to leave. The bells over the door chimed cheerfully as he unlocked it and pulled it open.

“What are you going to do now?” his grandfather asked.

Dylan paused on the threshold. “You should visit grandmother,” he said instead of answering. “She misses you.”

And that might keep him out of trouble until next year. Dylan stepped outside and let the door close behind him. Despite Krampus's concern, the Sleigh was just where he'd left it. Dylan climbed up onto the bench seat and gathered up the reins.

"One more stop," he told the reindeer.

The wolves were injured—inasmuch as they understood that—and worn. They still ran. That's what wolves did. Rough paws scraped over the dirt track as they followed the smell of the rat-queen who'd double-crossed them up the mountain.

Her trail disappeared into a cave carved in the side of the mountain. A pile of human clothes and a pair of glasses had been left at the side of it.

Before they could follow the trail underground, a Sleigh, red paint battered and runners dulled, appeared on the road. It bounced as it landed, kicking up snow, and then raced by them into the trees.

The pack leader didn't chase it. He'd been human too long, learned how to cozen and lie to get what they wanted. He saw a trap. The human on the driver's seat had lied to them before.

It was the wolf with mistletoe wound in its ruff who gave chase first, and then the wolf whose charred leg was still match thin. The last two broke into a run out of habit, snapping at the back of the Sleigh as they raced after it.

The slap of the reins made the reindeer lunge forward and lean into their harness. The Sleigh bounced and then picked up speed, enough to keep the wolves' teeth from the woodwork.

Trees and snow blurred around them, and then the driver of the Sleigh cracked his Whip and the world shattered between one step and the next. When it came back, the winter was deeper, the snow cleaner, and the bodies they had crafted of wood and

stick and stone crumbled around them.

The dead fell onto the snow, and wolves with fur of wind and bones of ice chased Santa's Sleigh for a mile until he picked up enough speed to fall back into the mortal, but stilled, world.

He had a home to go to and someone to spend Christmas with this year.

The season might just be growing on him.