



# Soothsayer

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I know how this is going to end. I've seen it.

Can you imagine knowing how you die? For Cillian Kelly, its a curse he cant escape. With the ability to see peoples fates just by looking into their eyes, hes been on the run for years, trying to hide from his past filled with mistakes.

But when he discovers that the man he once betrayed, Soren Egilsson, is still alive, Cillian is determined to make things right.

However, the person he finds is not the man he once knew. Sorens body is now possessed by an ancient spirit, and Cillian must fight for the right to control Soren's fate.

As he delves deeper into this battle for power, he realizes that he may have to make the ultimate sacrifice for the man he could have loved.

If Cillian isn't careful, he may lose everything—not just Soren, but his own life.

**Total Pages (Source):** 33

## Page 1

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Sleep was an insidious thing, in my opinion. It was bad enough that the body required you to shut down— forced you to drop your defenses and make yourself vulnerable to any old person who happened by. To compound that insult by giving your subconscious free reign, letting it sort through its damage and parade all your internal conflicts, shameful desires, and unacknowledged fetishes through your head while you're too out of it to resist...that was just goddamn sadistic. Whatever made us, whether it was the slow crawl of evolution or some bored intergalactic deity looking for laughs, it didn't have a concept of mercy. When your own mind was made to turn on you while you were at your worst, you couldn't deny the heartless humor of it.

Not that I had personal experience with that particular cosmic joke, but the things that filled my head when I slept were more than awful enough to make up for missing out on standing in front of a class of my peers butt naked or having fumbling, awkward sex dreams that left my sheets glued to my crotch. Instead of providing a distorted window into my own mind, I dreamed about the things I'd seen in other people's heads. Not just their wants and desires?although those were bad enough?but their endings: how they were going to die, or worse yet, the things they were going to do on the way to that final end. I saw different things in everyone, but the one common denominator with my visions was that whatever I saw, it was true, and most times the truth wasn't going to be what you hoped it was.

Those visions stuck with me and replayed in my mind night after awful night, unless I was smart enough to drink my mind blank before they could take hold. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option while I was staying with Marisol—she didn't approve of alcohol and wouldn't let me bring any into her house. I wasn't about to risk staying in a hotel with no protections on it, so that meant I obeyed her rules. I slept on my belly with my hands gripping the pillow so tight they were curled into

claws when I woke up, mouth sour with despair and eyes gritty with other people's tears every morning.

This morning was particularly nasty, because the first thing I smelled as I blinked my way out of someone else's oblivion was the heavy, smoky scent of sage and patchouli, underscored by the drifting funk of pot from the dispensary next door. The pot smell was the new norm since the laws had changed in Denver, but Marisol's continual attempts to conceal it were a new and ever-changing torment. I groaned and pushed my face farther into the pillow. Maybe I could doze through the worst of it.

"Cillian!"

No such luck.

"Cillian Kelly! Get down here before your breakfast gets cold."

Oh god, she'd cooked. There was no escaping her now. Marisol was accepting of a lot of things, but being late for a meal wasn't one of them.

I pushed myself out of bed and staggered into the small attached bathroom, did my business, and tried not to mind the way the grinning Buddha print on the wall always seemed to stare at me. Who put a Buddha in a bathroom; that was what I wanted to know?but Marisol wouldn't let me take him down. Every room in her house contained an "avatar" as she put it, and they were linked to her protection spells for the house as a whole. Those protection spells were part of the reason I stayed with Marisol to begin with, so if that meant Buddha got to watch me brush my teeth, well, I hoped the guy liked Colgate.

I pulled on a pair of sweatpants, exchanged my sweat drenched T-shirt for a clean one Marisol had given me that read "Namaste, bitches," and headed downstairs. The tiny hall at the bottom landing had a door to the shop at the end, a sitting room on the

right, and the kitchen on the left. I walked into the kitchen and collapsed into a chair.

“Coffee,” I begged. “Tea, bleach, anything to get rid of that awful smell.”

Marisol frowned at me from her spot by the window, where she was brandishing a smudge stick at the shop next door. “You think it needs some lavender?” she asked. “I thought the sage would do the trick, but maybe if I mix in something sweeter...”

“God, no,” I blurted. “Nothing floral, nothing sweet, and absolutely nothing that smells like food. I’ll never eat again.”

“It’s not that bad,” she scoffed, finally putting down the stick and opening up her oven. The aroma of fresh pancakes drifted out, and thankfully my hunger overrode my sense of disgust at the conglomeration of scents in the room. “Whole grain,” she said as she set a loaded plate down in front of me. “With some flax seed and a little bit of—”

“You can stop right there,” I told her, grabbing for the maple syrup that was already on the table. “Don’t ruin this for me with healthiness.”

Marisol rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t be such a baby.” She added boiling milk into the two cups of coffee she’d poured, spooned sugar into both of them, and then sat down and pushed one over to me. “Eat fast. We need to get your spread done before I open the doors. You slept late, cielito .”

I glanced at the clock. It was almost nine, which was very late for me. “Weird,” I said before taking a bite. They might be whole grain, flaxy, and, hell, vegan for all I knew, but Marisol still managed to make them delicious, light, and soft with just a hint of sweetness.

“Mmph,” I groaned around my bite.

Marisol smiled. “Even my Tavo liked these pancakes. You’re a lot like him, you know.”

Yeah, I knew. Half the reason Marisol was letting me stay with her was because I reminded her of her estranged son, Gustavo, whom she hadn’t seen since he left for college ten years ago. The other half was because she was best friends with my mother, and hosting someone else’s kid was the sort of thing best friends did for each other. She and my mother had met when they were both young, Mom on the run with me and Marisol on a break between trips to India.

How they had become friends I didn’t really know. They were as different as shadow and light: my mother small, thin, and worn with the weight of her ability and the burden of caring for me; Marisol curvy and robust, of Puerto-Rican descent, and unhindered by the expectations of others. She had been careless and carefree, always laughing, dancing, and gently mocking. She had been an archetype, a goddess, and the world had been a jewel that was rightfully hers to wear.

The years had changed Marisol in all the expected ways, and some unexpected ones. She’d kept the curves and the dark curling hair, but she laughed less these days. Tavo’s estrangement had been a blow to her, and it had taken a long time for her spirit to recover. Helping me was somewhere between a privilege and a penance for her, but she was kind to me and understood my situation in a way unique to those who had a similar gift. Hers was nowhere near as strong as mine, but she was getting better with practice, and I gave her plenty of that.

I also brought her a lot of business, but that was strictly under the table. Marisol ran a metaphysical supply shop on East Colfax in Denver, which meant the store that made up the front half of her building was full of incense, CDs of Gregorian chanting, lots of the little god statues that she favored, and more esoteric books and sigils and charms than you could shake a stick at. It was a custom blend of Buddhism, Eastern mythology, Catholicism, and bullshit, and Marisol ran it all with a smile on her face.

That there was some truth to it didn't mean I had to appreciate it, though.

Marisol pushed a strand of silky hair out of her face and grabbed her worn tarot deck, turning it from edge to edge before putting it down again. She tapped the top card with her fingers a few times, a one-two-three *lentando* tempo, and then switched it up, moving her fingers faster, *precipitando*, like the beat of an overworked heart.

"You're fidgety today," I said after I swallowed. "What's up?"

"Strange dreams," she replied a little absently. "At the time they felt like a premonition, but I don't remember them well. And that pollution from next door isn't making it any easier to concentrate," she added darkly.

"What kind of premonition?" I asked. Marisol's ability with telling the future was like most gifted people's: inconstant, uncertain, and loaded with so much metaphor you barely knew what to make of it. That didn't make the things she saw false, just unreliable.

"Something about you," she said. "Bad enough that it woke me out of a sound sleep. Could be nothing worse than a rich *pendejo* coming in to get stock picks from you today, or it could be something else."

Lots of things could fall under the category of "something else." I'd only stayed with Marisol twice before, but she'd seen the bad results of one reading I'd done. It turned out the shrinks were right: serial killers wanted their skills to be acknowledged. I'd been a test for that man, and I hadn't been savvy enough back then to keep the truth off of my face. I'd spoken lies to him, told him he was going to die an old man surrounded by his loving family—complete crap, and he'd known it. He'd left with a polite thanks and a grim, pleased determination in his mind to make me his next victim.

Of course, knowing someone else's fate takes a lot of the fear out of them coming to kill you. I never saw my own fate, so what he wanted to happen didn't matter—I knew he wasn't going to be my end. Thankfully Marisol was more than happy to put her shotgun to good use, and when he broke in that night, he got a face full of buckshot. Marisol had called the police, who'd chocked it up to a robbery gone wrong, and my name was kept out of things entirely. All's well that ends well, except sometimes I still feel that moment in my head, hear the ratchet of the gun and the boom before my brain exploded in a rush of red and gray. I try not to let it get to me.

"Let's do the spread," I suggested. "It'll clear things up." Tarot was Marisol's medium of choice when it came to prognosticating, and it was usually pretty reliable.

"Let me shuffle first," she said and worked the deck through her hands while I finished my pancakes. I put the plate on the counter, cut the deck when she told me to, and waited for her to finish shuffling, her midnight eyes soft and unfocused. Finally she looked up at me. "Three today." I obediently pulled three cards, setting them down in a straight line on the table between us. Marisol put the deck aside and turned over the first card.

"The Ten of Swords." She traced the body on the card, pierced by ten long blades. "The Corpse. Destruction and ruin."

"Oh, dammit," I said, sitting back and running a frustrated hand through my bleach-blond hair. "He's coming back again." A week ago, I'd pulled the Nine of Swords, and now my work from that afternoon was catching up with me. There was nothing worse than a fucking repeat customer, as though their fate would have altered since I saw them last. The visions I saw never changed, unless they turned completely black. Black usually meant the person I'd gotten the vision from was dead, although in some cases a part of them stayed with me after death.

This particular guy hadn't liked the fate I'd laid out for him and had come back twice

now, expecting it to be different each time. Like trying to cover his tracks better was going to save him from his future. He'd been more and more insistent with every visit, and I was completely out of patience.

"It's time to get tough on this fucker."

Marisol brightened a little. "I've got a brand new AR-15 that could use a workout."

"Not that kind of tough," I said. "I think what he needs is...a more extensive reading." You could drown in the details when it came to reading the future, but sometimes a client needed that kind of kick in the ass.

"Can I watch?"

"Pervert," I teased her, and she slapped my arm playfully.

"Don't make me call your mama and tell her you're being a bad boy," Marisol warned and then tapped the next card. "Go on."

I turned it over.

"The Ace of Cups." Marisol grinned. "Oh, how pleasant."

I gazed at the card for a long moment. "It could be." A new beginning, blessings and happiness to ensue...yeah, this visit would be pleasant. At least it would be a nice reprieve from the damn Corpse.

"Last one." I turned it over, and both of us frowned.

"The Hanged Man," Marisol said. "Reversed." She looked at me. "I think this one is meant to be you, Cillian." The card showed a man suspended upside down against a



tree, his hands and feet bound and his face surprisingly serene for someone who represented sacrifice.

Cards for me didn't come up all that often, especially not ones like this. "I'm not feeling very martyrly," I said dryly.

"It isn't a card of martyrdom; it's a card of divinity," she said. "This card could be both destruction and resurrection. It's closely linked to Christianity, in reference to the suffering of Christ. It could also depict Osiris, or even Odin." Something niggled at the back of my brain when she said that, but I pushed it aside. "This means that your life is coming to a crossroads," Marisol continued. "A big change is coming, and you'd be smart not to fight it."

"When am I ever smart?" I asked, forcing a smirk to my face. My throat was strangely tight, and I had to get the words out before it closed on me entirely. Something was wrong, but I didn't have time to get into it now. Two other cards came first, and I, more than anyone, knew that you couldn't fight fate.

Marisol had pity on me and dropped it. "Certainly not when you're working the cash register," she said.

"Hey, addition is hard!"

"Calculus is hard, cielito . Addition is for six-year-olds." She stood up and whisked away our empty coffee cups. "I have to open up the shop, and you have to get ready for the day."

"Right." Time to put my armor on.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

You know what they said: dress to impress. The way you looked had a lot to do with how you were going to be treated, and at this point in my life, I was better than a goddamn Boy Scout at being prepared. For most of the people in this business, your appearance was just another part of the con. If you looked mysterious, exotic, special, and strange, you'd have more credence to the average consumer than a housewife in a terry cloth robe and hair curlers. I'm not saying I believed that; I'd had my ass handed to me by more than one unassuming face, but I did believe in the efficacy of the right presentation.

When I was alone, or with a genuine friend, I could wear sweatpants and a T-shirt and lounge around like a slob and everything was okay. When I was getting ready to meet a client, especially a belligerent one, it was time to get formal. I had a few decent suits that had survived my escapades over the years, and those were my fallback position. I headed upstairs, back into Tavo's old room, and pulled my gray wool Hackett suit out of the closet. It was secondhand and a little short in the sleeves, but I could turn back the French cuffs of my crisp white shirt and make the length look deliberate. Wool was still a little warm for August in Denver, but it wasn't like I was planning to go out in this thing. A low black waistcoat, a chain for a pocket watch—I didn't have a pocket watch, but the look was good—and a decent pair of shoes and I'd get a businessman's attention, if not his respect.

I stripped out of my clothes, baring my skin to the light that made it past Marisol's heavy curtains. My body was covered with strategic tattoos: a band of thorns around each of my wrists?I'd been going through a dramatic phase?curling vines and smoke around my neck, an eye of Horus directly beneath my Adam's apple, and the disintegrating wings of Icarus falling to pieces across my shoulders and back. Most of them covered up something I didn't feel like sharing with the world, although if you

looked close enough you could see the scars beneath them. The wings had been the first and the beginning of my love affair with tattoos. I had some on my arms and legs that didn't act as camouflage, just images I liked or reminders I sometimes needed, all the way to my fingertips.

I stepped into my suit pants and put on my shirt, minding the creases and lines as I buttoned up my second skin. The suit was for respectability, the tattoos offered a bit of mystery, and the jewelry, well...

What could I say? I looked pretty pierced. Silver studs in my nose and ears, a silver teardrop by my left eye, and heavy silver rings on my fingers covered in symbols of dubious merit—the jewelry was a distraction, and also a convenient way to make my punches hurt a little more. I didn't often get physical with a client, but it happened occasionally, and what was my motto? Be prepared. It wasn't like I knew when someone was going to go psycho on me.

Well, all right, sometimes I did know, like today, but I was hoping I could head it off at the pass before things got serious. I combed my hair back and polished the look off with a short-brimmed gray fedora, a little more battered than the rest of my suit because I liked to wear it more often, and glanced at myself in the mirror. I looked lean, sharp-featured, the kind of smooth that hid knives just beneath the surface. I looked like a predator, like a shark. I sighed and then went back downstairs to help Marisol get ready.

She was dolled up too, like a cross between a fortune teller and a flamenco dancer. Her curling hair was pulled back with a purple silk scarf; she had a peasant-style blouse on that put her cleavage on display, and her skirt was layered with row after row of colorful fabric. She jingled a little as she walked, her necklaces and bracelets announcing her like heavenly trumpeters, and she'd darkened her eyelashes and added lipstick bright enough to draw the eye instantly to her mouth. Marisol had a schtick, same as me, but damn, she looked good while she did it. Unlike me, I knew

Marisol was armed with more than her jewelry. Couldn't be too careful.

Marisol looked at me and pursed her lips. "Not the black suit?"

"You told me it makes me look like a gangster," I said, turning on the OPEN sign and pulling up the blinds.

"It does, but this guy might respect you more if you look like that."

"At this point, I think the respect thing is pretty much moot. If he respected my skills, he wouldn't be coming back, yet again. This guy only respects himself."

"But you don't look really scary in that suit either," she said, a little disconsolately. "You look...Cillian, honestly, you look like you're out to seduce someone."

"Is it working?" I asked with a grin as she walked by. She smacked me on the shoulder, but she was smiling.

"Don't even try it, cielito . I'd give you a heart attack. Besides, then your mama would kill me, and I already know that's not how I'm going to go." She did know that; one of the first things Marisol had asked me, years ago when I was still scared of myself and missing my mother so bad it made me sick, was her own future. If I had known then what I know now, I wouldn't have done it, but she was kind and genuinely hopeful for something, and I gave in. I looked into Marisol's eyes, and I saw her tangled mess of hope and fear, all wound around a boy who had just left her, who she feared would never come back, and—

Marisol was my first really good lie, the kind of lie that has so much truth in it you can barely tell it's not what you want it to be. It was the chameleon of lies, the fucking stick insect of lies. I did what I did, and she cried and thanked me, and I still feel guilty about it, but you know...she shouldn't have asked. Of all people, Marisol

should have known better, so my guilt was tempered with a dash of anger and a sense of inevitability. She'd wanted to know, I'd told her, end of story. Just...the end, period.

"She'd be gentle," I said instead of bringing up Marisol's fate, straightening out one of her racks of brightly beaded kurtis. "You'd never see her coming. It would be just like falling asleep."

"Is that how your mama takes care of her personal problems, Cillian?"

"It's how she'd want to." I knew that much. My mother had killed one person that I knew of, and she'd done it right in front of me. It had been anything but gentle, but she'd been desperate. That was one of the few memories of my own that occasionally gave me nightmares.

"Well, she always was—oh hey, honey." She glanced out the front window. "Looks like he's here. And he brought two bruisers with him. Son of a bitch, I knew it. They stay outside."

"Marisol—"

"No, they stay outside! He wants to be a big man, he can be a big man all by himself. He doesn't get to intimidate us on my own property." She placed herself at the front door and waited for them to arrive.

It was definitely the same guy, big and broad, deliberately bald to help disguise his receding hairline, scowling and sweating in the morning sunlight. He wore a white suit and his goons wore black, which made me really happy I'd opted for gray. Marisol was right. I probably did look like a gangster in the other one, and that wasn't at all the point.

“Let us in,” one of the goons said to Marisol.

“Sorry, paying customers only,” she said with a bright smile, one hand drifting behind her back to the Glock I knew she had tucked in a holster at the waistband of her skirt. “That means Mr. Klinger and no one else.”

“They’ll each buy a fuckin’ trinket. Just let us in already,” Mr. Klinger snapped from his spot between the two men.

“No, sorry, I don’t allow dogs into my store.”

One of the men scowled. “Now listen here—”

“No, you listen,” she said. “This is my store, and I can refuse entrance to whoever I think might cause trouble. If you want to argue your rights with me, there’s a cop on the corner three blocks down in an unmarked car who would probably be happy to discuss the situation with us. He’s been there ever since the dispensary next door opened, just keeping the peace, but he probably gets bored. You gonna make me call him over here? Because the cops respond real fast to trouble like screaming women and loud bangs.”

To his credit, the goon didn’t try to push the issue, just looked back at his boss. Mr. Klinger grudgingly gave in. “Get back to the car, and keep it running. I won’t be long.”

“Yes, boss.” They left, and Marisol smiled again.

“Come right in, sir.” She let him through, and when he saw me behind the glass case where the register sat, all his badly hidden anxiety came rushing to the fore.

“You.” His hands gripped the lapels of his suit so hard I was a little afraid he would

rip it. “You, I need to speak to you, now. In private.”

“Just like before,” I told him. “Both times. It’s always private? Marisol’s just watching the door. She doesn’t hear anything that goes on here.” Which was a lie, of course. She heard everything, but people were easier to convince once they’d seen me in action. “Sit down, Charles.” I pointed at one of the chairs behind the register, and he almost fell into it. “Money.” He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and set it on the top of the case, a thousand dollars in small bills, just like before. I took the envelope and placed it inside my jacket and then sat across from him, folded my legs, and cocked my head with disappointment. “Charles, Charles...what did I tell you last time?”

“I know, but I changed it this time, I really did!” he insisted, sweating even though the air-conditioning was on high. “Last time you told me I hadn’t done enough, so I did this time, I swear. I took care of everything, so it has to have changed!”

“Charles.” I rolled my eyes. “When I told you that you hadn’t done enough, I meant that you could never do enough. You know that, I said the first time not to fight it. You have to accept that what’s coming down on you now—that hammer’s going to fall no matter what. You can’t hide your tracks, Charles. It’s too late.”

“You’re lying,” he snarled. “It’s not too late. I can change it? just tell me what to do! ” His demand was accentuated by the sudden appearance of his handgun, which I’d been expecting. Marisol hadn’t; she went pale and pulled her Glock, training it on the man, but I waved her away.

“Charles.” I leaned forward. “Look into my eyes. Come on,” I encouraged when he balked, “don’t get shy now, look into my eyes. Come here.” He bent forward, stiffly, his finger still on the trigger of his—whatever that was? something small and sleek. I looked into his red-rimmed baby blues and said, “You stupid, poor fuck. You thought it was enough to burn your hardcopies, to destroy your computers, to...Jesus, set fire

to your office building? Fraud on the scale that you perpetrated can't be burned away. You made money your god, Charles, and you worshipped it and sacrificed to it and gave it everything, and that leaves marks that can't be branded over.

“Your house, your beautiful house...that's still standing. Your car, your wife's car, the very fact that you brought two bodyguards when you came to see me this morning—all signs that you're in too deep. You can't trick and you can't lie and you can't repent fast enough, not anymore. It's too late for you, Charles Donovan Klinger.” I looked deeper, past the surface of his future and into his past as well. I cupped his face in my hands, warm silver on clammy skin, and he didn't even blink.

“It was too late for you the moment you had your business partner killed. It was too late when the pair of you went into business together, both of you determined to find the best ways to fuck your desperate clients out of their cash. Too late at Tulane when you decided you wanted to be a lawyer so you could have the satisfaction of screwing people over without them realizing it, too late when you thought it would be easier to beat your hooker into silence instead of paying her, too late when you convinced your mentally ill grandmother to give you her car, too late from the moment you shattered your little sister's piggy bank and stole two dollars and eighty-one cents, all of it in pennies.

“You dream of that sound sometimes, don't you, Charles?” His pupils were huge now, windows straight into his soul, and I followed the gleam of copper as he chased those pennies over the sidewalk, chubby fingers grasping and holding on tight even then.

“You liked that sound, that breaking sound, that crash. It gets you off, just like cash in hand gets you off, just like watching yourself peddling bullshit on television gets you off. You were always going to go down in flames, Charles, but those commercials were the start of that nasty attention from the DA. They've got everything on you, and you've got nothing at all. You'll end just like you began, a nothing, grasping for



pennies in the gutter. You're done , Charles. You're done, and there's nothing you can do to fight it." I let go of his face and sat back, letting the real world filter back into my vision.

Charles was still holding the gun, but just barely, his hand gone limp. His skin was sallow and sagging, his shoulders bent and his head lolling. He looked like he'd had a stroke. I knew better. It was just in shock, but this shock was one he would never completely recover from. All his plans, all his little tricks and schemes?gone. This was what hopelessness looked like. This was ruin, on a base and personal level, and I felt a little sick even though I knew he deserved it.

"Shouldn't have come back," I said with a sigh. "Nobody ever really wants the details, Charles." Marisol was still holding her gun on him, but now she looked uncertain. I waved her vigilance away. "Help me get him up. He's going to need his guys to take him back to his car." I used my pocket square to keep my fingerprints off his gun as I put it back in his pocket—stupid way to carry a gun, but it was a tiny thing, and I couldn't find a holster—and then stood and got a hand under his arm. Marisol grabbed on the other side, and together we hoisted Mr. Klinger to his feet, where he wavered for a moment before his legs decided to get their act together.

We maneuvered him to the front door, which Marisol opened and waved from. The goons were there in seconds, looking dumbstruck.

"What did you do?" one of them asked angrily, appearing ready to go for his weapon. The other one shook his head.

"Nah, don't bother," he said, taking over for Marisol. "The boss did this to himself." He nodded to us and then headed toward the idling car. His buddy gave us a final glower before going to help, and Marisol shut the door behind them.

" Fuck ," I said emphatically, wiping a hand over my face. "I need a smoke after

that.”

“In the alley, not out front,” she said automatically. She followed it with, “Cillian? Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” I could still hear the ceramic cracking into a thousand pink shards and see the bright pennies scattering across the pavement. I could feel the way the sight of them sunk into his soul, like little copper claws. “I just need a minute to myself.” I walked into the back hall, grabbed my cigarettes off their resting place by the alley door, and headed outside.

### Chapter Three

The alley behind the store was just wide enough for a decent-sized truck to drive down its cracked concrete. It was tufted here and there with surprisingly green weeds—it had been a wet summer so far. I leaned against the brick wall, tapped a cigarette out of the pack, and pulled my lighter out of my pocket. The burn of the smoke in my lungs soothed me a little, distracting my mind with nicotine and giving my hands something to do that wasn't crawling after fistfuls of imaginary coins.

I smiled to myself and shut my eyes, tilted my head back and blew the smoke toward the sky. It could have been worse. Once I'd read a murderer who liked to decapitate his victims with a butcher knife. I hadn't trusted myself in the kitchen for a fucking week after that?cutlery kept finding its way into my hands without me realizing it.

Sometimes I had to remind myself that it wasn't me who was ruining these people's lives. They had managed that all on their own. I was just the one bringing it home, and even that wasn't really on me. I didn't seek people out. They came to me, and I told them what I saw, and what they decided to do with it was their own business. How they reacted was out of my control.

Charles Donovan Klinger would be dead before the month was out. I saw how he did it—I saw his wife's pill bottle and his last fifth of Crown Royal, something he couldn't drink without thinking about his business partner. I hadn't seen this stuff the first time around, but looking deeper meant more knowledge for the both of us, all details that neither of us wanted to know.

"Fucking prick." I opened my eyes and looked up at the clear blue sky. Colorado had

ridiculously blue skies, even through the smog of downtown Denver. They were the sort of blue that made you wish you could fall up and keep going, because it looked so much nicer up there than down here. I had drowned in a woman's mind once, and in the end, everything had been blue, a dark, malevolent blue that eventually faded to black. Nothing like the sky.

God damn it. I banged my head hard against the brick and then immediately thought better of it—I was still wearing my hat. I took it off and checked it for damage, resolutely not thinking about drowning. Drowning always made me think about him , and I wasn't going to do that today; I fucking wasn't. I propped the fedora up on my fist and turned it in a circle, making sure it was still hat-shaped and didn't appear like a moron had been smacking it into a brick wall. It had held up to my inadvertent punishment, thankfully.

I needed to get out of here for a while. Marisol wouldn't wonder if I didn't come back for a couple of hours, or even the rest of the day. As far as the Ace of Cups and its promise for a new beginning went, well, it could hunt me down. I wasn't going to wait around for it. I took a final drag of my cigarette, ground it down in the empty flower pot Marisol had set out here for me—she didn't approve of littering—and headed toward the end of the alley. It emptied out onto Josephine, a busy one-way street that was all businesses where it buttressed Colfax but became formerly elegant houses and apartments farther back. If I went left, I'd hit a park eventually. Right and I'd be headed toward the shabby-chic conundrum that was this part of town.

My phone buzzed, interrupting my musing. I frowned as I pulled it out of my jacket pocket. Only a dozen people had this number, and I wasn't expecting to talk to any of them any time soon. I unlocked it and looked at my new message.

Move ten paces to the right.

My feet were moving even before my brain caught up, obedience was so instinctual.

Two seconds later, I was out of the mouth of the alley, and three seconds after that, a beat-up silver sedan coming down the road was clipped by a delivery van and veered straight into the corner of the building. It wasn't moving fast, thankfully, but the crash was plenty loud, especially since I was just a few feet away from the point of impact.

A memory flashed through my mind, one of my personal rare and painful gems. I was in the backseat of an old Lincoln, and I was very small. My feet wouldn't have touched the floor even if I hadn't had my knees squished to my chest, and my face was pressed to the knobby joints so hard they were leaving red blotches on my cheeks. The man driving was on a phone—an old-school dumb phone, clunky in his hand, distracting. He wasn't paying attention, but I knew the moment before the car was hit and covered my head with my hands, so when I went flying into the door, it didn't hurt as much. Metal crunched, and bright spots flashed across the darkness behind my eyelids as the car spun and spun...

I shook my head and took a deep breath, focusing on the present. The van hadn't stopped, but I didn't bother trying to catch its license plate number?there were plenty of people exclaiming and getting on their phones. I headed over to the driver's side and opened the door, but didn't reach in to touch the woman who had been driving. She was moving under her own power, picking her head up off the remains of her airbag and whimpering softly. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god..."

"It's all right," I said gently. I might not be a martyr, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel compassion for another person, especially one who'd just been thrown into a wall. "You're okay. Just a little accident. There's an ambulance coming to help you." I could already hear it in the distance. We were only a few blocks from a major hospital. "Can you look at me for a moment?" She blearily turned, and as soon as our eyes met, I sighed and backed out of the way. One of the employees at the auto-painting store took my place, and a second later—bam. The fucking Ace of Cups moment. Who found true love as a result of a car accident? This wasn't exactly the

heartwarming scene I'd envisioned getting me through the day earlier.

"Are you all right?" the newcomer asked frantically. "What's your name? I'm Felix. I'm gonna stay with you until the ambulance gets here, okay? Oh Jesus, are you all right?"

"I'm...I think so?" the woman said, her voice gaining a little bit of strength. "I'm Paula."

"Paula, hey." He smiled at her, and she smiled back. I rolled my eyes. "Nice to meet you."

For fuck's sake. Well, at least the settlement from the trucking company would give them a nice nest egg to get their new place together. I turned away and walked to the end of the block before getting out my phone again and making a call.

She picked up on the second ring. "Hi, baby."

"What, you can see me getting smeared across a wall, but you don't bother to let me know about having a gun pulled on me?"

"Cillian." My mother sounded half apologetic, half resigned. "You know it doesn't work like that."

Yes, fine, I did know that, but I didn't feel like being reasonable right now. "So you didn't see that this morning, then?"

"Did you need me to see it?"

I wasn't about to go down the self-sufficiency road with her. It meant a surefire argument, and I was still buzzing with adrenalin from being so close to the car crash.

“No,” I said flatly. “I guess not.”

“Cilly...”

Fuck, I was being an asshole. I didn’t talk to my mother very often, and I didn’t want to turn this into a thing. She didn’t hold grudges, but I did, and if I didn’t get myself together now, I’d end up not calling her for months out of guilt for being a dick to her. Vicious cycle.

“I thought you didn’t like to text.”

“The timing worked out better that way,” she said, sounding a bit more relaxed. “You’re all right, then?”

“You know I am,” I replied, pulling out another cigarette and lighting up on the corner. “Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome, baby.” She sounded genuinely pleased, and I started to respond, but waited for the wail of the oncoming ambulance to diminish first.

“How are you?” I asked once we could hear each other again. It sounded like a banal question, but it was anything but. If my mother was seeing things about me, then she was opening herself up more to other psychic influences. Depending on how those manifested, she might lose consciousness for days. I knew the neighbors would check on her?it wasn’t like she would die up there all alone?but I couldn’t help worrying. I would have given almost anything to be the one she could rely on, but she and I hadn’t been able to live in close quarters since I was thirteen. I might damage her if I stayed too close.

“Fine, baby, I’m just fine. Dana’s dog just had puppies, and she offered one to me when it’s old enough. I think I’ll take her up on it.”

“Good.” That was really good, actually. My mom did a lot better with a pet around, but she’d been heartbroken when her last dog had died and put off getting another for two years. There had been a few close calls since then, so a new puppy was a positive step. “That’s great.”

“I thought it was time,” she said. “It’s been a little lonely, and I don’t want to go into another winter without a companion.” I wished, not for the first time, that that companion could be me. It hurt to know that my mom felt like she had to be alone in order to be safe. Just because I wasn’t safe with her didn’t mean no one else could fill that void.

“Sounds like the puppy will be perfect,” I said, staring out at the passing cars but not seeing any of them. “So no headache, then?”

“Not this time. Random events seem to affect me less strongly.”

“Good.” The silence stretched out between us, and I thought about the last time I’d seen my mother in person, almost half my lifetime ago. I wondered if she was sitting on the same old couch by the window or if she’d finally gotten it replaced—the springs had been going back when I’d lived with her. I wondered if she was wearing warm enough clothes, because she tended to ignore the weather until it prevented her from going outside, and summer in Yellowknife was different from summer in Denver. I wondered if she missed me, and then felt like an idiot.

“I looked up your interview online. It seems like it was fun.”

“Oh.” Right, the interview. Through the complicated web of favors and reputation that my mother somehow maintained, she had gotten me in touch with a friend of hers whose daughter’s fiancé, a freelance journalist, was writing an article about psychics and wanted someone to talk to about it. I’d been volunteered and caved to my mom after a few minutes of arguing over exposure.



I eventually talked to the guy on Zoom, using a fake name and not giving him a visual, and the interview had been...surprisingly fun. Kind of tongue in cheek, really. He was more journalist than hardcore believer in supernatural phenomenon, but I guess when the economy was down you took work where you could get it, even if it was with Modern Parapsychia . “It was all right.”

“You should take a look at it.”

“I will.” My skin was starting to itch, just a little bit, and I knew it had to be worse for her. The longer we talked, the higher the chances of an incident happening. “Mom, I’ve got to go.”

“I know, baby.” She was quiet for a moment and then said, “I love you, Cillian. I just want you to be happy.”

“I know.” I wanted to ask her to call me again when she got the puppy, to let me know when the snow hit, to tell her about Marisol and her tarot and her strange dreams. Instead I hung up. The prickle immediately went away, and I scowled.

Fuck this for a lark. The day was hardly begun and I already needed to forget it.

I was in the right part of town for that.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

Back in the sixties and seventies, Colfax Avenue was the place to go in this city if you wanted to satisfy the four biological imperatives: feeding, fighting, fucking, and if you played your cards wrong, fleeing. You could do practically all of them at once if you went to the right bars. Those days were mostly gone now, washed away in the bubbly fervor of urban renewal, but there were still a few places around where a person could get in touch with their primitive side. I was jazzed with adrenaline, antsy and keyed up, and the only way I was going to work those bugs out of my system was with some serious exertion.

The easiest thing would be to find a professional to spend a few hours exhausting myself with, but sex was risky. The odds of looking into the other person's eyes during the act were pretty high, and during periods of stress—physical, mental, or emotional—fate became a lot easier to see. I could have a normal conversation with someone and walk away knowing nothing more than what they'd given me and maybe what they were thinking about having for dinner that night.

With sex, I almost always got information I didn't want unless blindfolds were involved, and most of the working guys were too cautious to go that route without being inside a specialty club, which I had no interest in. I had seen way more kink, debauchery, poorly executed sadism, and downright criminal levels of horniness in my mind than I ever wanted. I was no white knight, but a lot of my childhood had been spent running away from people who would have taken advantage of me, and I had no desire to be one of them. Especially not since him .

Fine, so not sex. I bounced on the balls of my feet as I considered the envelope in my jacket pocket, the cut of my suit, and the odds that I'd be able to land a whale today. At the very least, I had the cash to get into the exchange, and at this hour I'd have

plenty of time to find myself the right sort of player to attach myself to. Gambling it was.

There was an underground sports betting exchange not far from Marisol's, housed literally underground beneath a pub that had once been a famous strip club. The exchange catered to the professional crowd, people who made their living gambling. It also acted as a hangout for whatever Irish mobsters happened to be passing through Denver on their way to more profitable cities.

The house controlled the doors, and if you wanted in to play, you paid a flat fee of five hundred dollars. Whether you made the money back or not was your business, not theirs—the house didn't run any bets. Once you were inside, it was all about working the crowd. In-play betting was huge, and knowing the game was only half as important as knowing how to get your opponent to make the bets you wanted him to.

I sauntered down the street, keeping my walk slow as I passed the unmarked police car. The authorities tended to stare at me whether I was breaking a law or not thanks to my ink, so I generally made myself as innocuous a target as possible.

It had worked so far. Even with all of the shit that had gone down in my life: the drugs, the fights, the kidnappings, I had only ever been picked up by the police once, on suspicion of soliciting. Never mind that I'd only stripped off my shirt to staunch the blood flowing from a head wound at the time. I'd been a young man covered in tattoos, with no discernible gang affiliation and half-naked to boot—had to be a prostitute! The fact that it was in rural backwater Louisiana and not New Orleans made no difference. I'd gotten out in no time, but still?cells were not something I enjoyed, no matter who the owner was.

There was the pub. I walked behind the building, past a man who grunted "Morning" to me as he sprayed the alley wall with a hose to clean off last night's piss and vomit, and down a narrow flight of metal stairs to a solid black door with the number 8

painted in small white letters in the corner. The Magic Eight Ball. So cute. I knocked, and the door opened up a crack. I was in luck; Phin was the bouncer today.

“Cillian,” he said approvingly, looking down on me from his hulking height. The Irish places tended to give me the benefit of a doubt, thanks to Mom’s creative naming skills. “Here to play?”

“I’ve got the feeling it’s a good day for it,” I replied.

“Not many games going yet. So far’s just some footie, but we’ll have baseball up in a wee moment, and if you can stay until evening, it’ll be American football.” He leaned in close. “Got a good mark for you, someone you could make your whole day with if you don’t mind a few hurt feelings later on.”

Ah, this was the other reason I loved Phin—he understood my situation. He didn’t know the details, didn’t want to, but he had a touch of Sight himself. Nothing like mine, but what Phin was good at was connections. Profitable connections, and if you treated him right, he wouldn’t steer you wrong.

“Sounds good,” I agreed. “Mobster?”

“Better.” He ushered me inside and accepted my six hundred dollars—the extra hundred was his bonus—with an appreciative nod. “Cowboy. You’ll know ’im when you see ’im.”

Did I ever. The betting exchange was a mishmash of lounge-style comfort and theater seating, all of the focus on the series of enormous televisions that lined the far wall. The only thing up right now was the soccer game, which a small group of fans was paying attention to, but my eyes went to the man sitting at the bar. Oh, wow...it was Steve McQueen reborn, right down to the expensive TAG Heuer watch on his thick wrist. He had the cowboy hat, the boots?his hair was even dyed the right shade of

blond. Perfect. Looking at him, I felt a frisson of energy in my head that meant work could be done here.

I saw fates. It was my talent, my gift, my curse. It was what came easiest to me?it was what stayed with me forever, living on in my head. My mom had a much vaster ability, and while we'd been able to live together, she'd worked with me on mine, teaching me how to step back and take in less, to feel the energy in a room and let it guide my vision of where things were going to go, to let the fates I saw in other people—just glimpses—compel my own actions to manipulate circumstances in my favor.

You couldn't think about the epistemological implications of that for long, the whole "chicken or egg" thing would drive you mad. Needless to say, there were times when I could work a whole room to my advantage, and I could already tell today was going to be one of those times.

I sat down next to the cowboy at the bar. He glanced my way, and as soon as I saw the glimmer of his eyes, I knew the tack to take. How about that?a true Southern gentleman in an Irish-run Denver betting exchange. I could see the arc of his trip: the cattle ranch he owned, the way his private jet was tied up in Baja thanks to the missus, her admonishment to have a good time...he'd be fighting a few preconceptions with me, but I could get around those.

"Howdy," he said after a moment.

"Good morning," I said, rounding my vowels a bit, letting my accent both elevate and harmonize with his own to make me seem more familiar. "It's a little early for whiskey, isn't it?" I asked, gesturing toward his glass.

The cowboy sighed. "Never too early for whiskey. Especially when there's nothin' good on TV."

“Not a soccer fan, then.”

“That ain’t a sport worthy of the name, in my opinion. Buncha runnin’ around, kick kick, jog jog, ooh no I fell down...nah, not my game.”

“So I guess you wouldn’t be interested in a wager?”

“On soccer?” He looked at me askance and then laughed. “Hell no, boy! Nah, I’m here to bet on real American sports, something I can sink my teeth into.”

I shrugged. “No stakes, then, something just for fun.”

“Ain’t no fun if there’s no stakes.”

“Oh, I see,” I said knowingly. “You’re afraid. It’s fine, I understand. A lot of men have these sorts of troubles when it comes to performance as they age. Don’t let it get you down.”

He gaped at me. “I...what? Listen here, boy—”

“One bet. C’mon, I’ll make it worth your while.”

He looked me up and down. “That better not be a roundabout offer to suck my dick.”

I laughed, attracting the attention of the cluster of men in front of the soccer game. One look and I knew how to play it. “No blow jobs,” I promised. “I’m not hitting on you, I swear. I’m just passing the time. Here—how about this. I predict the team that makes the next goal, and you get me a drink with your next round. Not whiskey, though.”

The cowboy stared at me for a moment and then shrugged. “Fine. Let’s play.” We

turned around so we could see the screen. I'd already seen the group's reactions, largely dismay within five minutes, and one of them was wearing a Manchester United jersey, which meant... "AS Roma gets the next goal."

"If you say so." He sipped his whiskey, and we sat in silence for a while. I could feel him getting bored, but about thirty seconds before he seemed ready to tell me to buzz off, there was action on the television. The group of men groaned, and as the replay flashed across the screen and the score changed, I smiled.

"Well, damn," he said. "There it is."

"I believe you owe me a drink, sir."

"I reckon I do. What'll you have?"

"Gin and tonic." Light on the gin, heavy on the tonic—the last thing I needed was to get drunk right now. Fortunately, the bartender knew my preferences, and a minute later, I was sipping a drink of my own.

"What's gonna happen next?" he asked me.

"I can't say without a bet," I told him.

"Fine." He pulled a leather wallet out of his jacket pocket and unwound a hundred-dollar bill from his stack. "What's the bet?"

"Oh no, a hundred is a little rich for my blood," I lied. "Besides, it's hardly fair. I feel like I'm taking advantage." I emphasized it while he was still sober enough to appreciate my honesty. "You know nothing about soccer, and I'm generally a lucky person."

“Lucky, huh?”

“Very lucky. I hardly ever lose.”

“Huh.” I could see the wheels in his head turning. “Tell you what. You win a few more of these little bets and maybe we’ll see what we can do together once there’s a crowd in here, yeah? I’ve got the means to bankroll a nice run, if you’re lucky as you claim.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “AS Roma again in...” I let the tension build in my mind, saw the time at the bottom of the television screen as the men in front of it moaned their derision, “about four minutes.”

“We’ll see. I’m Roger, by the way. Roger Vandermoor.”

“Cillian Kelly, and we will.” We shook hands and turned back to the screens.

Four minutes later and I was vindicated. The soccer fans groaned, Roger whooped and smacked his knee, and I got another drink for my troubles.

Apparently once Roger made a friend, he went all in. As the place slowly filled up, he paid for the drinks, the awful bar food that tasted far better than it should, and told me all about ranching and oil and natural gas and his dozen other businesses. I met his eyes every now and then, enough to get a glimpse of where things were going. It looked like he would stay even-tempered right up until the end, so I figured I was good.

When the baseball started, things got more interesting. The way to make money in an exchange like this was to play against the other gamblers, and Roger had all the bearing of a golden goose waiting to be plucked. The professionals flocked to our table, and he drew them in with his Texan affability and liberality with drinks, while I



fed him the bets to make.

We didn't play standard and completely ignored the spread—we made bets based on what I could see of the back of a particular player's jersey as he slid into third, or on the quadrant of the stadium where the next home run would land. Goofball bets, stupid bets, and people took them out of curiosity and contempt and then kept betting to save their pride.

By the time the football game started, I was two thousand dollars and one Cartier watch richer, and everyone was drunk except for me. The mob gents who had joined in our fun had lost most of their good humor, though, and the only one still laughing was Roger.

"What's the trick?" one of them demanded, looking like he wanted to shake me and see if my secrets poured out of my head. "How'd you do it?"

"He's a lucky charm," Roger said expansively. "Some folks just got that shine to 'em, ya know?"

"Nah, I don't buy it. There's something goin' on here. Phin!" he shouted angrily toward the door. "You giving this fucker a leg up? Delaying the games so he can look things up early?"

"You want to watch your damn mouth, Morris," Phin growled. Any sane man would have stopped then, but this man had clearly lost his inhibitions. "Check your phone and see if I'm lyin'."

"We don't get service down here, you know that," Morris snapped.

"Then leave and check it outside."

“No! I want to know what kind of racket you have going with the rent boy and the hick.”

“Now, now,” Roger said companionably. “Ain’t no need to fight about this, guys. We can all be civilized here, right?”

In response, Morris threw his drink across the table at both of us. “Fuck you!”

Most of the beer hit Roger, who calmly wiped his face and took off his broad-brimmed hat. “Not a nice thing to do, throw the drink a man bought you back in his face.”

Morris’s friends were starting to lean back in their chairs, finally cluing in to the fact that things were going to go very badly. I set my hat aside as well—I liked that hat, damn it—and took off my stained jacket and waistcoat.

“I don’t play nice with cheats!”

“Luck ain’t cheatin’, and you coulda stopped betting at any time.” Roger rolled up his sleeves.

“Fuck you, you cow-fucking hillbilly piece of—” Morris’s insult was cut short as Roger snapped his long legs up under the table and kicked it, and everything on it, into Morris and his friends’ faces. I heard Phin groan and get up from his chair at the door, and I stood up and shook out my arms as I picked my target. Two seconds later, bedlam broke out.

There was something cathartic about being in a brawl. A one-on-one fight could be nerve-racking?there was an element of ego that came into play and made things personal. In a brawl, though, it was just you in a press of people, striking who you could where you could, and my betting buddy was clearly an experienced brawler. He

was trading punches with two different men, his grin bloody and bright on his face. Phin was doing his best to sort things out, but that only lasted until someone broke a glass against his head. Then he became a rage monster that would put the Hulk to shame.

And me? I preferred to be a little more vicious, less about trading blows and more about kneeing people in the crotch and then following them to the ground with punches, because I'd learned to fight from my mother and she'd had no compunctions about teaching me to go for the jewels. My blood was pumping, fists were flying; I was finally lost in the moment, and it felt gorgeous. We slid around on spilled alcohol and broken glass and generally had a delightful time until one of Morris's buddies finally lost his temper and pulled a gun, aiming vaguely at where Roger was still gleefully tussling with a couple of guys. A second later, a shot went off.

A second after that, I fell down.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

It wasn't the impact of the bullet that knocked me over. It was me trying to move too quickly on the slippery, glass-covered mess of a floor. My shoes were pretty things, but the tread had worn off years ago. The bullet hit my arm, I jerked and slid and wound up flat on my ass, and after that, well?things got a little hazy for a bit.

I'd never been shot before. I'd been beaten until I was nothing but red blood over purple bruises, burned more than once with the business end of a cigarette, and slashed with everything from chicken wire to bowie knives. I was well acquainted with the sight of my own blood. But being shot was novel, and I stared in surprise at the perfectly round hole in my shirt, just above and outside of my elbow, as it slowly changed from white to red. Gravity pulled the blood down, staining my sleeve like a perverse Rorschach blot. I just stared and ignored the sudden furor around me, people yelling and Phin bellowing like a bull. I didn't feel anything at all until long fingers turned my head and Roger's blurry face swam into focus.

"Holy shit, you all right, boy?"

His words broke my fugue. Suddenly I could feel everything, and I was very not all right. My arm burned like someone had shoved a branding iron through it, and of course it had to be my dominant side.

"Not really," I said through gritted teeth, clapping my free hand to the wound and then groaning at my own stupidity, because that hurt . "Fuck."

"C'mon now, let me see it," Roger said, reaching for my arm. I pulled away, and he looked at me sternly. "You're gonna need medical attention one way or the other, Cillian, and this ain't my first rodeo. Now let me see your arm."

“What?” I still felt argumentative, but I did let go when his fingers prompted. “You’re a doctor and a cowboy now?”

“Not a doctor, no. I was a medic back in my army days, though.” He prodded the wound, and I hissed at him, but he ignored me. “Looks like it went clean through, but it’s not like you’ve got much flesh to spare. Lucky it missed the joint.”

“Yeah, lucky me. I feel so lucky,” I agreed sourly.

“You told me you were lucky earlier, Cillian. I’m minded to believe it, after what just happened. Or maybe you’re just lucky for me?that son of a bitch was trying to shoot me. I dunno how the bullet hit you instead.”

Phin appeared, bald and fierce and terrifying. His ruddy skin was smeared here and there with blood, and I didn’t even want to think about the state of his knuckles.

“He gonna live?”

“The bullet missed the major artery, but he should be checked out by a doctor,” Roger said as he casually shredded the other arm of my beautiful shirt and turned it into a makeshift bandage. “We need to get him to a hospital.”

“No hospitals; we can’t afford the questions,” Phin said. “And neither can he,” he added when Roger opened his mouth. “Gunshot wounds are too obvious. We can’t play this off as anything else, though, and it would be dangerous to let Cillian loose in a hospital anyway.” Phin got his shovel-like hands under my back. “Time to stand up, lad, y’ready?”

“Don’t I look ready?” I snarked, then whimpered as Phin hoisted me unceremoniously to my feet. My legs felt like they belonged to someone else, someone sick, because they trembled and swayed like I was coming down off of a

bad trip.

“Dangerous how?” Roger demanded, getting under my good arm and helping to hold me up. “He couldn’t harm a fly, way he is right now.”

“Not fighting dangerous,” Phin said as he led the way to the door. We had to detour around several prone bodies; Phin hadn’t been fucking about. I could barely tell that the guys were still breathing. “He doesn’t need to be usin’ his talent right now is all. The more people he’s around, the harder it is to make sure he stays in control of it. Mac!” he yelled out the door, and a moment later, the guy who’d been washing the wall earlier appeared. “Help these two upstairs, someplace he can lie down. Siobhan’s already called for the doc.”

“Move fast, lads,” Mac said, making room for us. “The cops are on their way.”

“Bloody fuck...” Phin muttered.

“Any dead?”

“No, he’s the worst of it.”

The conversation continued, but I didn’t really follow it any more. There were stairs, a trip down the alley, the brick walls as red as my own blood in the light of the setting sun, up more stairs, and finally into a dark room with a leather recliner that Roger did his best to dump me into gently. He was panting like a dog by the time we got up there.

“Thanks,” I grunted, shifting around so I was on my side, away from my wounded arm.

“You won me close to ten grand. A little help’s the least I can do for a friend like

that.”

I chuckled. “We’re not friends. You were convenient, and I was lucky for a while. That’s all there is to it.”

“Not for me,” Roger said staunchly. “Man takes a bullet for me, he’s my friend after that, like it or not. You mighta saved my life.”

“I made the trouble for you in the first place,” I pointed out.

“That little brawl? That was no trouble; that was fun , boy. Hell, back in Texas, we’d call that a warm-up! Nobody ever needs to die in a bar fight, as long as the dumb fucks keep their weapons out of it.” He shook his head. “Damn fools, the gamblers here.”

“People care a lot about their money.”

“People need to remember that money ain’t the most important thing,” Roger said. “It’s important, I grant you, but I bet some of those dumb fucks downstairs wish they’d just walked away instead of escalating things. That bouncer was breakin’ bones.” He glanced at his watch and sighed. “My plane’s come in, and I can’t keep my missus waiting much longer before she comes lookin’ for me.” He leaned toward me. “Give me your arm, Cillian.”

I was just groggy enough to extend it without asking why, but startled when he uncapped a pen and began writing on the inside of my forearm. “Foreplay, finally?”

“Aw, you wish,” Roger shot back. “Here.” He scrawled a second line beneath the first and then recapped his pen. “That’s my contact info. You need help, you call me?day or night. If you can’t get me, I wrote down my secretary’s number too. She’ll answer as Ace Industries.”

“Ace...” I looked up at him, suddenly confused. He took the phone from me and stuffed it back in my pocket as I stared and then checked to make sure my bandage was still uncomfortably tight. “Your company is called Ace?”

“Childhood nickname. I never quite outgrew it,” Roger said as he stood up. “I mean it now, Cillian. Don’t let your pride get the better of ya.”

“I won’t,” I said blankly. Ace...I wondered suddenly if I hadn’t mistaken my Ace of Cups earlier. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure, boy. Apart from the shootin’, this was a real pleasant way to spend the day.” He ruffled my hair and then straightened his hat—how he was still wearing his hat after the day we’d had, I didn’t know, but there it was—and headed out the door.

I drifted for a while, wanting to think but not quite able to. Shock. It was a weird thing. I could handle all sorts of pain and privation and keep going, but one little bullet wound and I was fainting like a corseted Victorian on a hot summer day. It was so tempting just to close my eyes and sleep, and I’d never been one to resist temptation. The darkness behind my own eyes beckoned, and the deeper I got, the less I felt the throbbing pain of my arm. I could just?

“Cillian!” Warm hands gripped my own, and I was pulled out of the welcoming black and back into the bright, painful world of the waking. Marisol stared down at me, her expression a mix of worry and fury that was very familiar. “Cielito, honest to Goddess, I thought you might be dead! You!” She let me go and rounded on Phin, who took a step back. “You let him get shot, you leave him here alone, and then you summon this damn meth cooker to tend to him! What’s wrong with you?”

“He wasn’t alone when I left him, and I had my own mess to clean up,” Phin said, scowling at her. “At least he’s a real doctor, Mari.”



“Who is addicted to his own drugs as well as who knows how many illegal ones!”

“It’s not like you could do the doctoring, woman. A bullet wound can’t be cured with a bundle of sage and some chanting!”

The tall black-suited man in the background slid around them and crouched next to the recliner, opening the briefcase he’d brought along. I recognized him as the go-to doctor for “unmentionables” on Colfax and tried to relax as he loosened the bandage to take a look. His face was ascetically thin, fine-boned and high-cheeked, and he worked with brisk disregard for my pain. That worked for me. I didn’t need any more coddling.

“Straight through,” he murmured. “But I need to clean it before closing it. Chew and swallow this.” He handed me a Valium, which I took, cringing at the bitterness of it as it went down. He injected something numbing into my arm and got to work.

Fifteen minutes later, I was stitched up with half a liter of orange juice swimming in my stomach. The doctor had taken off after being paid by Phin, leaving me with a pocket of antibiotics and painkillers that were definitely not over the counter, and Marisol was still furious enough to spit fire. She chewed me out for being an irresponsible bastard, chewed the doctor out even though he wasn’t there, and then went back to Phin, who endured it stoically this time.

This could take a while. I groped awkwardly for my phone—learning to use my left hand instead of my right for the foreseeable future was going to be tough. My fingertips brushed something ragged. I recognized the feel of a wad of bills and smiled dopily to myself. Roger had left me with cash? a lot of it, apparently. Guess he really did feel bad. I finally got my hands on my phone and opened up my email. There was one from my mother, with a copy of *Modern Parapsychia* that featured my interview attached to it. I opened it up, skimming through the other articles as I went to indulge in reading about myself.

Something about aligning chakras, something about opening the third eye, something about some rich guy angering the Icelandic government by moving a sacred site—literally moving it, the ground, the rocks, the trees, everything—from Iceland to America...huh, weird. The only picture was of a shipping container flanked by two bodyguards dressed in military fatigues and carrying very illegal submachine guns—P90s, I thought. There was something kind of familiar about one of the guys, but my eyes were blurring by this point, and I could barely keep them open.

“We need to get him home,” Marisol said with a sigh.

“I’ll bring a car around.” Phin left, and Marisol touched my cheek.

“Cillian? Are you ready to go?”

“So ready,” I muttered.

“Can you stand up?”

“Sure.” She helped me to my feet, and amazingly, I stayed there. My arm felt sore but not brutally painful, and I stared at it in awe as I slowly bent and straightened it. “Wow. It still works.”

“Yes, you little idiot, it does,” Marisol snapped. “Come on now, we have to get downstairs.”

“No, no more stairs!” I moaned. Maybe I was a little high at this point, or just stupid from blood loss. “I hate stairs.”

“Oh, me too, but you’ve got to handle them anyway. Come on.” She gripped me like iron around my arm and led the way down to the street. Phin had his own car pulled up, and it didn’t take long for us to get the few blocks back to Marisol’s place. The

two of them got me upstairs and into bed after making me take another antibiotic. Once they were gone, I was on the verge of sleep. Such good, good sleep. I was so tired I knew I'd be unconscious fast. I relaxed, closed my eyes, and let the drugs and the pain and the stress carry me off to sleep. I hoped I'd be too tired to dream.

Instead I saw him , over and over again, his beautiful young face twisted by shock and fear as it vanished into a pool of blackness.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

Dreams were always a problem for me, but dreaming of him was the worst. I'd made a lot of bad decisions in my life, poor choices that couldn't be explained away with youth and stupidity, but the things I did with him were far and away the most shameful moments of my life.

I could try to excuse it by saying I'd been a captive, trying to escape before the patriarch of that twisted family lost patience and did away with me. I could say my mother had failed me by not letting me know about the danger that was coming before I tumbled into it, head over heels. I could say he should have been the one to bear the shame, since he had technically been free while I'd been the one imprisoned. All of that would be lies, though—awful, facetious lies. The truth was, I'd seen an opportunity in Soren's eyes, and I took it.

I'd never witnessed anything like that in another fate since, a moment of teetering where my own actions would make a significant change in another person's destiny. I'd never seen it before that, either. By the time I'd realized what was going on, it had been too late to turn back. I might as well have shoved Soren down the lightless hole I saw in his eyes myself. The only thing I knew—knew completely, uncontrovertibly—was that he was dead. He had to be dead. There was nothing left to see. The vision ended in the dark, with all his fear and confusion and helpless anger consumed by...

I didn't know, and I didn't want to know, but my mind wouldn't let go of it. The painkillers kept me under for a long time, and every second of it was a misery, because every second of it was with Soren. Worst of all, it wasn't just the end that replayed in my mind. I remembered every minute with him, from the first halting, shy glances to the heat of his fumbling, eager embrace. I remembered every moment of

seducing him, turning him to my purpose and sealing his fate in a way I hadn't understood then and hadn't cared to. He'd been a means to an end, and it wasn't until the end came that I'd realized what a goddamn idiot I'd been.

I woke up with a headache and a hard-on, which I glared at before stumbling to my feet and heading to the shower. My arm hurt?it hurt like hell?and I swallowed another painkiller and antibiotic before turning on the hot water.

"Cillian!" Marisol banged at my door. "You better not get that wound wet. Come here, let me wrap it."

Oh, for the love of... I stared down at my crotch. Nope, still there. Whatever. I'd leave the door mostly shut and just hold my arm out. She could deal.

I opened the door a crack and saw Marisol, hair pulled back into a messy bun and wearing nothing but a purple sarong and her slippers.

She tapped the doorjamb with a box of plastic wrap. "Come on then, let me see it."

"Hang on." I tried to turn myself so I could stick my right arm out the door while still concealing the rest of me, but extending it was harder than I'd thought it would be.

"Just open the door."

"Give me a minute."

"Stop being an idiot and open the door!"

"Mari!"

"Cillian!" She looked me up and down and then rolled her eyes. "Oh please, I've seen

it all before. You're not going to shock me with your morning wood." She pushed past me and into the room. "Sit down."

"Jesus Christ, you're pushy," I groused, but I sat for her. She touched my right arm with warm, tender fingers that belied her snappish tone.

"I bathed you as a baby," Marisol reminded me as she peeled back the bandage and got a look at my arm. "Right there in that very same bathtub, so don't get stupid with me when I'm just trying to make sure you don't injure yourself further." She ran her hand up to my shoulder and pressed on the muscles there, making me groan with relief. "You should wear a sling today, let your arm relax."

"It's done nothing but relax for the past twelve hours."

Marisol gently smacked the side of my head with her free hand. "That's all it should be doing, after being shot. Honestly, Cillian." Her lips were terse lines as she rewrapped the bandage and carefully covered my elbow with plastic wrap. "I called your mother last night."

"Ah." I would have paid to have heard that conversation. "She say anything interesting?"

"Just that this was a necessary step for you. I asked her 'how is your baby being shot a necessary thing, huh?' She didn't answer, of course. I love your mama, Cillian, but I swear she makes me want to rip out my hair sometimes."

"Try living with her," I joked.

Marisol sighed as she tied a knot in the plastic. "I know how I would feel in her shoes. I'd want to know my baby was safe. I'd do everything I could to keep him that way." She paused. "You're sure, aren't you? About Tavo?"

“I’m sure,” I said. “I see his face beside your bed on the last day of your life.” It was a truth so twisted I was surprised the words even made it out of my mouth, but technically it was true. Marisol had a good bullshit detector, but in this case, I knew she wouldn’t call me on it. She wanted to be fooled.

She leaned in and kissed my cheek. “Thank you, Cillian.” She smiled and then stood. “Phin’s making breakfast downstairs. You’d better hurry if you want to get any of it.”

I stared at her. “Why is Phin here?”

“Because I asked him to stay last night.” She took in my expression and began to laugh, evilly, almost a cackle. “What, you didn’t know he’s my booty call? My man on the side? My—”

“Stop. Leave, go? I don’t need to hear anything else. I really don’t.”

“Oh, you’re such a wimp.” Marisol grabbed the plastic and left, and I got on with my neglected shower.

The warmth was incredibly relaxing, and despite everything I might have been tempted to get off that morning except, of course, I was right-handed. It was hard enough to open the shampoo bottle with my left hand, much less resurrect my erection.

I showered thoroughly, getting the flecks of blood and the patina of sweat and alcohol off me, and also, maybe, prolonging things so Phin would be gone by the time I got downstairs. I got dressed, another bitch of a thing to do with an arm injury, and took a second to mourn the loss of my nice gray suit pants before I finally went downstairs.

Phin was still there, of course, wearing a fresh pair of jeans and a clean white undershirt. He was sipping a cup of coffee and reading the paper with the help of a

pair of spectacles I'd never seen on him before.

"Eggs and sausage are on the stove," he told me as I came into the kitchen.

"Since when have you worn glasses?" I asked as I fetched my breakfast.

"They're just reading glasses. I keep a spare pair here."

"You're over often enough to keep spare things here?"

"We all have needs," Marisol informed me from where she sat shuffling the tarot deck. "It's not a sin. Come on now, sit, eat. We can do a spread."

I sighed. "Can we not? Yesterday's was kind of inconclusive."

"All the more reason to try again today," she coaxed. "It might give you some clarity."

"Fine." I was such a sucker. I awkwardly stabbed a few puffs of scrambled egg and ate while she shuffled a few more times. The painkiller was kicking in, and the sweet coffee helped take care of my headache. Everything would have been fine if not for the fact that I felt like I was forgetting something.

"Here." She handed me the deck. "Cut." I cut it once, again, and then a third time before handing it back since I couldn't shuffle on my own. Marisol fanned the cards out. "Now pull three."

"My lucky number," I muttered, but I obediently pulled three cards and laid them facedown on the table. She held a hand over the first one and then slowly turned it over.



“The Eight of Wands, reversed.” She frowned at it. “Something important is going to happen today. You’re going to want to jump into it quickly, but be careful about that. It could lead to frustration and mistakes.”

“Sounds like me,” I agreed.

“Don’t be flippant, Cillian, this is serious. I thought you were planning on staying here another week.”

“I am. Where would I go, especially with this?” I gestured with my good arm at the bandaged one.

“Somewhere, if this card is to be believed.” Marisol shook her head a little. “Ah, well. Let’s see what’s next.” She turned it. “Oh. Death.”

“He’s coming for revenge since I cheated him yesterday.”

“No, that’s not what it means and you know it,” she chided me. “Death is a sudden and unexpected change, a transition, a?it’s the beginning of a whole new phase in your life.” Marisol looked at me, her concern clear in the furrow of her brow and the downturn of her mouth. “What’s going on with you today, Cillian?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know.” Except there was something at the back of my mind, niggling at me. “Turn the last one over.”

She did. “The Hanged Man, reversed. Again.” We all stared down at the card. “Cillian, think, something important must be happening today. Is it related to the man you met yesterday, the cowboy?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I don’t think so. He was part of it, but...” What was it that had spurred my awful night? “Oh, shit.” I pawed at my pocket for my phone, pulling up

the article on it as fast as I could get the damn thing to turn on. I found the picture I needed, zoomed in as best I could, and stared at it.

I could be mistaken. It had been two years—that was a long time to still be able to recognize someone, especially since he'd only been twenty when I met him. You still changed a lot at that age. Of course, he'd been taller than me already and broader through the shoulders thanks to his Nordic heritage, so how much bigger could I expect him to get? But the curve of his chin, the way his naturally blond hair seemed to reach skyward, the way his hand lay on the side of the gun...it looked like him.

I pulled back and scanned the article for a name that might confirm it, the name I'd missed the night before. A businessman who'd angered the government of Iceland by moving a portion of his ancestral homeland—emphasis on the land, I had no idea how he'd done it—to America, where it was sitting in a warehouse outside Chicago. Possible ties to the Bróeurlega, the Icelandic mafia. Shit, who even knew they had a mafia? Name, name?there. Ólafur Egilsson.

It was him, then. Fuck my life. It felt like the floor had just vanished and I was freefalling straight into Hell. "It's...well." I swallowed hard. "I think I'm looking at a dead man."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

Neither of my companions were the sort of people to look dumbfounded after hearing something that should be impossible. They'd each seen too much. If I'd been hoping for a moment of shocked awe, maybe a frisson of fear or two, I'd have been sorely disappointed. As it was, I got ruthless practicality, which was exactly what I needed in the moment. I was already freaking myself out. I didn't need to deal with their panic too.

"What are you talking about?" Marisol snatched the phone from me and looked at the picture. "What do you mean? Who's Ólafur Egilsson, and why would he be dead?"

"No, he's not in the picture. They're talking about the shipment belonging to him." I forced myself to speak, to explain. There was a part of me—a big, big part of me, huge really—that wanted to backtrack, to say I'd been mistaken and not go down this road.

I hadn't willingly talked to anyone about this before, ever. The only person who knew about it was my mother. Of all the things we never discussed, this little period in my life was at the very top: more than when I was drugged out of my mind, more than the second time I'd been kidnapped, more than anything. Just thinking of speaking to her about it infuriated me, and she knew that. Not fair to her, maybe, but I was no prince. I didn't have to be fair to my own mother, not with everything we'd been through.

Marisol, though?maybe?I could tell the story to. Some of it, at least. And Phin because he was here, and because he reached across the table to press the back of his hand briefly to my forehead, his extensive forehead wrinkling with concern.

“No fever,” he muttered. “Did you take your pills this morning?”

I glared at him. “Yes, thanks, Dad . I’m not sick, I’m not high, I’m completely compos mentis .”

“Well, who’s the one who should be dead?” Marisol looked from the phone to me. “And why?”

“The blond guy on the right. His name is Soren, and he...” Is the son of. “Works for Egilsson.” They didn’t need to know all the sordid details. “Remember when I dropped off the grid a few years ago?”

“Of course,” Marisol said immediately. “You didn’t answer your phone for almost a month! I was worried sick about you, but your mama told me not to fuss, that you’d be back soon. And then you were, and you seemed fine and you never said anything. Until now.” Her dark eyes glistened with concern. “What happened, cielito ?”

“Well.” Now that it came to it, the words stuck in my throat. I couldn’t tell them everything, I just couldn’t?it was too hard. I could talk about being abducted as a child, I could talk about wasting away for months in shackles in a backwater Louisiana shed, but I couldn’t talk about everything that had happened with that fucked-up family. Everything I had done. Maybe if I felt less, I could have. “I?” I took a deep breath and exhaled it explosively.

“I got grabbed in Vegas.” And I should have known better. I should never have gone back to Las Vegas, not after all the trouble it had caused me. I’d been an idiot. “I was knocked out, transported across the country, and when I woke up, I was in a hotel room.” A really nice hotel room, actually. “ólafur Egilsson was there, and he had some work for me to do.”

“What kind of work?”

“He wanted me to help him break a geas.”

Phin nodded his head slowly. “An old-country curse.”

“Very old-country.” I smiled in an effort to keep my mouth from blurting things it shouldn’t. “He said it had been laid on his ancestor by a god.”

“A Norse god?”

“Yeah.”

Phin sighed. “I can probably guess which one.”

“Well, I can’t,” Marisol interjected. “What are you talking about?”

“A geas, Mari. It’s a magical compulsion. It’s a way of keeping someone you don’t trust loyal, or punishing someone who’s wronged you.” Phin crossed his arms, his fingers tightening on his biceps. “They were simple enough for a practitioner to lay on someone else, but to manage one that followed an entire line...that’s uncommon. That would take some real power. Possibly godly power, and there aren’t many Norse gods who worked magic.”

“Anyway,” I continued before Marisol could ask anything else, “apparently he’d heard about me back during my stupid phase, and when the geas got bad enough, he paid someone I knew to help him find me.” If Ricky hadn’t already been dead, I would have gone back and murdered him myself after I’d gotten free. He was the guy who’d made me swear off semi-regular lovers.

“What exactly did he want you to do?”

“He wouldn’t tell me.” I ran my left hand over my face. Fuck, I wanted a cigarette.

“He just said I was going to help him break the geas, and then he basically left me alone.” With a rotation of jailers, each one a chip off the old block. Some of them had done more than just watch me, too; I still couldn’t look at a bathtub the same way. “I looked at his fate when he asked me to. I saw what he did, what he would do. I told him he couldn’t escape the geas. He told me to look harder.”

Marisol huffed. “Sounds like a typical asshole. What was this geas, anyway?”

“Extreme violence.”

“Berserker,” Phin mused.

“Yeah, something like that.” A berserker rage combined with the durability of a curse-strengthened body, and the mindlessness of a rabid animal. “The geas triggered about once a month. He made me look, and I saw him kill.” Not me, because I never saw anything pertaining to my fate, no matter how obliquely I went about it, but he killed a lot of people: people I saw in the hotel, people he made me look at. People around me, and even though the vision went dark when he turned on me, I knew what would happen. I knew that I was next.

So I’d looked for a way out. I’d looked at his men for weaknesses and found what I needed in Soren. He’d been the youngest of the group, out of place among the stern men in their black and gray suits. He’d been twenty, only there because his father wanted him to be, not because he had any stake in it or that he liked what he was doing. He’d been worried about his father, and then he’d been fascinated with me.

“I seduced one of my guards.” To put it mildly. I’d been older, worldlier, while he was just figuring out who he was. He’d felt guilty, caught between what he thought were his father’s needs and my own compromised position, but I hadn’t allowed that to keep a distance between us. After a week, we were fucking. Within two weeks, he thought he was in love with me. The last time we had sex, the same night he got me

out of the hotel, I saw his eyes change for a moment. I hadn't been trying to look—it had only been a moment—but they'd gone from clear blue to something alien, the irises swirling like smoke before vanishing completely into black.

“Cillian.” Marisol laid gentle fingers on my arm, pulling me out of my reverie. “You were the one who'd been kidnapped. Nothing that happened was your fault. Whatever you did to get out of it was only because you had to.”

“Right.” Only it wasn't right. The whole reason I'd been in that position was because I'd misused my ability in the first place. It wasn't right, because somehow, Egilsson had known what I was going to do. He'd known I was going to escape, and he hadn't cared. It was the manner of my escape that had given him whatever information he'd needed. I still didn't know what he'd gotten out of my methods. I didn't want to know; I didn't like to think about it. All I knew was that I'd joined the long line of people who had taken advantage of Soren's inherent kindness, his inexperience, and his fidelity.

He hadn't come with me when he'd helped me out of there. It hadn't even occurred to him, and I couldn't convince him otherwise. His father needed him, he'd said. He had to stay and help him however he could, even though he knew it wasn't going to be pretty. He was the youngest son, he was family?he was loyal. He stayed, and within the week, that consuming blackness was all I could see when I thought of him.

Done, finished. Dead. He'd been the only person to love me who hadn't known me since I was a kid, and I'd ruined him. The way my mouth went dry whenever I thought of him, the way my heart seemed to sicken and shrivel in my chest—maybe I'd ruined my own capacity to love like that as well. It would be fair.

“Anyway. I got out with his help, and he paid the price for it. I looked and looked, and all I could see was his death. And now here he is.” I gestured toward the picture. “Walking around carrying a gun.” He looked like his older brothers had, back then. It

made me feel a little sick. “I see his death, and yet there he is. So how’s that possible?”

“Are you sure you’re interpreting what you see the right way?” Phin asked. I stared at him, and he raised his hands peaceably. “I’m not doubting you, but I know how cloudy some of these visions can be.”

“Mine are never cloudy,” I snapped. “I see him drown, all right? He drowns, and then there’s nothing left. No hint of personality, no sliver of thought, just nothing .”

“Did you ask your mama about this?” Now Marisol became the target of my ire, but she pushed ahead anyway. “Oh, I know how she can be, Cillian, but surely she’d be willing to help you figure this out if it’s still bothering you so much! She just wants you to be happy.”

“She wants me to be alive,” I corrected. “She doesn’t care if I’m happy.” Which was a complete lie, but I didn’t feel like getting into a fight with Marisol about my mother less than a day after getting shot. Mom was another person I’d never understand.

“Cilly...”

“I’m going out for a smoke.” I stood up and grabbed for my pack and then remembered it had gone the way of the dodo, along with my jacket, my arm, and my fucking mind at this point. I stalked outside anyway, heat burning in my cheeks and chest, and leaned against the warm brick with a groan. My arm still ached, I was unreasonably twitchy thanks to my bad habits, and memories were pouring through my exhausted brain at a painful rate.

I knew it had seemed like I was the victim here. And I had been, in the plainest sense of the word. I was the one who got abducted, I was the one kept at the mercy of my captors, but the thing is, they hardly did anything else. Compared to how I’d been



treated by other kidnappers, their half-assed attempts at torture were minimal. The worst of it by far was ólafur, big as a mountain as he sat across from me and made me look into his eyes, and cool as an ice flow when he told me I was going to help him cure his geas.

“I won’t,” I’d told him. “Fuck you,” I’d told him. He’d just shaken his shaggy blond head, somehow smaller in diameter than his neck—the man really was a giant, the widest person I’d ever seen. It was amazing the bed hadn’t collapsed beneath his weight.

“You will,” he’d replied. “Or you’ll die. Very simple. You have a month.” He’d left me, and that was the last time I saw him in person. After that it was just his stooges, his bodyguards?his sons . All of them were his family, and I’d chosen the weak link, the sweet one who’d panted when I swallowed around his cock, who’d begged to reciprocate, who’d cried the night before he let me go and sacrificed himself for me, letting me change his fate.

Maybe Soren had broken the geas somehow, maybe he hadn’t. Either way, I’d sentenced him to death. I should have left him alone and gone after one of his brothers, someone who was already a killer, but I hadn’t. I’d taken Soren, twisted him up and thrown him away, and I’d never forgotten that. I never would.

I sensed Phin before he spoke, but I only bothered to open my eyes when I heard the click of a lighter followed by the scent of smoke. I accepted the proffered cigarette and took a drag, letting the smoke fill me up, drowning in it like I imagined Soren drowning.

“She wouldn’t tell you not to do it,” Phin said after a brief silence. “Mari might be a wee bit flighty, but she trusts the cards. You’re in for a world of change whether she wants it or not. She just wants to make you feel better.”

“I don’t deserve to feel better.” It was the most honest thing I could say, and glancing at Phin, I knew he understood. “I really don’t.”

“Then put on a good face, at least. How is she supposed to feel? You’re shot up, you’re her best friend’s child and her guest, and now you’ve got something to handle that she doesn’t understand and you can’t explain to her. Try not to be a berk about it.”

“Good pep talk, thanks.” Only it was kind of good, pulling me out of my funk enough that I could think again. “I have to find him.”

“Who, the guard?”

“Yeah. I need to see if he’s real.”

“You’re sure it’s him?”

“As sure as I can be.”

“Well then.” He stole my cigarette and stubbed it out against the brick. “I guess you’ve got some calls to make.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

I really only had one call to make, and that was to the author of the article on Egilsson. Andre Jones was a multitasker? I had to give him that. He'd written about half the articles in this month's *Modern Parapsychia*, in addition to posting articles on completely different subjects on two different news blogs.

He was a freelancer, willing to go almost anywhere to get a story, including a three-month stint in Turkey last year that had led to a piece being picked up by *Rolling Stone*. We'd chatted a little bit before he'd interviewed me, and he was a surprisingly relaxed guy, not dogmatic or demanding about how he expected things to go. He didn't ask me to do any parlor tricks to prove I was psychic, but he didn't go out of his way to debunk the idea either. It had been pretty balanced, all things considered, which was why I didn't think he'd reject me out of hand for asking about his sources for the other article.

"I've gotta say, I didn't expect I'd hear from you again," he said once I got through, his voice every bit as smooth and soothing as I remembered. He'd laughed at me last time when I'd mentioned that he sounded like he gave good voice, saying he could get his newborn daughter to sleep in under five minutes by singing to her. "No offense, but I got the feeling you only did that interview because you'd been forced to."

"That's exactly why I did it," I agreed. "But I'm not calling about the interview. You wrote another article about a guy called Ólafur Egilsson."

"Right, that." His laugh sounded a little self-deprecating. "I was basically just looking for filler at that point, man. The guy's way better known for his business interests than for anything potentially supernatural, but the fact that he's basically uprooted an

acre of his home country and brought it all the way over to the US is pretty strange.”

He was right, that was strange, but it danced around the information I was looking for now. “Do you know if he’s still in Chicago?”

“No, I haven’t done any work on that story since last month.” Andre’s tone sounded considering. “Why? Is there more there I should be considering?”

Now came my crisis of conscience. I wasn’t prone to them, but occasionally they hit me like a shovel to the back of the head. I had a gift, but it was specific to whoever I made eye contact with. I couldn’t just predict the future, and Marisol’s cards had already been less than helpful. What I wanted—what I needed —was a researcher, someone to help me figure out what was going on before I walked into a bear’s den and got myself mauled. I wasn’t a coward, but there was no way I was getting anywhere near Egilsson, even with Soren as bait, without some serious prep work. But I couldn’t guarantee that it was going to be safe, not for myself and not for anyone I enlisted to help me.

“Cillian?”

“Sorry,” I said, focusing back on the call. “Listen, about that story?there might be something else there, but I’m not asking you to get involved in it.”

“Something else like freaky, supernatural shit, something?”

I scoffed at the phone. “You don’t believe in the supernatural, remember?” That hadn’t been hard to suss out. I didn’t have to look into Andre’s eyes to know he was working for Modern Parapsychia because he needed the money, not because he was a true believer.

“Just because I haven’t seen any evidence of it doesn’t mean it’s not there. What, you

gonna make a believer out of me?”

I just might. “Look, I need as much information as I can get on Ólafur Egilsson, his crew, and his cargo. I’m coming to Chicago, so if you could just point me in the right direction, I’d appreciate it.”

“I thought you didn’t like flying.” Another tidbit he’d gotten out of me with his subtle chatter before the interview.

“I don’t.” Stuck in a plane with nothing to look at but the back of the seat in front of me, in case I picked up fates from the people around me? Flying brought out the worse kinds of anxieties in people, and when someone was emotional, they were a lot easier to read. It was safe to say that I hated flying. “But I need to go there regardless.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’ve got no fucking clue. Somewhere close to wherever that warehouse is, I guess. Feel free to pass that info along any time,” I added sarcastically.

“There aren’t any hotels in that part of town. Not to mention, if you’re interested in the people and less on the cargo, you’re not gonna find them there.”

“Where will I find them?”

“Tell me why you want to know and I’ll tell you where they were as of three weeks ago.”

“The why is the dangerous part.” Time to lay it out there and see if he still wanted a piece of this once he had a better idea of what was going on. “I don’t know what’s going on, I don’t know anything about why they’ve brought part of Iceland to

America, but I know this guy. There's something really, really wrong with what's happening, and I need to find out what that is."

"Is this some kind of psychic premonition?"

"No. More like what I'm hoping is a case of mistaken identity, but I don't think it is. I have to know one way or the other, though."

There was a moment of silence. "How do you know Egilsson?"

"I was a guest of his for a while." Let Andre make of that what he wanted. "I can't promise you a story out of this. I can't give you any information that will make helping me out worth your time. I just need to know how to find these guys, and then I'll leave you alone." That was as honest as I could be. I wasn't going to reduce myself to hunting down Andre and forcing our eyes to meet in order to get the information I needed. I wasn't that desperate, not yet.

"But the situation might be kinda dangerous?" He didn't sound like he minded the prospect.

"Missing your war zones already?"

"Hey, you can only write so many op-eds on diaper choices and formula comparisons before you start to go crazy," Andre replied. "I've got some free time right now. I can get you the information you need, maybe help you do a little digging once you get here. My standard rates apply, of course."

"Of course." The swell of relief sweeping from my chest to my knees made me glad I was sitting down. "I can do that. Thanks."

"When are you getting in?"

“Sometime today or tomorrow, I haven’t actually booked the flight yet.” But I would. I had a pile of cash upstairs, courtesy of Roger. Hopefully it would be enough to see me through whatever happened in Chicago.

“Let me know. I’ll pick you up at the airport. We can talk about things then.”

“You don’t have to go out of your way for me,” I cautioned him. “You don’t even know me. I might be a complete jackass for all you know. I could be wasting your time.”

“Maybe.” He drew the word out like he was pulling on a thread, curious to see what would happen. “But even if you are a jackass, it’s an interesting situation, and you might have a story here worth looking at. Why else would you have called me up? I know you don’t like reporters, man. I don’t have to be psychic to get that you were basically coerced into talking to me. Why do it if you dislike the idea so much?”

“My mother made me. Don’t laugh,” I added as I heard his quick intake of air. “You try having a mother like mine and see if you ever get out of anything.” I’d wondered at the time why my mom had been so invested in getting me to do a stupid interview, and...

Suddenly the pieces fell into place. I’d needed to do something that would get me to look at *Modern Parapsychia*, because it was probably the only publication in the world that bothered to write about what was, at best, a human interest story about a man and his land. She had known I would see it; she’d known I’d remember the name. She’d known I’d recognize Soren. She’d? holy shit.

“I’ll text my flight info when I have it,” I said and hung up the phone so I could take a moment just to breathe. Thank god I was still outside. I didn’t have to worry about what Marisol and Phin might be thinking and could just have a nice little panic attack all by myself.

How much had she known? How much had my mother known the first time around, when I got kidnapped and ultimately made a decision to destroy a young man's life? How much could she have prevented?

It was useless to speculate, and it was even more useless to blame my mom for any of it. I'd gotten sick of that years ago and couldn't go back to it, not now, not even with a bullet wound in my arm and an undead lover staring out of a picture on my phone. Still... I dialed her number. It rang through to voice mail.

"I hope you know what you're doing." I might not blame her, but I couldn't help the frustration that bled into every word, squeezed through my viselike throat. "I figured it out, okay, just the beginnings of it, and I just hope that?you know I'm not like you."

That was both my failing and my greatest achievement, not being as far-seeing as my mother, not able to be as objective and decisive. I knew that fate couldn't be changed, not without extreme circumstances, but my mother couldn't see every specific of my fate either. Whatever was happening, whatever she'd planned, most of it was based on extrapolation. Psychic guesswork. "Fuck." I hung up on her and didn't feel any better for it.

Marisol was waiting for me in the kitchen, ready to ambush me before I could retreat upstairs. "Cillian—"

"Where's Phin?" I asked, gaining another little moment to collect myself.

"He had to go and supervise repairs in that rathole of a club they run." The bitter twist to her lips seemed to intimate that she'd be happier burning it than repairing it. "Cillian, what's going on? What do you need?"

One simple sentence was enough to remind me of why I loved Marisol. She



understood the forces at work well enough to know that things had gotten beyond my control?that the situation was bigger than just me. She knew I had to act. “I need to go to Chicago.”

She sighed, obviously unsurprised. “To find out more about the man who drowned?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, shit.”

I choked out a laugh. “Yeah, exactly.”

She stepped forward and put her hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently. The right one ached despite her care, but I didn’t flinch. “You better let me help you pack, otherwise it will take you hours. When do you need to leave?”

“Soon.”

“Fine.” She nodded and let go, glancing around the kitchen. “I have enough for a decent good-bye dinner, I suppose. I’ll drive you to the airport after we eat.”

“We just had breakfast,” I pointed out.

The fire that suddenly rose in her eyes was almost enough to make me take a step back. I sometimes forgot that Marisol could be a force of nature when she wanted to, as wild and dangerous as anyone I’d ever met before. “The cards don’t lie. You’re about to leap into something that will test everything you are,” she snapped. “I’m not going to let you go before I know I’ve done everything I can to help you, and that includes feeding up your skinny ass so you don’t starve on your first day in Chicago when you forget to eat. Idiot.” She turned me around and swatted me on the butt. “Go. I’ll get the chicken started and then I’ll be up.”

It would be pointless to argue, and I didn't really want to anyway. I left, feeling the little bits of give in the stairs as I climbed, listening to the creak of old wood as I walked into my room. Tavo's room, but my room too. This was the closest place to a home I'd ever had, and I wasn't quite ready to let it go. I knew I had to, though.

Feeling a little ridiculous, I grabbed one of Marisol's many tiny bronze Buddhas off the windowsill and stuck it in the side pocket of my bag. It was a tiny reminder that I had somewhere to go if all this went to hell.

I had the feeling I'd need it.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

The fastest flight I could manage included a layover in Michigan, of all places, before doubling back to land at Chicago O'Hare at noon the next day. Michigan, right, because that made so much sense. The worst thing about flying was being part of a group of people with nothing in common other than their desire to get from point A to point B, forced into close contact for hours on end.

The next worst thing about flying was the way the whole process seemed completely arbitrary when determining who, what, when, and where we stopped along our journey. I didn't believe in arbitrary, but goddamn, airlines could test even my patience.

For the first flight, I was seated between a teenager who kept his headphones in for the entire trip, and a chatterbox of a lady who was clearly nervous and took it out on me with loquacity.

"My sister said it would be hot, even in Michigan. And we're going to be on the lake, and I knew I was going to forget something on this trip, and you know what? I completely forgot to pack my bug spray. How am I going to be outside without bug spray? I've already had malaria once, and I don't want to get it again, blah blah blahhhh..." She dropped off for an hour in the middle of the flight, thank god.

Upon arriving, I glanced at her eyes once, quickly, and said, "Don't forget to use sunscreen."

"Oh...you know, I didn't even think about that."

Yeah, I knew that. This lady had plenty of first-degree burns in her future, but hey,

I'd done my part.

The second flight was faster, quieter, and by the time I landed in Chicago, I was more than ready to get to work.

I made my way out of the morass that was the baggage claim and called Andre. "I'm here."

"Great. I'm twenty feet behind you."

I jumped, honestly jumped, and whirled around to face him. Andre Jones was taller than me by a few inches, with dark brown skin and an angular, attractive face. He didn't look like a reporter; he looked like a Marine. A smirking, smug Marine who dabbled in covert ops.

"Feeling a little edgy?" he asked as he lowered his phone and walked over to me.

I put my phone away and holstered my sudden desire to yell at him. It wasn't Andre's fault I was working on less than three hours of sleep and my perforated arm hurt like a bitch. The bullet wound bothered me, beyond the normal "oh damn, there's a hole in my body" type of unease. It was a weakness?it would slow me down. With the people I was going up against, I couldn't afford to be slow. I also couldn't afford to piss off the only person I had to help me out in Chicago, so I plastered on a smile.

"Long flight."

"Yeah, not that long." His eyes immediately went to my sling. "How bad is that?"

"Nothing I can't manage."

"Let's hope so," he said cryptically. "My car's out this way. You got that?" He

gestured toward my duffel bag. “Cause you don’t need to be ripping stitches just to prove you’re a man or anything. I’m happy to help.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Do I look like I’m overly concerned with my masculinity? I’ll take the assist.” The duffel bag wasn’t really heavy, but it was unwieldy, and I’d already strained myself back in Denver hoisting it around.

“Got it.” He picked it up like it was nothing. “C’mon.”

His car was a Tesla that smelled like baby powder and dog hair. I wrinkled my nose, and he laughed. “You’re welcome to take a cab, Cillian, but my ride’s cheaper.”

“Not for what I’m paying you,” I replied, but I got in and, after a moment of awkward staring, buckled myself in with a sigh. “Where are we going?”

Andre started up the car and began to weave his way out of the airport parking lot. “We’re going to lunch.”

“Lunch.”

Well...that wasn’t quite what I was expecting, but then, waiting for him to say, “We’re going to the mob boss’s secret hideout!” probably wasn’t in the offing. “Anywhere in particular?”

“TGI Friday’s, down on the Magnificent Mile. Be grateful?I could have you buying me a fifty-dollar steak.”

I closed my eyes and leaned against the headrest. “Don’t get carried away just because you get to play private investigator for a while.”

“Hey, I don’t have to be a PI to know my shit. Reporters are fact finders. I could do

this in my sleep,” he chided as we turned onto the highway.

“Oh yeah? Then tell me what you’ve found out.”

“Not yet.” He glanced sidelong at me. “I need to make sure of something first.”

I knew what was coming; I fucking knew it. I groaned. “For fuck’s sake. Really?”

“Do you have any idea the kind of weird shit that’s going on with these people?” he asked. “I’ve got to make sure you’re above board before I do any more business with you.”

“Yeah? And how can I possibly prove that to you?”

“Tell me what they’ve got on you that makes you so anxious, and let me verify it.”

I shook my head. “No way. This is you angling for a story, Andre, and you already got your story from me. I told you not to expect a new one.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “You didn’t tell me not to, either, and you know what? There’s something happening here. That other story was a puff piece for a magazine about psychics. This is about the Icelandic mob moving some sort of illegal contraband into the United States and throwing its weight around to make sure no one comes down on them before they move it again. And when I say weight, I mean some heavy-duty shit, Cillian. Political, monetary, and mercenary leverage. This is a real story.”

Aaand here was the unwitting deprecation of my entire life. I was good at taking it, but I had rarely been in less of a mood to. It seemed that living for a few months with people who were like me, who believed me, had spoiled me. Andre knew what I could do, and I had expected to be taken at face value, especially after he’d done an

entire interview with me. Apparently he considered that prior experience a waste of time.

Fuck that. “Look at me.”

“I’m driving, man—”

“The road is clear for the next two hundred yards, this won’t take me long. Fucking look at me.”

Andre kept his eyes resolutely forward for another moment, surveying the traffic and slowing down a little before, finally, turning his head. Our gazes met, and I pushed myself hard, fell into his mind and past his surface thoughts— ridiculous, not really a, oh my god— and beyond into the depths of his past, and his future.

Three seconds later, I broke eye contact. “Journalism major but you entered the Marine Corps right out of university because you thought it would make your daddy proud of you the way college wasn’t going to. You did two tours in Afghanistan, and you hate it there, but you also can’t stay away, can you? You’re always thinking about going back, looking for whatever you feel like you lost over there, but you’ll never find it again.”

“So you did some research on me,” Andre said, his lips pursed tight, eyes staring straight ahead. “That doesn’t prove anything.”

“You’ve got a baby girl who’s five months old and has been colicky for the past three days. She keeps you and your wife up at night. You love her, but you don’t know how to tell your wife that you’re going to accept a contract to go overseas again in three months and leave her alone with the baby.” I plowed ahead, ignoring the growing strain on his face. Question me? Let’s see you question me now.

“You haven’t fit into the life you thought you should have ever since getting back from the war, and you never completely will. You have a scar above your left knee that you scratch at when you get nervous, and you secretly like how easily you can tear the skin and make it bleed. It makes it feel fresh, like it’ll never go away, and you don’t want it to.”

“Shut up now , Cillian, or I swear to god—”

Time to back it off a little, or I might self-righteous myself out of any help. “You’ve got a special speech all planned out for your daughter’s first date, and it’s going to scare the shit out of that boy, but he wouldn’t have been good for her anyway. You’ll be there to walk your daughter down the aisle, and your first grandchild will be named Andrea, after you. You’re a survivor.” I exhaled noisily, letting go of the visions as best I could. They were still lurking in my mind, and they’d be there forever now, but I had plenty of practice pushing them back. Andre wasn’t the worst I’d seen, not by far.

“And I’m a psychic. You don’t think that a person like Egilsson would be able to find a use for me?”

“He did before,” Andre guessed after a tense minute. “When you told me about being a guest, you meant more like a prisoner, right? This is a personal thing for you.”

“I certainly don’t give a shit about the mob.”

“Huh.” We drove the rest of the way to the restaurant in silence, but it wasn’t the kind of silence that made me worry I was going to be shoved out of the door onto the road. That was an improvement.

Andre managed to find parking in a ridiculously crowded section of downtown, in the middle of skyscrapers I’d never seen before. I felt positively tiny and completely



insignificant. It was kind of nice.

“The Magnificent Mile,” Andre said as we got out of the car. “Shopping and lodging for people with more money than sense.”

“And we’re eating at TGI Friday’s?”

He smiled at me, a little narrow but still genuine. “Everybody wants to slum it sometimes.”

“Why are we here?”

He snorted as we walked down the sidewalk. “What, you didn’t see that in my head?”

“I don’t see anything that connects to my own fate.”

“So you never know what’s going to happen to yourself, just to other people.”

“Yeah.”

He sighed. “Gotta say, I’m real tempted to pop you in the mouth for what you pulled in the car, but I don’t start shit with guys who can’t fight back.”

“Not to mention you had it coming.”

“Maybe,” he allowed. “Come on.” We went in and were seated fast inside the overly bright, overly neon restaurant. We got water and ordered burgers, and then Andre started pulling things up on his phone.

“So, this is your guy’s warehouse.” He showed me a picture of a two-story brick building with high, opaque windows. “It’s huge, twenty-thousand square feet, and he

had some big-ass skylights installed before he moved whatever contraband he's got into there. It's also guarded." He swiped a few more pictures across the screen. "Four people are always on site, two outside, one just in the door, and another on the roof." I quickly checked the pictures for Soren, but he wasn't there.

"What I'm getting at," Andre continued, "is that you're not gonna get into that place. Not the way it is now, not without major backup that I don't think you've got."

"Great," I muttered, grabbing my pain meds from my pocket and popping one out. I washed it down with some water and grimaced. "What else?"

"Well, Egilsson himself? He's not staying at the warehouse. He's in a hotel, checked in as Ollie Venkin. He got two suites, one for some bodyguards and another for him and a guest."

A guest...it had to be Soren. If something strange was going on, he'd want to keep Soren close. "Which hotel?"

Andre grinned. "Glad you asked. We happen to be one block from it. It's the Omni." He looked at me. "Don't suppose you've got a nice suit in your bag, huh? Sports coat, maybe? They've got a bar?good place for some recon?but it'd be easier if you looked the part."

I'd left most of my nicest suit in the club, and the pants had been unfixable after sliding through broken glass. "Shit."

Our burgers came, and we lost a couple minutes of conversation to hunger as my appetite caught up with me. Marisol's chicken and rice had been delicious, but it had also been yesterday, and I hadn't eaten since. It was almost one now.

"Never mind," Andre said after most of the food was gone. "I can go in and do the

initial sightseeing.”

“No, you can’t. Your wife’s about to call.”

“My—what?” His phone rang a moment later, and he stared at me unblinkingly. I carefully avoided his eyes, and he finally answered the phone. “Hey, baby. Yeah. Really? No, I can do that, sure...yeah. I’ll be there soon.” He hung up and stared at me. “My sister-in-law just went into labor. I’m supposed to meet the family at the hospital as soon as I can.”

“Fancy that.”

“Did you do this?”

I laughed?I couldn’t help it. “Did I what, jumpstart your sister-in-law’s labor? How the hell would I do that?”

“How the hell do you do any of the stuff you did?”

“Good question, one for the ages.” I didn’t say anything else, and he looked away after a moment.

That was fine. It was better I be alone for the next part anyway.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

Far be it from me to confess to a fault, but if I had to name one off the top of my head, it would be vanity. Used to be pride, or maybe arrogance, but after you got kidnapped, tied up, and threatened with death enough times, the arrogance bled out of your system. Literally, in some cases. So, while I might be confident in my abilities, I wasn't arrogant.

Vanity, though?well, fuck it, I knew I looked good. I had my mother's eyes and nose and her rail-thin build, but my naturally dark hair, the square cut of my jaw, and my height all came from my unnamed sperm donor. I might look like a tattooed punk, but they were nice tattoos. They should be?I had put a lot of thought into them. Each one had a meaning, a little slice of purpose inked into my skin.

I'd met a British guy named Steven once, back when I was fifteen and invincible, who could actually pull his tattoos off his body into the objects they represented. He had a stiletto along the inside of his forearm, a gun at his hip, and lock picks along his thigh. He had to keep getting them done, he told me when we were drunk one night, because eventually his trick wore the ink away, and eventually there was nothing but blank skin.

He'd been there when I'd had the work done on my throat, a winged Eye of Horus spreading out across my Adam's apple and around my neck. He'd kissed me afterward to distract me from the pain. He'd been one of the only people smart enough to know what I did and not ask for a glimpse into his future.

I kind of wished I had looked anyway. I could imagine him enjoying himself, living large, an ever-changing palette of color and design.

My tattoos were noticeable because I liked them that way, and also because by in large, I tended to hang out with a more, shall we say, relaxed crowd than the business-elite happy hour contingent I was going to find at the Omni. Most of my ink could be covered up by a well-tailored suit, though, and that was what I left to find after I finished my burger.

I had to hand it to the guy in the shop—he didn’t bother with a double take when he saw me, just stepped right up. “Good afternoon, sir. How may I assist you today?”

“My last decent suit just met with an unhappy accident,” I said, casting my eyes over the tasteful displays behind him. No racks, just well-dressed mannequins representing a handful of upscale designers. “I need something as close to fitted as you can manage in the next hour.”

The man frowned, not quite hopelessly, but with more than a bit of doubt. “One hour won’t get you a decent suit. There’s no time to tailor anything significant.”

“It’s just got to be good enough to pass for a little while.” His frown got deeper. “I know this is a rotten thing to ask you for.” I meant it, too. People who made couture their careers were serious about it. “But it can’t be helped.”

He sighed. “Well, needs must, I suppose. Come with me, I think we have something in Tommy that might work.”

One hour was enough to get me into a charcoal three-piece suit, a crisp white shirt with French cuffs fastened with seed-pearl cufflinks, and a simple burgundy tie. I bought the cufflinks mostly because I felt guilty, but by the end of it, I did manage to look presentable, especially once he handed me a hat. I’d been missing my hat.

“You could look worse,” he said philosophically as he took my cash without question. “Come back sometime, and give me more than an hour to work with,

ideally without a wounded wing as well?” He cast a glimpse at my bandaged arm, the bulge barely noticeable under the suit. “?and I’ll have you looking phenomenal.”

“You’re a miracle worker.”

“The duffel bag rather ruins the effect, though.”

“It’s temporary,” I assured him as I slung the bag over my shoulder. It made my arm ache, but I wasn’t going far. “Thanks again.”

The Omni was only two blocks down. I walked inside and gave myself a moment just to get the feel of the place. Sometimes, if I cast a very wide net and only caught glimpses into people’s eyes here and there, I could get an idea of things in the near future. It was nothing specific to an individual except how their day got derailed. I glanced from the front desk to the doorman to a server walking through the lobby and got an impression of...a parking garage? Level one? There was no reason a server would have to think about that sort of thing unless something loud was going to go on there, and I sort of specialized in loud. It was a starting point, at least.

I walked through the lobby, past the front desk and the curious eyes of the concierge working there, and back to the parking garage entrance. It was locked?only accessible by keycard, naturally?but a moment later, someone came along and opened it for me on their way inside. I slipped out, tucked the bag in front of the nearest car, just beyond where the cameras monitored, and then ducked back in before the door closed.

This sort of thing used to be a lark for me, back in Vegas. How to sneak in and out of casinos without getting caught, how far I could push it at roulette or craps before someone accused me of cheating. I’d been an idiot, but the skill set still had its uses. Speaking of skill sets?I needed to find a way into Papa Egilsson’s suite, and I needed to do it quietly. The last thing I wanted was a confrontation with that guy before I was

ready. Or at all, honestly.

I considered going big. A fire alarm was highly effective at clearing a hotel, but if Egilsson and his crew were upstairs, it would put them on alert. Better to be subtle. I glanced around, caught sight of the bellhop again, and...hmm. Embarrassment. That would do. I wouldn't need long, and the way those suitcases were piling up, an accident seemed almost destined at this point. Which, ha, turns out it was.

It didn't take much for me to start a chain reaction of falls, from a woman in teetery high heels subsequently caught by her husband, who had to take a step back to do it and ran into the luggage rack, which then toppled the pile of bags, which then tripped up the bellhop, who ended up sprawled right in front of the door. The concierge behind the desk gasped and came out to help, and I went to make my move, but then—

I was frozen. I felt like a mouse under the eye of an owl, trying desperately to blend in as ólafur Egilsson stepped through the front doors, escorted by one of his equally blond and enormous sons. He wasn't looking at me—he was looking with bemusement down at the mess in front of him—but I still felt inexplicably trapped.

He hadn't changed at all. He was just as broad, a snowcapped mountain clad in linen and silk. He was also just as imposing. People unconsciously moved out of his way even as they struggled with the pile of bags. And his face...I averted my own eyes, not willing to risk catching a glimpse of his. I'd seen enough of his fate to last me a lifetime. The screaming was the worst. It was the first thing I'd sensed and the one thing that had persisted, no matter how deep I got, which wasn't very.

This is an opportunity, my brain reminded me. Don't waste it. Get moving already.

“Lend them a hand, Rolf,” ólafur said to his son and then headed not for the elevators, but for the bar. Perfect. My lungs expanded more easily as I watched him

move away. Rolf bent over to pick up a bag, and in a blink, I was there, under the guise of grabbing the luggage rack but taking a moment to pick Rolf's pocket as well. He'd used the pants pocket, thankfully. I had no desire to brush up against his chest in an effort to get at an inside compartment.

I slid the wallet into my own pocket and then continued away with the luggage rack. "Sir, we need that here!" the poor bellhop called out, but I didn't turn around.

"Back with it in a moment," I promised as I punched the button for the elevator. It opened smoothly, and I got inside and shut the door as fast as possible. No one joined me, and I closed my eyes for a moment as the tremors in my fingertips subsided. Then I realized that the elevator wasn't moving.

"Fuck, fuck." I pulled the wallet out and opened it up, looking for a keycard. There—room 224. A governor's suite, of course. I rolled my eyes and punched the button for the twenty-second floor. The elevator rose smoothly and without pause, which was a lucky break.

I had maybe ten minutes, I figured. Ten minutes before Rolf checked for his wallet or Egilsson headed up to the room or someone else barged in. Hell, the room might be occupied for all I knew. I mean, it probably was, with Soren and who knew who else. Shit.

The door opened on the twenty-second floor, and I got out, pulling the luggage rack with me. It was past checkout time for most places, but before check-in, so there was probably a—perfect. Cleaning carts, two of them. I pulled off my jacket and waistcoat, removed my tie, and laid them on the luggage rack, which I pushed into an alcove next to the elevator. Hopefully I'd be back for it all soon, but if not...well, one more suit to regret. I walked to one of the carts, checked that the housekeeper was busy in the room, and then pushed it in the other direction, down to the end of the hall where room 224 taunted me with gold letters. I cleared my throat, caught my breath,



and ran my thumb over the smooth plastic of the keycard.

One look, just one. If it was Soren and he seemed fine, I'd—I didn't know. Find a way to get him alone. If things were off, I'd do something else. Yeah. Great plan.

I knocked on the door. "Housekeeping." Nothing. There was a Do-Not-Disturb sign hanging from the handle, but I ignored it as I ran the keycard through the reader. The light turned green. I took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped inside.

It was strangely cold inside the room, and I shivered as the warmth of the hallway dissipated. I closed the door behind me and looked around. A governor's suite apparently consisted of a bunch of useless extra space, as well as a television the size of a bed. I crept quietly along the hardwood floor, every sense alert for a noise, a sound, but there was nothing. I looked in the kitchenette?uninhabited. Shit. Had I missed my chance entirely? I moved on to the bedroom, glanced inside, and—

"Oh, fuck ."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

There was a body on the bed. It didn't move, not even the barest rise and fall to indicate breathing. The head was turned to look my way, eyes open and sightless, pupils tiny and fixed. There was a dead body on the bed, and I recognized it. It took me a few seconds of deep breathing and biting my lip so hard I drew blood before I could acknowledge that yes, the body was Soren's. I forced myself to step closer and take another look.

Yeah, it was Soren...but dead might have been an overstatement.

Seems like an odd thing to say, but I'd met more than a few people who dabbled in necromancy in my travels, and according to one of them, the body in front of me might be lifeless, but it wasn't dead. Soren's cheeks were flushed, his skin tone was normal—hell, he was even dressed in a suit, shockingly dark against his fair skin. He wasn't breathing, didn't respond when I touched him, but his hand was warm. The body was still alive, but what was keeping it going, I didn't know.

There was stuff I needed to be doing, plans I needed to be enacting, but at that moment I just couldn't. I couldn't make myself move other than to sink down beside the bed and stare into Soren's blank face, his glassy eyes, and heave a huge, shuddering sigh of relief. I took his closer hand in my own and gazed at it. I'd never seen anything so beautiful before: those were his long slender fingers; there was the scar on his knuckle that he told me he got when he was eleven. This hand had touched me, held me, worshipped me. He might not be able to respond, but he was familiar. All of it was familiar.

I checked his eyes again just to make sure, and—nope, nothing. Not a hint of his fate, not even a quiver within me. Soren was completely checked out. On the plus side, I

couldn't see any indication that he was under the kind of spell that would dissipate if he was moved. That was good, since I had no intention of leaving him here. I knew people, specialists, who could help me figure him out. I was going to save him the way he'd saved me so long ago. I was going to do better by him, and I was going to figure out why my vision of his fate had gone so strange. I could work it out.

First things first, though, I had to get him out. If I were built like Soren or one of his brothers, I could have just hoisted him into a fireman's carry and called it a day. But even though he was definitely the baby of the bunch, he still had two inches and probably thirty pounds on me. Carrying him would have been a tough sell if I was completely whole and in control. With a bullet wound in my arm, there was no way that was going to happen.

Good thing I'd come up here with a baggage cart.

Forcing myself to let go of his hand was ridiculously difficult. I wanted him to wake up. I wanted to speak some magic words or prick his finger on a spindle or cover him with fairy dust or whatever the fuck you did in stories to make someone wake up. My soul felt like it was teetering on the edge of a precipice of guilt, a depthless chasm I'd plastered over for the past two years that was back with a vengeance. I would either be pulled back onto the ledge if I could wake Soren up, or fall headfirst into something I wasn't ready to consider yet if I couldn't.

I squeezed Soren's hand and then set it back down on the comforter. I needed the baggage cart. No one had entered the room yet, but the clock was ticking. I walked back into the suite's foyer and opened the door, surreptitiously checking to make sure the baggage cart holding my stuff was still there— yes . So far, so good. I took a breath, let it out slow, and then walked over to the elevators. I grabbed the cart by one shiny brass rung and pulled it behind me toward the suite.

“Excuse me, sir? Do you want me to clean your room now?”

I stopped, my shoulders tensing painfully before I forced them to relax. I turned around and addressed the woman at the end of the hall. “No, it’s fine, thank you.”

She frowned. “Four days and no cleaning...are you sure?”

“Quite sure, thank you.”

“As you wish, sir.” She went back to her business, and I went back to pretending my heart hadn’t been about to jump through my throat. I maneuvered the cart into the suite, shut the door behind me, and headed down the hall. I also pulled my phone out and called Andre; I was going to need him for what came next.

He picked up on the third ring. “Cillian, what’s up?”

“How soon can you be at the Omni?”

“The hospital I’m at is only five minutes away, but man, this labor has barely started. We’re going to be here for hours.”

“Then you can take some time off to give me a hand and be back before the happy event culminates.” I considered the layout of the bedroom, trying to figure out how close I could wedge the baggage cart to the bed.

“Giving birth isn’t a race, man?it’s not just the ending that counts.”

“Uh-huh,” I agreed. “And does your sister-in-law want you there for her screaming, panting, pushing, swearing phase, or would she rather see you when she’s in the ‘Thank god that’s fucking over with, come admire my baby’ phase?”

Andre was silent for a long moment. “Fine, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Don’t see, just do it. Be in the Omni garage as soon as possible. I need a hand carrying a package out of here.”

“What kind of package?”

“The important kind,” I said softly before I hung up. Andre didn’t need details right now?they’d just encourage him to be more curious. Curiosity could wait until we got Soren out of here.

I had to get him on the cart. I pushed it as close as I could to the bed and then looked at him and sighed. “I’m so sorry, baby,” I muttered as I reached for his legs. His long, long legs... Damn, they went on for miles, and I needed to stop thinking about them and start moving them. I pulled them down onto the cart, folding them a little as they went before tackling his midsection. His head?I had to protect his head. I hoisted his shoulders up with my good arm and eased him off of the mattress.

Bang . I fumbled the landing, and his right shoulder slammed into the vertical rod of the cart, almost tipping it over onto its side. I swore and sat down on the far side and then wrapped my arms around Soren’s chest and hauled him into a more central position.

Wow...awkward. He looked like a broken mannequin, and I was briefly very grateful he wasn’t alive, awake?whatever it was?to recognize his own indignity. I rearranged his legs and shifted his chest around so all of his upper body was almost, kind of, fitted on the cart. If I tossed a blanket over him, he’d?well, to my eyes, he’d still look like a body covered by a fucking blanket, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. I threw the comforter over the top of him, wincing a little as I did so. Wha—shit. My arm was bleeding again. I’d probably torn a few stitches.

I didn’t have time to worry about it. I pulled my waistcoat and jacket back on, stuffed my tie in my pocket, and figured that at least if I bled through the jacket, it wouldn’t

be visible since the fabric was dark.

Okay: I was put together, Soren was on the cart, and Andre was on the way. Now I just had to make it down to the parking garage. Piece of cake.

The cart was a lot harder to maneuver with two hundred pounds of Icelandic muscle and bone on it, but I managed to get it out the door and into the hall without banging into too many walls. I headed for the elevator and pushed the button. We'd get in, get down, and get gone. In, down, gone. In, down, gone. It was my mantra, my muse. I had to believe everything was going to work out?what choice did I have? I was flying blind here, no hint of the future to help me figure out the present. It would be fine; it would all be fine. In, down, gone.

The door opened, and all my confidence instantly dried up. I dropped my head and pulled my hat down low so the two men emerging from the elevator wouldn't see my face. Two tall, broad, blond men. Neither was Papa Egilsson, which was a small blessing, but one of them was Rolf, who was being spoken to in a scolding tone by the other man as they exited. They barely spared me a glance, instead heading straight for their suite. Rolf had noticed his missing key card, then. I pushed Soren into the elevator and hit the button for the first floor, hearing them open the door and head inside. Close call. One minute later and they'd have found me and Soren in the back room together, and then—

I heard a muffled expletive, something that sounded almost like "Fuck" but not quite, and then the door to their suite was opening again, and I was frantically pushing the button that closed the doors?honest to fucking god, how long did it take for this elevator to get going? The shining metal closed on my reflection a moment before I heard the smack of a meaty body hit the other side, followed by a quick pop pop and a scream. Shit, they were shooting at things. They were shooting at me!

The elevator moved smoothly down, and I calculated times in my head as we

descended. Using the stairs, they'd be at least half a minute behind me. That should be enough as long as Andre was here already. He'd better fucking be here already. Otherwise I'd have to waste time breaking into a car, and that would only be messy.

Thank god we didn't have to stop at any other floors on the way down.

The door opened at the bottom, and I powered my way through the crowd on the other side with a vague, "Scuse me."

"Mommy, look, a hand!" one overly observant child called out as I passed by. Shit, one of Soren's arms had come partially uncovered.

"It's a dummy," I called back to his shocked mother as I headed for the door to the parking garage. "We're filming a video, it's a whole big thing. You'll see it on TikTok!" Then I was through and easing the cart into the garage, searching for Andre, who...was not there. Fuck .

Well, I wasn't being shot at yet, so there was still time. I recovered my duffel bag and set it on top of Soren's midsection, opened out the case with my Glock 19 in it and shoved in the magazine. I tucked it into the back of my trousers, then pushed the cart toward the garage entrance. Andre would be here any minute. Aany minute now...

"Tae er hann!"

The brothers had found me first. I didn't know what they were saying, but fortunately they provided a direct translation via shooting at me. I ducked down behind someone's Porsche SUV and fired back, well above their heads. I wasn't in this to kill anyone. I just needed to keep them occupied, and I had fifteen bullets to do it with. Bang bang bang. Twelve.

When Andre arrived thirty seconds later, he drove straight into a firefight.

To his credit, probably thanks to years spent in combat zones, he didn't balk, just stopped his car between me and the brothers and yelled, "Where's the package?"

"On the cart. I need your help with it!" Bang . Six left.

"Making me get out of my damn car in the middle of this shit," he muttered furiously, but get out he did. When he saw what was exactly on the cart, he yelled, "You've gotta be fucking kidding me!"

"Just get him in the car. I'll cover you." One of the brothers—Rolf, I think—was trying to flank us to the side. I fired two shots at him and then another at the first one by the door. "I'm running out of ammo here, hurry!"

"Running out of goddamn ammo in a gunfight, what kind of seer are you?" Andre was big, bigger than me, and he managed to heave Soren into the backseat, throw my bag on top, and slam the door shut. He jumped into the driver's seat again. "C'mon, let's go!"

Crash! A bullet shattered the Porsche's window just above the crown of my head, showering me with glass. I fired blindly in the direction of the shot, threw myself into the car over Andre's lap, and scrambled for the far seat. "Go, go now!"

"I would if you'd get your damn ass out of my face!" he snarled, but the car did leap forward. Five seconds and one broken barrier later, we were out on the road heading away from the Omni. I had never been more relieved in all my life.

"There are fucking bullet holes in my Tesla! How am I gonna explain this to my wife?"

Even with the shouting...so relieved.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

Andre obviously didn't share my relief at escaping relatively unscathed from the Omni parking garage. He was silent for the first few minutes of the drive, opening his mouth every now and then but stopping before more than a hitch of breath emerged. It happened five times before I finally spoke up.

"Just get it off your chest. I don't want you to have a stroke."

"And I don't want to punch you in the face so hard your daddy feels it, but that's where I'm at right now, so give me some goddamn space."

Well, that was clear enough. Except—we kind of needed to talk. "I'm going to need a car."

"Fuck you, man, I'm going to need a car," Andre muttered. "How am I going to explain this to my wife, huh? Bullet holes in my Tesla, man. This thing is less than a year old. I drive my daughter around in this!" He turned to glare at me. "Did you know this was going to happen?"

"No!" He looked unconvinced, but I was tired of taking it, so I glared right back. "No, because I don't make a habit of sending other people into dangerous situations just to save my own ass!" Except for Soren. "Especially when I'd rather not be in a dangerous situation in the first place. For fuck's sake, you think that was where I wanted to be? Do I look like John McClane?"

Andre snorted. "More like a really low-rent version of James Bond." He glanced at me again. "I think you're bleeding."

I checked my arm. Yep, there was blood happening. “Brand new suit,” I muttered as I started to squirm out of my jacket. A sudden pain in my upper back stopped me. “Ow, fuck!”

“Just...stop moving, okay? I’ll look you over when we get back to my place. We’re not far. You’re probably driving glass farther into the wound.”

“What glass?”

He stared at me like I was stupid. “Glass from the window that exploded over your head, maybe?”

“What window?”

“You really aren’t used to being in the middle of a firefight, huh.”

I sighed and stopped trying to get out of my jacket, letting the cloth settle back down over the bullet hole. Now that the adrenaline was wearing away, I could feel the burn where the stitches had been pulled.

“No, I’m really not. I try not to let situations get that far. It tends to end badly for me.”

“Well, settle in and just breathe, okay? I’ll fix you up when we get home.” He checked the backseat in the rearview mirror. “Although feel free to talk to me about the dead guy in the backseat whenever you want.”

“He’s not dead.” I looked back at Soren reflexively, as if to convince myself of that fact. No bullet holes in him that I could see—that was good. He was just...still. “He’s in stasis.”

“In stasis.”

“Yep.”

“That sounds suspiciously Star Trekkie to me.”

“Fuck off,” I snapped.

“You don’t actually know what’s going on with him, do you?”

“That’s what I’m going to figure out.” Figuring that out was now my life’s purpose. “He’s important, though. He’s the key to what’s going on with the Egilssons, I’m sure of it.”

“Really? Because at first glance, he doesn’t seem to have anything at all in common with their mysterious warehouse.”

“Except for, maybe, the mysterious part?” I shut my eyes determinedly. “You worry about getting us to a secure location; I’ll worry about how this all fits together.” I could tell Andre wanted to argue with me—the pressure of his gaze was palpable—but he didn’t speak. That was nice. I was a tired of being yelled at, in English or otherwise.

First priority: get myself patched up, because as much as I used to believe I was an island, really I was an archipelago at best. I needed help with some things, and putting fresh stitches in my arm was one of them.

Second priority: new transportation, and fast. Something that would fly under the radar, nothing that required me to use identification to purchase or rent it, and roomy. Preferably with tinted windows or—I winced—a big trunk.

Third priority: get the hell out of Chicago, find someplace to lay low for a while, and make some calls. I knew almost nothing about what was going on here, but I had contacts who were experts in, well, everything. I knew shamans. I knew priests. I knew hunters. I knew people who'd dealt with way heavier shit than me over the course of their lives. Possessions, plagues, angry zombie hillbillies—I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen the bite marks, but it had happened. The world was full of specialized knowledge, and I was in a unique position to bargain for it. Almost everyone wanted to know about themselves. Vanity, more than envy or pride, was the real weakness of humanity. The truly selfless were few and far between, and that made my job easier.

About ten minutes later, we pulled into a cul-de-sac populated with identical gray and blue townhomes. Andre and his wife lived in an end unit with a double garage, which the Tesla shared with an enormous old Buick that was somewhere in the process of being restored. As soon as the garage shut, Andre was out, grabbing my duffel from the backseat and, after a moment, gingerly rearranging Soren's limbs into a marginally more comfortable position.

"He's warm," he remarked with surprise.

"I told you he's not dead. Just..."

"In stasis."

"Right."

"Yeah, fine. Get inside, take a right into the kitchen, and do not get blood on my carpet."

I checked my shoes to make sure they were clean before I entered the townhome. It was as generically cozy as I'd imagined, white walls and champagne carpet with

occasional faux-wood accents and baby paraphernalia scattered all over the place. I made my way to the kitchen and sat on a wooden stool, grateful to be off my feet. For a moment, just a moment, I let myself feel all the anxiety that was building in me, all the hopefulness that had been transformed to fresh frustration. I kind of wanted to hit something, but that would just hurt, so I restrained myself and sat, cataloging scents. Coffee grinds in the trashcan, dirty frying pan in the sink that had been used to make eggs, blood...oh right, that was me.

“Hey.” My eyes shot open, and I looked up at Andre, who had a first aid kit in one hand and was looking at me warily. “Cillian. You back?”

“I didn’t know I’d gone anywhere,” I griped.

“You didn’t hear me come in, didn’t hear me ask the question the first time. I thought I’d check before touching you.”

“Always smart.” I went to take the jacket off again, but he waved me down.

“I’ve got scissors for that.” And he did, sturdy paramedic scissors that were dull enough not to cut me but strong enough to slice through a seat belt.

“This was a new suit,” I said sullenly, but I let him cut it off my back.

“Now you know—buy cheap,” Andre said. “I’m doing the shirt too, just hang on.” A moment later he pulled the cuffs over my wrists and then looked at my arm. His mouth tensed. “So. Not your first gunfight recently.”

“And I didn’t see the first one coming any more than I saw the last one,” I replied. “Can you sew me up?”

“This is my civilian med kit, man. I don’t have the stuff for that.”

“Butterfly bandages, then.” I didn’t care, as long as it stopped the bleeding.

“We’re cleaning this first.” He did, and it was excruciating. I barely noticed him take a sliver of glass out of my neck or wipe blood off my face.

“You need to get a hotel room and sleep for a while.”

That roused me out of my stupor quick enough. “No, no time. I need to get Soren out of the city as soon as possible. You might just want to drop your Tesla at a body shop, because it’s likely they’ll try to track it.”

“I know how to hide from people,” Andre said, rather enigmatically. “And I know when someone’s had it, and you’ve had it. You need rest.”

Oh, it was adorable how mother hens just seemed to fall into my life. “I can’t stay here because it’s a danger to you and your family, and I can’t stay in a hotel because I’m carting an unbreathing body around and getting him inside with me would be rather difficult. I need space, is what I need. And”—I took a deep breath—“your car.”

“My what?” Andre looked blankly at me for a long moment before he started swearing. “Oh, fuck no, you’re not taking my Electra, and I don’t care how you beg. You can rent something.”

“No, I can’t, no time. But you can rent something.” I bent over—more than a little woozy, but at least I didn’t fall—and pulled out a roll of cash. “Here. Two grand.” I tried to hand it to Andre, but he just stared at me, so I set it on the counter next to the first aid kit instead. “This should be enough to cover some work on your ride and the cost of a rental for a few days. Tell your wife someone rear-ended you so you had to send it in to the shop, and you let an old army buddy borrow the Buick. It isn’t a great car for someone with a baby, anyway.”

“You’re a goddamn piece of work,” Andre muttered. “Are you serious?”

“Serious as a heart attack. C’mon.” I nudged the cash again. “Take it. I know you know someone who can do that kind of work. They’re just bullet holes. It’s not like the structural integrity of the car is compromised.”

“Jesus Christ.” He cast his gaze up, sighed, and then looked at me again. “I want that car back. She’s a 1975 Buick Electra. I just got the power windows working, and I was about to start on priming her.”

“I’ll get it back to you.”

“Her. You call her Electra, ’cause she’s a lady who’s doing you a favor, carting you and your pasty not-dead guy around.”

“Whatever you say.” He could have asked me to worship his car and I would have looked for an appropriate sacrifice at this point. “Do you mind moving Soren to the trunk?”

Andre threw his hands up in the air.

“What? It’s not like I can do it, and your windows aren’t tinted. The last thing I need is a curious cop catching a glimpse of the backseat.”

“I’ll move him,” Andre said at last. “You get dressed, and for god’s sake, drink some water. You’re dehydrated and you’ve lost too much blood.”

“Sure thing.” Andre left, and I eased myself into a fresh button-down shirt, grabbed a couple of my pills, and headed to the sink. I turned on the faucet and drank straight from the source, washed down my medicine, and wished for something stronger than water. It tasted good, though, like it was filling a void I’d been ignoring, and I

supposed I had. I sat back down and took stock.

I was out of ammunition. I was out a significant amount of cash, although I still had some in reserve. I was healthy enough, but Andre was right—I was running on fumes. I had maybe four, five hours left in me before I crashed unless I took something more stimulating than coffee, and with the meds I was on, I didn't think I could afford to do that. I had the Egilsson family searching for me and I'd potentially compromised my only contact in this city, but I had a car. I had my phone with all of my contacts in it.

And I had Soren, who might not be breathing but was definitely alive. Overall, I'd say the balance was in my favor.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

It took for fucking ever to get out of Chicago. Seriously, I don't know how they even called it all Chicago. It was like, "Oh, the city center!" and then hours' worth of suburbs before the highway suddenly spit me out into farmland. I could smell the cow shit from here, and it was not lovely.

I would stand out like a five-alarm fire in one of these little farming towns, not that I expected the Egilsson family to be on my tail quite yet. Still, Andre was right. I needed to sleep, and that meant I needed to stop for a while. Soren was safe in the trunk—shit, and I hated that he was stuffed back in the trunk, but there really was no good way to explain the functional equivalent of a corpse to someone if they happened to look inside.

I pulled off the highway and headed east, from a double-lane paved road to single lanes, and finally stopped beneath a cottonwood on the side of a dirt road that looked neglected. My arm ached like I'd shoved my fingers directly into the wound and rummaged around in there. I could feel my exhaustion threaten to swamp my brain, but I had a few things to do before I could recline the seat and sleep. I pulled out my phone. Marisol got the first call.

"What on earth is happening with you?" she demanded before I could say a word. "I did a card spread for you, and they were nothing but swords, everything discord and upheaval! There are news reports about a gunfight in a hotel in Chicago. Was that you?"

My heart rate picked up dramatically. "Are there any clear pictures?" One family of maniacs I could probably evade, but my chances went way down if the regular police force got involved.

“No. Not that they’re showing on the TV, at least. What did you do?”

“I got Soren. It was just...a little more complicated than I’d imagined it would be.”

“Cillian...”

“I’m fine. We made it out okay, but the situation now is kind of hard to explain. I need some help.”

“What kind of help?”

She sounded suspicious. I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t ask for help very often, and I wasn’t gracious about it even when it was unavoidable. Andre could attest to that. Still, I didn’t have a choice.

“I need a drop bag, preferably somewhere close to...” I racked my brain for the name of the town behind me. “Bloomington? Or Normal? Or both? Somewhere in the middle of fucking Illinois.”

“You can’t just go buy new bullets like a normal person?”

“Not if my picture is possibly being circulated to cops.”

She sighed. “I’ll talk to Phin about it. You know he’s going to make me cook him corned beef and cabbage for this. I’ll never get the smell out of my curtains.”

“You two got domestic fast.”

“Well, when your only other option for meaningful human contact is an angry young man who steals your Buddhas, you learn to get by with who you’ve got.”

“Oh, right.” I’d almost forgotten the little bronze Buddha figurine I’d taken from her spare room. “Sorry about that. I should have asked.”

“They’re not just there to be decorative, Cillian, they’re protective as well. Now I have to pay Lourdes to come back and renew the spell on that room, and that’s not cheap.”

Yeah, Lourdes was good, but she didn’t do discounts. “I’ll pay you back.”

“At this rate, you’re going to owe more than you can offer,” Marisol grouched. I grinned despite my discomfort.

“No one can offer as much as me.”

“Says the boy who needs my booty call to arrange a drop bag for him.”

I pinched my eyes shut. “Could you refer to him some other way, please? I don’t want to think about the two of you getting it on.”

“Prude, cielito , such a prude. Anything else?”

“Yeah, do you know if Bobby is around?”

“Honey,” she said with a sigh. “It’s still summer, which means Bobby is wandering around bare-ass naked in the desert somewhere, flirting with scorpions and chasing coyotes. He never comes in until September at the earliest.”

“Shit.” Bobby was kind of crazy, but he was also an expert in a lot of the more esoteric lore that I figured was at work here. I didn’t want to call up a Northern European specialist in case they were working with Egilsson, and while I had an almost-priest on speed dial, he also reported to a higher power I didn’t want to share

with just yet.

“Why, what’s going on?”

“I’m not sure yet.” It was too soon to talk about it. I didn’t know enough. I could do some more testing on my own before I got desperate. “I’ll let you know.”

“If you say so,” she said doubtfully. “I’ll talk to Phin and let you know about the drop bag. It’ll probably be tomorrow at the earliest. Do you have a place to stay?”

I looked out the window at the layer of dull gray clouds overhead, feeling soaked in the heat of the afternoon and the stink that I was slowly becoming accustomed to. Electra’s seats were pretty comfortable, though, all things considered.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“All right. Be safe, Cillian.”

“You too.” I hung up on her and checked my messages. One new one from my mother. I opened it up.

It was today’s horoscope. Your esoteric stars! it read. Aries: Today will be a tough balancing act as you’re caught between your aggression and your enthusiasm. Remember to bend with the winds, not resist until you break. Different situations call for different tactics, and what works well with one person may backfire with another. Be the honest and straightforward person that we all know you can be, and no matter what, go with your gut!

Ooooh...kay. Thanks, Mom, for that completely random astrological bullshit. Not that I didn’t see the purpose behind astrology. All sorts of things had power that made absolutely no fucking logical sense, and astrology was one of them. It bothered me,

though, even more than tarot—at least with tarot there was an immediacy, an aspect of it that was tailored just to you. Generalized horoscopes were next to useless, the universe’s idea of shooting craps. Fucking ridiculous, and yet here was mine.

Fine. No Bobby, I could deal with that. I could deal with everything once I’d had a little time to sleep. I reclined Electra’s front seat and let the dizziness and fatigue I’d been repressing roll over me like a wave. It was an odd sensation, the feeling of turning like you were on a spit while lying still. I cracked the window to let in a little breeze, draped one of my hands over my eyes, and tried to ignore the vertigo long enough to fall asleep.

It must have worked, because the next thing I knew, it was twilight and the car was shaking. Like, literally bouncing forward and backward, rocking on its suspension like someone was jumping on the hood. Or—

Fuck, Soren .

“I’m coming!” I called out, fumbling for the keys and almost tripping over my legs as I practically fell out of the car. “I’m coming, hang on, I’m coming!” The sound of pounding against the trunk was intense, so loud I was surprised the metal hadn’t sprung up with dents yet. “Hang on, just let me open it!” It took three tries to get the key into the lock, the car and my hand were both shaking so badly, but I managed eventually and threw the trunk open. “Soren—”

I don’t know what hit me. It could have been feet. Maybe it was a hand—Soren had big hands. Whatever it was, one second I was bent over the trunk, the next I was flying backward. It felt like I was airborne forever, long enough for me to catalog every purple cloud in the sky, long enough for me to feel the creak of impact in my rib cage and wonder if any of them had cracked, long enough to know that hitting the ground was going to hurt . And it did.

I hit with the back of my shoulders, just below my neck. The ground was unexpectedly yielding, but it still knocked the last of my breath out of me and left me gasping, paralyzed with pain. The gun was in the car, with my bag. The gun—fuck the gun, this was Soren ; I wasn't going to shoot him, but what...what...

Standing above me, Soren was tall enough that my blurry vision couldn't quite make out his face. I turned my head and focused on the toe of his shoe: black leather with tiny, meticulous stitching. Handmade, maybe. Definitely too nice to be edged with mud and manure. He bent down, and now I could see him. Weird, how his eyes reflected the clouds when he wasn't even looking at them. Purple, kind of murky and dark...but he had blue eyes. I remembered he had blue eyes.

Soren said something in, well, it had to be Icelandic, but the cadence was weird. Hardly distinguishable as words, more like he was singing it. He repeated it more insistently, and I just shook my head. It hurt to move, but I needed him to know I wasn't his enemy. Didn't he recognize me?

“S?r—” My voice was a thready wheeze. “S'ren.”

“Tú veist hann ?”

“English,” I managed. “I know you—speak it, please—Soren.”

His pale lips thinned as he stared at me. Soren shut his dark eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, they were blue and horribly bloodshot. He stared down like he couldn't see me, his whole body trembling like a leaf in the wind. If I thought he was hard to understand before, that was infinitely preferable to the scream of complete horror that emerged from his throat now.

“Soren!” I reached for him, pain be damned, and he almost fell down into my arms before the scream suddenly cut off. The blue faded back to purple, he straightened up,

and this time when our eyes met, it was with a new understanding on his part.

“ Framsynir ,” he murmured, and then his cold hand touched the base of my throat, just above my collar. His chill spread across me like a blanket, and I felt my heart flutter weakly for a moment before my mind just stopped trying and let me go unconscious.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

I woke up and realized I couldn't feel my arms. It said something about my state of mind that the first thing I thought was, Where is Soren? It was quickly followed by, Oh fuck, what the hell is wrong with my arms?

It took a few seconds for my mind to clear enough that I could figure things out. I was still outside, although the sky was completely dark now, the sun gone, and the moon obscured by cloud cover. I wasn't in the dark, though. The car was about ten feet in front of me, well into the field—how had it gotten there? Had Soren driven it there? Had he dragged it? Either way, the car was facing me, headlights on, so bright it hurt to look at them. I could barely make out the silhouette of a man crouched in front of them, rifling through a bag—my bag.

I tried to move forward and realized what was going on with me. I was tied to the base of the tree. Tied with—I craned my head back to get a glimpse of my wrists—jumper cables. Disassembled jumper cables. They were wrapped tight around my wrists, and I leaned back as close to the tree as I could, groaning when the pins and needles started in my shoulders. Good sign—that was a good sign. Hopefully I hadn't been cutting off my circulation for too long.

“Soren?”

The backlit creature going through my back glanced over at me, the reflective purple sheen of his eyes the only thing clearly visible. “Framsynir,” he said pleasantly, then, “Visionary. That is what you are, isn't it?”

“Ah...no. I'm just a soothsayer.”



“Liar.”

“No,” I said, more than a little desperate. “I’m not lying, that’s one of the words for what I am. Visionary implies things I’m not comfortable with, so please, just soothsayer.”

“Interesting. You’d rather be associated with charlatans than with the greatest of your kind.”

“I’m not that great.”

“Soren thinks you are.”

The pins crept into my elbows. My shoulders ached terribly. “I don’t understand,” I confessed, gritting my teeth and trying to think. C’mon, think —what could I do to turn this to my advantage? What could anyone do? I needed information, I needed to be interesting but harmless. I needed to make this whatever-it-was listen to me. I needed him to talk. “What are you, if you’re not Soren?”

“I’m his fate.” The bright white of his teeth shined in the yellow glare of the headlights. “You saw that, didn’t you? It’s why he gave himself to me so sweetly.”

“You’re possessing him.”

“I am him,” the creature corrected, abandoning my bag and coming to sit in front of me. He blocked some of the light so I could stop squinting and focus on seeing. “Let me help you understand,” the creature said and leaned forward until those purple eyes were only inches from mine, and I couldn’t help looking deep. I saw—

Deepness, darkness, tendrils of power spread through rocky soil, boulders and a pond and a small grove of trees. Not the greatest of my kind, no, but this place is mine, and

they won't move me, not the great ones, not the Christians, not this family that dares to lay claim to me. They won't. They won't. I hear the machines coming closer, but I won't be moved. I would rather perish with my land than be erased like some minor wight.

The berserker offers me a deal, offers me a new path, possibly even a new life—room to expand, a human body to exploit, a spirit to join mine and renew me for centuries to come. His madness...it tastes delicious, and so does the boy, sweet and brave and oh, so helpless with his love. Love. I think I like it. I think I want to know more. That's why you're still alive, seer. Thief. Out !

I was cast out of the creature's mind as abruptly as a bullet from a gun, leaving me choking on a residue of freezing water, decaying vegetation, and harsh, inhuman power that wasn't meant to sit steady inside a person. How Soren was containing it, I had no idea. He should have been dead from it. He should have...

"Not possession," the creature continued. "Soren is mine . He is become me, and I him. Anything less than that would never work."

"No," I gasped. "I can see that."

"I know you can. You're smart, soothsayer. Powerful. And you have a hold on Soren that not even his family can claim. You're interesting to me."

"Fantastic."

It ignored my sarcasm, or maybe it didn't recognize it. "Do you know what I am now?"

I did , actually. Months of road tripping with my mother had led me to burn through a lot of books as a kid. Since we kind of had a personal stake in mythology and magic,

I'd gone through a whole stack of Bulfinch and Edith Hamilton. I'd done my best to forget it all when I was older, but some things had stuck.

“Landv?ttir.”

“So smart.” The beast within Soren smiled again. “You know that that means?”

“You’re a...a spirit. You live in a particular place, and you protect it.”

“Close enough. My place was threatened, and ólafur Egilsson came to me and made a deal. He would save me, sacrifice for me, and gift me with beauty. In return I would save him from the geas the gods laid on his family. Once our deal is complete, we will be entwined, his line linked to me forever.”

There was a pause, like Soren was waiting for me to catch something. I racked my aching head, trying to ignore the burning sensation in my forearms as I went over his words.

“But—” The catch, where was the catch? “But you’re not entwined, are you? The deal isn’t finished, because you’re here.”

“ Very good.” He nodded. “The bargain is incomplete. My home is moved, but not yet rooted. I have been promised beauty, but all I see is the same thing over and over—men, weapons, and warehouse walls.” Soren frowned. “Dull. And my sacrifice yearns for something that tears at our bond, keeps him unquiet and unsettled. That thing is you.”

“Are you offering me a deal?” I asked, barely breathing. A deal for—what? Soren’s fate? A chance to undo what the landv?ttir and his father had done to him? Or something more subtle? Either way, I would take it. I didn’t exactly have a lot of options.

“Yes. Swear to provide me with three things, and I will give you a chance to prove your offer is better than that of ólafur Egilsson. If you succeed, I will join with you and help you defeat your enemies. If you fail, I will return to my original supplicant. And kill you, I suppose,” he added nonchalantly. “Even though it would distress Soren. I want my sacrifice to be content, but I will settle for overwhelming him if need be.”

Well, shit. There wasn't much I could say to that, but there were some things I just couldn't offer up either—things I would rather die than experience again.

I swallowed dryly. “What three things do you want?”

“First, a home, and the means to root me there.” The purple flared in Soren's eyes. “That means ensuring there are no native spirits there to fight me for it, because I refuse to displace another of my kind to steal their home. That would be dishonorable.”

Funny he was worried about that, but I could roll with it. “Okay, so you need land.”

“And the magic to root me,” he reminded me.

“Okay, land and a shaman.” Or something. “I can do that. What else?”

“Something to occupy my time. Something more than sitting and waiting and being ordered about. I am v?ttir , stronger than any human, no matter their magic. I will not be your hound, any more than I would for ólafur Egilsson. He underestimated my obedience. Don't make the same mistake.”

“Okay, so...entertainment.” Whatever the fuck that was supposed to mean. What, was I supposed to get the spirit a Wii and let him go to town? I'd come up with something. “I can definitely do that.”

“Finally, you will provide me with a sacrifice to prove the strength of your commitment to our bargain. Someone meaningful, someone close to you.”

Well, fuck . I had no idea how to do that. I didn’t want to do that. There was no way I could get down with sacrificing anyone else to this fucking thing, but right now my options for living if I disagreed were exactly zero, so...

“Yes. Fine.” I had to add, “That’s what Soren was to you? Egilsson’s sacrifice?”

“Yes. An imperfect one, because he was motivated not by love for his father, but by love for you. His love is what has disposed me to spare you, so do not mock his sacrifice.”

“I’m not,” I said numbly. God, I wasn’t. “Can I speak to Soren?”

“It distressed him to emerge from his sleep,” the landv?ttir demurred, as if it wasn’t the thing that was fucking distressing Soren so much. “Perhaps later, if you earn it. If you fulfill your promises before Egilsson does. Now, do we have a bargain?”

“Yes.” Yeah, we had a bargain. I’d been in tighter places—not lately, but I had. I could get through this. I’d find the loopholes. I’d figure this out. In the meantime, I just had to survive a terminally curious, body-snatching Icelandic spirit who wanted to fucking road-trip with me. “You’ve got a deal.”

“As do you.” The thing in Soren’s body leaned forward and kissed me, his lips cold but somehow refreshing, reminding me that I was parched. “Sealed.”

“Great.” I tugged uselessly at my bonds. “Do you think you could let me go, then?”

“Certainly.” Soren—it was using his body, I had to get used to calling it that or I’d slip up along the road—reached around my back and with one firm yank, pulled the

jumper cables in two. He unwound the loops securing my wrists, and I almost collapsed with the sudden pain.

“And a boon,” he murmured. “To show good faith.” He set his hands on my shoulders and ran them slowly down my arms, making my flesh crawl with cold. After he brushed over my fingertips and released them, though, the pain was gone. All the pain was gone, even the pain from my bullet wound. I pulled my sleeve back and stared dumbly at the unbroken skin.

“That’s...quite a boon.”

“Yes,” Soren agreed. “A gift for my love’s beloved.”

I stared at him. “You love him?”

“He is mine. Of course I love him.”

“But he was screaming.”

Soren shrugged. “I never said it was easy to be mine.”

Holy shit. I’d made a deal with a psychopathic spirit from the black fucking lagoon. “We need to go,” I managed at last.

“Of course. One moment.” He reached behind himself and handed over my—my phone? And it was on?

“What did you do?” I asked as I looked at the screen. The connection was live. “Who is this?”

“ólafur Egilsson.”

“He’s been listening in this whole time?” I exclaimed.

“Of course. It wouldn’t be fair, otherwise. He must know the terms of the competition.” Soren grinned at me. “I’ll wait in the car.”

I barely restrained the urge to throw the phone at him as he walked away. I should just hang up; I should turn it off and take the battery out and get rid of it, but...

I turned up the sound and lifted it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Cillian Kelly.” Oh, I knew that voice. He always sounded so reasonable, just before he ripped your heart out. “You stole my son.”

“If he didn’t want to be stolen, he wouldn’t have let me take him,” I said, forcing myself to speak. “You should have taken better care of him.”

“So I see. I’ll have to remedy that. I suggest you run, boy. Don’t mess with powers you don’t understand. If you leave now, I might not hunt you down.”

It was too late for more bargains. “Nah, I think I’ll give beating you a shot first.”

“If that’s the way you want it.” Egilsson sounded more amused than anything. “In that case, enjoy the rest of your very short life.” He hung up. I stared at the phone for a long moment.

Beeeeepbeepbeep! The blare of the horn jolted me to life. Soren was bored. Great.

I’d be lucky to survive the rest of the night.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

It should have taken about eighteen hours to drive from Illinois to the tiny town of Santa Rosa, New Mexico, home of the Blue Hole and, occasionally, Bobby Garcia. Bobby was the man I needed to see about nature magic, so New Mexico was where we had to go. I'd trawl the whole fucking desert if I had to in order to find him. One really long day, maybe two if we were wasting time sleeping and eating, and then we'd be there.

Ha-fucking-ha.

"You should let me drive," Soren said after midnight, once the highway traffic had cleared a bit. We were headed south toward Missouri—it wouldn't be long before we crossed the border and hopefully made it that much harder for Papa Egilsson and his crew of vicious offspring to find us.

"Do you know how to drive?" I asked warily.

"Soren knows. I have familiarity with all of his skills."

"Yeah?" I remembered playing Mario Kart with Soren in the hotel room. He'd crashed on every other lap. "Is he any good at it?"

"He's never harmed anyone but himself with it."

Well, that sounded ominous. "What does that mean exactly?"

"Soren has totaled four motor vehicles since he began driving. One was a motorcycle," the landv?ttir added helpfully. "He broke a collarbone, two bones in his



right hand, and five ribs. Overall—not all at the same time.”

“He’s a menace on the roads, then.” I glanced at Soren. I had promised him entertainment, and if driving was something that would fulfill the requirement... “Do you know about cops?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then you know it’s important that we don’t get pulled over. We don’t want them to notice this car, we don’t want a ticket, and we don’t want to be reported. Got it?”

Soren smiled politely. “Got it.”

Was that chill crawling down my spine a premonition, or just plain old fear? “Fine.” I pulled over onto the side of the highway. “Switch with me.” We each got out and changed sides, and I shut the passenger door with a distinct sense of foreboding. I couldn’t see my own future, and I couldn’t see Soren’s, not with his body under the landv?ttir’s control, but that didn’t mean my talent wasn’t working. It just meant it had nothing to focus on. “Shit.”

“What?”

“This is a friend’s car. Be good to it, okay?”

“The friend who helped you capture me?” Soren asked. “A brave man, but a foolish one.” He revved the engine, revved it hard. I pulled my seat belt on as fast as I could. “Brave because he stood by you in battle, foolish because he knows little about you and even less about me. It was foolish of him to entrust you with his vehicle.”

“I sort of made him give it to me.”

“You believe he had no choice in the matter?” I could smell burning oil, see smoke start to rise from the hood, and still Soren didn’t let off. “That free will doesn’t exist?”

“Pretty much, yeah. Look, can you just go ?”

“Humanity is shrouded by a veil of perception,” Soren said conversationally, as if our car wasn’t about to catch on fire. “Free will, predestination...none of it really matters to mankind. Belief is largely dependent on circumstances. You and your kind, framsynir, you cut through the veil on occasion to see more clearly, but your picture is still incomplete, influenced by your own natural solipsism. I think it would be good for you to let go of the idea that you, more than anyone else, have control of your own life.” Soren grinned at me, teeth glowing in the moonlight. “Because it simply isn’t true, Cillian.”

The Buick Electra leapt forward with a hellish squeal, all that pent-up energy finally let loose. The tires probably left three layers of rubber on the asphalt as we peeled out, going from zero to sixty in way too short a time. And Soren didn’t stop at sixty.

“Soren,” I managed once my heart had settled back into my chest. “We can’t afford to get pulled over, slow down!”

“That’s a funny thing to say,” Soren replied, still grinning as he swerved around the few other cars on the road.

“Why the fuck is it funny?”

“Because you say it as though it should mean something to me.” We surged past a BMW, whose driver looked at us like we were insane. Which, okay, was fair. “I am the object of a competition. I am a prize to be won, and just because I’m with you right now doesn’t mean I’m going to stay with you if I’m not satisfied by your

performance.”

“You stayed with Egilsson for two years!”

Soren shrugged. “His magic compelled me. If you hadn’t found this body untethered, I wouldn’t have been able to leave with you. Now that a new bargain has been struck, his hold on me is weaker, but yours isn’t strong yet. Nor will it be until you fulfill the deal.”

“So...” I saw where this was going, and I didn’t like it. “You can leave me at any time. You could run right back to him and leave me high and dry.”

“I don’t want to. I want Soren to be happy. You would make him happy, but I will not be disrespected or judged as though I’m human.”

“You’re wearing a human body!”

Soren shrugged. “What’s the saying? Never judge a book by its cover.”

A faint wail started up behind us. I glanced back and saw the flashing lights of a police cruiser coming up fast. “Fuck. Pull over.”

“No.” Soren pulled the wheel back and forth, weaving us all over the road. We had to look like the drunkest car in creation. “This is fun!”

“If you’re not going to pull over, at least lose the cop.” I didn’t want to get into a car chase, but it didn’t look like we had much of a choice.

“Tempting, but no,” Soren said. Suddenly he slammed on the brakes and pulled the wheel hard to the right. The Electra spun out, doing donuts down the highway. I clutched the dashboard and the edge of my seat, almost but not quite sick enough to

throw up, and watched as we headed for the concrete retaining wall. Shit shit shit —

We stopped maybe two inches from the wall, facing the wrong direction. Soren beamed at me like a mad thing. “I love driving,” he confided to me. The air turned red and blue as the cop pulled up, sirens still blaring. At least he didn’t get out with his gun pointed at us.

He’d have to come to my side of the vehicle; the driver’s side was blocked by the wall. I’d get a chance to talk to him first. A chance to manipulate him. I’d have to do it if I wanted to keep us from getting arrested, because that was what the look on the guy’s face promised.

I turned to Soren. “Keep quiet.”

“Are you going to use your magic on him?”

He sounded way too excited about that prospect. “I’m going to have to,” I snapped. “Now shut the fuck up and let me talk.”

The cop rapped hard on my window, his flashlight illuminating the interior of the car. I rolled the window down. “Hi, Officer.”

“I assume you know just how fast you boys were going down that last stretch,” he said flatly, not looking at me but at Soren. I needed to catch his attention.

“Yeah, sorry, my cousin’s not from here. He’s still getting the hang of driving on the right side of the road.”

“This wasn’t a traffic violation, sir. This was reckless endangerment.” He straightened up. “Both of you get out of the car.”

“Officer, if I could just—”

“Get out, turn, and face the car, hands on the hood, now!”

I sighed and glanced back at Soren. “Stay here,” I mouthed. He nodded agreeably. Great, now he was obedient. I opened my door and got out, but instead of turning around, I held my hands up and looked the cop in the eye. “If you’d just let me explain.” We were too far apart for a good capture, but I was starting to get images now, bits and pieces of his future. Grief that big was easy to read.

His hand went to his sidearm. “Turn around!”

“Shouldn’t you be home with your mother? I get that you need to work, but leaving her with a hospice nurse the night before she dies...that’s just cruel.”

“What? She—what?” Flustered, good, I could work with that.

“Your mother. The Alzheimer’s, the hospice nurse, you bringing her to stay with you for the last few weeks of her life... What use was it if you aren’t going to stay with her?” I took a careful step closer, very conscious of the whirl of cars as they passed to the left of us, slowing down to rubberneck.

“It’s the smell, isn’t it?” I said as I got a better view. “That sour, dry smell. Kind of like dust and urine mixed together. You hate it, can’t bear it, in fact. When your mom was in the nursing home, it was okay because they bathed her all the time. You could visit and she smelled fresh as a daisy, but now that’s your job and you can’t even do it. The hospice nurse is only there at night, but you’d rather let your mother lay in her own filth all day than change the pad and wipe her clean.”

“That’s...that’s not true,” the cop stuttered and then recovered. “I don’t know who you think you are, but—”

“I’m not Mary Henley’s eldest son. You are, and Mary is dying in your living room, right now. And you know the worst part? All this work you did to make her love you, years and years of it, and you were so bad at it that your mom favored Jimmy all this time. Little Jimmy, who you hate.” Oh, how he hated that favored son, favored by both parents even when he was the one who’d gone into law enforcement like their father.

“You’ll split the property on the lake, but she left him all her stocks, the ones you aren’t even supposed to know about but you do, and they’re all going to Jimmy. A year from now, he’ll be sitting pretty on vacation in Aruba, and you’ll still be plain old Officer John Henley, one step up from traffic but never the detective you thought you’d be by this time in your life. No wife, no kids, and now no parents.” I stepped close enough to whisper into his ear, “Your mother just died, Officer Henley. My condolences.”

I could hear his personal phone start to buzz somewhere on his body. I moved back as he reached for it, completely lost now, brought to the edge of his sanity by my cruelty.

“Hello?”

I didn’t want to hear the rest of the conversation. I got back into the car. “Happy now?”

Soren wasn’t beaming anymore. Instead he leaned over and kissed my cheek, cold and tender. “You’re a worthy competitor, Cillian. Thank you.” He kissed me again. “I’ll move to the back. You can drive now.”

In front of me, Officer Henley had just sat down on the hood of his cruiser, one hand on his cell phone, the other covering his eyes as he sobbed. Worthy. I didn’t feel very worthy of anything. I wished I could make it better for him, but the longer we

delayed, the likelier it was that reinforcements would show up.

I got into the driver's seat, turned us around, and drove off into the night.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

The smart thing to do would have been to keep going, in line with my original plan. After what happened with the cop, though, my eyes burned like my body was trying to cry and my magic just wouldn't let it. The guilt didn't abate after two hours, and I wasn't about to hand the keys over to Soren again, so I pulled off the highway at the next hole-in-the-wall motel I saw.

"Why are we stopping?"

I didn't say anything, just got out of the car and slammed the door shut. I wasn't in the mood to talk to that fucking dick right now. I headed into the tiny front office, where a boy who couldn't be more than eighteen looked up from his video game a little incredulously.

"Seriously?"

"I need a room for a few hours."

He wrinkled his nose. "Dude, we're not that kind of hotel."

I sighed. I was so done with dealing with smartasses for one night. "I need a room. Period. Full fucking stop. How much?"

"We have to charge you for the full night."

I put both my hands on the counter and leaned in. "How. Much?"

The kid didn't intimidate easily. "Twenty-nine ninety-nine. Hey, why is your car



bouncing up and down?”

I didn't even turn around. I didn't want to know. “Because there's a freak with a short attention span in it.” I passed him thirty bucks. “Key.”

He rummaged behind the counter for a key. “Look, whatever your buddy is on, don't let him shoot up in the room, okay? We had a heroin addict miss a vein last week, and she got blood all over the walls. Mom doesn't like it when she has to wear a face mask to clean the rooms.” He handed me the key, attached to a battered plastic tag. “Number eighteen, last one on the left.”

“Thanks.” I turned around, and sure enough, Soren was sitting on the back of the car and bouncing it up and down. I throttled back the urge to murder him. It wouldn't take, and I'd probably just die myself as a result, but—yeah.

“Knock it off,” I said as I rejoined him outside. The lingering warmth of the day had finally petered out, and I was chilly now.

“I've seen video where cars do this, except those ones leapt much higher into the air,” Soren said, still bouncing.

“Those cars are specialized. All you're doing right now is ruining my friend's shocks. So stop.” He stopped, to my surprise, and I reached in and got my duffel bag out of the back. “Our room is this way.”

“We're getting a room?” Soren smiled brightly. “Are we going to have sex now?”

“Oh my god.” I wasn't equipped to deal with this right now, I just wasn't. It was too much. “No. Not going to happen.” I stalked off toward the room.

Soren trailed along behind me. “Why not?”

“Because,” I said as I inserted the key in the lock. The edges were worn down so far they were barely enough to get the pins to move, but it worked eventually. I stepped inside and said a silent thanks for the strong smell of bleach in the room. Bleach was better than a lot of what I’d smelled in other places like this.

“Because why?”

I turned on Soren, who was shutting the door with a look of distaste on his face. Apparently bleach wasn’t so comforting to him. “What are you, five years old?”

He looked at me, and his expression went still as misty purple rose up in his eyes. I froze. “Older than you,” he said, an edge of hollowness back in his voice. “Older than all of your short-lived kind. I was old when humans first stepped foot on our land of fire and ice. Consider that, as you seek to chastise me.”

I wasn’t going to apologize, but I couldn’t afford to be an asshole either. I tamped down on both my fear and my aggravation. “We’re not going to have sex because I don’t want to do that with you.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No.”

“You’ve had sex with this body numerous times.”

I shook my head. “That was with Soren, not you.”

“We’re the same person now.”

I dropped my duffel at the foot of the bed—the double bed, goddammit—no twins here. “Not to me.”

“You aren’t attracted to this body anymore?”

“Not when Soren isn’t in it.” I felt filthy, covered with the remnants of too many cold sweats and a gritty layer of dirt. Every muscle ached, despite Soren’s little burst of healing magic after the whole tying me to a tree thing. If I didn’t clean up soon, I wouldn’t be able to, I’d just collapse onto the bed and sleep for way too long. “I’m going to shower. I’ll be back out in a few minutes.” I grabbed sweatpants and a T-shirt and headed into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I didn’t bother to lock it. That wouldn’t help anything.

The water was lukewarm at best, and the little bar of soap had obviously been used before and stuck back inside the wrapper, but I didn’t care. I scrubbed every inch of myself, rubbing hard at where the bullet wound used to be, just to see if I could still feel something of it, anything.

In less than a day, my entire life had been turned upside down. I was a contestant in a game I was in no way sure I could win. I had, at best, half a plan that relied on people doing stuff I didn’t know how to compel them to do yet. And I was traveling with the body of a man I loved and the soul of a spirit sociopath. Life didn’t just suck, it was ready to grind me down into the cracks on the sidewalk and leave me there to rot.

I cupped my flaccid penis, thinking about Soren for a moment. There was nothing, not even a stir of interest. Too tired. Too sad. Too wrong. I stayed in the shower until the water went cold, putting off my exit as long as I could. When it was no longer possible to delay, I dressed and went back out into the room, expecting another discussion, maybe a fight, about why I wasn’t going to give in to Soren’s very poor seductions.

Instead, I found him lying on his back on the bed, so still at first I thought the landv?ttir might have left the body. But no, his lips were moving, although no sound emerged. I sat down on the edge of the bed and watched, warily, until Soren’s eyes

opened and he looked at me.

“I’m singing him a lullaby,” he explained in a soft voice. “He sleeps, for the most part. It’s easier on him, even though the water is soft. He dislikes the cold of it, so I don’t wake him to experience it unless I must. But some things can seep through, and singing is one of them.”

I turned out the lamp and then stretched out on the bed next to him, keeping a little distance between us. “What’s the lullaby?”

“It’s called *Móeir mín í kví, kví* . It’s about a mother who couldn’t take care of her child, so she left him outside to die. Later, the child comes back to haunt her and offers her the rags he died in to clothe herself.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“It’s traditional. Are the lullabies you’re familiar with any better?” Soren gently prodded. “When the bough breaks, the baby will fall... That’s a song about a child perishing, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure.” Maybe it was, I’d never really thought about it. “What else can seep through?”

“Only the things I choose to let in. Comforts. Sounds that he enjoys. The warmth of another body. He misses it greatly.”

“I don’t want to have sex with you.”

“Which is very peculiar, but I suppose I can’t force such a thing,” Soren said. I felt suddenly, drastically relieved. “A reluctant gift is worse than no gift at all. But if you lie with me here, he’ll feel your presence. If you wrap me in your arms, he’ll feel

your embrace. This is no trick,” he added. “When we’re quiescent, the bond is stronger. You will comfort him as much as me.”

The idea of anything I did really being a comfort to the landv?ttir sat a little odd with me, but I could at least do this for Soren. “Roll over on your side,” I said, and he obeyed. I scooted closer, clenched my jaw for a moment as I wrapped my head around what I was going to do, and then moved in to spoon Soren from shoulder to calf. His body was cold to touch, but I rested my head against the back of his neck and put my arm over his waist because if I was going to do this, I was going to do it right.

I held him close, and a moment later, Soren’s hand found mine. He laced our fingers together, and I let him, because the move was familiar, something he’d done with me before everything had become so terrible.

We lay silent for a few minutes, and my fatigue started to get the better of me. I was almost asleep when he said, “I didn’t think that using your magic like that would displease you so. You’ve done far worse.”

It was an apology and a rebuke all in one, because the thing I’d done that was worse lay in my arms right now. I’d consigned Soren to this fate. It didn’t matter how hard I’d regretted it later, I’d still done it. I’d messed with fate for selfish reasons, and this was the result. It was my fault, my responsibility, and I had to make it right.

“I’m trying to change,” I said at last. “I’m trying to be better.”

“Humans like Soren are rare. The vast majority are motivated by their own betterment, not the betterment of their fellows. You’ve already proven to be the first type. Why fight against your nature?”

I didn’t want to think about it. I was tired of talking. “Go to sleep,” I mumbled

against the nape of his neck. “Just go to sleep.”

Soren didn’t speak for the rest of the night.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

When I woke up, Soren was gone. My first instinct was to run out and check the parking lot, because if he'd abandoned me after the fiasco that was last night, I didn't know what I'd do. Die, probably, after a lot of melodramatic running and screaming. Nothing about that thought appealed, so I closed my eyes again, took a deep breath, and ran my hand over the other half of the bed. Still noticeably cool. Okay, that was good. He hadn't been gone long.

I opened my eyes and sat up, carefully not letting myself freak out yet. I checked for the car keys—there they were, right where I'd left them on my duffel bag. I couldn't hear the shower going and the bathroom door was open, but if he'd gone out, he probably hadn't gone far. Maybe he was hungry. Shit, now that I thought about it, I was hungry. The last time I'd eaten anything was...yesterday, late morning. Lunch with Andre. It felt like a hundred years ago already.

I eased myself to my feet, expecting to feel more fragile than I did. Last night had been—I didn't really know what to think about it. It had been intense. Painful. Sad. Mostly sad, and if I thought about it too much, I'd just end up feeling guilty, and not only over Soren. I knew exactly what Officer Henley was doing right now, and it wasn't pleasant. I did feel a bit better after ostensibly giving Soren some comfort, but any pleasantness was fleeting. And that had to change.

Fuck this. Fuck being down and out; fuck the nerves; fuck the worry . I was a goddamn seer. I was the son of a woman who had manipulated an entire government into freeing her. I was primed to succeed . I needed to leave behind my doubts and jump into this feet-first, or I would lose.

Number one thing on the agenda: get decent and get some food. Number two: get

moving, but mindfully. I'd always hated that word—it was the sort of thing Marisol would throw out every now and then when she was in a particularly new-agey mindset, but right now, it seemed pretty cogent. I needed to be mindful of Soren most of all. I mean, yes, mindful of his vengeful relatives too, but if I couldn't hang on to the landv'ttir on my own, all of my problems became purely academic because I'd probably be dead. So. Bathroom, clothes, find Soren, get us some food, and get out of here. We'd make it to Santa Rosa when we made it.

I put on jeans and a T-shirt, covered my more distinctive tattoos with my suit jacket, the only part of the getup that had mostly survived the carnage of yesterday, and headed for the office. I hadn't looked too closely at the kid who'd checked us in last night, but I'd seen enough to get a glimpse of what he spent most of his time on.

My hunch was correct. Soren was there, sitting cross-legged on the grimy floor in yesterday's clothes, dual-playing with the kid as they shot up purple aliens on a screen that was way too small to be good for this.

“The one on the left, the left. Switch guns!” the kid insisted.

Soren switched to something that shot grenades and fired.

“Better. You've gotta be ready to change things up, otherwise you'll be overwhelmed. I can't believe you've never played this before.”

“Me neither.” Soren seemed to be enjoying himself. He looked over at me as I approached and grinned. Apparently we were moving on from the trauma of last night without another word. I was absolutely fine with that. “You and I haven't played this game. Why not?”

“I think it's too new for us to have played it.”



“It came out last year,” the kid scoffed. “That’s not new. And by the way, if you’re not out by ten, we’re charging you for another day.”

It was already nine forty-five. Wow. We—at least, me—had slept a lot. “I’ll go load up the car and get the key.” I left with only a tiny sigh of relief at having found Soren safe and sound and headed back to the room. I stuffed my clothes into the duffel bag, silently promised myself I would get some new gear soon, made sure the weapons were secure, and then...

God, I wanted to use my phone. Apart from the fact that it had GPS and I could look up directions on it and a zillion other useful little things, I felt kind of naked without it. I was cut off from my network, my community. I couldn’t turn the thing on without worrying about it being traced by Papa Egilsson, though. So that meant I was stuck with finding a payphone, if those even existed anymore, or borrowing someone else’s phone, which came with a certain amount of risk attached for the person I was borrowing from. For all I knew, Egilsson could track Soren remotely with magic, no need for technology, but I didn’t have to make his job any easier on him.

Payphones it was. Which meant I needed a way to occupy Soren while I made some calls, which meant that I really hoped he ate food. I threw my stuff in the car and went back to the front desk, where the two of them were still playing.

“We’ve got to go,” I told Soren, who frowned at me. “I’ll buy you a Switch, okay?”

“When?”

“After we get something to eat.” I turned to look at the kid. “Is there a decent diner in this town?”

“There’s a Denny’s two blocks that way.” He pointed west. I felt my lips purse involuntarily.

“Is there anything better?”

The kid raised an eyebrow at me. “Have you seen this place?”

Good point. “Denny’s it is.” I expected an argument from Soren, but he stood up without any prompting and left the office without bothering to say good-bye.

“Weird guy,” the kid said.

“You have no idea.” I handed the key over. “If anyone asks, we were never here.”

“Who would ask?”

“Hopefully no one.”

“I was wrong,” the kid muttered. “You’re both equally weird.”

He had a point. I left and joined Soren in the Electra. It started smoothly enough, despite the hell we’d put it through in the past eighteen hours. “Are you a breakfast person?” I asked him as I backed out of the parking lot and onto the road.

“I don’t need to eat much.”

“Does that mean you don’t like Belgian waffles?” There was the Denny’s, yellow and red and gross all over. I tended not to like places like this because I’d eaten at way too many of them as a kid, and living with Marisol had spoiled me. On the other hand, they were cheap and plentiful and, more importantly, there was a payphone on the sidewalk just in front of it.

“I’ve never had a Belgian waffle.”

“You’re in for a treat, then.” I parked, and we got out. “Unless eating makes you sick, in which case, we should avoid this place.”

“It’s not a problem for me; it just isn’t a vital necessity like it is for you,” Soren said as we walked into the restaurant. There were probably twenty booths and tables, and only two of them were occupied. The hostess/waitress, a bored-looking woman with dark skin and bright red lipstick, showed us to a table and handed over menus.

“Coffee?” she intoned.

“Yeah, with lots of cream.” She left, and I found the waffles in the menu and pointed them out to Soren. “If you like sweets, these are indulgent. If you don’t, they’re grotesque.”

“Like so many human pastimes,” Soren said. “Do you think I’ll like it?”

I shrugged. “We won’t know until you try it.”

He looked at me curiously. “You seem much better today.”

“I got a little perspective, I guess. A little distance from the stuff that bothered me.”

“And that’s enough for you to let it all go?”

I laughed a little, wondering if my Soren remembered how violent I’d sometimes been during my awful dreams. “No, I don’t tend to let things go. I hold onto them even when I don’t want to, but in this case, it isn’t too hard. I’m trying to win this competition, after all.”

“Very true.” Soren nodded decisively. “Good. Since you’re in the mood to discover things that amuse me, I want to go here.” He handed me a thin pamphlet.

I stared at the roller coaster on the front of it. “Six Flags St. Louis?”

He seemed captivated by the image. “I’ve never been on one of those. I imagine it’s like being in a bolt of lightning.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Randall said he thought I would enjoy it.”

“Randall?”

“The child with the game I like.”

How much had Soren gotten done while I’d been sleeping? If I wasn’t careful, I’d wake up tomorrow and he’d be demanding cocaine and a Maserati to sniff it off of. I’d been to a party where that had been a theme once, actually. Fucking Vegas.

“You want to go to an amusement park?”

He tapped the pamphlet. “This one.”

Well, fuck. At least it was on the way. “Um...all right, we can do that.”

Soren beamed at me. “Good!”

Any more revelations were put off by the return of the waitress, who set down two cups of coffee and a little pot of cream and said, “What do you want to eat?”

“A Belgian waffle,” Soren said immediately.

“You want the Slam, or just the waffle?”

“What’s the Slam?”

The Slam was the waffle, butter, syrup, plus two eggs, bacon, and sausages. It was the sort of enormous catch-all breakfast that satisfied when you were getting over a hangover. Soren got all of that, plus whipped cream and strawberries for the waffle. I ordered two eggs, toast, and hash browns. I was hungry, but not that hungry.

The cook must have been bored too, because our breakfast came in less than five minutes. Soren took the first bite slowly, like he wasn’t quite sure what he’d gotten himself into, but then he swallowed and smiled.

“This is delicious!”

“Glad you like it. Get ready to say hello to the wonder of the sugar coma.” I ate my own breakfast as quickly as I could and then got up. “I have a few calls to make. I’ll be right back.” I didn’t think he even noticed, he was so focused on his waffle. I got change for a five and headed to the payphone.

My first call should have been to Phin, but instead I found myself dialing my mother’s number. She didn’t pick up, of course. I hadn’t expected her to. Instead I got the familiar beep of her voice mail. “Hey. I got your text. I...have no idea if I’m doing this right or not. I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into, starting on this.” I glanced back at the restaurant, where I could see Soren through the glass, plowing through what looked like his second waffle.

“I’m trying to do the right thing.” I paused, fighting to fit the awkward words into my reluctant mouth. “If I can’t, if I completely fail at this, then...I don’t know, maybe you should think about coming back down to the rest of the world?” My mother had plenty of reasons for keeping to herself, but if I was out of the picture, there’d be one less. “Bye.” I hung up and shook my head. Brilliant conversationalist, me. I put in more coins and dialed up Phin.

He picked up on the second ring. “If this is another telemarketer, I don’t want any of what you’re selling. I don’t need any of what you’re peddling, and if you don’t put me on your ruddy no-call list, I’ll hunt you down, hang you up by your ankles, and skin you alive.”

“I can’t imagine why they’d want to call you, you’re so fucking unpleasant,” I told him.

“Cillian. This about the drop bag?”

“Yeah.” Sort of, mostly. That was all that mattered to Phin, which was refreshing. I liked not having to justify every decision like I would with Marisol. “Can your friend get it to St. Louis?”

“Aye. Standard equipment?”

“I need a new phone in there. The old one’s compromised. Make it two, actually. And a handheld gaming system. And fresh underwear.”

There was a moment of silence. “How about I have him buy you diapers as well, since you’re clearly an infant?” Phin asked sourly.

“How about I tell Marisol the cologne she likes so much on you is actually a bottle of your mother’s perfume?” I retaliated. “Those older scents are so ambiguous, huh?”

“Fine, you bastard.” There was no real heat in his voice. “Where in St. Louis?”

I sighed. “Does your friend know where the Six Flags is?”

“Six Flags?” Phin repeated. “The theme park?”

“That’s the one.”

The silence was a little longer this time. “I don’t need to know,” Phin muttered at last. “He’ll be there. Look for a rainbow-colored beater with a decal of a mustang on the hood.”

And I was the child here? “Um...okay.”

“Don’t cast stones, Cillian. How long before you’re there?”

Given that I desperately didn’t want to get pulled over again? “Say two, two and a half hours.”

“Fine. I’ll let him know. Call Marisol once you’ve got a new phone.” Phin ended the call on that note, and I left the payphone in a slightly better mood. Lone wolfing it: never again. Not when I had willing—or at least mostly willing—friends who could step in to lend a hand. Thinking I could handle everything by myself was the root of a very deep problem with me, and I needed a reminder every now and then that no, I wasn’t a fucking superhero and it was okay to get help. Not that I wasn’t racking up a lot of debts in my ledger—I knew Andre was going to take the repairs for his car out of my hide—but that was better than failure.

I headed back into Denny’s and interrupted Soren in the middle of what had to be his third waffle. The waitress hadn’t left, just stared at him like she couldn’t quite figure him out. Was he a student getting ready to crash after cramming for a test? A tweaker

who'd been up all night on drugs? Maybe someone with an eating disorder, or just a guy with a ridiculous metabolism?

"Check, please," I said. She nodded and finally walked off, and I turned back to Soren, who was licking whipped cream off his fork. "I guess you like waffles, then."

"They're delicious," he said. "I could eat them every day."

Nudge nudge, wink wink... "We can probably work that out, but you're going to have to explain to Soren where his waistline went when this is all said and done."

The landv?ttir shook his head. "That won't be a problem. Human food doesn't affect me in such a way, and Soren doesn't need it anymore." He stuffed the last quarter of a waffle straight into his mouth.

The waitress dropped our bill of at just that moment, naturally. She cocked her head and asked, "Y'all cosplaying or something?"

"Yes," I said absently, glancing at the total. This was the most I'd ever spent at a Denny's. I laid down the cash for the meal and a tip and then got up. "Time to go."

Soren stood with me and followed docilely enough, but once we were out in the car again and headed down the road, he asked, "What's cosplaying?"

"It's..." I tried to come up with an explanation that would make sense to him. "It's making yourself look like someone else, usually someone imaginary. Then you pretend to be that person. I think." I'd dated a guy for a while who had a special Captain America wardrobe for cons. He'd told me I'd make a great Loki under the right circumstances. If only he fucking knew, I thought, a little bitterly.

"Why did she think I was doing that?"



“Probably because you were talking about human food like you weren’t human, and regardless of what’s going on in there,” I waved one hand at him vaguely, “the point is you look human right now. So yeah, it comes off a little strange.”

“But I could simply be touched.”

“Touched...what do you mean?”

“Touched.” Soren pressed his fingertips to the center of his forehead. “Touched by a god and changed because of it. Or inspired to prophecy, like you. Or even cursed. Why not assume one of those?”

Oh man, tricky. Especially for someone who longed to be a devotee of the scientific method but didn’t have the stomach to lie to myself like that.

I took the time to think about it and give him a decent answer. “People in America—okay, I don’t know how it is in Iceland, but most people in America don’t believe in that kind of direct connection between gods and humans. Or if they do, it’s in a very strictly religious context, not just something that can happen to anyone. People who claim otherwise tend to be labeled mentally ill.” Like my mother, back when I was taken away from her the first time.

“But what about those who are genuinely possessed, like Soren? Or those who truly are seers?”

“We lie about it,” I said wryly. “We lie our asses off or we call it luck or we hang out with people who are like us and understand these things. That’s one of the reasons I rely on Marisol and—” I stopped, not wanting to bring them into the conversation unless I had to. It was one thing to work with others. It was totally different to expose them to unnecessary risk just because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“Why don’t you use your ability to garner power?” Soren asked. “It would be easy, wouldn’t it? You are framsynir ; you look into the future. This should enrich you.”

“Just because I can do something, doesn’t mean it’s the right thing for every occasion.” Vegas had taught me that.

“Ah.” Soren sounded knowing. “This is related to last night. You handled that policeman, but you were unhappy afterward.”

“Yeah.”

“This quest would be much easier on you if you were properly motivated, like Egilsson.”

Now this was an opportunity I wasn’t going to pass up. “Tell me about that,” I said, turning the radio down some. Getting a better handle on my enemy trumped NPR. “Why did ólafur Egilsson make a deal with you in the first place? There’s a geas on him—it’s like a curse, isn’t it? What are your terms for curing him?”

“Something like a curse,” he agreed. “Very well, I will tell you. He knows about your abilities, so it’s only fair that you know about his as well. ólafur’s family line is afflicted with a geas of might and insanity. Long ago, when the gods traveled the world, Thor came to the home of ólafur’s ancestor. He only asked to stay the night, but the ancestor refused to allow him to rest there unless Thor could defeat him in a wrestling match. He was a very stupid man,” Soren said reflectively, “but very strong.”

“Of course Thor defeated him and then told him that, as punishment for his pride and ignorance, the ancestor’s strength of body would slowly overwhelm his mind. The more he used his might, the less control he would have over it, until one day he would lose himself altogether. Thor left, and the ancestor didn’t think much of his

threat, but the next time he got into an argument with someone, his rage overcame him. When he came back to himself, he realized he had killed the man.”

I’d seen as much in ólafur’s eyes. “This is some sort of berserker geas, right?”

“Yes, exactly. It doesn’t begin to affect those of the blood until they start to quicken to adulthood. The longer they live, the stronger they become, but the easier it is for their bodies to get the better of their minds. They have tried to break the curse for centuries to no avail.” Soren made a little face. “As if anyone other than a god can remove another god’s curse.”

“Then I don’t understand,” I said. “How can you break the curse? You aren’t a god.”

“Not at all.” Soren sounded almost affronted. “Gods wax and wane with the passage of time. I am spirit. I am land. As long as my land exists, so do I. I haven’t broken the curse, I’ve merely...” He searched for the word for a moment. “Absorbed it. Like I did with your wound.”

“You’re holding back their familial madness?”

“I am. And it isn’t easy,” he added with a frown. “The geas is a strong one. That’s why I needed one of ólafur Egilsson’s bloodline to strengthen me so I could contain it. The fact that I get many of the things I want out of being one with Soren is just another sign of ólafur’s cleverness in making this deal. He is much smarter than his ancestor was. I can see why he doesn’t want to give up his mind.”

“I guess I can too.” ólafur Egilsson was a conniving motherfucker, but he’d really planned this shit out. Put into context, I was a wrench in the gears that he wasn’t going to tolerate. It made my spine prickle with paranoia just thinking about it.

“I protect ólafur, and his remaining sons, in exchange for the freedoms I told you

about,” Soren continued on blithely. “The youngest is his sacrifice, and the eldest is his second. They are united in their desire to see the family line remain whole.”

There was a term I hadn’t heard before. “Second? What’s a second?”

“The second has the power to speak for the primary supplicant if he becomes incapacitated, and to offer counsel during negotiations. If ólafur lost his reason, his son Jakob would step into his position.” Soren shrugged. “It was a wise precaution, but not a necessary one. Your fight for me won’t be compromised for lacking a second of your own. It didn’t help ólafur. He took his son’s sacrifice for granted, without caring about the love behind Soren’s offering. That offends me. That’s why I’m allowing you to make your play for me.”

Soren smiled. “If you win, you will understand what I am and I will have your respect and fear. If he wins, he will see that he cannot rely on my patience and humility to keep me in line. I am one with his son, but I am not his son.”

“Very clearly.” Fuck, I could barely speak past the sudden dryness of my throat. “If—if Soren hadn’t offered himself, what was ólafur’s next play? How would he have gotten another son to go along with this?”

“ólafur Egilsson has four children, all males. Two of them have married and produced offspring of their own. He kept the truth from them for a long time. Had Soren not given himself to me, ólafur would likely have leveraged the future of his grandchildren as a means of getting another son to offer himself as a sacrifice. They are loving parents, from what little I’ve observed.” When I glanced over at him, Soren’s eyes had gone that misty purple color again. “He is determined to get what he wants. I hope you are equally determined, Cillian Kelly.”

Yeah, I hoped I was too.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

We reached St. Louis by early afternoon, and it wasn't hard to find Six Flags. Just look for the enormous roller coasters, which I expected I'd be spending some time on. Again, not something I'd done since Vegas. Soren was a bad influence.

He was also impatient. "I want to go in now."

"You can wait until I get you a phone." I'd driven through the parking lot three times now and still hadn't found the rainbow beater with the mustang decal.

"No, look." He thrust the pamphlet in my face again. "The park closes at six, and it's already two! If we don't go in soon, we won't have time to do anything." I hadn't seen a face that pouty since I was looking in the mirror at age fifteen.

Well, I could keep driving in circles and hope that Phin's friend showed up soon, or I could let Soren head off into the park and trust that he wouldn't run away or do something dangerous. The memory of yesterday reared its head in my mind: me tied to a tree and the frightening trip down the highway under his driving. Soren wasn't safe to be around people without a minder. On the other hand, even with a minder, he didn't seem to be safe.

I sighed and pulled in close to the front gate. "I've got to meet my contact, but you can go in." He had money for the entrance fee—at least it was half price for the afternoon. "If we don't find each other inside, we'll meet together outside here at six, okay?"

"Very reasonable," Soren said, a little smile quirking his lips. "What makes you trust me to return?"

“The fact that you’re still here right now,” I told him honestly. “You could leave me or kill me and get back to ólafur at any time. You haven’t yet, so you’re still interested in being with me. For now.”

“For now,” Soren agreed. “But perhaps forever. I appreciate...” He paused and considered what he wanted to say. “Your faith in inevitability.”

I shrugged. “That’s fate. Can’t fight it without getting fucked over.”

“We should discuss that sometime when I don’t have a roller coaster waiting for me.” Soren leaned in closer. “And did you know they have paintball here?”

I felt myself pale. “You know what that is?”

“Randall told me.”

“Oh.” That little shit . “Look, I’m not telling you what to do, I’m definitely not, but...”

“But you’d like to.”

“Sometimes.”

Soren laughed. “Your honesty is also appreciated. I won’t break anyone, don’t worry.” He got out of the car and headed for the entrance, still wearing his black suit, although it was significantly more rumpled now. It was still a good look for him.

I shook my head and turned forward, determined not to watch Soren disappear. “Head in the game,” I muttered as I started driving again. Rainbow car, mustang decal...how hard could it be to find?

Pretty fucking hard. I didn't locate the car for another hour; it was hidden behind an enormous red truck in a far part of the parking lot. Also, rainbow might have been a bit misleading. It was a splotchy mess of primer and a dozen different colors of paint, each one slapped on like the owner was picking a new shade for his en suite . And "mustang decal" was also pushing it. It looked like—I squinted a little. It looked like a My Little Pony.

I pulled in next to the car, and the person who came out to meet me was also, very clearly, not a man. "Hi," the lady, dressed in a flannel crop top and a pair of Daisy Dukes complete with, yes, cowboy boots, said. She had long blonde hair, bright red lips, and an enormous smile. She also had a very thick Southern twang that sounded more Georgia than Missouri.

"Does Phin know anything about you at all?" I asked as I got out. It was hot today, but I kept my battered fedora on out of sheer solar self-defense.

"Oh, nobody knows all my secrets," she demurred, tilting her head and biting her lower lip. I almost expected her to giggle. "That's how you stay alive in this business."

"Yeah, well, you can drop the cutesy act and start things off right by giving me my new equipment."

"Ooh, tough guy." She patted her waist, and I saw the Taser at her hip. "Let's not get too bossy, huh? This is business, but that's not to say it couldn't be pleasurable too. I've heard a lot about you, after all."

Yeah, I just bet she had. "Nobody knows all my secrets." I tossed her own words back at her and watched her frown and fumble them. "And I'm not interested in pleasure, not with you or anyone else. I just want to pay for my stuff and go."

“Not very fun.”

“Lady, I don’t even know your name. Don’t go asking me for fun.”

She beamed at me. “You can call me Cherry! Or just pick a fruit. I don’t care, sugar.”

“How about Kumquat?”

“Now that’s just rude.” She leaned her hip against the car. “I could just leave, y’know. I don’t have to do Phin any favors on this hot, hot summer day. I came because he told me you could give me what I wanted.”

“I’ve got money,” I said. “Let’s keep this clean.”

“Mmm, no. I think I’d rather get dirty.” She grinned as though she had any idea of what she was talking about. Gods save me from people who thought they could out-witticism me.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I know what you’re thinking,” I said. “You got a call from Phin, and he let something slip that he probably shouldn’t have, and you thought to yourself, ‘hey, I know what would be neat! I could get this guy to tell me all about my future , so I know what’s coming for me. Then once he’s done, I’ll tie things up all nice and neat by killing him. Only he might see that coming, so first I’m going to lure him in so that he trusts me, or at least doesn’t mind me getting nice and close, and then I’ll use my fake Taser—” Her hand automatically twitched toward her hip. “Yeah, I can tell, I’ve seen modded Tasers before. It injects what, ketamine? What were you planning on drugging me with? Not that it matters, because you’re going to stay the fuck over there, and I’m going to stay here, and we’re going to do this transaction in money and nothing else.”

The smile had completely dropped from her face. “I wasn’t going to kill you.”



“Easy to say when I’m too far away to see into your future.”

“Why would I risk it?” She sounded a little desperate.

“Because you’re arrogant. Like everyone who thinks they can pull this shit on me. You’re not the first...” I leaned forward a little bit, juuust far enough to see more than the glimmer of her baby blues. “Charlotte Hauser. And you won’t be the last.”

My knowing her name threw her off for a moment, but she rallied fast. “It’s for my kid.”

“Sure it is.”

“I’m serious!” She thrust her hand toward her car. “Who do you think wanted a My Little Pony on the hood of this piece of junk? Why would I put something like that on the car I do business in?”

“To get people to underestimate you,” I said. “The same way you do by inviting people to pick a fruity name for you. Honest to fuck, you really think that’s cute?”

“It’s worked on plenty of assholes before. I’m not sure why it didn’t work on you,” she snapped. “And I am serious. My ex ran off with my daughter five days ago. I don’t know where they are, and I need to find her! Look, you want a show of goodwill?” She reached into the back of her car and pulled out a black duffel bag about half the size of mine and threw it over to me. “Take a look inside.”

I put the bag on the hood and opened it warily. Inside was a full magazine for a Glock 19 as well as a box of ammo, two smart phones with charge cords still in the packaging, a first aid kit, and a sleek new Nintendo Switch. The bottom was layered with clothes and, yes, underpants. I held up a pair. “SpongeBob? Why are these even made in adult sizes?”

“Little more interesting than plain old gray, right?” she said, the teasing edge coming back into her voice. “It’s pretty good, huh? The Nintendo already has games loaded onto it, but the wireless has been disabled so you won’t be traceable that way. All this would normally cost you ten grand, easy—” and that was some bullshit, but I was willing to hear her out “—but I’ll trade it to you for information. I just want my daughter back.”

“You do.”

“Yeah.”

I sighed. I could already see where this was going. “Put the Taser down and come here.”

She frowned. “I don’t think—”

“I’m not getting any closer with that in grabbing distance, Charlotte, so put it down and we’ll deal.”

She took it off and set it aside immediately, which at least showed she was serious. “But don’t touch me,” she said as she stepped closer. “Otherwise, you will have a bad time, sugar.”

I put my hands behind my back. “I’ve got no interest in touching you, don’t worry about that.” She stopped about a foot from me. “Look at me,” I said.

Charlotte looked at me, fierce and afraid all at once. It was better than most people managed. I stared into her eyes, so wide, so blue. Her daughter didn’t have blue eyes. Her daughter took after her biological mother, Charlotte’s partner, the one who had objected when Charlotte made a deal with the—

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Really?

“What?”

“You made a deal with the Mexican equivalent of the Godfather and then you tried to skim off the top? Are you stupid or just suicidally hopeful?”

“It was just an extra hundredth of a percent, who notices stuff like that?” Charlotte exclaimed.

“The fucking Godfather does! I’m not looking anymore.”

“You have to.”

“No.” There was no way. The last thing I wanted to see right now was Charlotte or her daughter being tortured to death, and that was 80 percent likely given as deep as I’d gone. “You want my advice, here it is: leave St. Louis and let your girlfriend keep Hayley for now, okay? Because until you’ve secured yourself, you’re not safe to be around.”

“But if I leave, they won’t know where to find me!”

“But you’ll be alive,” I pointed out. “Tough love, Charlotte. Don’t go home, just go. And don’t be such a fucking dumbass! It isn’t difficult to find people to scam. You could have played along and made it big later, but you got greedy. Now get in your car and go find a hotel somewhere safe, and wait at least a month before you try to get in touch with Penny and Hayley.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “But who will keep them safe if I’m not there?”

I shook my head. “They’re a lot safer without you around right now, okay? Go. You

have to go. Thanks for the stuff, but you have to go now. You've got to run."

"Fine." To her credit, she didn't draw it out any longer. She just grabbed her Taser, tossed me a nasty look, and got back into her pony rainbow car. She drove away, and I rubbed a hand over my face.

I'd barely looked into her future, but I knew she'd at least make it out of Missouri. That was a good start. I reviewed the scene in my mind, seeing through Charlotte's eyes as she drove past the entrance, past the big black SUV, down to the exit where she could get back onto the—

Big. Black. SUV. With a tall blond man in the front seat, wearing a black suit.

It could be a coincidence.

Yeah, right.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

You weren't supposed to bring a firearm into an amusement park. The rules might be different in a place like Texas, but in Missouri the prohibition stood. More than that, I wasn't comfortable carrying and possibly firing a gun in a place where a lot of children were going to be running around. There was disregarding my own safety, then there was being okay with copious collateral damage, and I wasn't that.

So fine, no gun. It didn't matter. I just needed to find Soren and get out of here. Hopefully I could snag him as he came off a roller coaster and get him out before his brothers got close.

Yeah. And how often did things work out for me like that?

I moved the Electra closer to the entrance, keeping my eyes open for any sign of a black SUV. Ha , this was the land of Sport Utility Vehicles?the only things there were more of in this parking lot were trucks. There were way too many cars to mark, so instead I kept a weather eye out for enormous Icelandic bastards in suits as I made my way to the front of the line.

"Hi there!" the lady behind the counter said as I stepped up. "One for the day?"

"Half day," I corrected absently as I pulled out my money.

"Right! That's twenty-five dollars. Are you interested in any of our special rides? The water park is open, and we have an exciting paintball course."

I wasn't, actually, but I knew someone who was. "Sure. I'll play some paintball."

“That’s an extra forty dollars, then.”

That was fucking extortion, but I didn’t care enough to rail at unforgiving corporate gods. I forked over the money and got a stamp on my hand and a special ticket for my troubles. “Our paintball field is straight back through the rides, on the right-hand side,” she told me. “Just give one of our team members the ticket, and they’ll get you the equipment you need.”

“Thank you—” I glanced at her nametag. “—Alta.” I looked into Alta’s smiling face and past the warm brown glimmer of her eyes and saw her mild concern when, in about fifteen minutes, a bunch of cop cars suddenly pulled up at the front gate. Okay then?that was my timeline. “Have a nice day,” I said, heading off into the park.

There were two kinds of crowds—well, no, there were a million different types of crowds, every situation was slightly different, but for me, the distinction was simple. There were crowds in which you could hide, blending in like one of the herd. Then there were crowds in which you stood out no matter what you did.

This particular crowd? I stood out like a streak of blood on a plain white canvas. With no kid accompanying me, tattooed and pierced and in a hurry—folks stared as I walked by. I was tempted to stare back, but I didn’t have time for them. I had to find Soren as soon as possible. I was hedging my bets, going after him at the paintball course first. If he was on a roller coaster and I had to backtrack, we could be in trouble, but my gut said he was in the mood to shoot things today. Fuck, I knew I was feeling that way. First Charlotte, and now the Family Egilsson. How had they found us so fast?

That was a question for Soren. I had to keep reminding myself he wasn’t on my side, no matter what he’d already done for me?or to me. He wasn’t on anybody’s side. He was the prize, and we were the fools fighting over him, like goddesses battling it out over a golden apple meant for the fairest. Only in our cases, it was a matter of life,

death, and sanity. There was still so much I had to work out, so many things that had to come together for me to end up victorious...for a given value of victorious, of course. My Soren was bound to the landv?ttir, and before I could think about separating them, I had to win them both.

Those were issues for tomorrow. Right now I needed to solve my immediate problem, which was finding Soren and getting the fuck out of here.

Apparently a paintball match had just begun, because there was no line when I got to the entrance to that part of the park. Behind the shed that held all the equipment was an open field scattered with bits and pieces of old rides, the sort of thing that would look incredibly creepy if it was dark out. Beyond that was a heavily wooded area where I saw people running around and heard the quiet pop-pop of their guns.

“Hey,” the guy manning the booth said disinterestedly. “Gotta ticket?”

“Here.” I handed it to him, and he grunted before adding another stamp to my hand. “You wearing that out into the field?” he asked, gesturing at my suit jacket. “It’s gonna get messy.”

My suit was destined for the trash at this point anyway. “I’m fine with that.”

“Yeah, okay.” He passed me a muggy face protector and goggle set and then handed over the paintball gun. “There are preloaded hoppers back here if you need more ammo, which you shouldn’t,” he emphasized. “Just gotta wait until some of these games are played out, then you can go in.”

I leaned in a little. “Actually, I’m looking for a friend of mine. Really pasty guy, tall, not the most patient person ever...”

“Oh, him .” I saw the memory play out in the guy’s head. “Yeah, he’s part of the

King of the Hill game over that way. Gotta wait to get in on that so we can reset the field.”

“Are you sure?”

“That’s the rules, man. Haven’t you played paintball before?”

“Of course,” I lied, “but it’s kind of important I go in after him now. He’s got a medical condition, and I need to get him his inhaler.”

The guy scowled at me. “What are you, his dad?”

“Just a concerned friend who doesn’t want to have to explain to your boss why my buddy is getting hospitalized on your watch.”

You didn’t have to be psychic to read this guy’s mind. After silently calling me every name in the book, he grunted and vaguely pointed. “Over there. But you have to wear the protective gear, and you have to play by the rules!”

“I’d never dream of doing anything else.” I headed out into the field toward the woods.

“Ha!” A kid who couldn’t be more than twelve suddenly jumped out from behind an abandoned Moon Car and sprayed my right side with paintballs. It stung a bit where they hit me?I’d probably have some lovely bruises tomorrow. “I got you!”

“Nice job.” I kept going.

“You’ve got to be dead now!” she—I think it was a she, it was hard to tell with the mask and heavy camo clothing on—yelled at me.



“I’m the walking dead.”

“Zombie!” I got another spray of paintballs to the back as I walked away. Kids, holy fuck , what little menaces.

I quickly found out there was no way I could just walk over to where Soren was hiding, which was naturally at the top of the damn hill, shooting down on everyone else. If you weren’t wearing camouflage, didn’t run from tree to tree in an effort to avoid getting shot, and didn’t look like you were part of the team? Then you got shot by everybody . I wouldn’t have minded so much, but some people took the rules really damn seriously. Even the people on the team trying to take the hill looked askance at me after a little while, as covered in paint as I was.

“Fine,” I muttered to myself. I needed to get up that hill and I needed to do it fast, so I’d break a different rule. I took my jacket off and turned it inside out to hide most of the paint, fastened it in the front, and then positioned myself at the back of a wedge of players who seemed to be mustering the nerve to rush the hill.

When one of them glanced at me, I hoisted my gun. “Oo-rah!”

“Oo-rah!” he shouted. “All right, let’s do this, motherfuckers!” With copious yelling and screaming, they started up the hill.

Of course it didn’t work. Everyone got mowed down in a hail of paintballs, but instead of letting the man in front of me fall, I held onto the back of his shirt and used him as a human shield until I got to the very top of the hill, where the bunker that Soren defended was located.

Instead of getting mad, the guy just gave me two thumbs up and said, “Awesome!” Then he fell down in a heap, and I hopped into the bunker.

Soren didn't instantly shoot me, which was nice. He wasn't wearing his face mask, and I took my own off, throwing the sweat-saturated accessory aside. "You came to play!" Soren sounded pleased. "Are you defecting to my side?"

"If anyone's defecting today, it's you," I said grimly. "We've got to go, now."

"But I haven't won the game yet."

"There isn't time for the game! Your brothers are here."

Soren blinked quizzically. "How many of them?"

"At least one, probably more." How much time had passed since I first entered the park? Were we coming up on fifteen minutes? "Look, cops are going to be showing up soon. We need to be gone before they get here."

Soren looked on the verge of pouting. "But I want to win the game. I've hardly had a chance to do anything fun yet!"

Aaand there was the youthful rebellion. I should be playing this more cautiously, given that Soren was probably strong enough to rip my head off, but I was at the tail end of my patience.

"You want to do something fun? Here." I grabbed him by the back of the neck, drew him close, and kissed him.

It wasn't like I remembered kissing Soren to be. He'd been a good kisser, his lips soft and firm by turns as we played with who was going to be on top. This Soren was mostly still, and when he finally did move, it was with teeth, not lips. He gripped the sleeve of my jacket and bit into my lower lip and then released me only to do it again. It hurt, but it felt strangely good too. I had to stop now that I had Soren's attention.

Doing so was harder than it should have been.

I pulled back. “Please.” My lower lip felt raw, but I didn’t touch it. I let Soren look at it, and me, and come to his own conclusion that yes, I really was this desperate.

“Very well.” He reached over and picked my face protection up off the ground. “Put this back on.”

I did. “What about yours?” I asked.

“I can heal any damage, and I dislike limiting my peripheral vision. Come.” He jumped over the edge of the bunker and headed casually down the hill.

“Hey!” The guy I’d used as my human shield looked at me, anger in every line of his recumbent body. “You were supposed to shoot him!”

“Was I? Huh.”

I kept going and didn’t even mind when he yelled out “Prick!” and shot me in the back.

I did mind when someone else screamed. It wasn’t a fun, playful “Omigosh run!” kind of scream; it was a genuinely terrified scream. “He’s got a gun!” someone else yelled, and I groaned.

“Fucking perfect.”

“Ah.” Soren had stopped, his eyes clouding over with purple mist. “It’s my brother Art?r.”

Yeah, I remembered Art?r. Some of these guys might have been coerced into obeying

their father, but if anyone was helping of his own accord, it was Art?r. He'd been the one to dunk me over and over again into the bathtub filled with ice water. He'd been the one to pull out two of my fingernails when threatening to drown me didn't work.

Art?r wasn't the cleverest of the brothers, but he was the biggest, the meanest, and the one least likely to give a fuck about his risk-to-reward ratio, as evidenced by the fact that he'd pulled a fucking gun in the middle of a theme park. I could see him now, coming at us like a black-suited behemoth through the trees. And all I had was a paintball gun.

Well, I'd better make it count.

My hopper was mostly full, thanks to my stinginess with my shots. As soon as Art?r rounded the last tree, I dropped to one knee and fired my gun as fast as I could, right at his groin. The paintballs actually had a pretty slow muzzle velocity, just enough to burst on impact, but level enough of them at someone's crotch and they were going to feel it. Art?r didn't disappoint. He groaned and jackknifed onto both knees, one hand clutching his bespattered manhood, the other shakily raising his real, live gun in my direction.

I pushed to my feet and darted to the side just as the first bullet flew. More people screamed, and the guy I'd left "dead" on the hill quickly rolled over the top into the bunker for shelter.

I turned and faced Soren, who stared at me with a little smile on his face. "We have to go, now!"

"All right." He let me lead him away from his bellowing sibling, even though a cry of, "Tú getur ekki bjargae honum! Hann mun deyja!" made him pause for a moment.

I led the way out of the field of battle at a run. Soren could explain later, if we

survived.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

I was getting paint on Andre's seats. He'd probably be pissed about that whenever I got this car back to him, but at least it wasn't bullet holes. Chock that up in the "win" column, I guess. Ha, this was my life: where not being actively shot at with a deadly weapon was the best thing that had happened to me all day. I should've probably ditched the car, honestly, and gotten a new one just in case they had some way of tracking this one, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I settled on switching out the license plate at a gas station and just kept going.

We were an hour out of St. Louis now, and I was doing everything in my power to keep calm as I drove down the highway. I had to go fast but not too fast, burn away the miles but not get burnt in the process. Every time I saw a black SUV, my heart clenched and my hand made an abortive twitch toward my shiny new gun resting between the front seats. It wasn't them, I was almost sure of that, but the potential was enough to make me sick to my stomach.

Fuck, I wasn't meant for this vigilante desperado thing. I wasn't a guns-blazing, sharpshooting, badass motherfucker. I was an idiot with a talent he didn't want and a lot of luck, both good and bad. I wasn't sure which type was making more of an effort right now.

I'd given Soren the game console, but he wasn't using it. Instead he was quiet, eyes closed, head tilted toward the window as warm air streamed through the car, making a mess of his pale hair. Every so often his mouth opened, like he was going to say something, but a moment later, he'd close it without a sound.

I was happy for the silence and focused on the road and what a moron I had been. Kissing him? Kissing him to get him to go along with me? Great idea, really brilliant.

Mixed messages much? I'd already told him I wasn't going to have sex with him, and I stood by that, but it had seemed so...so right, in the moment. Like it was the only thing I could do, and it had worked. And it had felt good . Shamefully good.

I drove nonstop until it was dark and we were close to the Oklahoma border before I finally couldn't ignore my hunger anymore. "Drive-through okay for dinner?" I asked, and Soren finally opened his eyes and looked at me. Not with the purple I'd been expecting to see, but with red-rimmed blue eyes.

"It's so warm," he whispered, and my heart suddenly tried to beat its way out of my chest.

"Soren...oh my god, really?" My throat was incredibly tight, my words almost inaudible.

"Yeah."

I couldn't handle this and drive at the same time. I took the first exit and pulled into a parking lot, mostly abandoned except for a few big trucks parked lengthwise along one side of it.

I shut the car off and stared at him. "What?I thought this wasn't allowed."

"So did I," he whispered. I recognized the smile on his lips, small and trembling. It was the one he'd worn when he'd told me to go, to leave him and escape. "It's colder now," he said, and I saw his hands start to shake. "I need..."

"Hang on." I got out of the car, came around to his side, opened the door, and held out my hand. "I know just the thing." Soren stared at my hand for a moment, and I waited breathlessly to see if he'd reject it, or if the landv?ttir would reemerge and take control. Eventually he took a deep breath and grabbed hold of me. I pulled him

out of the car and into my arms, but his shaking got worse.

“Hang on, wait.” I guided him around to the hood, doing my best to ignore how strange, how exquisite it felt to hold him again, and sat him down on the edge of the hood. The engine had heated up the metal until it was uncomfortably hot, to my mind, but Soren visibly relaxed as the warmth seeped through his clothes. “Lay back.” He went, and I went with him, gritting my teeth and bearing the heat for his sake. I didn’t want to let go yet. “Better?”

“Better,” Soren agreed. He turned his head and looked at me. “So this is real, then?”

“Um...yeah?”

“I thought maybe I was making it up.” He laughed uncertainly. “It’s...I make up a lot of stuff when I’m in the dark. Gives me something nicer to focus on.”

“Fuck, I am so sorry about—”

“It’s not that bad,” Soren hastened to say, and I gritted my teeth against the torrent of curses trying to beat past my lips. “I’m not lying. It’s not that bad when I’m in deep. For the most part, I just sleep. It’s so cold there, though. If I felt the cold all the time, I think I’d just...sink into it and forget anything else, you know? But the v?ttir gives me heat and sensation sometimes, and I love it, but it also reminds me of everything I’m missing.”

“Soren.” I didn’t know how to continue. I didn’t know what to say.

“I’m so fucking angry at you, though.”

Wait... “What?”



“I did all this for you, and now you’re screwing around with my family again? Cillian!” He smacked me on the shoulder, not even hard enough to sting, and then immediately turned it into a grip that twisted my T-shirt up in his fingers. “I did this so you could be free, not so you could live to fight another day!”

“It wasn’t right.” I knew that?oh, how well I knew that. “You shouldn’t have had to do this for me.”

“None of it was right in the first place,” Soren said, looking pained. “I knew the things we were doing weren’t right, and I went along with my father anyway. I helped him kidnap you; I listened to my brothers torture you, and I didn’t?I didn’t say anything. I didn’t do anything. And you’re so beautiful, and strong, and you didn’t deserve what we were doing to you. I couldn’t live with that.”

No, no, this was all wrong. “I seduced you. I made you help me!”

“I fell in love with you,” Soren corrected me. “And I wanted to save the man I love. I still want to save you. It’s not too late to give us back to them.”

“I’m afraid it is.” There was no going back from paintballing someone in the crotch until they collapsed. “And I wouldn’t let you go anyway. I’m going to save you.”

“You’re going to try, I guess.” He sounded so resigned. “But you shouldn’t. Fuck.” Soren wiped his free hand across his eyes. “We’re a pair.”

It was true, but I couldn’t bring myself to care about how fucked we were right now. I rolled onto my side and curled closer to him, and he laid his head against my chest and sighed.

“Star-crossed lovers,” I murmured.

“Does that make me Romeo or Juliet?” he asked.

“Juliet, definitely. I’m the dashing one.”

“You’re the idiot who couldn’t wait for me to wake up before poisoning himself, you mean?”

The metaphor was breaking down now. I didn’t want to speak in metaphors anyway, not when I had Soren actually here, in my arms. I wanted the reality of that, the reassurance of it. Fuck, I wanted it forever.

“You wouldn’t have woken up if I hadn’t come after you, Soren.”

“But you’d be safe,” he whispered against my collarbone. “I just want you to be safe.”

“You can’t fight fate,” I said, and boy, was that ever the truth. “Whatever happens is gonna happen no matter what we do.”

“You didn’t have to come to Chicago.”

“You’re deliberately missing the point, jackass.”

Soren chuckled. “Maybe.” He shifted closer to me. “It’s really not so bad. But I’m so cold, and sometimes I remember the wrong things, and they loop over and over in my head. Sometimes I think I’m going crazy, and that’s?that’s kind of the deal, right? I go crazy so the rest of my family doesn’t have to.”

“That’s not the deal at all.”

“I love my nieces and nephews. I don’t want them to live with the curse.”

I held him closer. “I’m going to work this out. I’ll fix it. I know I will.”

Soren pressed a kiss to the base of my throat. His lips were freezing. “You can’t see into your own future, remember?”

“Soren...”

“I’m so cold, Cillian.”

God, could my heart break any harder? “I know, but it won’t be for long,” I promised him. “I’m going to fix this. I’ll make it better.” I squeezed him hard and wished all of my warmth into him, pressed him harder against the hood, but it was too late. A moment later, Soren was gone, and the landv?ttir looked up at me with eyes like twilight and a pleased expression.

“Was that nice?” he—it—asked.

“Bring him back,” I begged. “Let him come back.”

“The distance has grown too far to let Soren out for long. It exhausts us. The more energy I expend, the harder it is to keep him in comfortable stasis.”

“Well, he’s obviously not comfortable if he’s freezing and having nightmares,” I snapped.

“I could control for that better if I were closer to my land. But you stole me,” it reminded me, “and now you must fight to keep me. When one of you wins, Soren will be comfortable again.” It smiled at me. “But it was nice to see him, wasn’t it? To speak with him again? He misses you.”

Time to control my temper. I didn’t need to antagonize anyone else today. “I...yeah.

It was nice.” Fuck, it was so, so nice. “I appreciate it.”

“Good.” It—no, he —looked at me happily. “I think I’m learning better how to behave humanly.”

“You mean humanely?”

“No, humanly.” He nestled closer. “Would you like to kiss me again?”

I suddenly recalled that the two of us were basically cuddling on the hood of a car together, and Soren version 2.0 looked way too interested in turning that into something else.

“No, we should get going. I need food and we need to find a place to sleep. I have to figure out how Egilsson tracked us down so fast.”

“He consulted a sorceress.”

“He...” Of course he did. I wasn’t the only game in town. “How?”

“Over the computer. She is a distant kinswoman, and he knows she won’t betray him to the others. She read the cups and saw the amusement park. She isn’t terribly powerful, though. I think if we avoid large landmarks, it will be all right.”

“How did you learn all of this?” I asked.

“While Soren was with you, I returned to my land. Within my land, my powers extend to those under my protection. I wanted to learn how ólafur would fight for me. He’s quite dedicated,” Soren added with a contented sigh. “It’s very pleasant.”

“I’m glad my imminent destruction amuses you.”

“You are a drama queen.”

Fucker . “I am not a fucking drama queen,” I muttered. “Who’re the others? The ones she might betray him to?”

“That,” Soren said languidly, “is information you will have to earn. You can start by taking me to bed.”

“Ha.” I let him go and sat up, curling my hands together in my lap. I’d held Soren, the real one, my Soren. I’d touched him. I wanted to immortalize my hands in bronze; they’d never feel any better than they did now. “No way. And no beds either, nothing with a sign that might identify us. We’re camping from here on out.”

Soren frowned as he sat up next to me. “Camping?”

“Yeah. Sleeping on the ground. You’ll probably love it.”

I turned out to be utterly wrong on that count.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:39 pm*

Don't get me wrong. I was not, and had never been, big into the "great outdoors." My mother might like roughing it in a little cabin with unreliable electricity, and I might have spent more than my fair share of days tied up in uncomfortably rural locations, but I'd never enjoyed it. It wasn't the sort of thing I did for enjoyment?it was what happened when there were no other options and I had to suck it up. I figured it would be second nature for Soren, though. After all, he was a freaking landv?ttir. If getting comfy on the actual land wasn't a part of that, I didn't know what was.

Living in ignorance was way better than finding out the truth.

I bought a couple of sleeping bags, some paracord, and a few tarps at an army surplus store, because there was no way I was fucking around with putting up poles in the dark, and then drove us out to the ass end of nowhere with no identifiable landmarks and rigged a shelter. It was warm and the sky was clear, so I wasn't that worried about getting rained on, but I took the breeze into account when I tied down the plastic sheets so that our heads would be decently protected. I set up the sleeping bags and then called Soren over so we—or I, at least—could try to get some sleep.

Any hope I had of that vanished in the first five minutes of him joining me.

"I don't like it," Soren said just a few seconds after he lay down.

"Why not?"

"I just don't . I want to find a hotel."

I scrubbed the heels of my hands over my eyes, feeling dried out and worn down.

Fuck, today had been such a— ha —roller coaster ride. From Denny's to St. Louis, through our ill-fated theme park excursion and Soren's miraculous, heartbreaking reappearance, I was so tired I was almost too tired to sleep. I saw the muzzle of Art's gun pointing my way every time I closed my eyes, felt the thud of paintballs that could have all too easily become real bullets. I still had paint on my hands and neck, and it itched. I was desperate for a shower and a drink, not in any particular order, and there was no chance of either right now.

I wanted to reach inside the v?ttir, grab Soren, and pull him out by force, another completely unattainable goal. I wanted to lie on my sleeping bag in the middle of this damn field and try to ignore the insects that crawled beside my head and over my fingers and get some goddamn sleep. Needless to say, I wasn't in the mood right now to cater to Soren's whims.

"Too bad."

"I can't rest like this," he said, and the way it was phrased made me sit up and pay a little more attention.

"I thought you didn't sleep."

"I didn't say sleep, I said rest ," Soren replied, and there was no mistaking the petulance in his voice. "I can't be comfortable here."

I sighed. "Look, if it's too hard—"

"It is not a matter of the body's discomfort. It's that this land doesn't like me."

Well, that wasn't what I expected to hear. Although maybe I should have, considering we were on our way to talk with a shaman about exactly this kind of problem. "How can you tell?"

“Oh, it’s letting me know,” Soren said darkly. “Wild lands are so much more territorial about this sort of thing. It’s being very rude, actually.”

“It’s, what, talking to you?”

“If that’s how you need to think about it, then yes, it’s talking to me. And it’s quite upset that I’m here.” He glared at me. “Not that this was my idea.”

“Jesus Christ.” I could almost hear Marisol chiding me for that, but I couldn’t be made to care right now. “How was I supposed to know you wouldn’t be able to camp like a normal person?”

“You should have assumed as much, since I am not a normal person.”

I was so tired of being the person people shouted at or got indignant with. “Right, no. I’m not buying that. If you can’t sleep like this, go and get comfortable in the car, because I’m not going anywhere else right now.”

Soren’s eyes narrowed. “That isn’t a very wise move, leaving me alone with your vehicle.”

“No?” I chuckled despite myself. “Why, are you going to drive off in it?”

“I might.”

“But you won’t.” I was becoming more and more convinced of that fact. “You’re the prize, but you’re also the prisoner. The terms have been set. The stakes are established. Sure, if you want to throw the whole competition, you can get in my car and drive back to Chicago. I can’t stop you.”

Soren’s frown deepened, and I knew I was on the right track.



“But you want the competition. You want it for not just yourself but for Soren—you told me as much already. You care about him, so you care about what happens next. He won’t be happy if you throw me to the wolves. So you’re staying with me, even though I’m not doing exactly what you want tonight, which means that yeah, I trust you in my vehicle. At least, I trust you not to leave me here without any way to compete for you.

“So go. Lean a seat back, stretch out in the backseat—fuck, pop the trunk and get cozy for all I care. But I can’t go any farther tonight. I’m exhausted, okay? I’ll do better tomorrow, I promise.”

Soren stared at me for a long moment, maybe trying to evaluate the truth of what I was saying, maybe so he could try to intimidate me into getting up. I broke the eyeballing contest after about a minute and rolled over onto my side, away from him.

He huffed. “Fine,” he said at last. “But no more camping after this.”

“Deal.”

“And I want waffles tomorrow.”

“You got it.”

“With all of the extras.”

I could just imagine the expressions on the face of whoever was unlucky enough to serve us breakfast tomorrow. “Done. Waffles with everything.”

“Good.” For a moment there was no sound but crickets chirping, and then all of a sudden, he was pressed to my back, cool and soothing against my itchy, sweat-soaked skin. His lips touched my ear, and I stopped breathing. “Thank you, Cillian.” Then

Soren got up and headed back to the car, taking his sleeping bag with him. I heard him recline a seat, put his feet up on the dash—Andre was seriously going to kill me—and then... Nothing. Sleep, or stasis, or whatever he called it. I was alone.

That was good, because honestly, Soren had a point when he called this uncomfortable. I wasn't a kid anymore, who could fall asleep on anything and stay that way for hours. I rolled around on my sleeping bag, trying to find one position that was marginally more comfortable than another, but it was futile. My body was run ragged, but my mind couldn't stop turning over the day's events, considering and reconsidering and trying to fruitlessly strategize about—nothing. There was just nothing. Nothing more that I could do to prepare, except for getting in touch with Roger the Oil Man, and that had to wait until I was sure Bobby could do what I needed.

I finally gave in and grabbed my new cell phone. If things went well, Soren and I would be in New Mexico by tomorrow, and I needed advice about Bobby. Happily, Marisol's number was one I had memorized. Not that my other phone was being tracked that I knew of, but I wasn't going to take chances with it unless I had to.

She picked up on the first ring. "Cillian!"

"How did you know it was me?"

"The cards told me you would call. Where the hell are you?"

I rolled onto my back and tucked my free hand under my head, finally feeling some of the day's tension leave me as I basked in Marisol's concern. "On my way to Bobby."

"And you're okay? Not shot again?"

I frowned. “No, I’m not shot. What have those cards been telling you?”

“Lots of swords and pentacles in bad conjunction, cielito .” I could almost see her head shake. “You’re really okay?”

“I’m still here,” I said, not as comforting as I could be, but really, I wasn’t capable of doing better right now. “So’s Soren. We’ll be in Santa Rosa tomorrow, I hope. Any advice on how to reach Bobby? Is he still out in the desert?”

“Last I heard, yes. But I thought about it, and you know, he’ll probably answer if you use the gong, so it’ll be all right.”

“The...gong.”

“Yes, the gong! What, did I stutter?” she demanded. “You know where his place is?”

“Vaguely.”

“Two and a half miles past the Blue Hole down County Road 7, another half mile to the east when you see the rock shaped like a turtle,” Marisol clarified for me. “He’s got a gong set up outside his little hut. It’s only to be rung in dire emergencies, according to him, but I think your situation qualifies. You hit it, and he’ll hear it and come back to meet you. I’m pretty sure, at least.”

That was way better than going out into the desert to try to find Bobby myself. “Great. Thanks, Marisol.”

“You’re welcome.” She sounded subdued, though. She wasn’t even scolding me anymore, and she never missed an opportunity to do that.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Marisol laughed faintly. “Too much tarot on the brain, I think. Listen, honey, if you can’t reach me over the next few days, don’t worry about it, all right? I’ve got some business to take care of, so I might be out of reach for a while. But I’ll be fine. All right?”

She wasn’t exactly lying, I could tell that much over the phone, but there was something in her voice that wasn’t right. “What’s going down?”

“Nothing, honey! I don’t know anything for sure, and it’s better not to go borrowing trouble. Don’t worry about me. Just do what you need to do. I’ll talk to you again soon, okay?”

I wanted to force the issue, but my fatigue was finally winning out over my brain. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure, Cilly. I love you.”

“Love you too.” Marisol hung up, and I put the phone down, frowning. There was nothing I could do from here, I knew that, but the way she sounded...

I fell asleep thinking about Marisol, and dreamed of her pancakes. It was my best rest in days.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

It took us two days to get through Missouri, Oklahoma, a sliver of Texas, and finally end up in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. Two days for what should have been an eighteen-hour drive, because ha-fucking-ha, there was no way I should have expected Soren to sit in the passenger seat and play with the Nintendo. No. He preferred to look up bad roadside attractions with his phone and then try to compel me to go there by bitching nonstop, or occasionally just staring at me with cloudy purple eyes until I gave in. Not that I could give in, because— hello —no distinguishing locations for the sorceress to track, which led to several arguments before he gave up.

“Next time,” I promised him. “After we’re not being hunted down by your dad’s soothsayer, I’ll let you plan a road trip, and we’ll waste time all over the country, but for now, we just can’t. Not if we don’t want your brothers crashing the party.” I let him read to me about the exhibits as a poor substitute for seeing them in person.

Springfield, Missouri yielded pictures of a giant Solo cup and a three-story fork, because enormous dinnerware—sure, why not?

Soren actually looked a little wistful as he stared at them. “There are no giants in this land, are there?”

“Not that I know of.”

“It is a pity. One lived next to me back home. She was an excellent neighbor.”

I honestly didn’t know if I could take him seriously or not. “You lived next to a giant?”

“A j?tunn . Ice giant. When Ragnar?k comes, she will rise up and fight against the gods.”

“Do you really believe in Ragnar?k?”

Soren turned and stared at me. “You don’t? How do you think the world will end?”

I tried not to think about that, actually. “I don’t know. Nuclear war? Global warming? Pandemics or famine?”

Soren shook his head. “I suppose it makes sense, you seeing things from such a limited perspective. Those are very human concerns to have. But you see beyond human concerns as well. This world will end in battle, in ice and flame and wrath and the blood of many gods.” He sighed. “I only hope I’m around to see it.”

Well...damn. There wasn’t much I could say to that, so I didn’t say anything, just kept driving. I stayed parallel to I-44 but not on it very much, another effort at staying under the radar, so our slower speed was my fault as well. We spent the first night in Oklahoma City, where in addition to the bombing memorial there was also a bevy of bronze Miss Americas on a college campus and a bone museum that Soren pined over for a little bit. We didn’t try camping again, sticking with a cheap chain motel and double beds, although Soren didn’t bother using his own. He didn’t bring out the Soren I loved, but he was quiet at night, almost gentle, and I let him soak up some of my heat as long as he didn’t get pushy.

The next day we avoided a huge pair of legs—just legs—and the Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas on our way through to New Mexico. “This country is huge,” Soren commented more than once. “Surely there has to be some place for my land.”

“I’m sure we’ll find something,” I said, although really I had no idea what Soren required in terms of relocating, and he didn’t seem to either. The process of

transference was magic that he'd left in the hands of Egilsson. Bobby would know, though. We just had to find Bobby and this part would get worked out, one more obstacle overcome. Before the next obstacle and then the final one. The sacrifice. I needed to find a sacrifice. A person.

I wasn't any closer to a solution on that one.

We got to Santa Rosa a little after noon. The sky was clear and blue, which meant it was brutally hot out. The ground was the reddish-brown you saw a lot of in the southwest, dotted with boulders and scrubby bushes. I wasn't a huge fan of the landscape, but Soren found a particular sort of beauty to it.

"It isn't the land I come from," he mused as we passed a sign for the Blue Hole. "But they both contain a comforting sense of desolation."

"Comforting?"

"Oh yes." He looked at me and tilted his head. "Do you think I was the one to seek out this bargain? I would rather have been left alone completely, but I could not alter my planned destruction, so I had to go where I was taken in order to survive. I want to live, just as you do. Just as Soren and all of his family do."

"Someone has to die, though."

"Someone will now that you've gotten involved, yes. But it will not be me."

Way to make me feel awesome. "We're almost there." I followed Marisol's instructions and turned when I saw the stone tortoise, heading down a rough dirt road with washboards so bad that the car shook and bounced like a Mexican jumping bean. I felt the bottom of the Electra scrape the ground over one particularly nasty pothole and winced. Not good. I'd be lucky if I didn't puncture something out here.

Bobby Garcia's cabin was at the end of the road, a little adobe hut that couldn't have more than three rooms in it. It was on the grid, if barely, but there were no lights on, no music coming from the house, and the front door was shut. Made sense—he was supposed to be wandering the desert, right? I didn't bother to try the door, just got out of the car and started looking for a gong.

I didn't have to look for long. It was set up about ten meters behind Bobby's house, suspended between two rough-hewn logs that were sunk deep in the rocky ground. It wasn't the kind of gong I'd been expecting, something brassy and polished. This was a round slab of iron covered with a film of rust, and probably weighed close to a thousand pounds. There was no pretty hammer or padded mallet to strike it with, just a crowbar leaned against the side of one of the logs.

Soren took one look at it and balked. "Oh, no. I am not touching that."

Not that I'd really expected him to, but... "Why not?"

"Because that's a part of this land. It was gifted to the keeper by the land itself. If I touch it, it will wound me."

I had to admit I was a little confused. "Because you're different lands?"

Soren bared his teeth. "Because I'm competition. "

All righty then. Landv'ttir versus elemental, Iceland and America going at it—whatever, I didn't need to start a fight. "I'll do it." I walked over to the crowbar, hoisted it, and then swung back and smacked the gong square in the center of its iron disc.

Oh my god , I thought my arm was going to vibrate out of my shoulder. It felt for a moment like I'd shattered my bones, the pain was so intense.



I dropped the crowbar, cradled my arm against my chest, and actually growled at Soren when he said, “Or perhaps this land is hostile to all.”

“Cillian?”

Soren and I both turned around and saw Bobby step out of the back door of his cabin, squinting against the sun as he surveyed the scene. Bobby was a few inches shorter than me, with skin so brown he almost vanished against the backdrop of the desert, tousled white hair that reminded me of Einstein on a bad day, and he wore nothing but a pair of flip-flops and some gym shorts. I hadn’t associated with him much over the years, but he still looked exactly the same as the first time I’d met him almost two decades ago.

“You coulda just knocked,” he said mildly, coming over to us and not even sparing a glance for Soren. “Hand me that arm, then.” I gritted my teeth and held out my arm, and Bobby gripped my wrist and elbow for a moment. The brutal buzzing sensation vanished, and I sighed with relief.

“Holy shit, Bobby, you should put a warning on that thing.”

“Not many folks get a chance to try it out, and most who do use a gentler touch,” he replied, his voice as even as anything, but I knew I’d made a mistake. It felt like disappointing Santa Claus.

Of course, now that he was standing in front of me, my words had dried up. I was bad at asking for help if it was from someone I wasn’t close to or couldn’t bribe, and I knew I had nothing Bobby wanted. “I...I thought you’d be out. In the desert. Somewhere.”

“Oh yeah, yeah I was,” he said placidly, sticking his hands in his pockets. “But I decided to come home a little early. You get a craving for a Slim Jim, you know how

it is, you just can't forget about it."

"What is a Slim Jim?" Soren asked.

"Oh, they're delicious," Bobby said. "Come on inside. I'll give you one, and you boys can tell me what brought you my way."

The inside of Bobby's hut was just as tiny as I'd expected, but surprisingly cool, and there were three chairs around a little white table that he insisted we sit at. He poured us water, gave Soren a Slim Jim before taking one for himself, and then looked at me expectantly.

I told him what I knew, with some help from Soren. That he was landv?ttir, that I needed to find a place for him and his plot. I didn't go into details about how I was going to get my hands on it, just that once I had it I needed to know what to do with it. Bobby listened placidly, chewing on his snack and glancing between the two of us contemplatively.

"Huh. That's a real problem."

"How big of a problem?"

"Oh, well, it's all in the location, but I'd say pretty big," Bobby said. "Most of this land is old and jealous, already well established. The cities are quiet, but any place where one of you—" He pointed a gnarled finger at Soren, who was on his third Slim Jim. "—might be happy is one that's probably going to be inhabited already. Spirits, elementals, landv?ttir...they keep this land alive with their energy. Keep it moving, so to speak. In a city, that energy is replaced with the vitality of humans, but out here, well...there isn't much room for new arrivals."

Soren shrugged. "I will fight for a place if I must."

“Oh dear.” Bobby shook his head. “Do me a favor, please? Head outside and put your hands down next to my gong. Not on it,” he assured Soren. “You don’t have to touch it. Just next to it, on the ground.”

“All right.” He got to his feet and headed outside. I watched him go with trepidation.

“Bobby...”

“It’ll be okay,” he said. “Just watch for a moment.” We both watched Soren crouch down next to the gong and, with a determined look, lay his hands on the ground.

The land beneath him crumbled instantly, a thousand pebbles falling away beneath his feet and dragging Soren underground. I barely had a chance to yell before he’d vanished completely.

“ Bobby! ”

“Oh, she won’t keep him,” Bobby told me. “She’s just putting him in his place. Give ’er a moment.”

A moment? A moment for Soren, him and the spirit, to be buried alive? “Bring him back now !”

“She just needs a minute to move him, Cillian. Hold your horses.”

I was ready to let those horses ride free, actually, ready to let them trample all over Bobby and this fucking game he was playing. Just then the ground split about a foot away from Bobby’s back door, spilling Soren into the air and coalescing again with a grinding murmur.

I ran over and helped him stand up, brushing the dirt away as best I could. He was

covered in it, his pale hair as ruddy as a sunset, every inch of skin and clothing coated with dust. He didn't say anything, just stared at me and shivered, and I felt like my brain might just boil out of my skull. I would pay Bobby back for this. I would show him. I would find his future, and I would twist it even if I had to—

Fuck. I took a deep breath and then asked Soren, "Are you okay?"

"This land is much stronger than I am," he whispered. His voice sounded dry, as barren as the rocks out back. "I don't want to stay here any longer."

"We're going, we're gonna go, just wait one second." I turned and looked at Bobby coldly. "What was the point of that?"

"Just a demonstration," he said easily. "Fighting, that's not going to win you a place here. Land has to be empty before it can be filled. I can help you to settle, once you find a suitable place, but I can't clear the land by force. None of us can do that."

"Well, what clears land apart from a city?" I asked.

"It has to be some sort of use. Biggest use out there today?" Bobby shrugged. "Drilling for oil or natural gas. That takes from the land but doesn't replace the way people living there do. Find a site where the oil wells have dried up, and see what you think of it." He stood up and inclined his head to Soren. "Please forgive our forcefulness, sacred one."

After a long, tense moment, Soren nodded back. That was all the cue I needed to get this show on the road. "Bobby, I'm going to be taking you up on that offer," I said. "Be ready for my call."

"I'll be happy to help, as long as you find the right place. Take some Slim Jims for the road, boys."

I didn't take any, but Soren spitefully grabbed the entire container before marching out to the car.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

Soren didn't talk to me at all after that, even though I kept asking if he was all right. It had to have been a terrifying thing for him, to be swallowed up by a force so much greater than he himself was. Like Jonah and the whale, only if the whale was just as smart as Jonah and they both knew it. Hell, I'd have been scared under the circumstances. I'd been scared just watching it.

Bobby was kind of a bastard, but I took his meaning. Soren wasn't a big fish in America. I needed to find him somewhere to put down roots—literally and figuratively—that wouldn't chew him up and spit him out. If I couldn't do that, I wouldn't blame Soren for not wanting to stick with me, because everyone needed a home. Just because I didn't know exactly where mine was didn't mean Soren had to suffer along with me. Fortunately, I knew someone in the oil business who I could talk to about that.

But first I had to take care of Soren, who was curled up in the passenger seat, still clutching a fistful of Slim Jims but not eating them. He was filthy, but he hadn't been amenable to me touching him after the initial brush down. Which, yeah, I could understand him wanting some serious autonomy right now.

I pulled up outside of a La Quinta hotel and said, "We'll get a room, and you can get cleaned up."

"No."

Well, fuck. Of course his first word in an hour would be No. "Why not?"

"I'm not getting out of the car."

“You can’t just stay in the car like this, Soren.”

Purple eyes glared at me. “And you can’t tell me what to do.”

It was like having a toddler as my copilot. “Explain this to me, okay? Why don’t you want to get out of the car? I’m not trying to make this hard for you. I genuinely want to know.”

“Because I don’t want to step on the ground.”

So this was sort of like the camping issue. “Why not?”

“Because this ground is aggressive now. It’s reaching for me, disrupting my energy. I hate this place.”

“What do you mean, reaching for you?”

“I mean that it’s reaching for me!” he hissed. “How can you not feel it?” Suddenly he reached over to me and grasped my face in his hands. “I will show you.”

“Wait—” Reading Soren when he was like this didn’t work the same way. I didn’t see the future in his eyes, but apparently if he wanted me to, I could get a really good grasp on the present. The sensation started as an itch at the base of my spine and then began a slow crawl up and down my body, like a wave of pinpricks stabbing my flesh. It wasn’t exactly painful, but it was definitely uncomfortable. “What the hell is that?”

“Magnetism.”

“Magne—how?”

“This land is rich in lodestone. It can move and direct it, and it is following us with it and disrupting this body’s equilibrium. The lodestone pulls on the very particles in this blood. It’s trying to tug me back to it, and I hate it. I want us to leave.”

And now I could see why, but I was starving, he was filthy, and we were running low on gas. “We need a room, Soren. We don’t have to stay the night” —although I was going to push for that if at all possible— “but we need to regroup. Look, the floor in there will be concrete and tile, and that will help to muffle things, right?”

“Barely,” he said, letting go of my face and crossing his arms. “But yes.”

“Then we’ll get cleaned up, I’ll get something to eat, we’ll figure out our next move, and things will be good. Okay?”

“Things haven’t been very good so far.” He eyed me dubiously. “What makes you think they’re about to change?”

“I’m going to talk to a guy who owes me a favor. I think he can find you the land you need.”

That perked Soren up immediately. “Empty land?”

“Probably.”

“Will it have an aquifer?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“I will need one, in order to replenish my lake.”

I didn’t even want to consider the logistical difficulties of shipping a goddamn lake



across country, but hey, if Egilsson could do it... “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“And some granite outcroppings would be nice.”

“Okay.”

“And a small volcano, if possible.”

“Look, this isn’t Hawaii,” I said, because there was a limit to the things I was willing to let Soren have access to, and a freaking volcano was at the top of that list. Right above fault lines. “The continental United States doesn’t have very many active volcanoes, and wouldn’t those have their own elementals guarding them?”

“Possibly,” Soren allowed.

“There you go. I’ll see what I can do, okay? Let’s go get a room first.”

Getting a room involved me practically carrying Soren into the hotel, because he was adamant about not stepping foot on the ground. The sidewalk was a compromise, but he basically ran inside once he was out of the car. I followed with my bag, got us a room on the second floor—the more distance the better—and got Soren situated before taking my phone back downstairs and outside. I didn’t want him to listen in while I was talking to Roger, in case things ended up being a lot more hopeless than I was holding out for. Thank god for permanent ink and lazy bathing habits.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon now, and the sky looked almost like a parody of a sunset, so orange and pink and violet and gold it could hardly be real. It was gorgeous, the sort of thing that could steal a person’s heart. I could see why someone would choose to live out here, in this town of less than three thousand people, if they had that kind of view every evening. Didn’t mean I’d ever want to do that, but I could understand it.

I dialed Roger's number, feeling a little nervous. It was one thing to tell a guy that you owed them right after they'd saved your life—it was quite another for them to call in the favor. And I was asking for a big fucking favor.

He answered on the third ring. "This Cillian?" His Texas twang was oddly relaxing.

"Yeah, Roger, it's me."

"Goddamn, son, finally! I'd about thought you'd fallen off the face of the earth!"

No, that would be Soren. "It's been a busy time. How are you?"

"Not as good as I'd be with you here. The cards just ain't fallin' my way tonight."

"You're in Vegas?" That was good and bad news. Good because that meant he was relatively close, all things considered; bad because there was no way in hell I was going to Las Vegas.

"Yep. I reckon you'd clean up in a town like this."

"That's the whole reason I can't go there."

Roger Vandermoor wasn't a multimillionaire businessman for nothing. He was quiet for a moment before saying, "Got yourself blacklisted, huh?"

"Among other things." Apart from not being welcome in any casino on the Strip, I was also wanted by the overtly criminal side of Vegas as well. And the magical community. All of Nevada was basically a no-go zone for me if I wanted to be safe.

"And they'll break your kneecaps if they catch you in their town again. I understand. Well, what can I do for ya, Cillian?"

“Okay.” I took a deep breath, trying to marshal my thoughts. “I need a piece of land.”

“The wife and I own over a million acres, so I reckon there’s plenty of pieces in that. What kind of land specifically?”

A million acres? I had underestimated Roger’s net worth. “Something that was used for oil or gas development and then tapped out, fairly recently. Something that’s not too remote—it has to have road access, but not be close to many people either. Something with access to water, if you could manage it. The plot doesn’t have to be big” —after all, Soren’s land fit within that warehouse, and while it was big, it wasn’t football field sized— “but it does have to have been used up, so to speak.”

“Huh.” I could hear him tapping his phone, looking something up. “I’m sure I could wrangle something like that. You need a place to build a house or something?”

“More like I need a place to transplant some property. It’s complicated.”

“I figure everything with you gets pretty complicated. Hmm.” He tapped some more. “Let me see what I’ve got and get back to you on it. This time sensitive?”

“Pretty time sensitive, yeah.”

“Any places you’re not willing to consider?” I heard ice clink in a glass as he took a sip of his drink.

“Nothing in Illinois.” Because even if, by some miracle, we came out ahead at the end of this, I didn’t want to tempt Fate by settling Soren in Illinois.

“Not to worry. Not much oil development in Illinois...” I let Roger mutter some more, pinching the spot right between my eyes where a headache was rapidly developing. It was probably dehydration; I hadn’t had much to drink today along with

my unintentional fasting, but the pain was building so rapidly that it was more like...more like...

Oh, fuck.

Sometimes—not often, but sometimes—I got premonitions. It was different from seeing someone’s fate, or playing out what was going to happen in the future through someone else’s eyes. A premonition was the sudden, intense knowledge that I needed to be looking at someone; Fate’s way of throwing me a bone, so to speak. And the only person around right now was Roger. Which meant—

“Can you do me another favor?”

“What d’you need, son?”

“I need to see your eyes. Can we go live?”

Roger chuckled. “You gonna change my luck, Cillian?”

“I think you might be the one to change mine,” I said. “Please.” I wasn’t actually sure if this would work over a phone, but I had to try.

There was some shuffling, and then Roger’s face came up on my screen. He was wearing the same white hat as before and had a glass of what was probably whiskey in one hand. He didn’t look drunk, though, mostly amused.

“Here I am,” he said expansively. “You need me to do anything else?”

“Just hold the phone a little closer to your eyes, and be still for a bit.” He obliged, and I relaxed my mind as best I could, stared into his eyes, and let myself dig down, a little deeper, a little harder. It wasn’t easy—the pixilation blurred some things—but

after a few seconds, I found what I was fearing.

“Oh, shit .”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“I...” How had they found us again? How had I given us away? Santa Rosa was a fucking hole in the road, there was nothing here to distinguish it—how had they found us? And we weren’t going anywhere, obviously. We could run into the desert, but the land was angry at us, and the farther we got from civilization, the more of a problem Soren might have. Besides, that wasn’t what the future showed anyway. It was blurry, but it was all I had to go on.

“Roger, I need to ask you another favor. A big one, right now. And I need you to just go with it, okay? Because it’s gonna happen, but the sooner you get started on it, the better the odds are. And I swear to god if I survive what’s coming, I will pick the winning horse at the next Kentucky Derby for you.”

Roger blinked once and then shrugged and threw back the rest of his drink. “Eh, Vegas was getting boring anyway. What can I do for you, Cillian?”

I told him. He laughed and laughed.

It was nice that one of us was confident.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

Naturally, once Soren knew about the looming confrontation, he insisted on being there. I figured it would be easier without him, but he thought, probably correctly, that since he was the one we were fighting over, he should have a say in our negotiations.

“Fine,” I said. “But keep your mouth shut for the most part, okay? Please? Because you’re not good at defusing these sorts of situations, and I think you know that.”

“Defusing such situations would be boring.” He smirked. “I much prefer when you fight over me.”

“And I much prefer to survive the negotiations, so don’t push it, okay?”

“I will think about it.” Which meant he was probably going to be a little shit. “Which of my brothers is coming?”

“Jakob.”

Soren’s expression immediately perked up. “Really? That’s a compliment to you, Cillian. Jakob is ólafur’s best negotiator. It means he’s moved beyond just threatening you into trying to reason with you.”

I snorted. “Before he kills me regardless, you mean?”

“Obviously.”

“I’m flattered.” I was more than a little relieved, actually. I had no desire to see hide

or hair of Art?r again, especially since he was probably still very put out over taking all those shots to the junk. And Rolf... “Why not the other brother?”

“Oh, Rolf is just a year older than me—he’s too young to have much influence with ólafur. Plus, he doesn’t speak very nuanced English. Jakob has a law degree from Oxford.”

Great. I got to bargain for my life with a lawyer. I’d never considered myself stupid, but occasionally I felt the weight of my lack of a formal education. The prospect of facing down a lawyer was a uniformly distasteful one. The second he brought up, I don’t know, probate or something, I was going to kick him in the face.

No, I wasn’t. But it was a nice thought to get me through the evening.

Jakob Egilsson pulled up in front of the La Quinta in a black SUV—naturally—an hour and a half later. He had two other men with him, both of them discreetly armed. Jakob himself was dressed in khakis and a nice button-down shirt, nothing that would stand out in the Southwest. He went through the rigamarole of getting a hotel room, speaking with barely a trace of an accent, and then came to meet me in the foyer not far from the front desk. If there had been an open meeting room, I would have taken it to keep things more private, but there wasn’t, and there was no way I was going to a bedroom with these people. Besides, I needed to be able to see outside.

Jakob looked between me and Soren as he sat down across from us. “Little brother,” he said conversationally. “You look like you’re doing well.”

“Passable,” Soren replied. “It certainly has been far more interesting with Cillian than it ever was with you.”

“That’s a shame. If I’d known how discontented you were becoming, I would have taken steps to alleviate it. You know we only want the best for you.”

“So I’ve been told. And yet you were not able to keep me, not even in the finery to which you’ve become accustomed. That is no way to win a battle, Jakob. Certainly no way to win a war. It is laziness, and ólafur cannot afford to become lazy, not with regards to me.”

“As you’ve so clearly demonstrated. However—”

“Hi,” I interjected, because that little game had gone on for long enough. “I’m sitting right here. I think you should probably talk to me at this point.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Jakob replied, but he did at least look at me. “If Soren felt free to make a bargain with you, then he is also free to bargain with me, as our father’s second. I’m merely cutting out the middleman.”

“You can’t.” That was Soren, and he sounded more than a little gleeful. “Because I am the object you both desire, and bargains have been struck that gainsay neither of the original agreements. I am free to make new choices, but not with you, unless ólafur is indisposed. You are restricted to your father’s bargain, which means you cannot cajole me into coming with you. You must deal with Cillian.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” I told Soren. He smiled at me and preened.

“It isn’t every day that wizards fight over a simple landv?ttir. I feel I should enjoy the moment.”

Jakob looked at me, really looked , and for a moment, I felt a weird kinship with him as we both briefly agreed on the fact that Soren was a complete and utter drama queen.

“Fine,” he said. He resettled to face me, crossed his legs, and pulled out his phone. “If you would take a look at this, please.” He handed it over to me, and I felt my breath



catch in my throat as I took in the picture he had pulled up. It was a brick building on a very familiar corner in Denver, and it was completely gutted by what had to have been a very fierce fire.

“You—”

“As I understand it, three bodies have been recovered so far. They’re still being identified, but at least one was female.”

I stared for another moment at the picture, getting my initial burst of fear and outrage under control, and then took a deep breath. “Well, arson is never nice, and I can’t say I approve, but I also happen to know you haven’t accomplished what you’re implying. Nice try, but I call bullshit.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Actually, I can know that. I’m a motherfucking soothsayer,” I snapped at him. “I can know a lot of things you’ve got no clue about, and that includes the fate of the occupants in that building. I also know that if by some terrible coincidence you have actually managed to take out either of the people I care about who live there, the Irish mob is going to come after you. You’re currently living in Chicago. It’s no Boston, but there is absolutely no shortage of people I can go to with this information who wouldn’t love to have an excuse to end you. So. Try again.”

Jakob smiled, actually smiled. Asshole. “Very clever, Mr. Kelly. Let me add that the fire wasn’t my idea. I greatly dislike collateral damage, but my brother couldn’t be gainsaid after your little stunt in St. Louis. He’s very, very angry at you.”

“Good thing I’m not negotiating with him then.”

“It is.” Jakob took his phone back. “You’re much better off with me, although not

necessarily safer. I'm something of a scholar, Mr. Kelly. I do like my research. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to research you, but as you can see—" He wagged the picture of the fire. "I did manage to come up with a few gems. There isn't much official information about you, but unofficially there's a wealth of it. Not so much you individually, but—well, I had no idea your mother was such a desirable commodity."

Oh boy. He went there. And he wasn't finished. "You talk a good game about the Irish mob, but I've got to tell you I would be very surprised if you actually went to them with anything, either information or demands. They seem to have their own connections to a group called the Draoithe, although their name has been bastardized by English to be the Adroit. And they're desperately interested in the whereabouts of your mother, Kelly. Funny, that you took her name for yours. Very respectful, but not very bright."

"You don't know where my mother is." They couldn't; there was no way, none. On the other hand, we couldn't see into our own futures, and my mother preferred to be alone. If they'd found her...

"You think not?" He turned his phone to me again, and all it took was a glance before I realized that the map he'd pulled up had a dot on it, a dot that centered squarely on the little nowhere town my mother had taken refuge in. "My brothers, Mr. Kelly, they're hunters. They track down their prey. They strive to understand its movements and anticipate what it will do next so they can stay one step ahead of it. Me, though? I'm a fisherman. I make it so that my prey comes to me, and I catch it by having just the right lure at just the right time." He set his phone down. "You'll tell me next that we haven't actually found your mother yet, and you're right. But we have found her home, and we are in contact with a member of the Adroit. You won't end your deal with my brother for your adoptive mother, but will you for your own flesh and blood?"

He leaned forward. “She escaped their clutches once, with you in tow as a child. Do you think she could do it again? Do you think she’s strong enough now?”

I was frozen for a moment, utterly dumbstruck. Fear beat a frantic pattern inside my heart, and the urge to scream bloody murder and shoot Jakob right through his smug face was intense. I couldn’t back down, though. I knew I couldn’t, not now. Not even for my mother, who—if she was watching out for me, and she always was, then she’d seen signs of this possibility. I had to trust that she knew to take care of herself, and I had to respond before Jakob was emboldened enough to think he could stop talking and start taking. Not to mention Soren sat stiff at my side now, wondering if I was going to fold like a paper fan. No. I couldn’t do it, and moreover, I was no one’s bitch.

I leaned forward, just far enough to catch the glimmer I was looking for. “Okay then. You want to press where it hurts? Let’s press where it hurts. You have two children.” Jakob started to sit back, but I reached out and grabbed his knee. “Don’t you fucking move,” I hissed at him. “And don’t think that this is the time for your guys to go for their guns, because it isn’t. This, right here? This is a conversation you need to listen to, and listen good, because it might save your life. Are you paying attention?” He didn’t say anything, but that was as good as a yes as far as I was concerned.

“You’ve got two children. Astrid is the youngest. She’s five, and she looks just like your beautiful wife. She’s your little darling, but it’s your son Michael who’s the apple of your eye. He’s ten, and you’re starting to worry because he’s having problems at school. He doesn’t have any friends, and his teachers say he has rage issues. This geas you guys carry, it doesn’t skip generations, but it does hit some more strongly, and right now you’re seeing it go after your son.

“Or you were, before you gave your brother away. Soren was always your favorite, and it hurt, didn’t it, to watch him sink into the black lake and get this thing back, this creature that you don’t understand and don’t want to. You’d rather have nothing to do

with him, nothing to remind you of your guilt.

“Too bad you ignored him, though, because now he’s with me, and you’re prepared to fight for him to keep your children safe, but you know , you know in your heart that it’s not that easy. You can threaten me, but you’re just as vulnerable because your wife doesn’t know the truth. You’ve never told her what’s at stake, and she’s in London with your children right now, and your father—” I laughed. “He doesn’t give a shit, does he? Not about your family. All he cares about is himself.”

I let go of Jakob and sat back. “Think about that balance of power for a moment, and then think about what you’re trying to do to me. Do you really feel like you’ve picked the winning side?” His future was muddled, too mixed with mine to see clearly, but there was a chance I’d be able to bend him my way, and I had to take it.

Jakob stared hard at me for a long moment before clearing his throat. “Peter, go,” he murmured, and one of the men nodded and went outside. I could see his outline through the glass, taking something out of the SUV.

“I have been instructed,” Jakob said very clearly, very distinctly, “to inform you that we will stop at nothing to get Soren back. You had your opportunity to negotiate.” He pushed a button on his phone. “Your mother’s location is forfeit. I hope you had a chance to say good-bye to her.” And a second later, Peter the Henchman, gas can in hand, set the Elektra on fire.

I knew it was going to happen, but that didn’t make me any happier. Andre was going to murder me, and I deserved it.

Soren seemed more upset by it than I was, actually.

“I liked that car!” he snapped. The front desk guy was already calling the cops, his voice a little panicked as he looked between the four of us and the growing

conflagration outside. “It was comfortable and protective!”

“You can have a dozen such cars with us once you’re safely returned,” Jakob said. “Now, Mr. Kelly. Do you have anything else to try to surprise me with before I resort to measures that would make even Art?r turn his face away?”

“Actually, yes.” And oh, Roger’s timing was perfect. I hadn’t expected to see him in a freaking armored, military Humvee, complete with a turreted machine gun, but there he was, and it was a beautiful thing. I watched Peter stagger away from the Elektra, and then smirked as all three of Egilsson’s people watched while Roger got out of the armored car, saluted with his jaunty cowboy hat, and then threw something into their SUV. Five seconds after that, all the windows blew out, and the car rocked on its wheels while smoke billowed from its engine.

By the time Jakob and his second were looking at me again, I had my gun out and pointed at him. “Time to call it quits. Better luck with your negotiations next time.” I stood up and grabbed my duffel bag from behind the couch we were sitting on, and Soren joined me a moment later. “You guys have a nice night.” I headed for the exit.

“Mr. Kelly.” Jakob sounded utterly serious. “I hope, for your sake, that you truly understand the moves you’re making. You have no second to speak for you if things go badly.”

“I know what I’m doing.” Mostly . “Enjoy Santa Rosa.”

“There they are!” Roger crowed as we came outside. Peter was nowhere to be seen, probably a smart move on his part. “Hell, I came dressed for a ball, and you gave me a middle-school dance instead, Cillian! One little grenade was all it took to keep ’em quiet.”

“Better to have the extra firepower and not need it than the other way around,” I said,

and Roger smiled and smacked me on the back. “Nice car.”

“Thanks, it’s my wife’s! It fit well inside the cargo plane, and she wasn’t using it, so she let me borrow it.”

Holy shit, what kind of woman was he married to? Apparently the kind who put stars in his eyes and had fully equipped war machines at hand. I looked forward to meeting her.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“You got it, boys.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

By the time we reached Roger's plane, the last of my adrenaline had worn down to the point where the aggression was gone, mostly replaced by exhaustion. I had just...holy shit. I'd just blown up a car. Well, I hadn't blown up a car, but someone had blown up a car on my orders. It was a spiral of flame and hate and violence, and I'd fed right into it, and yeah, that wasn't really my fault, but it still didn't make me feel good.

My mother was about the most nonviolent person I'd ever met. The only time she'd hurt someone that I knew of was when she came for me after I got snatched as a kid. Even then she'd only hurt them indirectly, with her beater of a car doing most of the work. The sight of blood made her feel faint, and she was as close to vegan as you could get without giving up eggs.

I didn't know if it was circumstance or inherited traits from the father I'd never met, but while I had way more of a taste for mayhem than Mom, even I knew I was going to be bumping up against my limits soon. The dice had been cast, the wheel was turning, and I didn't know what the end result was going to be. My vision had never been so blurred before—every new decision coming with consequences I couldn't suss out, because I'd dragged everyone I knew into the maelstrom with me.

What I wouldn't have given to be making my living as a fucking fortune teller right now. I stared out the reinforced window of the armored car and wondered where the hell Marisol had gotten to. She'd known this was coming—she'd known this was going to happen. Not the specifics, but she'd known, and she'd gotten herself the hell out of Dodge.

I was so grateful she'd told me. One less thing for me to worry about, and I had

enough to keep myself occupied thinking about Soren and his relentless family, what I was going to have to do in Chicago to free Soren from his father, and what I was going to do about the sacrifice... Time was running short, but all I could think about was Marisol's shop and the apartment in the back, Tavo's room that had become mine, and how maybe if I hadn't run off with one of Marisol's little bronze Buddhas, the protection spell woven in them might have held off the Egilssons.

I absently riffled through the bottom of the duffel bag at my feet, fingers searching until they found—yep. Still had it. I picked the Buddha figurine out and weighed it in my hand, measuring out the cost of people's lives against it: the loss of a home, a job, a future. Gauzy curtains and claw-foot bathtubs, shelves filled with tchotchkes and spiritual ephemera and the air full of the spicy scent of rice and beans, or the sweetness of coffee and pancakes. The closest thing I'd had to a home, burned to a shell. My hand squeezed tight around the figurine.

"It's a pretty favor," Soren said from his place next to me.

"Hmm?"

"The talisman. The favor is well-woven into it. You could have used it earlier, you know. It would have eased your path."

I didn't know what he was referring to. "What favor?"

"The protection within it. The power is small, but very targeted."

"Is it?" I looked at the Buddha a little more appreciatively. I knew Marisol had bitched about me ruining her protection scheme, but I hadn't imagined that I'd brought a little bit of it with me. I put the bronze in my pocket.

"Our time is drawing down."



“I know,” I murmured.

“You spoke very well to Jakob, but words will not save you from Ólafur. You need to have a plan.”

“I’m working on that.”

“Cillian...”

“Why do you care?” I snapped. “The more I think about it, the more it seems like all you’re after is the fight. You want to be the center of attention, and our conflict makes you happy, doesn’t it? Isn’t this exactly what you want?”

“I do want to be desired,” Soren said. “I want to belong to the strongest, for that will better safeguard my own existence. But that doesn’t mean there are no preferences involved. And the more I think about it, the more I know that I, and Soren, would be happier with you. You let me do things like drive cars and go to amusement parks and eat at Denny’s. I like all of these things very much, and Soren would be devastated if you died. I might have to keep him asleep if it happens, and that would be very lonely for me.”

Lonely. Yeah. Fuck, I felt tired. I wanted to take what the landv?ttir was saying the way he meant it, with all the earnestness something that wasn’t human could probably have in this situation. As it was, I was fighting not to be resentful. Only the reminder of Soren inside of this creature, and how he felt about things, kept me from snapping something now.

“Well, that’s something.”

Soren looked like he wanted to say more, but we were arriving at the airfield now. It was small, with a little tower and hangar beside a single runway. There were only two

planes visible, in fact?one a luxurious-looking private jet, the other a bulky cargo plane with an open back hatch and a few people milling around outside of it. One of them was a woman with what I'd call "Texas hair," teased big and dyed blonde, wearing a teal pantsuit and toting a pair of pink gun holsters. She was...adorably scary, if that was even a thing. She smiled widely as we drove up and got out.

"Honeybun! Well, that was quick, huh?"

Roger walked right over to her, a matching grin on his face. "Hey, darlin'!" They kissed loud and smackingly, and the well-armed people around them—two of them were women, actually, and they were just as competent-looking as the men—all smiled from the secondhand cuteness. "Yeah, no problems. I love those little microgrenades, by the way, real convenient when you want to do some very targeted damage."

"Aren't they lovely?" she purred. "I've got an order in for another couple thousand. I reckon they'll be real useful in urban combat situations. Now, who's the friend you had to rush out here and save?"

"Ah, right. Cillian!" He beckoned me over, and I came, feeling a little bit like a kid being introduced to a new teacher. "Annie, this is Cillian Kelly. He's the lucky charm I told you about. Made me a lot of money and kept me from being shot to hell not too long ago."

She rolled her eyes at her husband. "That's what you get for gambling when you should be doing somethin' safe, like drinkin'."

"In my defense, I was doing both."

"Oh, I bet you were." She turned and held a tiny hand out to me. "Lovely to meet you! I'm Annabelle Vandermoor, but my friends call me Annie."

“Hi, Annie.” She had a surprisingly firm grip. “Thanks for lending us your husband. Soren and I would definitely have been in trouble without Roger’s timely arrival.”

“My honey’s a good guy,” she said. “And you’re the boy givin’ everyone fits, huh?” she asked Soren.

“I...think so?”

“Way to keep life interesting!” She patted his shoulder. “Y’all come aboard the jet. There’re drinks waiting. I daresay there’re some other things you want to ask, but we oughta get to know each other a little first, right?” She led the way up into the plane, and Roger followed, stars in his eyes. I glanced at Soren, who looked at me and shrugged.

“I suppose we should accompany them.”

“Guess so.” I did have a few more things to ask for, after all. We followed them up the little ladder and into a plane that was more blinged out than anything I’d been in for nearly a decade, with red velvet seat covers and shiny bronzed cow skulls on the walls. Annie got us all drinks, and then we sat down, and I learned a little more about exactly how awesome she actually was.

Annie, it turned out, wasn’t solely a millionaire’s wife. She was an entrepreneur who ran the private security company her father had founded and had been in charge of it for the past ten years. She was also an Iraq war veteran, a licensed helicopter pilot, and apparently a crack shot with a pistol.

“My friends called me Annie Oakley growing up,” she said fondly. “I always thought it was a lovely compliment.” Annie’s company, Snakebite Security, had offices in over twenty states and provided security to everyone from traveling business people to diplomats to celebrities. And they had an office in Chicago. Excellent.

“Now, I don’t personally hold much with luck?I’ve never found it to be reliable in a firefight,” she said bluntly. “But you saved my man’s life, and you seem like a nice boy, so I’m willin’ to hear you out.”

“I didn’t say I needed anything else,” I pointed out.

Annie snorted. “Honey, please. I’ve negotiated with terrorists?I’m used to lookin’ for tells. You still want somethin’.”

I stared at her. “You’re kind of frightening.”

“She’s the scariest little thing in high heels,” Roger said adoringly. “Nobody messes with Annie twice, that’s for sure.”

“I believe it.” I marshaled my thoughts. “Okay. There’s a man in Chicago. His name is Andre Jones. First things first, I need to know what’s happening with him and his family.” This would set the arc of all my future actions in motion. “If he’s not responding but his family is, I need them put into protective custody. Or at the very least, moved out of Chicago to somewhere they’re less likely to be found for a couple of days.”

“Hmm. Have you got a number?”

“Yeah, and an address.” I gave both to her, thanking my past self for all the work I’d put into my memory tricks.

“Do you think his family will be amenable to being in protection?”

“I...have no idea.” Except I kind of did. “He’s a wartime reporter, just tell them it has to do with, I don’t know, Syria or something. Afghanistan, maybe.”

“And should I mention you?”

“No, they don’t know about me.” Annie was being as surprisingly amenable as her husband. “Why are you going along with this so easily?”

“Two reasons, darlin’. One, my Roger’s vouched for you, and that’s good enough for me. And two, speed is essential when it comes to success in an operation like this, so the less we sit around with our thumbs up our butts, the better.” She started tapping on her phone, bright pink nails clacking, and I watched with helpless gratitude.

“Hi there, Natasha, it’s Annie. Yeah! Oh, you bet, honey. Mm-hmm. And the kids? Great, great, give Zane all my love, yeah. Listen, honey, I need you to handle a little situation for me out in your neck of the woods.”

It took all of five minutes for Annie to get a crew together to go to Andre’s house. Half an hour later, they reported back in. Andre’s wife and baby were fine, if very worried and confused, and Andre himself hadn’t been home in twelve hours and was no longer answering his phone.

That settled that. They’d found him, found him before Jakob ever came and threatened me here, and had snatched him up as a hostage without bothering to tell me. It made me feel way better about my mom and Marisol’s chances, and way worse about Andre’s, but I had a plan. The beginnings of a plan, anyway.

Soren touched my arm and smiled at me. “You already arranged for a sacrifice!” he whispered excitedly. I felt sick, witnessing his glee. “It’s perfect!”

It was so, so far from perfect, but I wasn’t ready to confess anything to Soren yet.

I shifted in my chair so the little Buddha dug less into my hip and looked over at Roger and Annie. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to fly us to Chicago?”

“Hell, son,” Roger drawled. “All you had to do was ask.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

There was a long list of things I needed to review before my actual confrontation with Ólafur and his brood. The trouble was, I couldn't quite remember any of it. Most of it was setup, things that I needed to do at just the right time in order to get the result I wanted. I was heading out to conduct a symphony of violence and lies, and there was no time for rehearsal. Everything had to happen just right, which would take an unholy amount of concentration, but my mind swam around like a guppy in a fishbowl, turning in endless circles but not getting anywhere at all.

When we arrived in Chicago, landing at a private airport instead of one of the big ones, it was after midnight, and I was exhausted. I accepted Annie and Roger's offer of a safe place to spend the night in the back room of their office here in Chicago, which as places that were well-protected went was about as good as it got. Security cameras watched all angles of approach, and each of the employees—and how they were so goddamn perky after midnight I had no idea—were all armed to the teeth. When I saw the cot in the back, which looked way nicer than any “cot” I'd ever slept on before, I could have cried with relief. I still had a few things to do, though, so I left Soren chatting with Annie, who'd mastered small talk like no one I'd ever met before, and pulled Roger aside.

“This is the last favor, I swear,” I said quietly. Roger just chuckled.

“Hell, Cillian, you're keeping my Annie busy, and that's plenty worth a favor or two. She hates downtime. What do you need?”

“I need something to wear tomorrow. Something better than this.” I didn't have time to run to the suit shop, and they wouldn't have exactly what I was looking for anyway.

“Yeah? What exactly?”

I told him. I specified color, lengths, durability, everything I could think of. Roger just nodded, his expression never more than calm. This was a man who knew how to roll with the weird. I had to give him that. If I survived this, I was going to owe him and Annie so, so much.

“I can handle that,” he said once I finished. “You sure you don’t want one of these too?” He held something out, and I stared at it for a second and then started to laugh.

“Oh man, that’s perfect. Hell yeah, I want one of those.”

“Thought so.” Roger patted my shoulder. “Go get some sleep, Cillian. Everything else’ll keep until morning.”

“Sure.” I undressed and lay down in the dark, but I just couldn’t fall asleep. Somewhere out there, Andre was in the hands of ólafur Egilsson, probably being interrogated about what he knew, how he knew it, and who I was to him. That was on me. Somewhere out there, Marisol had been driven out of her home, her shop, her entire life because she’d been a friend and mother to me when I’d had almost nothing. Somewhere out there?and I had to believe this?my mother was on the run, forced out of the home she’d made for herself, the first place she’d felt safe in maybe her entire life, all so that she wasn’t turned into leverage against me while I did something objectively insane.

Soren entered the room and lay down behind me, tucking his body in close to mine, knees to knees, chest to back. He wound his arm over my waist, and I let him snuggle us tighter together. He felt cold, but maybe I was getting used to that now, because it didn’t bother me the way it had at first.

His lips touched the back of my neck, and I felt myself crack inside, just a little.



Everything I had done, I'd done for him. Was it worth it? It had to be worth it?it had to be worth what was going to happen next.

“Promise me you will not risk yourself needlessly,” Soren said. His voice was like the murmur of wind over water, stirring ripples that danced across the surface of a calm, quiet pool. “You are not expendable. Without you, there is no bargain.”

“I know how it works.”

“That is not a promise.”

“That's all I can give you.”

There was silence for a long moment, and then the chill changed. Soren gasped and started to shake, and I rolled over instantly. “Soren?”

“Cillian...” It was him ; the difference was immediately apparent. I gathered him into my arms and drew him close, but things were different this time around. He got warm faster, his shivers subsiding to occasional tremors after only a minute or so, and when he finally pulled back, there was more sanity than before in his bright blue eyes, and more fear. “Oh god, what are you doing?”

“I've got a plan.”

“ What plan?”

“Soren, it won't work if I tell you.” I actually had no idea if it was going to work regardless, but I couldn't share it with Soren, not in either form. It would just make both of them worry. There was one thing I needed to know?one piece of the puzzle I wasn't sure of yet. “I do have to ask you something, though. Will you be my second?”

Soren shook his head. "I can't be your second. I'm the prize here."

"No, you're not. The v?ttir is, but you aren't."

"Cillian, we're the same."

"That's not true." I made Soren meet my eyes. "I know it's not true. You might live in the same body, but fundamentally you're two different people. Otherwise, how could you be a sacrifice to him?" I sighed. "I'm not asking because I expect you to sit down with your father and negotiate on my behalf or anything. I just?it seems like something I need, and you're the only one I trust enough to ask. So please, trust me now. Be my second."

"Nothing good happens when you ask me to take things on faith." Soren stared at me, eyes wet, his fingers digging too hard into my back. I loved it, every bit of it. I felt like I could breathe again, like my heart was really beating for the first time since I'd seen him last.

I was growing fond of the landv?ttir. I could admit that to myself, but everything I was doing, every stupid chance I was taking and problem I was causing for the people who loved me, I did for Soren.

"Fine, I'm your second, whatever, but Cillian, fuck, please tell me you know what you're doing."

"I love you." That was the more important sentiment here, I thought. "Just...keep that in mind, okay? You're not making me do anything. I'm doing it all because I love you."

He smiled a little. "Asshole, that's my line."

“You already got your chance to use it. It’s my turn now.”

“Cillian...” Soren surged forward and pressed his lips to mine. Oh god, this, this felt good, it felt incredible, warm and soft and so full of want for me that I couldn’t help but respond. This wasn’t anyone but Soren, the man I loved. My body responded so fast it left me dizzy, my cock straining in my briefs. Soren didn’t reach down to touch me, and he didn’t touch himself, although I wasn’t sure if that was because he didn’t know how I would take it or if he wasn’t hard himself, but he thrust his thigh between my legs and pulled me into the kiss, going deeper, taking even more of me.

I let him have me. I let him have everything?it was all his anyway. I had never felt so overwhelmed by another person, so desperate for them. I didn’t know if it was good or not, what we had together?a love forged on a bedrock of violence and guilt and sacrifice. It wasn’t normal, I knew that, but then normal wasn’t ever going to apply to me in any meaningful way.

Soren held me close and I rutted against his thigh like a teenager, pressure and heat and an unbearable ache growing in my groin. God, it had been forever since I’d come and even longer since I’d actually enjoyed it, and now I was with him , and it might be the last time, and I needed?I needed?

Soren swallowed my cry, muffled it with his lips and soothed the wreckage of my body afterward with hands gone gentle now, almost worshipful as he stroked over my chest and neck.

He finally cupped my cheek and stared at me. “You’re crazy,” he whispered, and I managed to nod through the fugue of my orgasm. “You’re so fucking crazy that whatever you’ve got planned just might work.”

“Will work,” I mumbled. Soren didn’t call me on my bullshit, just helped pull off my soiled clothes, wiped me down gently with my T-shirt, and then wrapped his arms

around my waist and settled his head on my stomach.

“I love you.” He pressed the words into my skin, rolled them across my belly and the ink I had there, a tree with branches like a skeleton’s fingers, reaching into the pale sky of my torso for an empty embrace. “I fucking love you, you crazy bastard. You have to live, Cillian. You have to live.”

“That’s up to Fate, babe.” And some very careful timing, but for the first time since I’d kidnapped Soren out of that hotel room, I had faith, finally, that something good might come out of this. “I need to sleep,” I added regretfully, because my vision was blurring, and I was so tired I thought I might pass out in a minute. “Will you stay with me?” Just you, not both of you?

“I will. All night.”

“Good.” I fell asleep with my hands in his hair, the comfort of his weight—his warm, living weight—on my body. It was a perfect moment.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I woke up, Soren was no longer holding me. He also wasn’t Soren anymore. Eyes like purple smoke stared at me curiously, and my heart sank. “Where is?he said?”

“That he would hold you all night. It is no longer nighttime, Cillian. The sun is high, and you have much to accomplish this day.” He held out a bundle of clothes. “Roger brought these for you.”

“Oh.” Well, letter of the law and all that. I was grateful for what little time we’d had. I sat up, gave myself a cursory sniff, and decided fuck it, I didn’t really need a shower. I did my best with the sink and some paper towels before I came back out

and started getting into my new gear.

The suit was nicer than I'd expected, a light gray herringbone with a beige shirt. No tie, a sturdy leather belt with a Texas-style buckle shined to a mirror sheen overlaying the standard one, a leather jacket, new shoes, and on top of it all, a lighter and a pack of cigarettes. Oh fuck, I'd just asked for them for verisimilitude, but I hadn't realized just how badly I wanted one until I laid eyes on them. I opened the pack, pulled one out, and lit it, smoke alarms be damned. The first drag felt like a fucking blessing.

"You made that face with Soren last night."

"Shut up," I muttered, blowing the smoke out with a grateful sigh. Nasty habit, true, but sometimes all you needed was a fucking cigarette. This was the only one of my needs I could control right now, so I took my time with it, smoked the cigarette down to ash, and tapped it out in the sink before I got back with the program.

I dressed quickly, rummaged in the pocket of the jacket until I found the thin gold chain I'd asked for, and knotted it around the Buddha's neck before clasping it around my own. Kind of an awkward necklace, but I'd deal.

I grabbed my gun, because that would certainly be expected, and then headed out into the main room, with Soren blissfully silent behind me. Good, I didn't want to answer any questions about last night.

Roger was there, playing on his phone, but he looked up when we came in. "Hey. Lookin' sharp!"

My answering smile was vicious. "Good to know."

"You got everything you need?"

“I think so.”

“Well then.” He put his phone away and stood up. “Where can I drop you boys?”

I glanced at Roger’s eyes and, happily, got a glimpse of something I’d been wondering about. “You can drop us at the nearest Denny’s.”

“Really?” Soren asked excitedly.

“Really.”

Roger didn’t ask, just drove us ten blocks to the garish yellow building that had become synonymous with the landv?ttir’s favorite things. “See you later,” Roger said with perfect assurance. I shook his hand.

“You know it. Tell Annie thanks, from both of us.”

“You can tell her yourself, son.” He drove off and we went inside, and Soren ordered the most obscene waffle I’d ever seen, more fruit and syrup and whipped cream on top of it than you’d find in a bakery. He ate every bite with relish, and I sipped my coffee and had a few pieces of toast. I didn’t want to start shaking from low blood sugar in the middle of what was about to come.

I finally interrupted Soren in the middle of his second waffle. “Are you happy?”

“Very happy,” he said after swallowing. “This is my favorite food.”

“Good.” It wasn’t much, but if he had to remember me any way, I wanted it to be as someone who liked him enough to get him what he wanted. “I’m glad.”

“Cillian... Soren was very upset last night.”

“I know.”

“He was also very happy.”

“That’s good.” I had known that too, but I didn’t mind hearing it again.

“You do have a real plan today, don’t you?”

“Of course.” What was it with everyone doubting my plans? Were they really that bad?

A black SUV pulled into the parking lot, and I threw a twenty down on the table.

“Looks like our ride is here.”

“Oh.” Soren put down his fork and stared pensively at his plate. “I don’t want to go with them.”

“Maybe after today you won’t have to again.”

“Good. That is what I want.”

You and me both. I stood up, waited for Soren to join me, and then headed outside toward my own fate.

I had plans, I did. Hopefully they would be enough.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

The SUV wasn't as luxurious as I'd expected, but it was gratifying not to be cuffed immediately and stripped of everything I had on me. The driver who met us did take my gun, but that was just good business. He considered over the lighter and the pack of cigarettes, but I gave him a look and said, "Those might be my last fucking request, okay?" After a moment, he shrugged and handed them over before showing us into the back of the car.

The younger brother was inside. He also held a gun on both of us. "Hello, Rolf," Soren said pleasantly as he settled into a seat.

"Just keep your mouth shut," Rolf snapped, his eyes darting anxiously between us. He was shorter than his older brothers, a little slimmer, and had none of the stolid forcefulness of Art or the whiplash intelligence of Jakob. He looked even younger than Soren, honestly, and I was a little surprised that he was the one who'd been sent to fetch us. "Both of you."

"Talking passes the time better," I said. "How have you been since Chicago, Rolf? Not running after us, obviously." I took in the slight tremble in his hand, the slick pallor of his face, and came to a few conclusions. "I guess someone had to hang around and be the gopher for your dad while your brothers were busting their asses."

"I told you to shut up."

"I know, I know." I held up my hands. "Or rather, I guess I don't. It's not like I know what being cooped up with a megalomaniacal, magic-wielding, abusive parent is like. How's your shoulder, by the way?" Rolf was holding his right side very stiffly, and I remembered from before his father's penchant for grabbing Rolf a little too hard by



the arm and shaking him to make a point. It looked like the last time he'd done it had resulted in dislocation.

"It's none of—it's—"

"Is he still injuring you?" Soren frowned darkly. "He no longer has the excuse of his temper, and that was a poor reason to begin with."

"I'm fine," Rolf bit out. "Just keep your mouths shut, all right? We'll be there soon."

I didn't say anything, but I didn't stop looking at Rolf either. He squirmed under my scrutiny, and I suddenly realized what was going on here. Rolf was a test, a chance for me to prove my intentions. If I meant to go in guns blazing, the best way for me to start things off would be to take Rolf hostage. Maybe ólafur had hoped I'd kill him, which would give him leave to dispense with some of the formalities that were coming up and just blow me to smithereens once he had Soren safe again.

No, nope, wasn't gonna do it. Formalities were going to save my ass once "negotiations" got going. Formalities were keeping Andre alive right now and what made me more than 50 percent sure that Jakob had been blowing smoke up my ass when he'd talked about killing Marisol and my mother.

Magic was a tricky thing, and the older it was, the more formalities and ritual became a part of it. I didn't know much about Icelandic lore, but I did know that ólafur wasn't going to start things off inhospitably, not now. Being inhospitable had cost his family too much. I had no doubt he'd never meant to kill me after he realized what was going on, not even when he sent Art?r after me. We had bargains to discuss and sacrifices to lay at Soren's feet before there could be any killing.

Rolf being here, and being so obviously out of his depth, was an invitation for me to break the rules of hospitality before ólafur did. He was bait, plain and simple, but I

wasn't about to swallow this worm down. Besides, the kid had obviously been through enough.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Shut up."

"There's no need to be a broken record. I'm just asking a question."

"We're going to my land," Soren said, eagerness shining in his eyes. "I can feel it drawing closer. My power is growing."

"That's nice." I wanted Soren nice and powerful for what was going to go down. "You've missed it, huh?"

"As you have missed certain vital things yourself," Soren said, and I reached out and took his hand.

"It'll all be worked out soon."

Rolf stared at the two of us like he couldn't believe his own eyes. "What the hell?"

"Hmm?"

"What are you doing with it?"

"Which one of us are you referring to?" I asked. "Me or Soren?"

"It! The landv?ttir, obviously!" I felt Soren's fingers tighten around mine, probably with annoyance at being spoken about so dismissively.

“I’m holding his hand. It’s something I like to do with people I enjoy. I understand that you’re probably not used to the sort of relationships that include nonviolent touching, but try not to judge, okay?”

“You really think of me as a friend?” Soren asked, staring at me.

There was nothing but purple mist in his eyes, no hint of the Soren I loved, but I was still able to look at him and say, with complete honesty, “Yeah, I do. I really do.”

“You’re crazy.” Rolf’s gun hand shivered, and I really hoped he’d set the safety because an accident would just be ludicrous at this point. “You’re totally crazy. Soren’s not in there. He’s gone.”

Soren’s gaze narrowed to a glare as he glanced over at his brother, and I decided to intervene before he decided to change the rules. “The shutting up thing goes both ways,” I said. “If you want to make it through the rest of this ride without complications, I suggest you follow your own advice.”

Thank god Rolf was smart enough to take that at face value. I held on to Soren’s hand in total silence for the rest of the half-hour trip. By the time the SUV came to a stop outside a long beige warehouse, I didn’t even feel the cold anymore.

This was it. This was endgame: this was where I had to pull it all off. I shut my eyes and took a deep breath, felt my body hum with adrenaline and the lub-dub purr of blood pumping through my veins, fast and smooth. Rolf was already out of the car, and before I followed him, I leaned in, cupped Soren’s face, and kissed him, fast and hard.

“That’s for both of you,” I said quietly, enjoying the dumbfounded expression on his face before I let go of his hand and stepped out into the sunshine.

Rolf was gesturing with the gun toward the offices in the front of the warehouse, but I was more interested in watching Soren expand as he got within touching distance of his land. His eyes burned brightly, vivid violet, penetrating purple and every shade in between.

He smiled broadly. "It is good to be here," he said.

"I told you both to get the fuck inside!"

"Yeah, yeah." Nevertheless, I followed directions and walked up to the open door of the office. I took one step inside and then doubled over as a huge fist impacted my gut, just below the diaphragm. The force of it drove me to my knees. I was really happy right then that I hadn't had much to eat for breakfast, because I'd have lost it all right then if I had.

"Art?r!" Soren sounded annoyed. "That is not acceptable behavior."

"It's less than he deserves," the eldest brother said with a sneer. "If I were doing this quid pro quo, I'd have punched him in the nuts."

"Nevertheless." This time it was Jakob talking, the voice of reason calming the storm that brewed within his family. He stepped forward and helped me to stand up. "We must be hospitable." He straightened my jacket, his eyes fixing for a moment on the Buddha at my neck, and then reached into my pockets.

"Not on the first date," I croaked, but didn't resist his investigations.

"I'm disappointed that you don't count what happened before as our first date," Jakob said mockingly as he pulled out my cigarettes and lighter. "It was such an explosively good time." He held up the items to Rolf. "You were supposed to confiscate everything."

“I already got his gun,” Rolf snapped. “What’s he gonna do with those, give me secondhand lung cancer?”

“You can’t be so trusting, idiot,” Art?r said, condescension imbuing every syllable of every word. “What if there aren’t really cigarettes in there?”

Jakob was already opening the pack. He nodded, apparently satisfied with what he’d found. He met my eyes and, unwavering, struck the lighter.

A tiny yellow flame appeared at the top of it. “Good enough,” Jakob said and put them both back in my pocket. “ólafur is waiting for you in the other room.” He nodded to the guards. “We’ll handle things from here. Keep watch outside. This is family business now.” They left, and he led the way from the entryway to an office that flanked the main warehouse space. ólafur sat near the far wall in a reclining chair, but he got up when we walked in.

“Soren!” He came over to us and pulled his youngest son into an embrace. “Welcome back.” ólafur dwarfed Soren in terms of bulk, although they were nearly the same height. It wasn’t his size that made him so intimidating, though. Some people had a natural ability to fill any space they walked into with the force of their personality, even if they hardly spoke a word. I’d met a few of them over the years: mostly people in positions of power, and quite often men who were more accustomed to taking that power and using it like a bludgeon.

Women could do it: Annie did it?it was one of the things I respected about her immediately. But in all the years of disreputable company I’d kept, all the mob bosses I’d known and killers I’d looked in the eye, no one had ever matched ólafur when it came to sheer, undeniable impressiveness. The closest any of his sons came was Jakob, although his presence was more subdued?a force of intellect instead of raw charisma.

“I was so worried about you,” ólafur said, patting his son gently on the back. Amazing, how tender those huge paws could be when he wanted. I saw Rolf shift uncomfortably out of the corner of my eye. That wasn’t the sort of embrace he was accustomed to. “I know we parted under difficult circumstances, but I’m prepared to make amends. I disregarded your wishes, and I swear on our pact that I will never be so callous of your feelings again.” He pulled back and gazed lovingly into Soren’s eyes. “Will you forgive me?”

Oh, so beautiful. So calculated to appeal, and even though I knew that Soren understood what was going on here, he wasn’t unmoved. How could he be? This man had been the one to make the first contract, and he was the father of Soren’s body double.

“We shall see,” Soren said at last, and ólafur nodded encouragingly.

“Indeed, we shall see. I will show you, and you will understand everything. I’m very sincere in my desire to make things right, my son.” Now he looked at me, and his smile was exactly like I envisioned a shark might have as it circled closer and closer to its prey. “And I owe my new understanding of my responsibilities to you to this young man. Who would have thought?” When he bared his teeth, I literally had to stop myself from backing away.

“We meet again, Mr. Kelly.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

“We meet again, Mr. Kelly.”

“So we do.” I couldn’t make myself smile back at Ólafur. I just didn’t have it in me.

“I guess you got pretty much everything you wanted last time, though, huh?”

“Well, you were being recalcitrant, Mr. Kelly,” he replied. Ólafur looked at ease, but just like before, I saw the whip-fast capacity for violence inside of him. The last time I’d looked into Papa Egilsson’s eyes, I’d seen him kill, both under the effect of the geas and of his own volition. “I had to make do some way.”

“Bullshit. You used me to set this up exactly how you wanted.” I shook my head. “You had this planned from the start. The sacrifice had to be meaningful in order to appeal to the landvǫttir, and how much more meaningful could it get than your own son?” Now for the part I was really interested in, though. “How did you know to use me, though? Why bother, when you didn’t really need my talent for anything?”

“That’s a fair question,” Ólafur allowed. “And you might as well know. It will serve as a lesson to my sons in how to properly deal with issues of magic. Sit.” He pointed at a chair to my left, and I sat before Artúr could punch me into it. Ólafur sat across from me, folding his hands in his lap.

“The magic of my country is complex, Mr. Kelly. There are grimoires dating back many centuries that detail spells you can use to get what you want. Spells for faithfulness, spells for causing harm, spells for might in battle. I experimented with those spells for years, trying to find something that would work for my particular situation. Little spells, though, won’t counter a geas this strong. I finally consulted a vǫlva, who told me the trick to working great magic was to make it irresistible. An

offering to the v?ttir had to be perfect, based on genuine willingness and deep emotion in order to be accepted.

“I knew one of my sons would have the most important part to play, but which one? The v?lva couldn’t tell me, but she did know who you were. A soothsayer with almost unparalleled accuracy who also had no sense of self-preservation? You were a gift, and so I took you.

“And when you refused to cooperate...” ólafur leaned forward a little in his chair, pinning me in place like a beetle on a board. “My advisor counseled patience. And she was right. You revealed the perfect candidate for my sacrifice, and the preservation of my line. I had thought Soren too weak to be of much use for anything, but I was wrong.” He nodded toward the landv?ttir, who listened with a completely blank expression. “He’s the perfect vessel for my family’s greatest ally. He saved you and all of us with his decision, and I don’t think he would take it back even if he could.

“Honestly, I didn’t think it was possible to even offer another deal until you stole Soren out from under my nose. I see how very wrong I was about that.” He looked again to the landv?ttir. “I’ve made arrangements to have your land instilled beside a wilderness area in the Canadian Rockies. It’s beautiful there, absolutely pristine, and you’ll be able to settle there without dispute.”

“What did you do to appease the spirit who resided there before making arrangements for me?” Soren asked.

ólafur smiled. “I paid someone a great deal of money to dispose of it. There won’t be any competition for you to worry about.”

Soren’s eyes narrowed. “You destroyed it? A native land spirit?”



“Survival of the fittest, my son. I said I would give you a suitable resting place, and I would never go back on my word.”

“Hmm.” I couldn’t tell if Soren was happy about this or not. “And my bodily autonomy?”

“The wilderness area is less than twenty-five miles from a moderate-sized town. I’ll provide you with money, a house, cars, servants, whatever you want to make your transition and exploration more comfortable. Anything you desire will be yours for the asking, as long as you continue to abide by the deal I made in good faith.” Ólafur gestured at me. “Can anything this man offers really compare?”

“My turn to talk, then?” I asked dryly. I looked at Soren. “You know what I’ve done for you?you’ve been there for most of it. I’ve got a line on the space you need, without having to kill off or drive away the spirit already living there. Wouldn’t it be better not to enter into a new place surrounded by animosity?”

“As for bodily autonomy, I’m not going to tell you what you can and can’t do. I promise,” and I made sure I caught his eyes for this next part, because this was important, “that no matter what you want to do, I’m going to be there to do it with you. I won’t leave you alone, not as long as you want me. I might try to talk you out of something really crazy, but I’m not your owner, and I’m not your boss. I’d rather be your partner, honestly.”

“I know,” Soren said, and he smiled for a moment. “But Cillian...the sacrifice...”

“Yes, the quality of your sacrifice,” Ólafur drawled. “I was wondering about that too. Rolf.” He snapped his fingers at his son. “Go and get him.” Rolf left in a rush, and Ólafur crossed his legs. “I confess I didn’t know what to think when I finally discerned what you had in mind. I knew better than to think you might offer up your mother or the woman you’ve been staying with. You care for them too much. Then I

looked over my security footage, traced it all the way back to you and him in a restaurant, and I saw you developing the relationship. But honestly, Mr. Kelly, you can't possibly think the acquaintance of a few days' time will be forceful enough to trump the willingness of a vessel like Soren? And no second to fall back on? I'm afraid this is where your plans fly apart."

Rolf came back a moment later, dragging Andre with him. Andre looked...oh boy, he looked the worse for wear, with two black eyes and what was probably a broken nose, but he was still standing. He glared at me like this was all my fault, and—okay, fair, he was pretty much right. But I was going to fix it.

"Hey, man."

"Fuck you , Kelly."

"Cillian..." Soren looked confused. "I don't think this will work." Soren was primed to take the best offer, and ólafur was right, his son was a way better sacrifice than my unwilling kind-of-friend.

"You have to let me try," I said. "Let me make the sacrifice before you decide, okay?"

ólafur smiled broadly. "Oh, by all means. Kill your friend for nothing, and then we can finally dispense with the formalities and get into the matter of punishing you for your presumption."

That would probably involve slow dismemberment, knowing ólafur. I took a deep breath and stood up, firming my resolution. This was it. No going back after this.

I walked over to Andre. "Look, I'm really sorry about this. I never meant for you to get involved this way."

Andre wearily shook his head. “Best of intentions don’t count for shit now.”

“Your family is all right, I made sure of it.” I took off my Buddha necklace and hung it around his neck. Very faintly, I heard the slightest click . Andre seemed to as well, because his eyes widened. “Sometimes you’ve just gotta take the cards Fate deals you and run with them, you know?”

“Get on with it,” ólafur snapped. “If you need to borrow a gun—”

I shook my head. “I don’t need a gun for this. I do need a smoke, though.” I reached into my pocket and took out the lighter. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Jakob start to back away. Smart guy. I primed the microgrenade, looked at Andre, mouthed Run , and then tossed the grenade at the chair I’d just been sitting in. Two seconds later, it exploded.

The thing about a microgrenade was it had more bang than boom. Some decent concussive force, lots of smoke, but it wasn’t going to do any serious damage. It probably blew the chair to pieces and likely did some damage to everyone in its immediate vicinity, but I didn’t stick around to watch. I was already running, booking it through the door that Rolf had left open and out into the warehouse itself.

In front of me, stretching for half the length of a football field, was an enormous plastic tub reinforced with wooden beams that held still, black water, its shore edged with jagged gray boulders. At the far end of the lake was a small grove of white-barked birch trees, with one huge specimen in the center, twisted and branching, its long arms hovering over the edge of the water. That was the one I needed.

Behind me I heard a roar, an actual, honest-to-god roar , and the sound of ripping cloth. ólafur was changing, going berserk. Well, better that than him keeping his head and shooting me in the back, but that meant I needed to be faster. I sprinted toward the tree, unbuckling my belt as I went and whipping it off my waist. I worked the

buckle free and stuffed it in my pocket and then kept racing toward my goal.

Twenty yards...ten...

I'd almost reached the grove by the time the heavy footsteps caught up to me, so fucking close to where I needed to be but still too far away to act. I threw myself to the right at the last second while Ólafur continued forward, out of control in his rage and unable to keep his bulk from running him straight into the little grove. The smallest tree shuddered and split under the force of his impact, and Soren screamed.

Fuck, that wasn't supposed to happen! I glanced back and wished I hadn't, because Soren was running toward us now, and he looked wrathful. Purple mist spilled from his eyes, and the water of the lake began to froth. Ólafur would have some groveling to do if he lived through this. Speaking of that?the man's rage still drove him, and he was already stumbling out of the wreckage of the broken tree. I needed to go, fast.

I hoisted myself up into the biggest tree, high enough that even stretched out my feet didn't touch the ground. I sat on a branch, fastened my belt around my bent knees to hold me up when my muscles gave out, and then leaned back and let my body hang against the trunk. It was traditional when making a sacrifice of yourself to offer it like this, if Odin's legend was anything to go by. Plus, I'd bleed out faster. I fumbled in my pocket for the buckle, my hands already gory from handling its supremely sharp edges.

Ólafur and Soren grappled not two feet away from me, driven to combat out of pain and hurt and rage. If I was going to do this, I had to do it now, before either of them came to their senses.

"Soren!" Purple eyes glanced over at me and then did a double take. I smiled at him, trembling but for once completely sure of what I was doing. "Remember what we talked about last night, okay?"

“Cillian, what—”

I didn't hear the rest; I was too busy jamming the edge of the belt buckle into my jugular. The angle was weird, and I didn't trust myself to have the strength to cut my entire throat, but one straight shot into the vein—I could do that.

I did it. It hurt, but not as badly as I thought it might when I'd been considering it last night. Strange, that the end of my life should almost feel comfortable, like a muscle slowly unknotting, instead of the stark pain that so much of my life had been. Hot blood flowed over my chin and down my face, and the world went fuzzy and started to gray out. I let it go with a sigh of relief.

The last thing I heard before I died was Soren calling my name.

### Chapter Thirty

The first thing I felt as I began to wake up—and some little part of me was incredibly pleased to be feeling anything, I remembered enough to be sure of that—was a hard slap across the cheek. Not quite hard enough to make my head turn on the pillow, but it definitely wasn't a friendly caress. I groaned and slowly blinked my eyes open.

“Ah good, you're awake. You fucking fool.”

That wasn't Soren's voice. That was—“Jakob?” I asked hoarsely.

“Correct.”

“Where's Soren?”

He laughed, but it was an ugly, angry sound. “He's out communing with nature. Both of them were rather upset after the frankly ridiculous stunt you just pulled. I thought you had a plan.”

“I did!” I weakly tapped my chest with my own hand and then ran my fingers up to my neck where I remembered stabbing myself. The skin was smooth, completely healed. “I'm here, you're here, yay, we're alive. Hooray for plans.”

“No thanks to you trying to make yourself into the sacrifice. What the hell do you think would have happened if Soren hadn't transferred his intent to you?”

Transferred his intent? I'd have to figure out what that meant in a second, but first

things first. “I assume I’d have died.”

“Everyone here might have died if the battle between Ólafur and the landv?ttir had continued. You got extremely lucky,” Jakob snapped. “Ólafur destroyed one of the v?ttir’s trees when the madness took him. That went directly against the contract between them and gave the v?ttir room to maneuver.”

He sighed. “When you killed yourself, Soren—and I’m referring to my brother here—was apparently so distressed that he took his opportunity as your second to change his allegiance. He altered the nature of his sacrifice so that instead of giving himself for the sake of our family, he made his intent solely about you. Because my father had already broken the rules, the v?ttir allowed it.”

My blood went cold for a second. This was not what I’d been expecting. Sure, Soren had told me a few times that I wasn’t expendable, that I needed to be careful in picking my sacrifice, but I’d taken it as a caution, not a rule. I’d thought the v?ttir would accept me as a sacrifice and come share my body. I hadn’t been looking forward to it, exactly, but it had been worth it to free Soren. Instead...

“So now I’m responsible for keeping Soren and the v?ttir tied together.”

“Exactly.” Jakob smiled thinly. “Congratulations, my brother’s enslavement is now partially your responsibility. Thankfully, after the v?ttir managed to subdue Ólafur, I had the authority necessary to negotiate on the spot for its continued assistance with our geas. Now there are two sacrifices.”

“Wait?you sacrificed your own father to the landv?ttir?”

“What did you think my plan was all along?” Jakob said. “Did you think I was hoping that the frankly disturbing codependency between you and Soren would somehow manifest in a boon for the rest of us? Magic doesn’t work like that. There is

always a price to pay, and Ólafur was meant to be my coin. I don't leave things like the survival of my family to chance, unlike some of us."

"It wasn't chance."

Jakob scoffed. "Oh, please, spare me your—"

"It wasn't chance." I knew that as strongly as I knew anything. "It's Fate. However this worked out, that's how it was meant to work out. I can't see my own future, but I wouldn't be here right now if I wasn't meant to be."

"Forgive me if I find your argument for fatalism less than compelling."

"Look, you think I liked killing myself?" I asked, my energy finally risen enough to give me a bit of a boost. "You think that was fun for me? I came into this figuring I was going to die, and that if things worked out, Soren and the v?ttir would save me. I didn't offer up another sacrifice because I'm not an asshole, and it wouldn't have worked anyway. Honestly, whether or not I was the sacrifice, do you think your own cards would have played out the way they did if Soren and the v?ttir didn't think I was worth their time?" Now it was my turn to scoff.

"Maybe you did have your own fallback plans in place, ways of getting Ólafur out of the way, but that man craved complete control. I'm betting he'd have hung onto his power any way he possibly could have. At least one of your brothers would have probably sided with him, so you were looking at a possibly failed coup.

"Am I an asshole? Absolutely." I completely agreed with that assessment. "Could I have figured this out better? Almost certainly. But did I do everything I could to make it work, with a considerable amount of trouble from you and your goddamn family? I sure as hell did, so you can take your attitude and fucking shove it, because from where I'm sitting, things aren't perfect, but they're not completely shit either."



We stared at each other in complete silence for a long moment.

“Well,” Jakob said at last. “I suppose it could be worse. Although Soren is furious at you. You’re going to have a considerable amount of groveling to do. And your friend Andre is still hanging around, so I suggest you deal with him first.”

“What? I told him to run.”

“How generous of you,” Jakob drawled. “What he did instead, thanks to your little trick with the charm unlocking his handcuffs, was incapacitate one of our men, take his gun, and proceed to shoot my brother Art?r in the leg. Which?” Jakob shrugged. “I can’t really blame him for. Art?r was tasked with his keeping and was rather impolite about it. Soren has declined to heal him, so he’s out of the picture for the moment. Rolf is looking after him.”

“Oh. Nice. And?you said your dad was accepted as a sacrifice. Is he possessed now too?” Because that would be awkward.

Jakob chuckled. “No, Cillian. He’s dead. His corpse is lying at the bottom of the v?ttir’s lake, and long may it rest there.” Jakob got to his feet and then hauled me up as well. “I’ll send in Andre.”

He left through the gaping, splintered entrance where a door had been, and a minute later, Andre entered. He still had the pistol he’d stolen in one hand, but his face had been cleaned up some. He looked at me, shut his eyes, and sighed before he came the rest of the way in and punched me on the shoulder.

“Ow!”

“You deserve worse, you big baby.” He stared at my neck disbelievingly. “I don’t know how your guy managed to get you back, Cillian, there was?I’ve seen people die

in the field, and you were way bloodier than most of them.”

“Magic.”

“Fuck your magic.”

“Hey, my magic got you released!” I pointed out.

“With this thing?” He held up the little Buddha figurine. “I was close to getting out of those cuffs myself.”

“Yep, that’s the story your black eye is telling for sure.”

“Forget my eye, man. Tell me what the hell happened to my car .”

“Um.” It was hard to know what to say to that, actually. “It died a noble death?”

“God damn it!”

“I’m sorry.” I really was, too. I was sorry for dragging Andre into all this in the first place. “Look, I’ll replace it, I promise.” I’d been making a lot of promises lately, but I planned to follow through on all of them.

Andre sighed. “It’s already a done deal, man. The guy in charge—Jakob—he gave me more than enough money to replace the car, called it ‘reparations.’ He’s paying to fix up my house, too.”

“Oh.” That was a little surprising. “Good.”

“And Soren already told me the score on my wife and little girl, so thanks for taking care of them.”

“Jesus, don’t thank me,” I said, appalled. “Look what I dragged you into.”

Andre ducked his head for a moment. “Yeah. Foreign cartels, crazy magic, and gunfights. It’s the best story of my life and I can’t even report on it.” When he looked up, he was smiling, just a little. “But the hell with it. I was kind of bored anyway.”

“Glad I could help you with that.”

“Yeah, but...if it’s all the same? Don’t call me again, Cillian.” There was some gentle humor in Andre’s voice, but beneath it was a layer of steel. He pressed the spent Buddha charm into my unresisting hand. “Because I won’t answer.”

Aaand bridge officially burned. “Got it,” I said, and if my voice was a little subdued, well, this was the price of doing business. I was a bad deal in a lot of ways. “Take care of yourself, then.”

“You too, man.” We shook hands and he left. Finally, I roused myself to go and look for Soren.

He was alone at the far end of his land, where the grove was situated. He sat in front of the broken tree, his hands on its ruined stump, purple eyes trained on the water before him. To his right, the base of the larger tree still glistened with my blood.

I looked away from the gore and sat down next to him. “Hey.”

“Soren is very distressed.” There was more than a hint of blame in the landv?ttir’s voice. “You caused him much pain.”

“I’m very sorry for that.”

“As you should be. He is not sure he can trust you anymore. He doesn’t want to speak

to you.”

The pang those words sent through my heart was so sharp I was surprised my chest didn’t simply start bleeding. “Okay.” I’d have to be patient. I could do that.

“Personally, I applaud you. That was a bold plan, Cillian.” His cloudy eyes turned my way. “You knew Soren would choose you if at all possible. You used his love for you to manipulate both of us into doing your will.”

“Things fell out all right for me in the end.”

“But you don’t believe in chance.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m some sort of strategic mastermind either, or completely careless with my own life. I didn’t want to hurt Soren, and I’ll spend forever making it up to him, but...” I shrugged. “We’re still all here.”

“Indeed we are.” Soren looked back at the lake. “And so is he.”

I knew who he meant. “ólafur.”

“His blood shall nourish my roots, and my grove will grow strong again.”

“Oookay.”

“But I need to be settled in my new home.” The undertone there was fast, faster, RIGHT NOW . I got up again.

“I’ll go make some calls.” This promise, at least, I could start to fulfill immediately.

### Chapter Thirty-One

Two months later

Soren's plot of land ended up being about two hours outside of Lubbock, West Texas, in the shadow of a red sandstone stump that looked like a mountain had started growing and then abruptly abandoned its course. There was a spring, just a little one, but enough to replenish Soren's lake, which—holy shit, the logistics involved in transporting that much liquid across state lines, not to mention the structure to contain it and the little grove and the boulders?trains got involved, okay? Big-ass trains and probably a fair amount of bribery.

But now he was here, and he seemed content. There were a few local scrub bushes that Soren said he'd have no problems incorporating, decent soil to keep his grove alive and, most importantly, no land spirits. I'd gotten Bobby's word on that when he came to help settle Soren in the ground.

"It's a good spot for him," Bobby assured me for the tenth time, once things were done and Soren was too busy basking in his new landscape to pay either of us much attention. "The land could use some decent energy?it's completely empty. I'm surprised the mountain is still standing." He glared out into the distance like he could see the oil pumps working and shame them into stopping. "No need to worry for him."

"Good." That was probably the only thing I didn't have to worry about, although it wasn't all bad. Marisol had reappeared, mad as hell about what had happened to her shop. The last time we'd talked, I'd given her Jakob's personal number. I then

received a long and expletive-filled message from him, but he was paying for repairs, so that was something. Jakob was doing his absolute best to stay on Soren's good side, and mine, since he had no direct leverage over the v?ttir anymore. ólafur's sacrifice had bought Soren's forgiveness, but tribute was what would stem the tide of madness. Jakob hadn't been bothered by any berserker fits yet as far as I knew, at least. Phin was around to help Marisol out. Andre wouldn't respond to my emails, which?fair enough.

I'd done my best to repay Roger and Annie for all of their help, but I knew it would take years. At least they were willing to work in installments.

Or, as Annie put it, "Honey, we don't need a pound of flesh. Honest sweat is better than blood any day of the week." They'd given me easy jobs so far, just surveying to help locate the best spots for new wells while saving them the expense of exploratory drilling. I was convinced that the honeymoon period wouldn't last, but I'd take advantage while it did. I'd talked them into putting a dinky mobile home out here and even installing a windmill power system to generate electricity for it.

Of course I was living out here. Where else would I go, now that I was tied to Soren through our bargain? The only person who could have torn me away from him was my mother, and I still had no idea where she was. Two months, and we hadn't been in contact. She hadn't contacted anyone, actually, not even Marisol, who'd gone up to look for her.

"The cards are...well, they just aren't telling me much," she said apologetically. "I wish I had more for you, honey. I don't see her in immediate danger, if that helps. Just?laying low."

Fine. She was laying low somewhere and couldn't be bothered to get in touch with her only son? It wouldn't be the first time. I'd learned long ago to try not to let myself be hurt by anything my mother did. She was as much a slave of her gift as I was.

Telling myself that didn't always make it better, but in this case, I had something more concrete to help me get over the hurt: my mother's puppy.

Her neighbors had shipped the little thing across two continents to get to me, thanks to Marisol's meddling. I'd never had a dog before. I knew my mother liked them, but pets?honestly, they seemed like more trouble than they were worth. Still, when the puppy was brought out to me in a travel kennel by one of Roger's more unflappable employees, I couldn't just turn it away.

It was small and ridiculously fluffy. I'd have to trim a lot of that hair if this dog was going to be comfortable in the heat of Texas, but for now, I had an air-conditioner that worked, water to cool her off with, and an ache in my heart that welcomed something that wouldn't judge me for my innumerable mistakes. Her tag read "Lady," so she was my lady, and my only company once Bobby left.

Yeah, Soren still wasn't talking to me. Or rather, one of them wasn't. The landv?ttir loved to talk, but as the project got closer and closer to completion, his focus had shifted, and now that everything was finally in place?well, blissful was what I'd call him. And preoccupied. Which meant I'd spent the last week pretty much alone in the little trailer, except for Lady's energetic company. I was used to being alone?that was something I could usually handle pretty well?but I wasn't used to being lonely . And even with my mother's puppy wriggling into my side and chewing gently on my fingertips, I was lonely now.

Rap-rap. The trailer had a thin door, and knocking on it rattled it in its frame. I was a little surprised. Soren never bothered with knocking. Usually, he just came right in when he wanted something.

"Yeah?"

The door opened slowly, and Soren stepped inside. He glanced around my little home

like he'd never seen it before, which?hell, it wasn't like I'd redecorated. I didn't have much beyond a few suitcases worth of clothes, secondhand pots and pans for the tiny kitchen, and a tablet for mindless entertainment.

“What?”

“Cillian...” he began sheepishly, and then I knew.

Oh. Oh my god . I sat up in the tiny bed so fast Lady tumbled off my stomach with a disgruntled yip. “Soren?”

He shut the door behind himself and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Fuck.” It had been so long since we'd spoken I'd almost forgotten the timbre of his voice. I'd missed him, god, I'd?“Um.” I was a terrible host. “Sit down?” Except there were no chairs. What kind of savage was I? “Here?” I gestured toward the bed, and he nodded, took off his shoes—how polite—and sat down on the end of the bed. Lady immediately pranced over to him, and he smiled as he stroked over her soft crown and scratched behind her ears.

“She's sweet.”

“Thanks. She's my mother's.”

“I know, I've been?I mean, it's kept me informed, you know?”

“Oh.” Ooohkay . “Good.” This was off to a fantastic start. What had Marisol told me, the last time I'd bitched to her about this? I had to be willing to extend the olive branch. Despite the fact that I didn't really regret the way things had worked out—scratch that, I was fucking ecstatic at how things had worked out—it had still upset Soren, and that had never, ever been my goal. “Look, I'm sorry.”



“Why?”

“For manipulating you.” That much was true. “I hated hurting you. I swear that wasn’t what I wanted. But my hands were tied.”

He nodded. “I know.” He kept his gaze on Lady. “You’re clever, but you can’t work miracles. I should have seen it coming. It’s my own fault that I was disappointed.”

I still felt like a failure for not doing better, and it was worse hearing it from him. I shook my head and ignored the stubborn pain in my chest. “Still. That sucked.”

“It was probably worse for you than for me, objectively.” Soren shut his eyes. “You killed yourself. You were dying, and the v?ttir and my father were fighting, and all I wanted to do was run over to you and try to stop the blood, because it...it was wrong, you know? It just looked wrong. But I couldn’t move the v?ttir, so I did the only thing I could.”

“Changed your intent.”

“It wasn’t that much of a change, really,” he said. “I went into it in the beginning knowing that my sacrifice was really for you. It was the price I paid for your life, and it helped my family, so there was almost no downside.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I swore, because honestly. “Where did you get such a fucking martyr complex?”

“Where did you?” he countered, which?fair enough. I shut up, and he continued after a moment. “So things changed, and the v?ttir killed ólafur so that the old deal was completely severed, and then he saved you. That took a while, by the way. You’d lost so much blood by then.” He glanced up at me now. “The more the v?ttir does for you, the tighter the bond becomes. The first time he healed you, it wasn’t lifesaving, but

this time it definitely was. Your life is literally tied to us now. The farther apart you are from us, the harder it will be to focus, to sleep, to work your magic. We're all joined, for better or for worse, unless the v?ttir makes another deal or you die."

"Wow." Those were repercussions I hadn't considered, but getting them clarified wasn't the first thing on my mind right now. "Is that what you came in to explain? The way this deal works?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. You haven't spoken a word to me for two months."

"I was too angry to be rational," Soren admitted. "And it's easier to keep a distance when the v?ttir is using my mind, but it's off communing with nature right now, so it's just me. And I can't keep this up. I miss you too much."

"Fuck." Two months, and I'd been worried it was the start of the rest of my life, being with Soren but denied him at the same time. I held my hand out to him, and he took it without hesitation, and that was it.

I pulled him in for a kiss and I got an armful instead, Soren moving Lady to the floor before he straddled my waist, one hand wound through my too-long hair to hold my head still while he had his way with my mouth. I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him in so close I could feel his heart beating?his heart , and it was mine, so wholly and completely beyond a shadow of a doubt. I'd never possessed anything so precious in my whole life.

"I'm sorry," I said again when I had a moment to breathe. "I'm so sorry, I—"

"No," Soren said. "That's over. Don't waste any more time on it." He smiled at me, and it was sly and wicked and the sort of thing I hadn't seen nearly enough of in the

time we'd had together. "I think you should fuck me instead."

I was fortunate not to pass out from the world's most embarrassing blood rush right then and there. "Yes," I agreed emphatically, and then?

Sex was a funny thing for me, always has been. Sometimes it was smooth and easy, and sometimes it was completely goofy, full of misplaced elbows and stubborn zippers. There must have been someone looking out for me, though, because not only were we both undressed in under a minute, but I also didn't drop the lube, the bed didn't break, Lady didn't howl or stare, and then I had Soren splayed out beneath me, breathing hard as I slid a finger inside of him.

If it had been a long time since I'd had sex, hell, the last time he'd fucked anyone was me. Soren writhed against the cheap sheets, unable to keep his hands off me as I prepped him, taking my time because two years was a long stretch to go without, and the last thing I wanted to do was hurt him.

Still... "No," I said when he closed his eyes as I pressed three fingers into him. "Look at me, keep looking at me. I have to know..." That it's you went unspoken, but Soren understood. He opened his eyes, the hazy blue obscured by huge pupils, and his body clenched around my hand.

"Now," he begged. "Now, I can't wait anymore, please."

That was convenient, because neither could I. I slicked myself gingerly, positioned myself just right, and—oh fuck, it was slow and hot and so tight. Soren drew me down against him as soon as he could, wrapping his legs around my back and driving me deeper.

"Slow," he whispered, kissing my ear. "Like this."

We hadn't done it like this very often, a gentle push-pull, none of the long thrusts and quick pace that got us off fast. This was quiet, me barely moving at all, and I knew I couldn't be doing much for his prostate, but Soren didn't seem to care. He clutched my shoulders and kissed me again and again, and I let him take control, because he had so little of it in anything else. I wanted to give him exactly what he wanted, and right now that was the slow, tender grind of body flush to body, our skin slipping against each other's without creating any unwelcome space between us. His cock was trapped against my belly, rubbing wetly, hard and red.

I was drowning in Soren, surrounded by him, enveloped in him. Fuck, I never wanted it to end, but it had to, because my entire body was trembling with the need to come, every muscle tightening in anticipation.

“ Soren .”

“Yes,” he said, “Yes, yes, Cillian, fuck ,” and he came, and then I did, and?

And I just about died. It was amazing and intense and almost painful, the sudden surge of pleasure so strong it blinded me. How did people live through this? If I could have died right then, I would have gone happy, but I couldn't die; I could never do that to Soren again. I inhaled his breaths and used his strength to hold myself up, and eventually I existed again without feeling like I'd been broken open.

We separated just enough to clean up a little and then drowsed in the bed, wrapped up together. I have to get a bigger bed , I mused as we dozed. Or maybe not?it was kind of nice to be so close. I opened my eyes and turned to ask Soren about it, and—

“That was very enjoyable.”

“ Holy shit! ” I reared back and fell off the bed as purple eyes met mine. I hit the floor hard, taking the cover with me. Lady came out from her basket and licked at my

chin, and Soren—the v?ttir—stared down at me with amusement.

“Well, that looked exciting.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Not long. I didn’t interfere in the act itself, if that is your concern. I felt it, of course, through Soren.” The v?ttir smiled at me. “You’ve made him very happy.”

“Yeah, well you’ve ruined the afterglow, so thanks,” I muttered.

“We should have done that long ago.”

“No, no we shouldn’t have.”

He frowned. “But we’re all joined together now. There is no greater expression of appreciation than giving each other such pleasure.”

“The answer is still no,” I said. “What Soren and I do in bed is a two-person affair. Two, not three, okay?”

“But you are meant to keep me happy. How else will you do so?”

I stared blankly at the ceiling for a moment. How was this my life? Fuck. “How do you feel about waffles right now?” I asked finally.

Soren beamed at me. “I would love some waffles.”

“All right. Let’s get dressed, and we can go get a late breakfast.” I could take Lady for a walk too.

This new life wasn't perfect. But it was what I had, and in the absence of knowing the future, I would take the path that looked the best. Right now, this was it.

I had no idea what was next for us. But I was looking forward to finding out.

~\*~\*~\*~

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

The first thing Devon noticed about the underground lair that he was entering—though “lair” might have been coming on a bit too strong, given that the place was well lit and decorated like a cross between a cathedral and a seraglio—was the smell. It was too delicate to be called a smell, really; a scent, wafting up the stairs and past the two burly men who were waiting to escort Devon into the belly of the beast. The delicate curls of incense were flavored with spikenard, a derivative of the valerian family and supposedly the stuff that drove Judas to rebel after Mary Magdalene used the costly ointment to anoint Jesus’s feet, and...

Devon could feel his overactive memory trying to dive down irrelevant avenues of information in his head, and he firmly refocused himself on the men walking toward him.

“Arms up,” one of the men said, his English barely scratched by an Italian edge. He wore a cheap, shapeless polyester suit and a bolo tie, with some sort of rough-cut brown stone for a pendant. Not exactly contemporary fashion choices, but it looked like the standard uniform for henchmen, if the other guy was anything to judge by.

Devon just smiled and raised his arms, letting the man frisk him and taking note of the Taser at his hip as well as the piece he was trying to hide, a small-caliber pistol in the small of his back. The way he walked suggested there was something strapped down at ankle height, too, but Devon didn’t plan on getting up close and personal enough to make sure.

The man’s hands ran briskly down his legs, and Devon gave a tiny, experimental shimmy of his hips. The man finished his check and stepped a foot back, as square-jawed and implacable as ever. No reaction. Interesting. “This way,” he grunted. The

other man never spoke, but he followed behind them, sandwiching Devon between them as they headed deeper underground into the place called the Pearly Gates.

This place, hidden under ten feet of rock and sand in the middle of the Mojave Desert a hundred miles from Las Vegas, seemed like an odd place to set up a lofty den of iniquity. It was hard to get to this ghost town in the center of nowhere. The only visible things that marked the entryway were a crumbling adobe motel and a shuttered gas station. Few people knew about the Pearly Gates, and even fewer were allowed entrance.

No matter how exclusive the entertainment on offer, the inconvenience should have been enough to put people off when the glitz and glamour of Vegas was so readily available. In this case, though, it looked like the first rule of fight club was working in the Pearly Gates's favor, because this serpent's belly was filled to the brim with people.

Devon was led into a large central room that looked like it had been plated with marble: floors, ceiling, walls, all of them were white shot through with a soft, pale gold that soothed the eye as much as it captivated. There were silk carpets here and there on the floor, recessed enclosures behind carved wooden dividers for the fortunate few who'd found a place to sit, and beautiful, silent women and men weaving between the guests bearing trays of everything from drinks to drugs. Most of the clientele seemed to be male, men of many different nationalities, if the cut of their suits was anything to judge by, all drinking and smoking and trying to restrain their glances towards the center of the room, where a tall crimson candle in a gold candelabrum was slowly burning down. No one touched it, no one even bumped into it, despite the crowd.

Ah-ha. A timepiece, then. Symbolizing that something everyone was waiting for was going to happen when it burned down to a nub.



“Mr. Klein.” A young woman in a form-fitting silver and blue dress approached with a welcoming smile on her face. “Welcome to the Pearly Gates.”

“Thank you, miss.” Devon smiled charmingly; he couldn’t smile any other way. “Its reputation has preceded it.”

“I trust you’ll be well pleased with what our establishment has on offer. May I bring you anything as you wait for tonight’s entertainment? A bottle of our finest champagne, perhaps, or something stronger, to calm the nerves?” She fluttered her eyelashes enticingly, and it was all Devon could do not to laugh. “Or perhaps even the company of myself, to help occupy your time until the show begins?”

He shouldn’t do it. He knew he shouldn’t, but Devon couldn’t help himself. Being on the receiving end of a seduction was pure challenge for him. He had to prove he could outdo her, even though he was supposed to be keeping a low profile. But then, no one had ever said Devon was good at denying himself.

Devon captured her gaze with his and extended his hand. She gave hers over, almost unconsciously, and he bent over it slowly, in a gesture that appeared courtly from a distance but was smoldering up close. As he bowed, Devon pressed lightly against her body with his power.

Her scent changed instantly, growing stronger as her temperature rose, sweat and musk sliding more freely from her pores and between her legs. She gasped, then clutched her free hand to her neck. Too late, Devon realized that she was wearing the same brown stone as the guards, this time as a choker. It must have acted as some sort of warning, because an instant later she drew back, and the guards immediately reached for their Tasers.

Shit. This was not how the op was supposed to go. “Maria,” Devon muttered around his clenched teeth, “they can tell what I am.”

“Can you get out of there?” Maria asked through the com, her voice so faint that if his hearing hadn’t been naturally augmented, Devon wouldn’t have been able to hear her.

“Not sure yet.” He straightened up and smiled again. “Actually, I just remembered that I left something rather important in my car. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Nameless Guard Number One grunted, reaching for Devon’s arm.

Devon reacted instantly, grabbing the man’s wrist and jerking it aside as he spun toward him and neatly kicked him just above his ear. Guard Number One staggered back, giving Devon time to deal with Number Two, who had gotten his Taser free and aimed all of its fifty thousand volts at Devon.

Devon ducked the first deployment and smirked as he heard one of the guests fall and begin to convulse, his glass of expensive scotch shattering against the marble floor. He closed the distance and threw a front kick into Number Two’s gut, bending him just enough for Devon’s knee to connect solidly with his face. That freed up a path back down the hall, toward the door that Devon knew he needed a keycard to get out of. He grabbed Number Two’s off of his slumped body and got a running start back down the hallway before he felt the strike of a Taser’s barbs low in his back. The electric shock arched his body so hard he could hear his vertebrae creak, and Devon collapsed rigidly to the floor.

“Harper? Do you copy, Harper?” Yeah, he copied, but his tongue felt swollen in his mouth, too thick to speak. Devon just stared up at white-winged angel painted on the ceiling, its wide grey eyes seeming to glare down at him. After a moment that glare was replaced by a view of the young woman, who still held onto the Taser she must have grabbed from Number One. She snapped something in Italian, and Devon swore to himself that when he got out of here he was learning that goddamn language, because nothing was more obnoxious than being talked about when you couldn’t

understand.

Numbers One and Two, rather the worse for wear, came and hoisted him to his feet none too gently. “Saint Peter,” the young woman said firmly, and spun around, her skirt swirling out like a peacock’s tail. The men followed behind her, and Devon came along by default.

“Harper? Harper? Shit.”

Devon didn’t often agree with his handler, but in this instance, Maria was totally right. Shit .

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:40 pm*

Devon naturally had the kind of constitution that recovered rapidly from damage. By the time he was dragged into a private room beyond the madding crowd, carried right through the horde of muttering old men, all of whom stank of rich cologne and sour, secretive lust, the numbness was gone and he was back to feeling pretty much himself again. He let Numbers One and Two keep dragging him though, because it always paid to be underestimated, and besides, why should he make things easy on them?

The room he was pulled into was...strange. It was very well-ventilated, for one, with none of the cloying incense in the air. There was only one chair in it, an immense throne carved from what looked like a solid piece of marble. There was a large silver circle inlaid with the Seal of Solomon on the floor in front of the throne, and that was where Devon was tossed.

He rolled to his hands and knees and looked the circle over as he tried to catch his breath. It was very professional work, and infused with enough power that if he were a true demon he'd have been trapped already, even without the incantation to raise the ward. So, demon summoning, he could check that off the list of perversions that the Pearly Gates had to offer. It explained how they had known what Devon was. The situation had just deteriorated from "shit" to "serious fucking shit, I'm not kidding you, I think my balls just tried to jump into my throat."

Still, it was a little too early to be panicking. Devon loudly cleared his throat twice, and Maria's sigh of relief came through loud and clear. That signal meant he wasn't in eminent danger, and she didn't have to worry about sending the posse in quite yet.

In Devon's opinion, there was nothing like a good posse, but that was a big and often explosive step. If there was an alternative to letting things get that far, he knew he had

to pursue it.

A small man in a pure white robe sat on a thick silk cushion covering the seat of the throne. He wore a tall pontiff-style hat that looked oddly officious and had a neat, greying beard that fell down to his lap. His eyes were dark and calculating, and he smelled musty, like old wine and rotting wood. He had a brown stone hanging from his neck as well, and now Devon kind of wanted to kick himself for not figuring those trinkets out earlier. “You must be Saint Peter.”

“The lord of the Pearly Gates,” the man said in perfect English, nodding his head slightly. “And you are not Jacob Klein, despite all evidence to the contrary. It’s a most impressive cover identity, though. My girls couldn’t find anything wrong with it when they looked into permitting your supplication.”

“I thought it was an application,” Devon interjected.

“You must know better than that,” Saint Peter tutted. “No one can apply to get into heaven. They can only entreat me, their lord, to grant them access to delights beyond the mundane world, and if I look favorably upon them, then...” He smiled slightly. “Then their lives become enriched beyond measure. And creatures like you are the means of that enrichment. Did you truly think to hide your nature in a place like this?” He chuckled. “When we are already so knowledgeable about you? It was folly. I know what you are, demon child. Cammbion.” Saint Peter drew out the word like it was something to be savored.

“How did you know?” Devon had a pretty good idea, but he wanted it confirmed.

“My little charms.” The old man tapped the stone around his neck. “Peach pits, with a symbol carved on the back that renders the bearers nearly immune to your influence. All of my floor staff wear them. They grow warm when in the presence of an unshielded cambion or demon. They are expensive to manufacture, but well worth the price. After all, my people aren’t here to play. They are busy little angels, obedient

and constant in their devotion to none but me.”

Damn, but this guy had an ego. Devon straightened the cuffs of his suit, then splayed his hands out at his sides, putting himself on display. “Well, now that you have me, what do you plan to do with me?”

“That’s a very fine question,” Saint Peter said bemusedly. “Were my time solely my own, I would stretch your beautiful body out on an iron rack and devote myself to studying every last inch of it, inside and out.” His fingers twitched, as though they were already crawling over Devon’s skin. “There are differences, you know, in the anatomy of a human and a cambion. I’ve made quite a study of it over the years. I could tell the two species apart solely from the differences in the taste of their livers.”

Wow, vivisection and cannibalism. Some people just had to be overachievers. Devon tamped down on his nerves and gave his captor a breezy grin. “But you’ve got all these guests, huh?”

“Very true,” Saint Peter agreed. “So I’m afraid I’ll have to restrict myself to squeezing your identity from you before we use you as tonight’s entertainment. You are,” he mused, looking at Devon appreciatively, “very beautiful, even for your kind. Almost as beautiful as one of your forebears. Usually I summon a succubus for the crowd to gawk at, but I think that you will prove an interesting break from tradition.”

“It won’t work the same,” Devon pointed out quickly, barely keeping himself from sending the signal to Maria for the posse to come roaring in, stat . He could handle himself a little longer. “You can’t command a cambion the way you can a pure demon.”

“Ah, but a pure demon doesn’t bleed,” Saint Peter said, drawing his hands together in a professorial clasp. “And there are a number of sadists in my audience chamber who are perennially disappointed by that. While I can’t turn all your joints backwards or force your spine out through your stomach without killing you—” Devon

unexpectedly felt a surprising surge of sympathy for whatever demons had ended up here “—you’ll stay alive through much more torment than a regular human being, and the colors will be spectacular.

“So now,” he continued briskly, “let us proceed as friends. The more easily you tell me your true identity, the easier I shall go with you when it comes time for you to perform, in approximately half an hour.”

Fuck. Devon’s lips thinned into a flat line, and he was just a few seconds away from giving the signal for rescue despite the fact that he hadn’t accomplished any of the mission’s objectives yet. Getting tortured wasn’t part of the deal, and while he could take it, at least for a while, his bosses had been very clear on their opinion of futile heroics.

A faint click sounded as a door opened nearby, and suddenly Devon felt quite a bit brighter about the situation, because here, in the flesh, was the very man he’d been sent into the Pearly Gates to find. Porter Grey was an unusually gifted demon summoner, also the former leader of a cult in California that had created over a dozen cambion before the police got involved. He was wanted by mundane authorities for human trafficking, rape, assault, kidnapping, fraud, and murder. Devon’s employers wanted him for a whole lot more.

Porter Grey was classically handsome, with dark, slicked back hair and a dove grey suit tailored to show his broad shoulders and long legs to the best result. His chin was cleft and his eyelids were heavy, almost lazy. He looked languorous and dangerous, like a lion lounging just beyond reach, tempting you to pet it and promising pain if you did. He smelled like an alpha male to Devon, but he still bowed to Saint Peter.

“I didn’t call for you, magician,” Saint Peter said dismissively.

“I was in the security booth when I caught sight of you and the cambion, my lord.” Porter’s voice was urbane, compelling—the sort of voice that implied

trustworthiness.

“And why is this adequate reason for interrupting me?”

“Only because I’ve already summoned a demon for tonight’s entertainment, my lord. It wouldn’t do for the effort to go to waste. She’s in the holding cell, waiting to be brought out for your guests.”

Saint Peter looked a little put out. “You already have her manacled and collared?” Silver manacles with the right inscriptions would let a summoner move their demon from place to place without worrying that they would escape, but manacles like that were devilishly hard to make and maintain. Devon raised Porter Grey’s threat level in his mind.

“Yes, my lord. I was merely keeping to the schedule that you yourself have set.”

Saint Peter waved a hand. “I know, I know. Hmm...how long can you hold her?”

“No more than two hours, my lord.” Porter sounded apologetic, but his eyes were cold. Very few people had the innate power needed to summon a demon, and for someone like Porter Grey, so long the master of his own domain, it must have been galling to be at the beck and call of someone else now.

Then again, the man had been missing for close to a decade. Devon’s bosses had lost track of him after he’d arrived in Taiwan, and no one had been more surprised than they to see surveillance footage of Porter back in the States, probably the least safe place in all the world for him to be. They weren’t even positive it was him, which was why Devon had been sent in to reconnoiter.

Well, objective number one was complete. Number two...that was gonna take a bit more work. Apprehending Porter really wasn’t in the cards while Devon was hemmed in by a couple of very angry, still-bleeding thugs.



“I see,” Saint Peter said. He sighed a little, but finally assented. “This young man will keep. I will discuss his future further with him after tonight’s entertainment. It is better, in a way. Now I will be able to take my time with him. Take him to the cell and ready the succubus for presentation.”

Devon and Porter Grey stared at each other for a long moment. For a second, Devon thought that the man was going to be stupid, that he was going to get close enough for Devon to get his hands on him, which would’ve been like Christmas in July at this point. Then Porter smirked, reached inside his jacket and pulled out his own Taser. All Devon had time for was a brief moment of, Oh, fuck me before the barbs made two neat holes in his favorite goddamn Kiton shirt and the electricity filled his body and momentarily blanked out his mind.

Numbers One and Two picked him up and carried him behind Porter through a side door, well away from the revelry of the audience chamber and straight to the holding cells. Porter paused at a closed door and spoke into a small com set into his watch. “Take her into the secondary room.” He glanced over at Devon. “I don’t want them to have any contact.”

Good call , Devon thought hazily. Cambion couldn’t be magically commanded by humans, but their sensitivity to their demon side was much stronger, and much harder to resist. A succubus leveraging all of her sexuality at him, all of her pure, uninhibited lust, would be able to get him to do just about anything, even dampened as she was by the silver restraints. Porter Grey knew his business. Devon stared blearily at the side of his target’s head, noticing for the first time the furrowed scarring at the top of his ear. Something had taken a chunk out of it at some point, and while the surgeon who fixed it was good, nothing could quite replace that much lost cartilage.

After a few more seconds, Porter opened the door and motioned them through, and Devon felt his stomach turn at the smell that the succubus had left behind. The air was redolent with it, fear and anger and hysterical need, and he whined high in his throat, a faint protest as One and Two shoved him into the empty cell and locked the

door behind him. The insides of the cell's bars were lined with silver, and there was another seal in silver on the floor as well. The silver would cause physical pain to a true demon, but it wasn't enough to bother Devon. He pushed his sore body into a sitting position and lifted his head. Porter was still there, and looked down at him... hungrily, was the description that immediately came to mind. Like Devon was something to be devoured. Porter dismissed the guards, and once they were gone he moved in closer, his gaze fixed unblinkingly on Devon.

"You're not one of mine," Porter said softly, one elegant hand lingering on the metal frame of the cell. "But there's something very familiar about you." His voice was considering, but his face was oddly smug.

Devon didn't know exactly what to make of that, but he did know an opening when he saw one. "You could find out," he murmured, shifting to his knees. He kept his eyes low, barely glancing up through his long lashes. "If you wanted to. Right now." He wet his lips with his tongue. "And you wouldn't have to share me with Saint Peter."

Porter was wearing a peach charm, so he was resistant to the power of a cambion's allure but he wasn't immune to Devon, who had been making people want him in one way or another for as long as he could remember. Demons were sexual but not subtle, while Devon...he could do coy, and that seemed to be something this man wanted. Porter was obviously stifled here, Devon was new and interesting, and if he could just get his hands on the man and rip away that charm...oh, the things Devon could make him do.

Too late, though. Porter was pressed for time, and his sense of responsibility got the better of his curiosity. "I'll learn the way of you soon enough," Porter said, and his voice was full of dark promise. He left, exiting through a second metal door about ten feet away, and finally Devon was alone. There was nothing else there back there but a security camera in the corner of the ceiling outside the cell, blinking its little red light at him.

Well then. Good time to talk to his handler. “Maria?” Devon murmured.

“Status report, Harper.”

“Mission is partially accomplished. Porter Grey is definitely here,” Devon said, facing away from the camera and stretching languorously. “He just locked me up, actually.”

“Can you escape?”

“I probably can ,” he said judiciously, “given enough time to work my mojo, but I don’t know exactly when they’re going to be back for me, and I’d rather not be round two of tonight’s entertainment if it was all the same to you.”

“Time for an extraction, then.”

“Oh, do I get Rio?” Devon asked excitedly. Just the thought of it made his heart beat a little faster. “Please tell me I get Rio.” He hadn’t seen Rio in a few months, not since the job they’d done together in Florida, and while the sight of that man in alternating white linen suits and speedos was wonderful fodder for fantasies, over time the memory had grown a bit threadbare. Rio was the only one Devon didn’t have to be careful around, and he treasured every chance he got to work with him. This op had come together so fast that there hadn’t been time to nail down who would be his backup before he went in, and while the other guys were fine, no one compared to Rio. “Please, please, pretty please...”

Maria coughed uncomfortably. “ Reel it in some, Harper.”

Devon grinned unapologetically. “Oh, am I getting you wet, sweetheart?”

“You’re about to get yourself the next job in Siberia if you don’t stop fucking around with me, boy.” Her sigh was long-suffering. “ But yes, you get Rio.”

“Sweet.” Devon bounced up and down on the balls of his feet a little, as close as he felt he could get to a leap and a yell of joy right now. “So I’ll just sit back and relax until I hear the explosions start, shall I?”

“ETA is approximately half an hour. Think you can last until then?”

Porter had a hold on the succubus for the next two hours, and Saint Peter didn’t seem like the type of psycho to let any time he could spend hurting someone go to waste. Devon glanced up at the camera and wondered if the person watching this feed wore the same charm that the floor staff did. “I think I can keep myself alive and in one piece until he gets here.”

“Do that, Harper.”

The com went silent. Devon sauntered over to the cell door and rested his arms against one of the horizontal bars. He stared straight up at the camera, blew a kiss to the watcher, and started to work his allure. If he was lucky, he could have this door open by the time Rio arrived.