

THE POISON TREE



Mike Lee

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*For the Grassmere sept:
Janet, Micah, Ripper, Carrie, Matt, Gericke,
and Paul. Packmates forever.*

Chapter One: Wormwood

In her dreams, Savannah is burning.

The sky is black as smoke, lit from the north by eerie green and yellow light, and she knows it's because the river is afire. The buildings along the riverfront are already gone, hollowed out into blackened shells, but the screams of those who were trapped within still linger in the howling air.

Dark forms dance and writhe amid the firelight, capering to the sounds of torment, leaving poison footprints in their wake.

It is the end. She knows this. But also, it is the beginning of something else, something far more terrible, and that knowledge is a poison all its own, eating away at her soul.

The asphalt is hot beneath her feet. She is standing on Bull Street, with her back to the caern, watching Madison Square burn. She can hear the wail of the spirits within, and the gibbering cries of the monsters that are desecrating the shrine. People are being dragged from their homes and taken into the square to be defiled and then cast aside – or worse, to be welcomed with hateful laughter into the blasphemous revel.

The city trembles, and she howls her rage. She has taken her war form, and Donnerkeil is in her hand, but the ancient blade's hungry gleam is dimmed somehow. Her strength is failing, and she is alone.

The abominations know this. They stumble from the firelit square, drunk on slaughter; their misshapen bodies steaming in the heat. They howl in mockery of her righteous anger; their eyes glowing yellow and green with the chemical fires that birthed them, and reach for her with rubbery hands.

They pour from the square in ever-greater numbers, a tide of foes to drown the world. She stands at the verge and fights against them, because she is garou, and what is more, she is a Shadow Lord, and this land is hers. Donnerkeil flickers in the darkness, and the monsters topple by the score, their bodies split and scorched. The slaughter is terrible, but it isn't enough. The monsters reach for her. When she slices off their hands they laugh with delight. Here and there a claw gets through and leaves a burning wound in her side.

Slowly but surely, they drive her back. She retreats, the melting asphalt pulling at her feet, knowing that every step she surrenders brings the enemy closer to the caern.

It is the end.

Again and again she howls for her pack. At times she catches a glimpse of a black-furred shape in the distance, struggling against something unseen, but when she calls out, there is no reply. The despair, the loneliness she feels, cuts deeper than all her wounds combined.

They drive her back into Monterey Square, and she is forced to watch as the shrine is defiled around her. The capering mob smears blood and toxic wastes on the trees, splitting the bark and smothering the spirits within. Her kinfolk are dragged from her family home across the square and their brains dashed out against the sides of the old Pulaski Monument.

She can feel her heart breaking. Donnerkeil spills out a river of blood, but it is not enough. She howls until her throat is raw, but no help ever comes.

Another step, and her back is to the caern.

It is the end.

The trees of the old park rise up at her back. She can feel the ancient spirits within, and here she thinks she will make her stand. But the spirits do not heed her; when she calls out to them they reject her, as though she were the enemy.

The children of the Wyrms press close. They are silent now, their burning eyes glittering with a strange, secret mirth.

She takes another step back, and the ground beneath her crumbles like sand. Her heart is in her throat as she falls, the walls of the pit rising up all around her.

There is something at the bottom of the pit. It is black like tar, and reeks of death. She lands in it, and its touch sears her with cold. Tendrils of it wrap around her limbs, stripping away fur and the flesh beneath. Donnerkeil is plucked away and swallowed up forever.

She fights it with all her might. She struggles and snaps, her fanged jaws clashing against the tendrils, but they dissolve in her mouth and leave the taste of poison behind.

She is sinking into the blackness. A thick tendril wraps around her neck, pulling her head back against the tar. The cold of the abyss spreads across her chest, and she looks up, towards the faint circle of green and yellow light and the smoky sky beyond.

There are four silhouettes standing around the mouth of the pit. They wear the shape of huge, shaggy wolves, their fur blacker than the night itself. Their red tongues loll and their eyes burn with green fire as they watch her drown.

And as the end draws near, she glimpses the beginning of what is to come.

• • •

Ingrid Stormwalker woke with a strangled cry, still fighting the darkness. Terror and rage made her muscles twitch, feet scuffling for purchase to either fight or flee

from the nightmare. Her skin flushed with heat, nerves prickling as though with a fever, and the dull, familiar ache began to take hold in her bones.

There was a knock at the door to her bedroom. A muffled query came from the hall outside. The old, ceramic knob began to turn. Ingrid shouted a warning as she felt her body begin to shift.

No. She breathed deeply, fighting the red tide. Ingrid clenched her fists and was surprised to find *Donnerkeil's* antler grip in her hand. She was on the floor opposite her bed, head bent and shoulders pressed against the baseboard, bare feet tangled in the old, threadbare rug. The repurposed wardrobe where she kept her sacred objects was standing open to her right. The French doors to her left were also open, letting in the humid night air and the scent of flowers from the garden below.

Ingrid focused on each detail, clinging to them like anchor posts. The knuckles of her right hand ached as she gripped the ancient, silver blade, and the lightning spirit bound within reacted, throwing out flickering arcs of cold, blue light. As if in answer, a muted rumble of thunder echoed from the southwest, and the ghost of a breeze stirred the heavy curtains beside her.

A breath at a time, the panicked frenzy began to subside. The ache in Ingrid's bones ebbed, and the heat bled from her skin. The old house, with its familiar sounds, its familiar spirits, settled over her like a mantle.

Wincing at the stiffness in her shoulders and back, Ingrid pushed herself to her feet. She was tall and very fit, her pale shoulders and muscular limbs marked here and there with the scars of a grim and violent life. The faint breeze from the balcony was cold against her skin. Sweat trickled from beneath tangled strands of black hair and coursed in rivulets across her shoulders and back. Her t-shirt and cotton shorts were plastered to her body. Plucking absently at the clinging fabric she crossed to the wardrobe, and with a murmur of apology to the weapon's twin spirits, she placed the grand klaive in its customary spot next to her ancestor shrine and swung the wooden doors shut.

Her hands trembled on the polished mahogany. The aftermath of the dream was almost as unsettling as the dream itself.

There was another soft knock at the door. This time, Ingrid recognized the voice of Eleanor, one of the household staff. "Is everything all right, mistress?"

"Fine," she said in a husky voice. Ingrid raked sweaty tendrils of hair away from her face as she went and plucked her smart phone from the nightstand next to the old Queen Anne bed. She activated the phone, fancying she could feel the little device's electrical spirit stir to life. The screen said 9:00 PM. Ingrid muttered a curse, rubbing at her eyes. It felt like she hadn't slept at all. "I'm fine, Eleanor. Come in."

The door opened, spilling a shaft of yellow light along the bedroom floor and across the antique bed. Eleanor stepped into the doorway, her brown leather day planner clutched against her chest like a shield, and carefully surveyed the dimly-lit room. She was a dignified lady of middle years, her salt-and-pepper hair drawn back into a bun, highlighting the strong cheekbones and angular jaw common to the Reinhardt lineage. She and Ingrid were distant cousins, part of a bloodline that had taken root in the city more than two hundred years ago, and now wound like kudzu through most of Savannah's old families.

Eleanor studied the room a moment longer. When she was certain it was safe, she stood aside and ushered a younger maid carrying a bundle of clothes into the room. The maid was new, Ingrid saw. She moved nervously to the bedside, eyes downcast, and began to set out the clothes atop the rumpled sheets.

“Good evening, mistress,” Eleanor said, pointedly ignoring the tension in the room and launching into her nightly report. “Your father is out this evening at the symphony fundraiser. Will you be taking dinner with us tonight?”

Ingrid’s stomach growled at the mention of food. It was distracting – which, she suspected, was exactly the point. “Yes. Steak, if we have it. Set a table on the veranda.”

Eleanor made a note in the planner. “Master Campbell is waiting for you downstairs. Would you like a place set for him as well?”

Ingrid frowned. Marcus Campbell was another cousin, beta to her pack, and took advantage of his status and family connection by coming up to the “big house” whenever he could. He made no secret of trying to curry favor with her father Karl, though she suspected that there were more to their conversations than mere face time and flattery. Ingrid was war chief of the Coastal Empire, but Karl Ironhand still ruled here, as he’d done for the last twenty-five years. She suspected that Marcus was informing on her, keeping Karl abreast of her every decision – and any secret ambitions she might have, if and when the decades-long war finally came to an end. She didn’t fault Marcus for it. They were Shadow Lords; it was the way of their tribe. But that didn’t make it any less irritating. “Set out an extra wine glass,” she said. “Once he realizes my father isn’t here, he may not stay long. No sense wasting food.”

“Of course.” Eleanor made another note. The maid smoothed the clothes with a nervous sweep of her hand, returned to the hall to get Ingrid’s boots. As she left, Eleanor glanced up from her planner. “The pack leaders of all four visiting packs have put in requests for private audiences with your father before they leave tomorrow.”

Ingrid gave a curt nod. The news wasn’t entirely unexpected, and, technically speaking, none of her business. What purpose did Eleanor have for sharing it? Was it a feint, a test orchestrated by Karl, or a different kind of gambit altogether? “I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, offering nothing in return. “Is that all?”

“Is there any word on how many garou we can expect after the moot tomorrow?” Eleanor asked.

Ingrid sighed. Had there ever been a time when the sept could count on aid from the rest of Georgia’s werewolf tribes? It hadn’t happened in the five years since she’d accepted *Donnerkeil* and become war chief. “I think it’s safe to assume we’ll have at least fifteen, same as last year.”

The maid set the boots down on the rug with a muffled *thump*. Eleanor snapped the planner shut and waved the young woman back out into the hall. “I’ll start making preparations for the new arrivals right away,” she said, starting to pull the door shut.

“Eleanor?”

The kinfolk paused. “Yes, mistress?”

“Tell my father I’d like to speak to him as soon as I get back from the hunt. It’s important.”

Eleanor nodded. “I’ll make sure he gets the message.”

The door clicked shut. Alone again, Ingrid set the phone back on the nightstand and went to the adjoining bathroom, shutting the door behind her. Her hand fumbled for the light switch. Normally, she was comfortable moving about in total darkness, but the nightmare still had its barbs in her. White light played over marble and colored tile, banishing shadows. Even in her haggard state, the irony was not lost on her.

She stripped off her sodden clothes and started a shower. The sound of the water, the heat and the mist, were meditative. It helped clear her mind of raw emotion – a danger to garou in general, and to Ahroun, like her, in particular – as she tried to pick apart the meaning behind the dream.

On the surface, it seemed obvious. Savannah had been under siege since just before she was born, and there was never enough garou to keep the Coastal Empire secure. Her first change had come upon her at sixteen; within months she had completed her Rite of Passage and been thrown into the fight. Then, at twenty, she’d been given *Donnerkeil*, heirloom of the Reinhardt bloodline and the position of war chief. For the last five years, she had fought day and night to be worthy of both.

But there had been no great victories, no dramatic turning of the tide like in the old sagas. *I haven’t been given the chance*, she thought bitterly, letting the hot water work at the tension in her shoulders and neck. Karl would not risk allowing the garou to be drawn into a ruinous battle that might give them a short-term victory but leave them too weak to resist a protracted counter-assault by their foes. It had happened countless times in the past, to the sorrow of garou the world over.

She could not fault her father’s concerns – *dared not*, in fact. Karl Ironhand and his pack had wrested the Coastal Empire from a debased Fianna bloodline and defended it for twenty years against vampires, sorcerers, and worse. He had passed the mantle to her only because the last of his pack was dead, and he was too battle-scarred himself to continue. *I don’t deserve the status I hold now*, Ingrid thought. *The grand klaive passed to me because I was Karl’s daughter. I did not earn it, as others might have, and every garou in the city knows it.*

The Wyrn seemed to know it as well. Its attacks on the city grew more determined and more widespread with each passing year, while aid from the Southeast tribes dwindled.

And whose fault is that?

Ingrid held her head under the rush of steaming water. *You’re afraid of failure*, she thought. *You don’t want to be the war chief that lost Savannah to the Wyrn. That’s what the dream was about.*

The question is: what are you going to do about it?

She let the water do its work on body and mind for as long as she dared, knowing that Marcus was waiting downstairs and there was a long night’s work to be done. By the time she was out of the shower her muscles were relaxed, her skin tingling. She dried her hair and braided it, her worries giving way to the daily woes of a long and bitter siege.

Still naked, Ingrid returned to the bedroom for her clothes. She had taken two steps into the room before she realized she wasn't alone.

A massive, black-furred shape crouched in the far corner of the room, just to the right of the French doors. Ingrid heard its heavy, rasping breath, saw reflected streetlight gleam on bared fangs and long, dagger-like claws. Ingrid felt her heart clench; icy spikes of adrenaline left goosebumps on her arms and sent a chill racing up the back of her neck. Her skin flushed with heat. She hissed a spirit name under her breath and suddenly *Donnerkeil* was in her hand, blue arcs snapping angrily along the edge of the silver blade.

The sudden flare of light outlined the shaggy, wolf-like head of the intruder, and shone through the thin membranes of hairless, almost bat-like ears. The huge figure was part wolf, part man: a garou in warlike crinos form. But the powerful body was crooked. A twisted spine raised the right shoulder higher than the left, and the garou's right leg was turned inward at a painful angle. The gaping mouth and rasping breath hinted at lungs that never fully formed in the womb.

Ingrid knew the garou at once, even as her body reacted to the threat and began to shift. For the second time that night, her grip tightened on the grand klaive's hilt as she fought her primal instincts and held her killing rage in check.

"Eric?" she said breathlessly. "What in Gaia's name-"

The garou shrank a bit from the klaive's angry light, raising a clawed hand to partially shield his face. "Cousin," Eric said. The words came out in a rumbling growl, all but unintelligible to anyone not of their people. "Are you well?"

"Am I —" Her rage faded slowly, replaced with a dawning sense of fear. "Eric, how did you get out of your room?"

The misshapen creature hunched his shoulders and pointed at the balcony. "I climbed down. It was not so difficult."

"Your windows are sealed shut."

Eric gave a lopsided shrug. "Mother taught me many things when I was young," he said. "She whispered secrets to me in my cradle. Did you know?"

Ingrid scowled at him, hoping that he could not see how shocked she was. "What if someone saw you? Do you understand how bad that would be?"

"Saw me? No." He chuckled, a grim and terrible sound. "It was too dark. Besides, there was the shrine. It protects us, does it not?"

"What are you doing here?"

The crinos shifted uneasily. "I...was concerned. About you. You were having a nightmare."

Ingrid's breath caught in her throat. "How did you know about that?"

Eric gave another shrug. "I could hear you. The balcony doors were open, and I am just above." He rose to his full height. His hunched shoulders brushed the room's eight-foot ceiling. "I have been having dreams too. I wondered if yours were as terrible as mine."

Ingrid fought against a sudden wave of dread. Eric was born under the crescent moon. As a Theurge, he was closely attuned to the spirit world, and the secret landscapes of dreams.

“Before we can talk, you have to change,” she said sternly. “Your form is...not appropriate.”

Eric spread his massive hands. “But it is the shape that Gaia gave me.”

Ingrid winced. Garou were born of a mating between a garou and a human, or a wolf. Most offspring were born as normal humans or wolves, but carried the garou trait in their blood; these became kinfolk to the tribes. One in ten children bred true and became garou. In older times, when families were much larger, that wasn’t as much of a problem as it was today. The Reinhardts, and other bloodlines in the Deep South, tried to offset the difficulty each generation by spreading their seed as far and wide as possible. It did not matter if you were a bastard. If you were garou, you were part of the family, with all the privileges and expectations that went with it.

But if garou mated with garou, that was another matter entirely. The Great Mother, perhaps to shame her children, ensured that almost every child born of such a forbidden bond became a garou. But the offspring, the *metis*, would be twisted somehow, broken in body or mind – or both, as in Eric’s case. The tribes shunned and reviled their metis; in some cases, they were even killed. The Shadow Lords, who despised weakness in any form, were especially harsh on them. It remained a mystery to Ingrid and the rest of the family why Eric had been allowed to live.

“It is the law,” Ingrid insisted. “I am war chief. Do you mean to challenge me?”

Eric hung his head. He made a whimpering sound deep in his throat, and then, with a crackling of bone and a groaning of sinew, his body began to change. The great beast shrank in on himself, becoming more human than wolf, transforming from one minute to the next into a young man with the characteristic lean features, dark hair and pale skin of the Reinhardts. Eric’s body was still misaligned, but the humped shoulder was less pronounced, and the foot not quite so painfully turned. A simple black shirt, slacks and shoes – invested with spiritual energy and dedicated to Eric’s person – coalesced out of the ether around his thin frame as the transformation completed.

Eric’s new shape made Ingrid suddenly conscious of her own nakedness. She set the grand klaive on the bed beside her and reached for her clothes. “Tell me about these dreams,” she said.

The metis turned towards the balcony. “I dream of darkness and fire,” he said, pulling back the heavy curtains and looking out on Pulaski Square. He spoke slowly, as though breath was precious, but his voice was soft and almost musical. “The sky is full of smoke, and I can hear the howling of a wolf.”

A chill went up Ingrid’s spine. “What does the howl say?”

“There are no words. Just rage, and pain, and...madness, I think. A longing for something that can never be found.”

“Madness?” She pulled on briefs and a sports bra, then reached for a pair of loose-fitting black linen trousers.

"Oh, yes." Eric's voice grew soft, almost a whisper. "The kind that destroys everything it touches."

Ingrid could feel her heart thudding in her chest. She pulled on a tight-fitting, short-sleeved shirt and grabbed for her boots.

"Dreams are just our mind's way of working through our problems," she said tightly, tugging at bootlaces.

"Sometimes," Eric agreed. "But sometimes we see glimpses of what is to come. I dreamt of my mother, just before she died. Did you know?"

Ingrid shook her head. It felt like she was standing at the edge of an abyss.

"You need to go back to your room, Eric. If Father knew you'd gotten out, he'd be very angry."

After a moment, Eric sighed. "All right."

Ingrid put *Donnerkeil* away a second time, then went to a small dresser near the door and dug out a ring of keys. She beckoned to Eric. "Come on. I'll take you."

Eric reluctantly turned away from the balcony and limped over to her. Ingrid opened the door and glanced into the corridor. For the moment, the coast was clear. "Quickly now. We don't want anyone seeing you."

She led the metis into the corridor. The lighting on the third floor was subdued, creating deep shadows along the hallway. She led Eric down the corridor, towards the main stairway. Footsteps and muted conversation could be heard below.

At the main stairway, Ingrid turned left, down another short hallway that ended in a door. She searched through the keys until she found the one she wanted, and inserted it into the old lock. Beyond the door was a narrow, wooden staircase, rising up into darkness.

Ingrid led her cousin up the staircase. Another door waited at the top. This one was metal, and bound by a half-dozen locks. Once again, she worked her way through the key ring, the metal clinking faintly in the gloom.

"You never told me about your dream," Eric said. His voice was soft and strangely intimate in the close confines of the staircase.

Ingrid hesitated. She affected a shrug. "It's gone now. I can't remember."

"Well. I suppose that's for the best," he said. "I know there are dreams I wish I could forget sometimes."

Ingrid hurried through the last of the locks. The heavy door swung open. Beyond lay the old house's spacious attic, converted into a large, open apartment. The yellow glow of the streetlights slanted in through dormers set into the roof, illuminating dusty, antique furniture and stacks upon stacks of books. The air within was heavy and still.

Eric limped past Ingrid and entered the dimly lit apartment. He took a few steps further into the space and turned slowly about. The metis studied her intently.

"What is it like, cousin? Out there, in the city?"

Ingrid shrugged. "It's war. The Wyrms press closer to the caern every day."

Eric nodded thoughtfully. "It's going to get worse. That's what my dreams tell me. Something terrible is coming."

Ingrid swallowed. Visions of the city in flames, of the squares bathed in blood, danced before her eyes. "What is it? What's coming?"

The metis studied her a moment more, and then turned away. "An end."

Eric let out a pained cry as his body began to shift again, returning to its natural form. Ingrid shut the door on him and quietly reset the locks. As quietly as she could, she descended the wooden stairs. It felt as though she were falling through darkness.

She had just reached the base of the stairs and shut the wooden door behind her when the sound of running feet came pounding up the main stairway. Ingrid hurried down the hallway to see who it was.

Marcus was just reaching the third floor landing as she appeared. The look on his face was grim.

"What's happened?" Ingrid demanded.

If Marcus was surprised to find her coming from the attic instead of her bedroom, the Shadow Lord gave no sign. "I've been trying to call you," he said. "They've found another nest. We've got to go."



Chapter Two: Desperation

The fissure was a jagged wound amidst the knee-high weeds, its raw edges glistening and ruddy-colored beneath the orange glow of the streetlights. The tear in the earth was little more than four feet long, and just wide enough for a man to wiggle inside if he was willing to get down on his belly in the mud. It was all but invisible amid the mounds of trash that littered the narrow, fenced lot, just a block east of Savannah's Colonial Park Cemetery and the city's police headquarters.

The weeds had withered and died in a narrow patch surrounding the fissure. There were wolf prints in the bare mud. Ingrid knelt and brushed her fingertips across the deep marks of toe and claw. There were four sets of prints leading up to the fissure, but only one set – shallow and smeared in panicked flight – that led away.

"Start from the beginning," she said, her voice low and husky with rage.

The young garou hunched his shoulders. He was leaning against the graffiti-covered wall of the building to Ingrid's left, his face veiled by limp strands of dark, sweaty hair. Anna Hides-the-Moon stood close by, her arms crossed and her expression stern as she monitored the eighteen-year-old's condition. Dark spots had soaked through his jeans in several places, and his right hand was pressed against an even larger patch along his left side. The humid air was sharp with the coppery tang of blood.

"I told you twice already," Aaron Boarkiller muttered, his deep-country drawl rising nearly to a whine. He stole a nervous glance at Joshua Hunter's Song, who stood watch over the back alley at the north end of the lot. The galliard was turned away from them, his stocky figure cloaked in shadow, but no one doubted he was listening to every word.

Ingrid stood and stalked over to the boy.

"Tell me *again*," she snarled, drawing close enough that he could feel her breath on his neck. Her dark eyes were hard and unforgiving. "Keep talking until I can make sense of the *colossal* fuckup that happened here."

The young garou squirmed, shoulders pressed hard against the bricks, head turning away in a sign of submission. He was half a head taller than Ingrid, broad-should-

dered and powerfully built, but the force of her presence was such that he shrank under her stare.

"We were on patrol," he said sullenly. "You've been telling us to sniff around, try to find what happened to those missing homeless people. So that's what we did." He nodded over his shoulder, in the direction of Price Street. "We started at the Catholic place-"

"The Social Apostolate," Ingrid corrected.

"Yeah." Aaron took a breath and raked back his lank hair with a trembling hand. His face was haggard with fear and pain. "Dave and Erica shifted, started nosing around for scents. Jay and me kept watch, in case a cop rolled by."

There was a murmur of voices at the south end of the lot, facing Liberty Street. Three men in t-shirts and ragged jeans shuffled past, speaking to one another in low voices. They caught sight of Darius Stoneheart's imposing figure, standing watch at the fence line, then took in the tense scene unfolding in the lot, and hurried on past. It was late, well past midnight, and locals knew that the historic district was a bad place to be after dark.

"Who caught the scent first?" Ingrid pressed.

"Erica. Said there'd been some kind of a fight in the alley. Once she pointed it out, Dave caught it, too. Six or seven people, they thought: two homeless guys and twice as many taints." Aaron gestured at the north end of the lot. "Trail led down the alley to here. That's when we found the hole." He shook his head slowly. "Been past this place I don't know how many times the last few weeks, and never knew."

"And then?"

The young garou stared at his blood-spattered sneakers. "We went in after them."

"Just like that?" she pressed. "No hesitation? No discussion? You couldn't even be bothered to come up with a fucking *battle plan*?"

Aaron gave her a defiant stare. "We screwed up, okay?" he said through gritted teeth. "Is that what you want to hear?"

Ingrid's lips drew back in a snarl. "What I want to hear is that one of you idiots at least *tried* to tell your pack leader to stop and send a message back to the caern," she growled. "Gaia knows we've tried to drill that into your thick heads over the last year. *One* call, and help would have been here in five minutes."

"We didn't think-"

"Bullshit," Ingrid snapped. "Here's what I think happened. In the time it took you to walk from the Apostolate to here, the four of you decided to go after these taints on your own. Am I right? One last grab for glory before you head back home?"

Aaron's defiance guttered like a candle under Ingrid's glare. His gaze dropped back to his shoes.

"We thought there was just four of them," he said weakly.

Ingrid shook her head. "Gaia weeps," she growled. "Give me a name, Aaron. Whose idea was this? You're the only one left, so it's not like you've got anybody to protect."

Aaron took a deep breath and met Ingrid's gaze. For the first time there was a real hint of iron in his eyes. "You want to stain somebody's name, put it on me. Like you said, I'm the only one left."

Ingrid glared at him a moment longer, then glanced back at Marcus, leaning against the cinder block wall of the house on the east side of the lot. The Philodox gave her a faint shrug. She nodded, and then glanced back at Aaron.

"How many are *really* down there, Boarkiller?"

The young garou's expression grew haunted. "I don't know for sure," he told her. "At least a dozen. There's a tunnel that leads to this one big room, like a sunken basement or something. We went in, and they were all over us." He took a ragged breath. "Three of them tried to pull me down. Erica was snarling and snapping, and then something bit me in the side. The next thing I knew, I was up here." His voice grew thick with emotion. "I was up here, and my pack was gone."

Maybe if you'd stood and fought, the others might still be alive, Ingrid thought, but she bit back the angry reply. There wasn't much point saying it now. Instead, she turned to Anna. "Will he make it?"

The Theurge nodded slowly. Her human shape was almost the exact opposite of Ingrid's: short and somewhat pear-shaped, with narrow shoulders and broad hips. Her frizzy red hair was bound at her neck with a black elastic tie, and her round cheeks were flushed a bright red. "I've dealt with the worst of it," she said. "The bite in his side is still bleeding, but that will help flush any corruption from the wound. He'll need to be taken to the caern for a proper cleansing in the next few hours, though, just to be safe."

"Good enough," Ingrid said, then pointed a commanding finger at Aaron. "Stay here and keep watch. If we're not back in fifteen minutes, call the other packs. Can you do that?"

The young garou nodded weakly. Ingrid turned away and headed for the fissure, beckoning to the rest of her pack.

The Shadow Lords of Savannah gathered together in silence. Whatever they thought about the debacle in the tunnels below, they kept to themselves. Once they were together, Ingrid spoke in a low voice. "He thinks there could be a dozen fomori down there."

Darius frowned, dark brows knitting together. "A *dozen*?" he said, the words rumbling up from his barrel chest. He crossed his thickly muscled arms, tattoos flexing across dark skin. "That can't be right. We're a block and a half from Crawford Square."

Ingrid felt another flush of rage and fought to hold it in check. Coming from Darius, the comment probably wasn't an accusation, but it was hard to take it as anything else. She was the war chief; for good or ill, she was responsible. Certainly the elders at Stone Mountain would blame her for the loss of three young garou, less than a day before the visiting packs were due to return home.

"What's the plan?" Joshua prompted, helping focus Ingrid's thoughts. The Galiard's gray eyes and black goatee lent him an aura of maturity and wisdom, even though he was only a year older than Ingrid herself.

“According to Aaron, the hole leads to part of the old tunnels. We’ll go to hispo, head down the passageway, and kill any lookouts we find. Then we hit the nest with everything we’ve got.”

The pack uttered low growls of approval. Marcus eyed his pack leader warily. He had the same sharp, angular features as his cousin, but his chin was more pointed, the cheeks more hollow. He had the look of a fox rather than a wolf.

“Shouldn’t we call the caern first?” he asked.

“Don’t be a smartass.”

“I’m serious,” Marcus protested. “This is bad. We’ve got three dead garou and a Wyrn nest less than a mile from the caern. Shouldn’t we at least let the other packs know what’s happened?”

Ingrid felt her cheeks grow hot. The suggestion was reasonable enough. *If I want to broadcast this debacle to every werewolf in the Southeast*, she thought angrily. The fact was, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. Stone Mountain only sent the youngest packs to help protect the Savannah caern: those with the least experience and the most inclination to go hunting for glory. Had the elders any talent for intrigue at all, Ingrid might have suspected that they were deliberately trying to undermine her family’s hold on the city.

Marcus was another story. She knew *exactly* what he was up to.

“You think we can’t handle a dozen fomori?” she countered.

The beta’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t say that. I just think we owe it to the caern-”

“*We* are the caern,” Ingrid declared. “And once we’ve dealt with this threat, I will decide what, if anything, our guests need to be told.” Without waiting for a reply she turned away and went to the edge of the fissure.

The rage was building within her again. This time she welcomed it. Her skin grew fever-hot, and her bones began to ache. Her heart raced. For a dizzying instant, she felt suspended, as though at the edge of a vast precipice, and then, all at once, her muscles bunched like knotted ropes and she began to shift.

The pain was immediate and intense, radiating through every part of her body. Ingrid felt her shoulders broaden and her ribs stretch. Her tortured muscles swelled across her chest and limbs. It felt as though her fingernails and half her teeth were being pulled out. Her jaw lengthened, stretching the skin until it seemed it would split. A low growl rose unbidden from her throat.

The garou were not entirely human, nor were they entirely wolf. They could be either when it suited them, or something between the two. From one heartbeat to the next, Ingrid became less human and more wolf-like. Her clothes wavered, became insubstantial, and finally disappeared altogether as she went from *glabro*, a human with wolfish features, to *crinos*, the massive, wolf-human war form. Ingrid fell to her hands and knees as the change continued, her hands shrinking into paws and the shape of her body giving up the last vestiges of its human shape for something still huge, but primal and wolf-like. This was the *hispo* form, more like the terrible dire wolves of legend than their smaller, more modern descendants.

As Ingrid changed, the world seemed to change around her. Her senses shifted along with her skin. Color faded from the world. She could hear the sizzling hum of the electric lights along the street and the flutter of bat wings overhead. An explosion of smells flooded her nose, each one distinct and nuanced. The scents of her packmates were as familiar and reassuring as the sound of their voices, and just as unique. She knew how long each piece of trash had been in the alley. She could smell the foulness of her enemies, and the trail they had left as they'd exited the fissure and gone hunting for flesh at the Social Apostolary. She caught the scent of the two victims the fomori had dragged back with them. She smelled blood and piss and the acrid stink of fear. The musty breath of the old city and its many ghosts raised the hackles on her neck.

A breath of wind stirred the trees along Liberty. Ingrid tasted rain and ozone on the night air. Thunder rumbled to the west, and she greeted the sound with a cold, wolfish grin. She chose to see the coming storm as an omen, a sign of their spirit father's favor.

Her pack sidled up around her, jaws agape, fangs gleaming in the artificial light. A low, anticipatory growl rose in her throat. Slowly, silently, she nosed her way into the fissure.

It was a tight fit, even in *hispo* form. Thick mud and broken roots brushed against her snout. Ingrid clawed at the earth for purchase, and forced her broad shoulders through the gap. After that she dropped easily and silently to the floor of the tunnel beneath. Ingrid smelled dank air and old brick, black mud and the thick smell of rot.

Enough light leaked through the fissure that she could see brick-lined walls to either side of her that curved upwards to a low, arched roof. The tunnel was very old, like scores of others that honeycombed the historic district. Some dated from the Civil War, while others were older still, carved out of the limestone in the days when pirates and privateers sailed from Savannah Harbor. Behind her, the passageway ran for little more than three feet before ending in a pile of tumbled dirt and stone. Ahead lay darkness, and the sharp smell of blood. Ingrid edged forward, mud squishing up between her toes, tasting the air ahead of her as she sought out her prey. One by one, her pack dropped into the tunnel behind her.

The city's tunnels were favorite spots for addicts and the homeless, and as close as the opening was to the shelter down on Price, she expected to find piles of trash and other signs of habitation. There was nothing, not so much as a single beer bottle or cigarette butt. The tunnel, therefore, couldn't have been open for very long. That meant the nest was something recent, which made its size all the more alarming.

Ingrid crept through the darkness, her pack tensed like a clenched fist just past her shoulder. There were no sentries that she could see in the barren passageway. She stopped and glanced back at Anna. The Theurge sniffed the air and seemed to stare blankly into space. After a moment, her vision refocused and she twitched her ear. There were no spirits watching the tunnel either, as far as she could tell.

The war chief *whuffed* thoughtfully. The fomori were being careless. Or perhaps they had no fear of reprisal. It was hard to fathom the servants of the Wyrms at the best of times.

Emboldened, Ingrid picked up her pace. The tunnel stretched for nearly thirty yards, straight as an arrow, and ended in a large room. She could feel the subtle change in air pressure against her whiskers as she edged up to the opening.

The reek of the nest hit her full in the snout – a miasma of unwashed bodies, excrement and oozing infection. Then she heard the sounds of tearing flesh and frantic chewing, and with an awful clarity she understood why there were no fomori watching the tunnels.

The room was low ceilinged and fairly long – a sunken basement of some kind, or a root cellar that had been sealed up and forgotten in decades past. A strange, faintly phosphorescent mold grew in patches on the flaking walls, illuminating a hellish scene of filthy, human-like creatures crouched over the gory remains of what had once been Aaron Boarkiller's pack. The Wyrmspawn were tearing at the dead flesh, hands caked in mud and blood and viscera, stuffing shreds of dripping meat into their mouths.

Ingrid looked upon the scene of horror and reason fled. Only rage remained.

Her snarl ripped through the dank air as she leapt into the nearest group of fomori. The impact sent the creatures sprawling in the mud and filth. She lunged at one, a glassy-eyed man with jagged teeth and rubbery, gray skin. The fomori hissed at her, the sound bubbling up from cancer-riddled lungs, and raised an arm to protect himself. Her powerful jaws snapped shut on the Wyrmspawn's forearm and bit through flesh and bone with ease. She lunged again, shoving past the severed limb, and this time her jaws closed on the fomor's skull. Bone splintered like kindling, and Ingrid spat the remains of the Wyrmspawn's face into the mud.

Her pack was right behind her, darting like deadly shadows into the sunken room. Darius, as huge and powerful in *hispo* as he was in human form, caught a fomor by the waist and bit the creature nearly in two. Marcus sped past, snapping at exposed limbs and leaving severed hands and crippled legs in his wake. Joshua let out a chilling howl, cold and cruel as the winter wind, and Ingrid relished the cries of terror from the Wyrmspawn. *Here is nature's vengeance, red in tooth and claw.*

Anna caught a fomor by the back of the neck and shook him like a rat, tearing flesh and snapping bone. Another of the Wyrmspawn lunged at Ingrid, claws raking at her side. She spun, catching the foe's arm at the shoulder and tearing it from its socket.

Another blow rocked Ingrid from the opposite side. Sharp, cold pain jabbed again and again into her side. A fomor had thrown one arm around her neck, and was stabbing her over and over with a rusty-bladed knife. With a snarl she shook herself free of the creature's grasp and leapt aside, the wounds in her flank already knitting shut.

They had taken the enemy by surprise, but the fomor had already recovered from the shock and were throwing themselves at her pack with mindless zeal. From the ragged, mismatched clothes most of them wore, they had once been part of the city's homeless, before the Wurm had sunk its claws into them. The stink of infection was everywhere. Some were already showing signs of mutation, as the power of the Corruptor made its mark on their bodies. The sickly glow of the phosphorescent

mold revealed a collection of freakish, writhing muscles, curved claws and flicking, barbed tongues.

There were also, as near as she could tell, much more than a dozen of the enemy.

The fomor with the knife let out a lunatic shriek and lunged for her again. Ingrid ducked beneath the blow and bit off the creature's right leg at the knee. The rusty knife plunged into her neck as the fomor toppled and stayed there, buried to the hilt. With a snarl she tore out the foe's throat and then willed her body to shift again. The rage-fueled transformation was impossibly swift; in the blink of an eye she had gone from *hispo* back to *glabro*. Ingrid reached back with a clawed hand and tore the knife free, then called out to *Donnerkeil*.

The grand klaive appeared in a flash of actinic light and a hungry crackle of power. Ingrid howled in fury, the sound shaking dust from the walls, and leapt back into the melee. The silver blade, broad and single-edged, flickered through the air. Flesh sizzled beneath its edge. She slashed a fomor across the back, severing his spine, and stabbed another through the heart. Another of the creatures whirled and raked her midsection with his claws. Its mad shriek was cut short as *Donnerkeil* swept down and split the fomor's skull from crown to chin.

Thick liquid splattered across Ingrid's neck and shoulder. At its touch, hair crisped, and the flesh beneath started to burn. The pain was sudden and intense, far worse than the stings of knife or claw. She cried out, snapping at the burn sites out of pure, wolfish instinct – then hard-earned reflexes caused her to duck and leap aside before she could be sprayed with another shower of acidic bile. Heavy droplets splattered across the churned mud where she'd stood, sizzling and sending up tendrils of acrid smoke.

She spied her attacker a moment later. The fomor had climbed the wall to her left and clung up against the low ceiling like a spider, some twelve feet away. Green bile oozed from the creature's rubbery lips. He grinned evilly at her, and then his throat bulged like a toad's as he prepared to spit again. Without thinking, Ingrid flung the grand klaive and speared the fomor through the chest, pinning him to the wall.

Ingrid spun, seeking another foe, but the battle was over. The bodies of the enemy lay in heaps, ripped by tooth and claw. Her pack stalked among the bodies, flanks heaving and teeth bared. A mauled fomor stirred weakly, and the garou leapt upon the creature, snapping and snarling as they tore it apart. Part of her longed to join in, to surrender herself entirely to bloodlust, but she focused on the pain of her burns instead and pushed her violent passions away. After a moment, Ingrid turned away and went to reclaim *Donnerkeil*. By the time she'd levered the heavy blade free from the wall, the others had shifted again and were poring over the battle's grisly remains. Anna was already picking her way across the room towards Ingrid, her brows knitted in concern.

"Anybody hurt?" Ingrid growled. The burns along her throat stung fiercely when she spoke.

"Just you," Anna murmured. "As usual." She gave the burns a cursory glance, and then bent to check the claw marks across Ingrid's midsection. When shifted, a garou could withstand incredible injuries, except those inflicted by fire, silver, or the supernatural. The

fomor's claws had left four ragged cuts from Ingrid's left ribs all the way across to her right hip, and the spray of acid bile had burned away fur and left a mottled pattern of angry red chemical burns across her left shoulder and along her neck. The Theurge frowned. "Do you always have to throw yourself at the biggest knot of enemies you can find?"

Ingrid winced as the Theurge probed at her wounds. "I'm going to assume that's a rhetorical question and not dignify it with an answer," she replied through clenched teeth. The *glabro* form accented the words with a thick, rough-edged growl.

Anna understood what Ingrid was saying well enough to scowl up at her pack leader. She pressed her bloody hands together for a moment and closed her eyes. Her lips moved, whispering an invocation, then she laid her palms over the fomor's claw-marks.

Ingrid sighed as energy suffused her body in a cool, soothing rush. The ache of the claw wounds vanished at once, and the throbbing sting of her burns diminished until it was barely noticeable at all. A sense of peace swept over her, and her body relaxed. She felt her body start to shift, returning her to her human form, and reluctantly surrendered to the urge.

Anna opened her eyes and grinned tiredly at her pack leader. "Not perfect, but that should take care of the worst of it," she said. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more, but healing Aaron took a lot out of me."

"No apologies necessary," Ingrid replied. The sense of wellbeing was already fading, leaving behind a host of aches and the still-smoldering throb of chemical burns, but it was far better than before. She glanced up from the Theurge to find Marcus standing beside them, a worried frown on his face.

"How many?" she asked, glancing about at the carnage.

"Twenty. Our backwoods friend needs to learn how to count."

Ingrid cursed under her breath. The idea of a nest that big, so close to the caern, made her blood run cold. "How did we not catch this before?"

Marcus nodded over at Darius, who had pulled aside a curtain of filthy muslin hanging along the north wall and was peering into the narrow opening concealed behind it. "They're learning to use the tunnels," he said. "It's been years. For all we know, they've got a subterranean route all the way up to the Blight itself, right under our very nose."

Ingrid bared her teeth. The derelict Bosch Paper Mill, northwest of the city, was a toxic site that had been allowed to fester during the '70s and '80s, when the Fianna controlled the city. Now it was the source of the Wyrms' strength in Savannah.

Anna scowled. "We've got to scour the tunnels. Clear them out before this happens again."

Ingrid shook her head. "We don't have the numbers, Anna. We're stretched thin as it is, and these tunnels run for miles."

"But this is the third nest we've hit in two months," the Theurge protested.

"I know."

"Gaia only knows how many more there are. *Anything* could be down here —"

"I know."

Anna started to press the matter further, but caught the look in Ingrid's eye and thought better of it. "I'll go check on Darius and Josh," she said, and turned away.

Marcus watched the Theurge go. "This is getting out of hand," he said softly.

Ingrid sighed. "She's just tired. Healing that fool pup wrung her out."

"That's not what I mean." He stepped closer, meeting her eyes. "*This* isn't working. The Wyrms are getting stronger."

Ingrid felt her hackles rise. Her hand tightened on *Donnerkeil's* hilt. Marcus tensed. The lightning spirit woke inside the grand klaive, causing the air to crackle around the blade.

"And what exactly would you have me do?" she said, as calmly as she could manage.

For a moment, the room was still. The pack stood frozen, watching the exchange in wary silence.

Slowly, slowly, Marcus raised his hands. "No disrespect," he said carefully, taking a single step back. "I only mean to say that we need more warriors. A few dozen garou from the Southeast tribes. Just for a week, maybe less. We could sweep across the city, root out the Wyrmspawn..." he hesitated. "Your father managed something similar, once. Didn't he?"

"He did," she admitted. *How good of you to point that out.* "Once. Twenty-five years ago." *After the city had been closed off for more than a century, and every pack within four hundred miles was eager to taste the power of our newly won caern.*

"Then maybe the elders at Stone Mountain can be persuaded again. That's all I'm saying."

Ingrid wanted to box Marcus's ears. *Damned Philodox. He sounds just like Father.* She wanted to snap at him, to snarl a challenge and close her jaws around his throat, but that would reveal too much about her own sense of desperation. Instead, she bit back her anger and gave her beta wolf a level stare.

"I am sure the Stone Mountain elders will give us all the support they can," she said. "They recognize the value of the caern here as much as we do."

A slow smile crossed Marcus's face. "I'm sure you're right."

"In the meantime," she said, raising her voice so that the entire pack could hear, "we're going to clean this place out, and then see to our dead. Go and get Aaron. I want him to see the consequences of his pack's foolishness. And while you're up there, call in some kin with a can of gasoline to take care of these taints."

Marcus stiffened slightly at his alpha's dismissal. The indirect rebuke would bite deeper, and in a more tender area, than actual teeth could have managed. He gave her a curt nod and backed away before turning and heading back to the surface.

Ingrid watched him go, then drew a deep breath and went to work, dragging the corpses of the fomori into piles for burning. The creatures were sticky with gore and stank of corruption, but the work took her mind off the invisible teeth worrying at her own heart.

She returned to the old house on Monterey Square just a couple of hours before dawn, loping silently from shadow to shadow along Bull Street in the shape of a wolf. A few lonely lights burned from the windows of the townhouses along the street, but no one was about.

Ingrid tried to take comfort in the familiar sounds and smells of home. Oak and ivy, roses and ferns, old stone and rusting iron, the scents of the people that came and went through the square the day before. The tall homes rose around her like old companions as she turned off Bull and began trotting around the perimeter of the square. The air was heavy and damp, even at this early hour. Though there had been echoes of thunder all through the night, the promised storm had never come. The realization only added to her unease.

She couldn't shake what Marcus had said, down in the tunnels. *Things are getting out of hand.* And it was true. The discovery of such a large nest, so close to one of their shrines, had unnerved her. It meant, among other things, that the enemy was getting stronger by the day, while the shrines were getting weaker. Despite her best efforts, Savannah was slipping from her grasp.

Something's got to change, she thought. *Father will understand. He has to.*

Ingrid slipped through the wrought iron gate at the front of Reinhardt House and into the deeper shadows of the front garden. As she did so, she willed her body to change, returning at last to her human shape. The world seemed to fade around her as her senses dimmed, and, as ever, she felt a momentary pang of sadness at the loss. All at once, she felt weary to her bones.

Doggedly, she climbed the steps to her family home. A light was burning over the dark, wooden door. It swung open on silent hinges as she approached.

"Welcome home, mistress," Eleanor said softly. The kinfolk was alert and attentive as ever, but the glow from the porch light showed bags beneath her eyes and wrinkles along the sleeve and shoulder of her blouse. As was her habit, she'd been napping on the upholstered bench beside the door, awaiting her mistress's return.

"Thank you, Eleanor," Ingrid said as she stepped inside. The vestibule was dark. She could just make out the shadowy lines of the wooden staircase and the entrance to her father's study on her right. Faint, yellow light shone from the second floor landing just overhead. The muted ticking of a clock echoed in the gloom.

"How was the city tonight, mistress?" the kinfolk asked, as she did every night when Ingrid returned from the hunt.

Ingrid ignored the question. "Did you give the message to my father? I need to speak to him. Now."

Eleanor paused, choosing her words carefully. "I did as you asked, mistress. But your father has retired to his rooms. He said to tell you that he would speak to you at his convenience this evening, before you leave for the Moot."

The news took Ingrid aback. She saw the look of concern on Eleanor's face, and quickly regained her composure. "This evening, then," she said, and forced a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you. Go home, and get some rest."

"I will. Good night, mistress," Eleanor said. She gathered her purse from the bench and headed out into the waning night.

Ingrid shut the door behind her. The stillness of the old house settled around her like a shroud. Alone with her thoughts, hounded by despair, she climbed the creaking staircase to her room.



Chapter Three: Among the Thorns

Ingrid overslept. She knew it the moment she woke, limbs stiff and tangled in the bedcovers after a day of tossing and turning in the old four-poster bed. The light outside had mellowed to a deep, ruddy, orange, throwing long shadows across the bedroom floorboards, and the square echoed with the sound of cars and people as locals made their way home from work. Cursing under her breath, Ingrid twisted in the sheets and fumbled for her phone. She'd set her alarm, hadn't she? Try as she might, she couldn't remember.

Twilight was stealing over Savannah by the time Ingrid had dressed and made it downstairs. She emerged onto the wide veranda at the rear of the house to find the household staff bustling about her father's table, clearing away the remains of their master's evening meal. Eleanor stood at the ivy-covered balustrade, jotting a quick note in her planner. When she saw Ingrid, the kinfolk gave a slight tilt of her head in the direction of the rose gardens. The war chief gave a faint nod, her hands busy pulling back her hair into a tight ponytail as she crossed the veranda in brisk strides and descended the broad, stone steps to the back lawn.

When Karl's sister Elizabeth had been alive, the rose garden had been her special preserve. She had tended its spirits with great care and veneration, creating a sanctuary of vibrant, earthy life just steps away from the brooding, old house and its many woes. Ingrid remembered running down the garden's winding paths as a child, chasing fireflies through the soft, perfumed air. She had dreamed of tending the gardens herself one day, too young yet to understand about caerns, or auspices, or tribes.

Since her aunt's death, the garden's spirits had gone neglected, and the roses had grown tangled and wild, until they took up most of the house's walled rear lawn. After fifteen years the roses were like towering, dark-leaved hedges, fragrant still but also forbidding, their depths dark and vaguely threatening. The twisting, gravel pathways remained, but they were narrower now, almost claustrophobic in places, and no one could say whether they ran the same way from one night to the next. The household staff feared the place, but Karl Ironhand walked its paths almost every evening, in good weather and in bad.

The fireflies were coming out as Ingrid entered the garden. The towering roses pressed close on either side, leaves almost touching her cheeks. She paused, listening for her father's steps, but heard only the muted sounds of traffic and the drone of bumblebees. For a moment she was tempted to shift and track her father's scent through the maze, but she knew her father would take it as a sign of weakness and pushed the thought aside. The war chief set off down the path, the will-o-wisp flicker of fireflies beckoning her on.

Ingrid tried to calm herself after the headlong rush to get downstairs. She'd slept badly, sore from her wounds and dogged by nightmares she only barely recalled. *Sharpen my thoughts like razors*, she prayed to Grandfather Thunder. She had to convince her father to see the danger they were in, a difficult proposition at the best of times, and she was at a disadvantage before she'd even begun.

A few yards ahead the path forked beside a weathered stone bench. The right-hand path led deeper into the garden, she knew, towards the reflecting pool at its center. She followed it, picking up her pace, gravel crunching beneath her boots.

The path wound like a serpent's track through the towering roses. The air was thick with their perfume. From time to time she would come upon a small bench at a bend in the path, its legs wound about with creeping vines. Once she turned a corner and came face to face with the statue of a faun, peering at her from the deepening shadows. The satyr's grin seemed to mock her as she went by.

After several minutes of walking, Ingrid began to think she'd taken a wrong turn. It was getting steadily darker amid the roses, and she hadn't reached the center yet. *You're just tired*, she told herself. *The garden isn't that big. You can't get lost inside it.* But the farther she went, the less certain she became.

That was when she came upon the shrine. The path curved sharply to the left, and when she followed it around she found herself staring at a niche of sorts, set deep into the tangled growth. Within was a menhir of polished, white stone, carved with the likeness of a dryad upon its surface. At the foot of the menhir was a copper bowl, bright and clean, as though it had been set there only yesterday.

The path continued on, past the shrine, but Ingrid paused. *This wasn't here before*, she thought. *Was it?* She couldn't recall. It had been years since she'd last walked these paths, and the realization stung her. The spirits of the garden deserved better.

Ingrid sank to one knee in front of the shrine. The bowl was empty, save for a handful of dried leaves. She racked her brain, trying to think of what she might offer. Only one thing came to mind.

The war chief eased her right hand into the dense rose bush to her right. She found the thickest, thorniest branch within reach, summoned her resolve, and closed her hand tightly around it. Her breath hissed between clenched teeth as dozens of needle-sharp thorns sank into her flesh.

Ingrid held the branch for a long moment. Slowly, painfully, she unclenched her hand and held it up to the menhir. "Forgive me," she whispered, and pressed it against the stone.

"I expected you more than an hour ago."

Her father's cold voice echoed from the darkness. Ingrid jerked her hand away and whirled, expecting to see Karl Ironhand standing over her. But the path behind her was full of shadows, and nothing more.

Ingrid glanced back at the menhir. The carved face of the dryad stared back at her, a bloody handprint dark against her pale cheek.

"I had a late night," the war chief said to the shadows. She clenched her fists. "There was a battle. Perhaps you heard."

"A battle. Is that what you call it? Three dead garou in exchange for twenty wyrmspawn. I call that a disaster."

Her hackles rose at the scorn in her father's voice. She turned this way and that, seeking its source. "It wouldn't have happened if they'd done as they were told-"

"Is that what you plan to tell the elders tonight? You let three of their people die because you weren't strong enough to keep them under control?"

Ingrid let out a low growl. Her skin started to tingle, but she fought the urge to shift. *Don't give him the upper hand*, she told herself. *Use your head! He sounds like he's just on the other side – oh. Of course.*

With a last glance at the menhir, Ingrid continued along the path. "I'm going to tell them the truth," she replied, keeping her voice as neutral as she could.

"And what truth would that be?"

Getting some distance helped. The voice came from behind her now, and a bit to the right. "The enemy is growing bolder, and attacking in greater numbers. That nest had been festering under our noses for weeks, just a short walk from the caern."

"I see. So it's not enough that you make yourself seem weak, but you must include the rest of us as well?"

The path turned sharply to the left. Ingrid bared her teeth in frustration, but just around the bend she found herself at the center of the rose garden. The space around the reflecting pool seemed smaller than in her youth, and the water that once glimmered like silver beneath the moonlight was now scummed over with algae and broken up by thickets of yellow reeds. The old gazebo was in ruins, pulled apart by creeping roses, and many of the stone benches were broken or lost amid the weeds. On the far side of the pool, a spectral image glimmered in the twilight: her aunt Elizabeth, carved in marble, kneeling by the water's edge with two great wolves at her side. The statue had been a gift by one of her packmates, now long gone like all the rest. Her face was dignified, even regal. An enigmatic smile teased the corners of her perfect mouth.

She whispered secrets to me in my cradle. Did you know?

Ingrid tore her gaze from the statue and searched the curving wall of roses to her right. What appeared at first to be a shallow depression turned out to be a narrow passage intersecting a second path that paralleled her own. She slipped through, pulse beating in her temples.

"I never said anything about being weak," she said to the shadows.

"But that is exactly what they will hear," Ironhand growled back. "Have you learned *nothing* in the last five years?"

Ingrid bit back an angry reply. Her father's voice had come from her right, back the way she'd come. She turned down the new path, moving in silence.

"Those old wolves would like nothing better than to take this caern away from us and give it to one of their own," her father continued. "I've been dealing with Stone Mountain since before you were born, child. And I guarantee you, they're no friends of ours."

Closer now. Ingrid smiled, starting to enjoy the hunt. Her senses sharpened. She drank in the heady smell of roses and the bitter tang of her own blood.

"There are five Shadow Lords in Savannah," she replied. "Not counting you and Eric, of course. If Stone Mountain wanted the caern, they could take it from us any time they like."

When Karl did not reply at once, she knew her barb had found its mark. She slipped down the curving path, listening for the slightest movement.

"No one tribe could accomplish it," her father said after a moment, his voice even colder than before. "Not in these difficult times. Which is the entire point of bringing these young packs to the city in the first place, so they will compete for our favor instead of conspiring against us."

Up ahead, the path branched once more. Ingrid paused. "I thought we brought them here to help protect the caern from the Wyrn," she said.

"Of course we do," Ironhand snapped. "But the war serves our purposes as well – so long as it can be *kept under control*. This is about *influence*, child. Not just here, but across the entire Southeast. In another five years, the tribes will be gathering *here* for the Solstice Moot instead of Stone Mountain."

Ingrid edged up to the left-hand path. "We don't have five years!" she snarled. "We may not even have five *months*. We've been on the defensive for far too long. If we are going to keep Savannah, we've got to take action. *Now*."

Karl let out a low growl. There was the faint scuff of shoes on gravel. "How many times do we have to go over this- "

He was moving now, the voice receding. Ingrid went after him, picking up the pace.

"I can make the case to the elders tonight," she pressed. "We might even get a few of the older, stronger packs to join in. With fifteen garou we could clear the Blight- "

She dashed around a curve in the path and suddenly there he was, looming out of the shadows right in front of her, his lined face pale with anger.

"You'll not go anywhere near the Blight!" Karl Ironhand snarled, glaring down at Ingrid. "Not while I am master of this city, child. Do you hear me?"

Nearing sixty, the renowned Lord of Savannah and the Coastal Empire was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and a stern, square-jawed face. His dark hair had been receding for years, drawing back from a high forehead creased with frown lines and

accentuating his pale, deep-set eyes. The Shadow Lord wore a dark linen suit and a white dress shirt, its collar unbuttoned in the muggy summer air. He brandished his mahogany cane in one, gnarled fist, its silver cap nearly touching her nose.

It wasn't the cane so much as the force of Ironhand's presence that brought Ingrid up short. Her pulse hammered in her throat. The wolf in her bared its teeth, ready to fight or flee. *That's what he wants*, she told herself, trying to drag herself back from the brink. *Don't give him the satisfaction.*

"I am not a child," she managed to say. "I'm your war chief. And I'm telling you the caern is in great danger."

"If we attack the paper mill, the Wyrms will trap us and destroy us," Ironhand snapped.

"If we don't, Savannah will burn."

"Not if you do your job," Ironhand declared, rapping his cane on the gravel for emphasis. "Convince the tribes. Bring back those fifteen garou you were talking about and scour the city from here to the river. It's that simple."

"Is it?"

Ironhand's expression hardened. "I did it for twenty years. Are you telling me that you are not up to the task? Because there are other garou in this city who would be eager to lay their hands on *Donnerkeil*."

Ingrid bared her teeth. All of her concerns and self-doubt were swept away in a red rush of anger. "If Marcus Shadow-Dancer thinks he can take my klaive from me, he is welcome to try," she snarled. "In the meantime, I will do whatever it takes to defend the caern. Make *no* mistake about that."

Karl's pale eyes narrowed at the implied challenge. Ingrid held her father's gaze steadily, refusing to back down. She knew, in the back of her mind, that she was treading upon the edge of something vast and dangerous, but she was nearly too angry to care.

Ironhand bent forward, close enough to raise the hackles on the back of Ingrid's neck. "Whose city is this?" he asked.

Ingrid felt her cheeks burn. "That isn't the point —"

"That is *exactly* the point." Her father leaned closer. "Tell me. Whose city is this?"

She stared into her father's pale eyes, and for a moment she wrestled with the answer.

"It's yours," Ingrid said through clenched teeth.

Karl nodded, his lips drawing back in a lupine grin. "That's right. And until that changes, my word is law." Ironhand stepped past her, his cane scraping along the path. "Now stop wasting time. They're waiting for you at the caern."

Ingrid watched her father go, limping down the path of the neglected garden, until finally, he was swallowed by the darkness. Her right hand throbbed in time with her heart, her fingers sticky with blood.

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She was in a rare mood by the time she made it back to the house, swinging wildly between flares of anger and rushing waves of despair. The household staff scurried from her path as she approached. When she went into the big kitchen to rinse off her punctured hand and wrap it in a clean towel, the cook and her three assistants retreated to the far side of the room and watched her with the wide-eyed apprehension of cornered rabbits. They remained there, too frightened to move, until long after she was gone.

Halfway to the front door, Ingrid decided she needed a drink. Storming down the main hall, she went to her father's study, just to the right of the main entrance. To her surprise, the tall, pocket doors were slightly ajar. Frowning, she gripped the brass door handles and pulled them wide. The heavy doors rattled on their tracks, startling the young man standing by the bookshelves on the far side of the room.

The shock of seeing a total stranger in her father's sanctum brought Ingrid up short. For a moment, she forgot all about the debacle in her aunt's garden.

"Who in the hell are you?" she snapped.

"Oh! Um...I'm...shit...hang on..." The young man struggled to fit one of her father's antique history books back in its place on the crowded bookshelf. He looked to be about Ingrid's age, tall and dark-haired, with a wide, freckled face framed by horn-rimmed glasses. His white dress shirt and khaki pants were rumpled from sitting too long in the June heat, and his brown dress shoes looked almost as old as he was. An artfully weathered messenger bag hung from his narrow shoulders.

"I asked you a question," Ingrid warned, her voice low.

"Right. Yes, you're right. I'm sorry." The heavy book slid home with a muted *thunk*, and the stranger turned, wiping his hands nervously on his khakis. "I'm Nathan Carter, Atlanta Business Journal." Seeing her for the first time, his eyes widened. With a nervous smile, he held out his hand. "You must be Ingrid."

She ignored the gesture as Carter came forward, feet scuffing across the expensive Afghan rugs. Her father's study was decorated in comfortable but imposing Old World style, with a massive antique desk and office chair set opposite a pair of tall, wing-backed leather seats. An antique walnut sideboard stood between the bookshelves facing the room's pocket doors.

"You're not supposed to be in here," she said, brushing past the human and heading for the bottles ranked atop the sideboard.

"I'm interviewing your father. For the Journal," Carter replied. "He, ah...he sure likes his books, doesn't he?"

"He likes his privacy even more." Ingrid reached for a crystal tumbler and a bottle of scotch. "My father would skin me alive if he knew I was in here. Imagine what he'd do to *you*."

Carter gave a nervous laugh. "Sorry. His assistant, Eleanor, left me sitting in the parlor across the hall about an hour ago. I, ah...I guess I got restless."

Ingrid poured a generous measure into the tumbler and took a sip, savoring the warmth against her tongue. "I'll make sure to tell your next of kin," she said. "They're going to wonder what happened to you."

"You almost sound serious. What happened to your hand?"

"I was picking roses." Ingrid replied, her voice husky from the liquor.

"Oh. Right. The rose garden. I read something about that. It's supposed to be one of the biggest in Savannah, but no one really knows for sure. From what I can tell, you don't allow many visitors."

Ingrid finished her drink in a single swallow and poured another. "As few as absolutely necessary. And yet, here you are." She turned and studied the human over the rim of her tumbler. "So why is the Atlanta Business Journal interested in my father?"

Carter gave her a bemused look. "Because he's managed to turn the state legislature on its head in just five years. Your father backed something like six candidates for the state senate and the house of representatives – real dark horses, outliers with little support and even less chance of winning – and got every single one of them elected. The campaigns were ruthless, even by Georgia standards, but they knocked off incumbents who'd been in office for decades. And the best part is: no one knows quite how your father did it. He's got half the state's politicians running scared, and half lining up to kiss his ring, and nobody knows a damn thing about him." He studied Ingrid. "What about you? Any interest in politics?"

She shook her head, taking a long drink to mask her surprise. "I prefer solutions, not debates."

"Your father must be disappointed."

"You have no idea."

Carter thought about that a moment, then shrugged. "Well, anyway, I'm here for a week to gather background on the family. Maybe you could help me with that."

"I have to work."

"What do you do?"

"I manage the family business. Real estate, mostly."

"Right. I read about that. From what I dug up at City Hall, your family owns most of the prime real estate in the Historic District. It's got to be worth millions."

"We've made some shrewd investments over the years," Ingrid said carefully.

"More like the last 150 years," Carter said with a grin. "The Reinhardtts must have come over with the first settlers."

"Not quite. We came here in 1756, from a place called Erfurt, in Thuringia."

"So, basically, they were Hessians."

Ingrid scowled. "The Hessians were German mercenaries. From Hesse. My ancestors were landowners in Savannah nineteen years before the war began. Merchants and seafarers, mostly, though some fought alongside the British, I believe."

"The losing side."

"My people are drawn to lost causes, it seems."

"The Civil War, too, I believe. As a matter of fact your family made most of its fortune running the Union blockade, carrying cotton and tobacco to England."

Ingrid shrugged. "That was where the money was. When Sherman captured the city, we worked with him, too."

"Is that how the feud started?"

Ingrid frowned. "Feud?"

"With the Stirlings. The newspaper accounts I found said that the bad blood between the Reinhardts and the Stirlings went back a long way. Did it start when Sherman took the city, or did it go back even farther?"

Ingrid felt her hackles rise. She tossed off the last of the scotch. "That's ancient history, Mr. Carter. We buried that hatchet a long time ago."

"Literally?" Carter's smile turned cold. "They never caught who murdered the Stirling family. One of the grisliest crimes in Savannah history, and the police never named a single suspect."

Ingrid turned and carefully set the tumbler back on the sideboard. "Let that tragedy lie, Mr. Carter. Not every mystery has an explanation – at least not for the likes of you."

Her answer took Carter aback. "What is that supposed to mean?"

It means you're digging your own grave, Ingrid thought, barely managing not to voice the threat aloud. She'd said too much as it was. Glowering, she stalked past Carter and out of the room, feeling his eyes on the back of her neck the entire way. Within moments she was out of the house and hurrying across the front garden, heading toward Forsyth Park and the caern, just a block away.

The night was not working out the way she'd planned – and the hardest part was yet to come.

Chapter Four: Cracking the Bone

Night had fallen by the time Ingrid left Reinhardt House, and the spirits of the old city had begun to stir.

The ghosts were a constant presence in Savannah, especially the closer one got to the caern. She could feel their distant stares and catch their wispy shapes out of the corner of her eye. On rare occasions, at certain hours of the night, she felt their light, cold touch brush against her skin.

The historic districts were crowded with the unquiet dead: settlers and soldiers, pirates and plantation owners, free folk and slaves. Victims of war, plague and storm, of crimes known and unknown, perpetrated in taverns, back alleys, and curtained drawing rooms. No other city in the country, not even dark and decadent New Orleans, could claim to be so haunted. It was one of the city's many enduring mysteries. Ingrid often wondered how Anna and the other Theurges, with their greater sensitivity to the spirit realm, could stand it.

Traffic was already thinning out along Gaston Street. The businesses around the park were closing for the day, and people were leaving in small groups to get into their cars and head out of the district. Across the street rose the brooding oaks of Forsyth Park, their spreading branches draped in eerie shrouds of Spanish moss. The darkness beneath the trees beckoned to Ingrid, and she bared her teeth in a hunter's smile.

The people of Savannah shunned Forsyth Park after dark, and with good reason. Even the local ghost tours had learned to shun the place. The brick-lined paths were poorly lit, and the shadows beyond were thick with menace. When the moon was high the atmosphere in the wooded park turned threatening and primeval. It heightened back to elder times when mankind cowered in caves, listening to the howls in the forest beyond and counting the hours until dawn.

The park was thirty acres of wood-lined pathways and well-tended fields, bordered by some of the city's oldest surviving homes. Spirits of a different kind stirred as Ingrid crossed the boundary of the park: air and water, earth and wood. Here, within the bounds of the caern, she could feel their presence, regarding her from behind every leaf and branch. The spirit realm lay very close to the surface here,

flowing in spectral currents along Ingrid's skin. It never failed to quicken the pulse and send a thrill down her spine. It was wild and potent, timeless and elemental, and it was *hers*.

She followed the park's central path, pausing briefly to dip her hands in the grand fountain and wipe the psychic stink of the city from her face and eyes. After a brief prayer of thanks to the water spirits, she continued on, breathing in the scents of the fragrant garden beyond the trees to her right. Soon she reached an intersection and turned left, heading for the old fort.

The "fort" at Forsyth Park was a squat, two-story structure made of whitewashed concrete, its sides blackened and weathered by the passage of years. One of two such "dummy forts" built during the early 1900's, it was constructed to resemble a coastal artillery fortification, complete with rounded, turret-like gun emplacements and steel shutters to protect its imaginary cannon. They were used to train the Georgia National Guard during World War I and beyond, and had been a great embarrassment to the few garou families left in the city at the time. Some pointed to the forts as the first sign of the Stirling family's decline, while others insisted that the signs went all the way back to the construction of the Confederate memorial at the very center of the park. Over time, the forts had outlived their purpose, and been abandoned. One, the western fort, had been torn down, while the eastern fort was now little more than a dirty, decrepit shell. Since 2002, the city had entertained plans to renovate the fort and transform it into a restaurant and event space, which Karl Reinhardt had been politicking against ever since.

Ingrid left the path and crossed through the trees to the back of the fort. The rusting, metal door along the back wall was unlocked, and swung open at her touch.

A cluster of lanterns set amid drifts of trash and debris created a welcoming bubble of light amid the cave-dark interior of the empty fort. Her pack waited there, along with the surviving garou from outside the city, each divided into discrete groups. Silhouetted in the open doorway, Ingrid exchanged nods with the three remaining pack leaders: Sarah Hunts-the-Foe, a Fianna from southern Mississippi; Jason Shadowfinder, a Get of Fenris from Alabama, and Thomas Ghost-talker, a Silver Fang from the Florida panhandle. Sarah had two other Fianna at her back, while Jason was accompanied by three grim-faced Get. Thomas had a mixed pack, comprised of a Glass Walker, a Silent Strider and a Child of Gaia. All had fought with courage and tenacity against the Wyrms over the past year. David Boarkiller stood apart from the rest. The young Get, suffering from wounds both physical and mental, crouched at the edge of the lantern light and avoided the gaze of his kin.

The Shadow Lords withdrew from the circle of lantern light and went to Ingrid as she entered the fort. They gathered around their pack leader in the darkness, speaking in low tones.

"We were getting worried," Marcus teased. "Another few minutes, and I was going to send Darius and Anna out looking for you."

"My father and I had some things to discuss," Ingrid replied. *That will give you something to think about while I'm gone.* "Everything ready?"

"We're just waiting on you."

"Then let's get this over with. Anna, open the gate."

Ingrid listened as the Theurge moved off to her left, deeper into the empty chamber, and began a slow, rhythmic chant. "Keep close to the caern while we're gone," she told her beta. "Check for more tunnels, but don't do anything more until we get back."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Marcus said with a canary-eating grin.

Ingrid rolled her eyes. "Darius, keep him out of trouble."

"No problem, boss."

Ingrid took a deep breath and headed for the waiting garou, with Joshua Hunter's Song following close behind. The werewolves bowed their heads respectfully to the war chief as she stepped into the light.

"Kinain," she said by way of greeting. The word felt awkward on her tongue. She and her pack had little use for the archaic language of the tribes. "The summer solstice is upon us, and your oath has been fulfilled. For the past twelve months you have hunted with us, guarding shrine and caern, keeping the forces of the Wyrn at bay. You've seen firsthand the dangers we face. You have also reaped the rewards of your service, gaining potent gifts and knowledge from the spirits connected to this sacred place."

The young garou nodded solemnly. Ingrid smiled. "We will speak of your steadfastness and courage at the moot," she said, inclining her head to Joshua. "Your exploits have earned you considerable renown. Rest assured that you will be remembered. Savannah owes you a great debt, and you have earned the right to visit the caern whenever you wish. It is a privilege that few in the Southern Protectorate can claim.

"All we ask in return is that you spread the word of what you've seen here. Share the stories of your exploits, and the wonder of our caern. Let the tribes know what it is we are fighting for. Let them know our cause is just."

As Ingrid spoke, a pearlescent light began to fill the echoing chamber. A glow like captured moonlight took root in a cleared space on the concrete floor at Anna's feet. Swiftly and silently it expanded, growing into a shining sphere taller than human height and wide enough for two people to enter abreast.

She knew the lines by heart. They had long since curdled in her throat. Yet she smiled at the young garou and gestured towards the moon bridge, and said the words her father commanded her to say.

"Gaia willing, and with the help of our kith and kin, one day we will triumph."

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It was a swift run by moonlight to Stone Mountain. Ingrid and the other garou shifted to wolf forms to run along the silver arch that linked Savannah to Stone Mountain; within minutes they emerged from the spirit realm into an empty parking lot more than 250 miles away.

The mountain loomed against the night sky beyond the parking lot, its bald top silhouetted by the summer moon. A flood of sounds and smells washed over Ingrid: asphalt and oil, gasoline and human sweat, processed food and plastic. She

could hear the surf-like murmur of traffic along Highway 78, and the popping hum of electricity along the wires of the subdivision just a few dozen yards behind her. Most of all, though, Ingrid was struck, as she always was, by the *lifelessness* of the place. Compared to Savannah, bound by shrines and crowded with its many ghosts, the atmosphere of Stone Mountain seemed almost desolate.

Even so, the caern at the summit was an old and venerated one, and the sept that watched over it was renowned throughout the Southern Protectorate. One of their number waited patiently just a few yards away, backed by nearly a dozen kin dressed in the green uniforms of the state Forestry Commission.

In his human shape, David Stalks-the-Forest was tall and rangy, his skin browned like old leather from a lifetime spent in the sun. Nearing sixty, he had a strong jaw and a seamed face that spoke of a lifetime of hardship, but his blue eyes were still clear and bright. The caern's Gatekeeper wore a checked shirt and ragged jeans over a pair of ancient engineer's boots, and gripped a staff of stout, Georgia oak, carved with ancient garou glyphs and sporting a fetish of owl feathers.

Ingrid focused her will and resumed her human shape, and the rest of her companions followed suit. Skin tight and bones aching, she approached the Gatekeeper and cleared her throat. "A good night for a gathering," she said, remembering to smile. "Thank you for allowing us to cross."

David eyed her coolly. The kinfolk tensed, alert to their master's mood.

"A blessed solstice to you, Ingrid Stormwalker," the Gatekeeper said, but there was an edge of reproach in his voice. "Perhaps one of these days you will arrive in time to take part in the opening howl, and help call the winds with your fellow garou." He gave a pointed sigh. "But better late than never, I suppose."

Ingrid felt her cheeks burn. She started to speak, but Joshua stepped forward quickly and cut her off.

"War disdains schedules and timetables, David-*rhya*," the Galliard said gravely. "The needs of the caern must come before everything else, as I am sure you understand. We apologize to you, and will make our apologies to the council when we reach the summit."

The Gatekeeper frowned, reluctant to be mollified, but gave Joshua a grudging nod. "Go on up," he told them. "They'll be cracking the bone by the time you arrive."

"Thank you, elder," Joshua answered quickly, and gave Ingrid a warning look. She kept her mouth shut and gave the Gatekeeper a grudging nod, then beckoned to her companions. As they crossed the parking lot, the Galliard stepped close.

"We're not going to have a problem this time, are we?" he asked under his breath.

"That's up to the elders," Ingrid said coolly. "I'm not here to squabble over honorifics and points of order. I've got a job to do."

Joshua suppressed an exasperated sigh. "That job would be a lot easier if you showed a just a *little* respect. These rites are the glue that hold our people together."

"The fight to save Gaia is what holds us together," Ingrid snarled. "Or it should. Certain garou seem to have lost sight of that fact."

“Are you absolutely *sure* you’re a Shadow Lord?”

“Don’t start with me, Joshua. I’m not in the mood.”

Past the parking lot was the mile-long trail that led up the mountain to the summit. The garou walked in silence, passing through a forest of oak and pine that surrounded the lower slopes. Ingrid tried to calm herself as she went, seeking some kind of peace beneath the tall trees. But the higher they went the thinner the forest became, revealing the sickly glow of streetlights from the subdivision at the base of the mountain, and the vast sprawl of the Atlanta skyline to the northwest. By the time she reached the summit, the war chief had fallen into a dark and melancholy mood.

The trail carved a straight path through the trees before emerging onto a rugged scarp of raw granite. The stone surface was like a moonscape, marked with ancient scars and pocked with shallow depressions. Many of the depressions held trapped rainwater, which shone like molten copper in the reflected light of the great fire burning at the mountain’s highest point.

The Solstice Moot was held in the shadow of a snack bar and gift shop, part of the shuttered amusement park that sat at the base of the mountain’s north face. Garou from six states sat cross-legged around the fire, or stretched out in wolf shape, their eyes shining and their faces shadowed by the leaping flames. It was a primordial image, one as ancient as humankind itself, potent both in symbol and in substance. For all her impatience with garou politics and customs, the sight never failed to stir Ingrid’s blood. She scanned the gathering as she approached; at a rough guess she estimated that there were nearly two hundred garou present. *Fewer and fewer every year*, she thought grimly.

The werewolves sensed the approach of Ingrid and her companions. Looks were exchanged, and the air was charged with subtle challenges as the crowd took the measure of the newcomers. Most of the garou who accompanied Ingrid settled at the rear of the crowd, finding their place in the order of dominance. Ingrid and Joshua kept going, working their way closer to the fire. Appraising looks turned to stares that hardened with every step she took, but Ingrid refused to submit. Finally she settled onto her haunches just two steps behind the garou who formed the inner ring of the gathering, close enough to clearly view the elders of the Great Council on the far side of the fire. Joshua settled down next to her, clearly uncomfortable.

“You’re pushing your luck,” he hissed. From the look of reproach on many of the elders’ faces, the Galliard was right. Ingrid kept her eyes forward and her back straight. She hadn’t come to make friends. She’d come to make her case to the moot, and she meant to be heard.

Just as David had predicted, the business of the moot – known as “cracking the bone” – was well underway by the time Ingrid arrived. A portion of every moot was set aside to discuss matters of importance that pertained not just to a single pack, but the sept as a whole. In the case of the Solstice Moot, the issues discussed involved the entire Southern Protectorate, from Mississippi to South Carolina, and as far south as Florida. With so much territory and so many garou involved, the discussions lasted deep into the night, and not every individual who wished to speak had time to be heard. It was the right of the Grand Elder to recognize who could address the moot,

and the speakers were typically chosen in order of status. Ingrid recognized the garou currently pacing about the fire, clutching the yellowed bone that, by custom, gave her the right to speak: Laila Raindancer, a respected elder from Louisiana whose sept guarded one of the state's oldest caerns.

"I tell you, Katrina was the work of the Corrupter," Laila said to the gathering. Tall and slender, with smooth, brown skin and gray hair tied back with a leather cord, she was well past fifty, but her voice was still clear and strong. "Terrible spirits rode into New Orleans on the back of that storm," she continued, shaking the yellowed ox bone in her hand for emphasis. "Me and my people hunted them through the lower wards for months after. But the damage was already done; the waters swept up all manner of poison from the port and the refineries and scattered it for miles through the swamps." Raindancer whirled, the skirt of her long, floral dress lifting about her bare ankles. "You hear me, kinain, and hear me good. There's a terrible foulness that's festering in the bayou country north of the city, and something got to be done. We need to rouse folk. Take this thing in our teeth and shake it 'til it's dead!"

Shouts and yips of approval rose from the gathering, especially among the Mississippi garou, who had witnessed similar horrors during the hurricane. Nearly a dozen young garou leapt to their feet, ready to pledge their packs to help fight the threat. But instead of recognizing any of them, the Grand Elder, Helen Oakheart, nodded to a middle-aged man in jeans and a t-shirt sitting close to the edge of the speaking circle.

"Let us hear Samuel Longstrider's thoughts on the matter," she said.

The Theurge from South Carolina rose smoothly to his feet. Laila scowled, her gaze going from the Grand Elder to Longstrider and back again. Finally, she stepped across the circle and handed the yellowed ox bone to the man. Samuel accepted it with a respectful nod and stepped into the circle.

Silence stretched, broken only by the hungry crackle of the fire and the faint whisper of traffic. Samuel Longstrider was justly respected for his wisdom in the matters of the spirit world, but he did everything in his own time. Ingrid glanced up at the passage of the moon and fought to keep from gritting her teeth.

"It seems to me," the Theurge said, after careful deliberation, "that this is a matter best served by appealing to the spirits of the swamp itself. The wetlands have great powers of purification; would it not be more sensible to enlist such aid as can be found instead of trying to cope with this problem by ourselves?"

Samuel's words were met with barks of disagreement. Half a dozen garou, some from Mississippi, others from across the Protectorate, began clamoring for the Grand Elder's attention. The young garou, their impulsive ardor spent, looked uneasily at one another and then sank slowly back on their haunches as the debate around them raged.

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Hours passed. Luna continued her stately procession across the summer sky, distant and inscrutable. The bone passed from one hand to another, as the garou squabbled amongst themselves. After Samuel Longstrider was done, an Uktena elder from central

Florida shared news of finding a long-lost caern just outside Inverness. Again, several young garou packs vied for the Grand Elder's attention to pledge themselves to the caern's renewal, touching off another debate on whether Floridian garou should be preferred over those from other parts of the Protectorate. Then an elder Get of Fenris from Alabama tried, once again, to call for a campaign of violent sabotage against government facilities in and around Huntsville. Many young garou thought it a good idea. They were quickly stared down by their elders, who knew that drawing the attention of Homeland Security was the very last thing that the Protectorate needed.

On and on it went. Ingrid quickly lost patience and started tuning it all out. As more and more garou pledged themselves to one undertaking or another, she found herself searching the crowd to see how many potential recruits remained. Twenty perhaps? Less? The darkness and the shifting firelight made it difficult to count. At one point, when a log in the fire collapsed and sent a flaring pillar of sparks into the sky, she caught sight of three garou – a male and two females – standing by themselves a short ways off from the rest of the gathering. *Ronin*, she thought, with some surprise. Lone wolves, who rejected the tenets of pack and tribe and existed at the margins of garou society. It was not unknown, especially in these unsettled times, for ronin to pass through the Protectorate – even linger for a short while – but it was rare to see them at one of the great moots. They seemed a lean and hard-bitten lot, Ingrid mused, and probably good in a fight. Years ago she had tried to talk her father into opening the city to ronin in the same way that they accepted packs from the other tribes, but Karl Ironhand had forbidden it. *More politics*, she thought sourly.

It was now well past midnight. The gathering was growing restless. There were still stories to be told of the past year's deeds, and the wild revel to follow. All the great elders who wished to speak had taken their turn with the bone. Now it was down to the pack leaders of the major septs, many of whom saw the opportunity to address the moot as more a matter of status than anything else. When each one finished speaking and offered up the bone, Ingrid tried to catch Helen Oakheart's eye. The Grand Elder's gaze swept past her again and again settling on another sept leader instead. The garou sitting around Ingrid had started to notice, and were casting sidelong glances and whispering to one another. Her expression darkened, to the point that Joshua gave her a warning nudge with his elbow.

Finally, the current speaker – a sept leader from southern Georgia that Ingrid had never heard of – finished his long-winded speech about the status of some minor water spirits in and around Boggy Bay. He relinquished the ox bone with an ostentatious bow. Ingrid leaned forward, staring hard at the Grand Elder.

For once, Helen Oakheart met the war chief's stare. The Fianna elder was in her early 50's, with gray streaks in her long, brown hair. Slight of build, with high cheekbones and a sharp, patrician nose, she seemed fragile and bird-like – but there was cold iron in her blue-gray eyes. Her expression was implacable.

"The hour grows late," Oakheart said. "There are many tales to be told, and I expect our Galliards are ready to burst." Rueful chuckles rose from the gathering. "If there are any pack leaders who have pressing business and wish to speak, we will hear them, but I caution you to be brief –"

Any pack leaders? Ingrid jerked upright, as though Helen had somehow reached across the speaking circle and slapped her across the face. The garou around her were openly grinning at her discomfort, their teeth glinting in the firelight. Joshua drew in a sharp breath and reached for her wrist, but Ingrid was already rising to her feet.

"The *war chief* of Savannah has pressing business, and will be heard," she said, her voice sharp as the edge of a klaive.

The gathering fell silent, the air stretching taut between Ingrid and the Grand Elder. Hackles rose around the circle. Helen's eyes narrowed, but her stony expression remained unchanged. A small part of Ingrid's mind warned her she was making a terrible mistake, but she was too affronted to care.

"The Great Council of the moot tries to ensure that every respected elder and sept leader is able to share their business with the gathering," Oakheart said, putting a not-so-subtle emphasis on *respected*. "That is why they are encouraged to meet with us in advance, before the moot convenes, and make their needs known to us."

Ingrid could not believe what she was hearing. Her blood began to boil. "Other elders and sept leaders have the luxury of *not living in an active war zone*," she retorted. "We have been fighting, day and night, to keep the Savannah caern open for twenty-five years. As you and everyone else here well knows." Finally, her political instincts, such as she had, caught up with her tongue. She gestured to the garou who accompanied her with a sweep of her arm. "I return now with the heroes who pledged to help protect the caern at the Solstice Moot last year."

"You return with some of them. Not all."

"Which surely underscores the seriousness of what I have to say."

Oakheart took a deep breath, hinting that her own self-control was perhaps not as solid as it appeared. "Very well. For the sake of those who came with you – and those who did not – you may speak."

Ingrid made her way swiftly into the speaking circle, not particularly caring whom she stepped on in the process. The pack leader holding the bone relinquished it without a word and hastened back to his place.

The ox bone was warm to the touch after passing through so many hands. Bits of gristle clung to the knobby joints at either end. Ingrid gripped it tightly, struggling to leash her anger and focus on what she needed to say. Slowly, she turned her back on Helen Oakheart and addressed the garou of the Southern Protectorate.

"My caern is under attack, kinain," Ingrid began. "Yes, there are toxic spirits taking root in the Louisiana swamps, and yes, there are mining companies blowing the tops off of mountains in South Carolina. I don't doubt that there are Wyrmspawn working in the government labs at Huntsville, too. All of these are serious concerns, and all of them deserve our attention, but *my caern is under attack*."

"Just last night, we found a nest of nearly two-dozen taints within a block of one of our shrines. That battle cost three young garou their lives." She drew a deep breath. "Their deaths, however heroic, diminish us as a whole. We mourn, while the enemy swells its ranks further and readies itself for another assault. It's been that way for twenty-five years, as the Wyrms tightens its coils around our sacred sites."

Ingrid began to pace before the fire, her gaze sweeping the silent crowd. "More than a few of you served my father in the past, rising up on the Solstice to come to Savannah's defense. You know that I am not being boastful when I say that the caern and its shrines are like nothing else in the Protectorate. There is ancient power there, and paths to the deepest parts of the spirit realm. There is good reason why the Wyrn is so intent on destroying it."

Grudging nods and grumbles of agreement rose from the gathering. Ingrid felt a feeble spark of hope.

"Let me also say that I don't think it was a coincidence that this all-out assault began right after my father seized the caern from Everett Stirling and opened it to the rest of the Protectorate. After a quarter century we've only just begun to plumb its depths. The caern's construction is intricate, and contains many secrets, and the Wyrn is intent on keeping that knowledge from us. That, more than anything else, is what my people and I have been fighting for.

"Now who will stand with us? Who else thinks this is a battle worth fighting?" Her voice rose, charged with emotion. "There is glory to be had on the streets of Savannah, kinain. If you pledge yourself to the city's defense until the next summer solstice, the city and its caern will be open to you forevermore. What is earned in blood and valor is never forgotten, not by the people of my tribe.

"The Sept of the Coastal Empire calls to you for aid. Who will answer?"

"We will!" A tall, young Get of Fenris leapt to his feet, his expression fierce. The rest of his pack, two men and a woman, joined him.

"I will!" A Silver Fang stood alone, her fists clenched.

Two other lone garou, a Fianna and a Child of Gaia, followed suit, and within moments the three had gathered together and agreed to form a pack. Ingrid's spirits rose.

"Who else? Seven is a good start, but we need more. Many more!" The war chief's voice rang across the mountaintop and into the night.

She waited for an answer, but none came. A pall of silence fell across the assembled garou, and Ingrid's heart turned to ice.

"The people have spoken, Stormwalker," Ellen Oakheart declared. "Your business here is done."



Chapter Five: Lone Wolves

After the moot's business was done, it was time for the telling of tales, as the bonfire burned low and Luna bent her course towards the western horizon. The ox bone was put away, and Oakheart beckoned to the gathering. "Let us hear how the people have fared since the last solstice," she intoned. "Who has a story to share, or a deed to be remembered?"

This was the call for the Galliards to come forward and practice their art. One by one the storytellers took their place before the fire and told the truth as they knew it. Some spoke in low, rolling tones; others sang, or worked in verse. Still others danced as they wove their tales, shaping each scene with leaping shadows and the crackle of sparks. Each storyteller tried to outdo the one who came before, as was the Galliard's way, and the gathering listened to each tale with rapt attention. This was a rite all its own, as sacred to the people as any other, and the garou treated it with the appropriate reverence.

The stories together wove a tapestry of events from across the Protectorate. A pack of Red Talons had reclaimed a lost caern, deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains. An Uktena Galliard and her pack – who worked more or less in plain sight as a group of "monster hunters" known as the Strange Sightings Investigation Team – had gone hunting reports of a wampus cat up in north Georgia, and wound up crossing paths with a fearsome Wurm-spirit instead. A Child of Gaia in southern Georgia had bridged the divide between a pack of Fianna and a pack of Silver Fangs, putting an end to a feud that had raged for decades. The garou cheered as a trio of Silver Fangs, hunted and outnumbered, turned the tables on the fomori who cornered them and tore them apart. They roared with laughter at the escapades of a Uktena Theurge, whose spirit quest spun disastrously out of control. They clung to one another and wept as a respected elder sacrificed her life so the rest of her pack could live. The stories resonated in their blood, and bound them together as one.

Ingrid heard none of it. It felt like a knife had been slipped between her ribs. Her heart stung, and her breath came in shallow gasps. Visions from her nightmares danced before her eyes.

She wanted nothing more than to get up and run, to give in to the wolf and howl her rage at the sky. Instead, she had to sit and wait, to listen to the laughter and the cheers and think about how she had been betrayed.

An eternity passed before it was Joshua's turn to speak. The galliards operated on unspoken rules of precedence that only they seemed to understand. After a great many storytellers had come and gone, the Shadow Lord saw his cue and rose smoothly to his feet. The crowd waited respectfully as he took his place before the fire. Joshua was much esteemed by the people for his skills as a storyteller, their antipathy towards Ingrid notwithstanding.

Joshua didn't have the theatrical flourishes of many of his peers. His storytelling was simple and spare, but he had the gift of making each listener feel as though he were speaking to him or her alone. The audience listened as he told the stories of the young garou who had helped defend Savannah from the forces of the Wyrms.

The tales began simply, as they always did, with eager pups thrust into a dangerous and demanding situation, far from home. He spoke of the perils they faced on the city streets, and how they learned to face them. Each pack was given its moment to shine, and each member within the pack was singled out for a notable exploit of courage, cleverness, or wisdom. The gathering applauded at different points and yipped in admiration, and the young garou grinned proudly.

The story closed on a tragic note, as Aaron Boarkiller's pack descended into the nest. He spoke of them as keen hunters and brave warriors, recognizing the dangers the nest posed to the nearby shrine and confronting the enemy in its lair. Joshua recounted in moving detail how the battle turned against the brave garou, and how each of the pack members fell, fighting more than five times their number. Their pack leader, David Howls-at-Dawn, was the last to fall, ordering Aaron Boarkiller back to the surface to warn the other packs.

Heads nodded in approval. Several garou howled to honor the pack leader's sacrifice. Ingrid looked over at Aaron. The young garou looked like a condemned man who'd been given an unexpected – and undeserved – reprieve.

It doesn't suit our purposes to take in young garou and send them back in disgrace, Ingrid thought, recalling what her father had told her before her first moot. We give them gifts, and burnish their reputations. One way or another, we place them in our debt, and we never let them forget it.

She swallowed her bitterness as Joshua concluded his tale. The garou murmured their approval, turning to the young ones in their midst and congratulating them in gruff, warm tones. Forgotten by the crowd, the Shadow Lord Galliard gave a quick bow and returned quietly to his place. As he sat down, Ingrid could not shake the feeling that this moot would be their last. By the time of the next summer solstice they would all be gone, and Savannah would belong to the Wyrms.

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There were few stories left to tell after that. By the time the last Galliard took her bow, it was just after two in the morning, and the fire was a bed of sullen embers casting more shadow than light.

The pent-up energies of the gathering had built steadily over the course of the night. Now the summer air crackled with tension, hungry for release. The sound of a flute came piping out of the darkness, followed by the pulse-like beat of a drum. The doors to the gift shop swung open, and kinfolk emerged, bringing out food and drink and laying more wood on the fire. The garou rose to their feet, calling to one another, laughing and growling and showing their teeth. The weighty matters of the moot were done. Now was the time to call out the wolf, to revel in the night and consecrate the caern for the months to come.

Ingrid rose to her feet. Her dark eyes were fixed on the far side of the circle, where Ellen Oakheart was speaking with others of the Grand Council. "Gather up the new volunteers and take them down the mountain," she told Joshua. "I'll be along in a minute."

"Ingrid, *no*," Joshua warned, reaching for her arm. "Don't do anything rash."

But the war chief was already moving, rage building as she slipped through the crowd and across the speaker's circle. A chunk of pine was tossed into the fire as she passed, kicking up a crackling plume of cinders. A garou howled in response, full-throated and fierce, and the wolf inside her began to strain at its flimsy bonds.

She came up to the elder as the council was going their separate ways. "What the *fuck*, Oakheart?" Ingrid snarled.

Ellen turned back to Ingrid, her expression cold. The caern's Master of the Challenge, a tall, powerfully built garou named Cole Foe-Render, stepped between them. He glared down at Ingrid.

"Watch your tongue, whelp," Foe-render growled. "You think you can come here and disrespect your elders, you better think again."

"It's all right, Cole," Oakheart said coolly. "I take no offense." She laid a hand on the Ahroun's arm. "Go and join the revel. Ingrid and I will talk for a moment."

Still glaring at Ingrid, Cole gave a reluctant nod and then brushed past the Shadow Lord, heading for the fire. Oakheart watched him go, then turned and walked away from the gathering, into the darkness. "Is that how you talk to your father, back in Savannah?" she asked.

Ingrid stalked after her. "Is this because I didn't show up on time and kiss your ass, like the other speakers? Is it possible you're that petty? We came here for help and you *screwed* us."

"Spare me your self-righteous disdain, child," Oakheart replied. "It gets tiresome, even if I only have to listen to it once a year." She shook her head. "Your father wasn't much better, truth be told, but at least he made a token effort to respect our traditions."

Ingrid felt her cheeks grow hot. The wolf inside her spun and snapped at its bonds. Part of her wanted nothing more than to let the change come, and to bury her teeth in Oakheart's throat.

"I don't have hours to waste shaking hands and kissing ass," Ingrid snarled. She clenched her fists, fingernails digging into her palms. "We're barely holding on -"

"Savannah's been 'barely holding on' for twenty-five years," Oakheart snapped. "I suspect you'll manage."

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Oakheart spun on her heel, bringing Ingrid up short. The two stood nearly nose-to-nose, hackles bristling.

“Only that I’ve been fighting the Wyrn longer than you’ve been alive,” the elder growled. “And I’ve never heard of a caern – much less one on the middle of a damned *city* – that’s held out against a determined attack for a quarter-century. Not in these desperate times.”

Ingrid felt the familiar ache swell in her bones. The wolf was now very close to the surface indeed. “Are you calling me a *liar*?”

“Gaia weeps!” Oakheart exclaimed. “Do you think we’re fools, child? Do you think we can’t see what you’re up to?”

The accusation brought Ingrid up short. “I don’t - ”

“You keep the city closed to outsiders, save for those who support you. You take no part in our moots, save when it serves your interests. You send no aid to other septs, even when their need is great.”

“No. Not yet - ”

“*Not yet*,” the elder echoed. “But once the city is safe, things will change, oh yes. Your father assured us of that many times. In the meantime, though, you’ll take as many of our young garou as you can get your hands on, and spend twelve long months whispering in their ears.”

“You’re paranoid.” Ingrid’s eyes narrowed. “Or maybe you just can’t stand the fact that the Shadow Lords have been better guardians of the caern than the Fianna ever were.”

Oakheart stepped closer. “Maybe we’re all just sick of your *bullshit*,” she snarled. “You had your chance to speak at the moot, Ingrid Stormwalker. You got your volunteers.”

“What do you expect me to do with just seven garou?”

“You want more help? Open the city. Let other packs move in and claim territory. I can think of four off the top of my head that would jump at the chance.”

Ingrid gritted her teeth in frustration. “That’s for my father to decide.”

“Ah, yes. Karl Ironhand, the lone wolf, still clinging to power.” Oakheart showed her own teeth in a cold, wolfish smile. “Of all the strange customs you Savannah folk have, that one confounds me the most. I hear he’s taken to meddling in human politics now. Will he send you to Atlanta next, to get help from the National Guard?”

“You know what? I’m starting to think you made a mistake sending the Master of the Challenge away,” Ingrid said, the words rumbling from deep in her throat.

Oakheart sighed. “Go home, Ingrid,” the elder replied. “Think on what I’ve said, and we will see what the next solstice brings.” And then she was gone, moving past Ingrid to join the towering forms dancing around the fire.

The Shadow Lord watched her go, trembling with thwarted rage. In her mind’s eye, she watched Savannah burn.

Ingrid ran through the darkness, boots pounding on raw, weathered rock as she made her way down the mountain. The howls of the revelers echoed behind her, dogging at her heels, mocking her failure at the moot. Her skin burned – not with rage this time, but with shame.

She pushed herself, running harder, stoking the fire in her legs and chest. The war chief wanted to give in to the change at last, to throw back her head and howl her pain at the sky, but now she found that even her rage had failed her. The wolf had withdrawn to some deep place inside her, far out of reach. Never before had she felt so bereft.

The caern is lost.

The thought cut deep. *How did it come to this?* Ingrid felt the hot sting of tears. *I'm not worthy. I was never worthy.* The wind rushed past her face, and for a dizzying moment it felt as though she were falling, just like in her nightmares.

Desperation gnawed at her. When she was a child, sitting in her aunt's garden, she'd been told the stories of her people, and how a black despair would sometimes come over them when they knew that all was lost. She hadn't understood it then; often, she'd scorned all those fallen heroes as weak and undeserving of praise. But now...

Only death can make this right.

She did not see the three figures until they stepped into her path from the shadow of a pine tree to the left of the road. Her breath caught in her throat and she stopped short, instantly alert. Reflexively, Ingrid tried to summon her wolf, but once again, it shied from her grasp. Cursing, she held her right hand out low and to the side, preparing to call *Donnerkeil*.

"I suppose I should have expected this," Ingrid growled. "Who sent you?"

The three figures paused, still well out of arm's reach. Ingrid saw them exchange looks. The middle one regarded her, and spoke in a woman's husky voice.

"Excuse me?"

Ingrid sneered at them. "You expect me to believe this is some chance meeting, on a dark, lonely road in the dead of night?"

The figure to the woman's right let out a low chuckle. "You know, she has a point." It was a young man's voice, amused and a perhaps a little bored.

Ingrid scowled at them. "Look, are you here to kill me or not?"

The woman let out a snort. "You Shadow Lords..." She raised her hands. "Peace, sister. We just want to talk."

"On a lonely road. In the dark."

"Oh, blessed goddess... Look, we didn't want to get in the middle of whatever was going on between you and Oakheart, and we knew you'd have to come this way eventually to get back to the Moon Bridge. That's all."

The black despair that had gripped Ingrid was ebbing away, like the sudden shifting of the tide. She shook her head, as if to clear the dregs of it from her mind. The whole thing did sound a little absurd, when she stopped to think about it. "All right," she said, relaxing slightly. "What do you want?"

The woman stepped closer, until details took shape from the darkness: short, spiky black hair, a lean, angular face, prominent cheekbones and deep-set eyes. Though several inches shorter than Ingrid, she was lean and sinewy as a whip, which made her seem taller than she actually was. Steel rings glinted in her left ear, her right nostril and the middle of her lower lip. Ingrid recognized her as one of the ronin she saw during the moot.

"My name's Euryale," she said. The ronin beckoned to her companions. "This is Kevin Gallowglass, and Catherine River's Child."

The others came forward. Kevin was tall and broad-shouldered, with long, red hair pulled back in a ponytail and a drooping moustache like a character out of the Wild West. He had a sharp nose and heavy, brooding brows that lent him a naturally fierce expression, but his manner was calm and eerily detached, as though the world didn't hold much interest to him. By contrast, Catherine was short and somewhat stocky, and clearly of Native American descent. Her round face was expressionless, but her shoulders were tense and her dark eyes were apprehensive.

Ingrid studied the ronin warily. "What kind of a name is Euryale?"

"The old kind," Euryale said, her lips drawing back in a lupine grin. "I was a Black Fury, once. Kevin's a Fianna in all but name, and Catherine's Uktena. We came here from Oklahoma just a few days ago."

"And what brings you to Stone Mountain?"

"We're headed for the coast," Euryale said. "Catherine's a Muscogee, and her people were from around there, back before the Trail of Tears. A lot of their sacred sites were lost, and she's trying to find them."

Ingrid scowled. "The Coastal Empire's closed to outsiders."

Euryale nodded. "So we heard. We were hoping you'd make an exception."

Now Ingrid began to understand. Ronin were forbidden in the city because they had no political value, and therefore didn't fit into her father's plans. "I can't help you," she said. "My father makes the laws, not me."

"But you're the war chief, and the caern is under attack," Euryale countered. "I saw the look on your face at the moot. You were counting on a hell of a lot more than just seven volunteers."

Ingrid felt a headache coming on. "What exactly are you proposing?" she asked.

Euryale spread her hands. "Let us into the city, and we'll help defend the caern. Simple as that."

"For a year?"

"For as long as we're in the city – a few weeks, maybe as long as a month. We're not looking to put down roots."

"That's not much."

“It’s more than you had a minute ago, Shadow Lord.”

Ingrid sighed inwardly. Oakheart’s voice echoed in her head. *You want more help? Open the city.*

It was out of the question – or at least it would have been, just twelve months before.

Father’s laws be damned. The caern must come first.

She gave the three ronin a forbidding stare. “If you come with me, you’ll be treated just like any other pack of volunteers,” she warned. “Which means you’ll have precious little time to do anything but hunt Wyrmspawn.”

Euryale glanced at Catherine. The young garou nodded. “I understand.” She spoke in low, melodic tones, lending her words unexpected weight despite her age.

“And you’ll follow orders without hesitation. I do not have time or patience for mavericks or loose cannons. Let me down, even *once*, and you’ll be lucky if all I do is run you out of town.”

A slow smile spread across Euryale’s face. “We can live with that.”

“Then get your gear,” Ingrid growled. “It’s been a long damned night, and I’m going home.”

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A half-hour later, Ingrid stepped from the Moon Bridge and into Savannah’s embrace. For a moment, she basked in the energies of the caern and breathed in its scents before reluctantly shifting back into human form. When the rest of the volunteers had followed suit, she led them out through the fort’s rear door and into the night air.

It was almost four in the morning, and the city was quiet. Fog had rolled in from the river, transforming the park’s wrought-iron lamps into eerie will-o-wisps and wreathing the mossy trees in shifting cloaks of ghostly gray. Ingrid breathed in rusting iron and wet stone, damp earth and summer growth. The touch of the mist was like spectral fingers against her skin.

The newcomers followed her silently through the fog, out into the middle of the park. Their eyes were wide, their expressions rapt, as they experienced the power of the caern for the first time. Even the ronin were affected; Catherine wore such a look of wonder that Ingrid suspected she was a Theurge. Euryale and Kevin were more circumspect, but the war chief saw them share a momentary look of amazement.

Now you begin to understand, Ingrid thought.

Anna and Joshua brought up the rear of the small group. As they walked, Anna pulled a smart phone from her pocket and made a brief call, her expression grim. Joshua padded silently across the damp grass, still in *lupus* form after the run along the Moon Bridge. When Ingrid came to a halt, the Galliard drew back his head and uttered a long, low howl into the predawn sky.

As the howl faded into the mist, Joshua shifted to human form and went to Ingrid’s side. Speaking in low, somber tones, he addressed the garou. “This is the

Caern of the Riverlands, dedicated to Uktena, the Great Serpent. For hundreds of years the caern belonged to the Uktena tribe, who lived among the native Muscogee here in the region.

“By the time the first English settlers arrived in 1732, the Uktena and the Muscogee had been weakened by a long struggle against the Spanish, who were expanding from their bases in Florida. Among the English was a pack of Fianna, led by a Philodox named Samuel Stirling. When the local Muscogee tribe, the Yamacraw, welcomed the English to their land, Stirling likewise reached out to the Uktena, and a rare peace was forged between mortals and garou. As General Oglethorpe, the leader of the expedition, negotiated with the Yamacraw over the location of the settlement, the Uktena offered to share the bounty of the caern with the Fianna.”

The Galliard gestured northward, towards the distant river. “The English settled on Yamacraw Bluff, within sight of the caern. Stirling, who was one of Oglethorpe’s chief advisors, assured the Uktena that the Europeans could live in harmony with both the natives and with the caern itself. He knew that Oglethorpe had a detailed plan for growing the settlement, and the Fianna saw the potential to create something extraordinary: a community that existed in balance between civilization and nature, mortal and garou.

“The original settlement was built around a series of communal squares, with the squares forming a grid that extended southward from the river. Originally, the east and west sides of each square were occupied by public buildings, while the north and south sides contained private homes. Stirling took the plan one step further. With help from the Uktena, who knew many secrets about the spirit world, and drawing upon the energies of the caern, Stirling transformed each square into a shrine that worked upon the mind and soul of every human being that lived near it. The shrines were made to siphon away a portion of each human’s spiritual energy to fill the reserves of the caern. In return, they worked to shield the minds of the residents from the forces of the Wyrms, and also to conceal the presence of the garou living and hunting in their midst. The settlement originally consisted of four such squares. *Twenty* more were built between the 18th and 19th centuries, comprising what we now call the Historic District.”

Joshua paused, giving his audience time to take in all they’d heard so far. Ingrid watched the newcomers’ reaction. The expressions ranged from surprise to veiled disbelief. Catherine was listening intently, her face carefully neutral. Euryale was watching the young garou with a kind of veiled amusement.

“For nearly eighty years the settlement grew and prospered, becoming for a time the capital of the new state of Georgia. But peace between the Europeans and the natives did not last. More garou had settled in Savannah over the years, and Stirling’s descendants began to covet the caern and its secrets for their own. They turned on the Uktena, destroying the local sept, and the Stirlings took complete control of the caern. By 1832, a hundred years after the founding of the settlement, the Muscogee people were gone as well, rounded up by the army and sent west.”

As Joshua spoke, two huge, black wolves came loping out of the mist and joined Anna at the rear of the gathering. Within moments, Marcus and Darius had shifted

back to their human forms, and were eyeing the newcomers with ill-concealed surprise. Ingrid saw Marcus lean close to Anna and the two began to whisper intently.

“For a while, Savannah continued to grow and prosper. But then came the Civil War, and the servants of the Wyrms unleashed a fresh hell on Earth. When Sherman and his Wyrms-riddled army occupied the city, the Stirlings and the rest of the city’s garou were nearly overwhelmed. No one knows for certain what happened, but legend has it that the Stirlings turned to the secret lore that they had stolen from the Uktena and used it to save the city from the enemy.

“Savannah was spared, but not without cost. Many garou were lost, and the Stirlings themselves were changed – some say tainted – by the powers they contended with. They became secretive and suspicious, withdrawing by degrees from the outside world. Finally, in 1880, they closed the city off entirely, forbidding kinain from entering Savannah on pain of death.

“The years afterward were dark times for the garou of Savannah. The Stirlings turned in on themselves, growing vicious and mad. The old garou bloodlines in the city dwindled, while the servants of the Wyrms grew strong. Vampires slipped into the city and made their lairs in hidden places, preying on carpetbaggers and decent folk alike. Magicians took residence in fashionable homes and drew on the well of power at the caern to fuel their obscene rites. Battles raged in the dead of night across the Historic District. The Savannah garou were victorious more often than not, but the tide was slowly and surely turning against them.

“Tensions grew among the old families. The more that the elders pressured the Stirlings to share their secrets, or to open the city for aid, the more tyrannical they became. Garou who spoke out were silenced. Some fell in challenges, while others disappeared, never to be heard from again. And all the while the forces of the Wyrms grew stronger. The Bosch Paper Mill to the west became the source of the Corrupter’s power, dumping poison into the great river and breeding horrors within its depths.”

The Galliard sighed. “No one can say for sure when the Stirlings were corrupted by the Wyrms. By the late 1980’s the family had been in a long decline, and its garou rarely ventured from the halls of Stirling House, just off Telfair Square. Samuel Stirling, the old patriarch, had died under mysterious circumstances in 1987, and his grandson Wyatt now ruled over city and caern. Samuel had been a despot, but young Wyatt was a true monster: violent, capricious, and cruel. Not long after he took over there were rumors of strange visitors to Stirling House in the dead of night, and foul rites carried out in the cellars. Young humans – women mostly – were snatched from the streets and brought back to the old house to feed Wyatt’s degenerate appetites.

“Savannah had all but fallen to the Wyrms. Most of the old garou bloodlines had died out, and only a handful of our people remained to defend the shrines and the caern from the enemy. Defeat seemed certain. Then, in June of 1989, Wyatt Stirling took a new victim to sate his desires – only this time it wasn’t a human, but a garou.”

Joshua reached out and gently laid a hand on Ingrid’s shoulder. “Elizabeth Reinhardt was taken on the night of June 14th, 1989, and held for three days in the cellars of Stirling House. The tortures she suffered are too numerous and awful to recount.

“When her brother Karl finally learned where she had been taken, he assembled every able-bodied member of his family – garou and kinfolk alike – and descended on Stirling House. Wyatt Stirling and his entire household were killed, and the remaining members of the family hunted down. The Stirlings’ reign of terror was over. Elizabeth Reinhardt was rescued, but the abuses she suffered left her deeply scarred. She died only five years later, at the age of thirty-one.”

The Galliard bowed his head, his story done. Ingrid nodded her thanks to Joshua, and then stepped forward.

“Nearly all of you have heard of my father, Karl Ironhand. Everything the stories say about him is true. He drove out the vampires of Savannah in a single night. He hunted down every last magician, killing most with his own hands. Then, on the night of the summer solstice, he opened the Moon Bridge to Stone Mountain for the first time in more than a hundred years and told the moot that the city was free once more. He returned with a war party of forty-seven garou from all across the Protectorate, and over the course of the next seven days they killed every Wyrmspawn they could find.”

She took in the volunteers with a sweep of her hand. “You walk in the footsteps of those same heroes, twenty-five years later. You are the next link in the chain. And I speak for the entire sept when I say that we are honored and grateful to have you here.”

As she spoke, a trio of figures walked out of the mist, coming down the park’s central path: Eleanor and three male kinfolk, summoned by Anna’s phone call. After five years, Ingrid and the house staff had the welcome ceremony timed down to the minute.

“This is Eleanor, my father’s personal assistant,” Ingrid said, indicating the approaching kinfolk. “She will see to your needs over the next twelve months. Living quarters will be provided, and you’ll receive weekly deliveries of groceries and other supplies. Special requests will be honored, within reason.”

Euryale raised a hand. “What about transportation?”

Ingrid frowned. “I can’t think of a situation that would require it.”

The Silver Fang raised her hand. She was a statuesque African-American girl of about nineteen, with regal features and large, piercing eyes. Ingrid had yet to learn her name. “What exactly are our duties?” she asked.

“Defense of the caern, obviously, as well as the associated shrines,” Ingrid replied. “Of the twenty-four shrines originally dedicated, twenty-one remain. That’s a lot to cover, but the good news is that they’re concentrated in an area of roughly two square miles.”

The garou’s head tilted to one side. “Joshua said the shrines were made to repel the Wyrms?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Ingrid said. “Look, I’ll be honest: we don’t fully understand how the shrines work. The knowledge that went into creating them was lost more than two hundred years ago. What they seem to do is shield human minds against the corruptive touch of the Wyrms. That makes them much less susceptible to

possession, among other things. But the shrines are weaker than they once were, and fomori are constantly testing their limits, looking for a way to defile them.”

One of the Get spoke up. He was a tall, broad-shouldered teen in a threadbare shirt and jeans, with a thick, Alabama drawl. “You say the shrines hide us from the regular folk?”

“Again, in a manner of speaking,” Ingrid replied. “The shrines create an effect similar to the Delirium: sightings of wolves or wolf-like creatures are rationalized away and almost immediately forgotten. Since each shrine acts as part of a larger grid, they reinforce one another somewhat, so within the bounds of the Historic District we have a lot more freedom of action than one would get in any other urban setting.” She raised a cautioning finger. “That doesn’t give you leave to go roaring down Broughton Street in broad daylight with your fangs out and your hair on fire. *At best*, this means we have a little more leeway hunting in the presence of humans. Do *not* push your luck.

“We run patrols every night, without fail, and occasionally during the day. We hunt for Wyrmspawn on the streets, and search for nests across the Historic District. We also keep humans away from the caern after dark. Back in the 80’s there was a big problem with dealers using the park to do business. Not any more. Humans found in the park after midnight are fair game. If you can frighten them away, fine. If not, they disappear. No exceptions.”

“You’re talking about murder,” Kevin said.

“I’m talking about protecting the caern,” Ingrid replied. “Is that a problem?”

Euryale glared at Kevin. He shrugged. “Not particularly.”

“Good.” Ingrid’s voice hardened. “Make no mistake. This is a war zone. We can’t afford to take chances, especially not as outnumbered as we currently are. As war chief, my word is law. I don’t give orders lightly, so when I tell you to do something, I expect to be obeyed, without question or hesitation. If any of you have a problem with that, now is your time to speak up. I’ll have Anna send you back to Stone Mountain, and you can rejoin the revel. Anyone?”

Ingrid paused, studying each of the newcomers in turn. Catherine seemed agitated, but Euryale placed a calming hand on her arm. No one said a word.

“Good.” Ingrid beckoned to the kinfolk. “Eleanor will assign you living quarters, and these gentlemen will take you there. Get some rest. We’ll meet back here at sunset.”

Ingrid nodded to Eleanor, who opened her planner and approached the pack of Get first. As the others began to gather about the kinfolk, she and Joshua circled around them and joined the rest of their pack.

“How did it go tonight?”

Marcus gave her a grim look. “We found three more nests,” he said. “The entrances all look pretty fresh. From the smell, there could be a dozen or more taints in each one.”

Ingrid felt a chill race down her spine. “I thought I told you to keep close to the caern.”

"We did," Darius's deep voice rumbled in reply. "They're all within two blocks of the park. Gaia only knows how many others are out there."

Marcus looked past Ingrid's shoulder, at the small crowd of newcomers. "Tell me that this is just the first batch. The others got delayed at Stone Mountain, right? Right?"

"What you see is what we've got," Ingrid said.

Suddenly, Marcus scowled. "Who are they?" he asked, pointing to Euryale and her companions. "They're quite a bit older and...scruffier...than we usually get from Stone Mountain."

Ingrid took a deep breath. "They're ronin. They offered to help defend the city. It's just temporary."

"*Ronin*" Marcus hissed. "Are you *kidding* me? Your father is going to be furious!"

Ingrid stepped in close to Marcus, her teeth inches from his throat. "You want me to send them back?" she snarled. "You'd rather have seven warriors instead of ten?"

But this time Marcus did not back down. He met Ingrid glare for glare. "They're forbidden. You *know* that. What were you thinking?"

"There are three Wyrms nests within walking distance of this caern and you're worried about *ronin*?" She shoved the beta roughly away. "Get your head out of your ass, Marcus. Before it's too late."

Ingrid turned on her heel and left, boots thumping angrily along the path as she headed for home. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Euryale staring at her; when she glanced over the ronin gave her a grin and a sardonic, two-fingered salute.

Maybe it's too late already, Ingrid thought, as the mist closed in around her.

Chapter Six: The Charnel House

"I thought *fifteen* was bad enough," Karl Ironhand snarled. "But it appears that you've outdone yourself yet again." The Shadow Lord leaned back in his leather office chair, green eyes blazing with anger at Ingrid. "Perhaps you can explain —"

Before he could continue, there was a soft knock at the study's pocket doors. One of the ornately carved panels slid open just wide enough for the house's new maid to slip inside. Avoiding Karl's cold stare, the girl crossed the room with exaggerated care and presented Ingrid with her coffee.

Ingrid accepted the brimming China cup and waved away the proffered saucer. "Thank you..." she frowned bemusedly up at the maid.

"Charlotte," the maid answered quickly. She looked to be about sixteen, with dark eyes and a small, freckled nose. "I'm new."

"I know," Ingrid said. The girl started at the war chief's impatient tone. Ingrid sighed. *What's Eleanor thinking, sending a lamb into the wolf's den?* "Thank you, Charlotte. You may go."

The young maid half-turned, nodded deferentially to Karl, and beat a hasty retreat. By the time the pocket door clattered shut Ingrid was out of her chair and heading for the sideboard.

"A bit early for that, don't you think?" Karl said archly.

"Yes, indeed." Ingrid poured a strong measure of brandy into her cup. It was one-thirty in the afternoon. She'd only gotten to bed at six, and Gaia only knew how many hours in between she'd actually slept before Charlotte had been sent to wake her. "If it were up to me, I'd still be upstairs trying to get some sleep."

Karl's hand came down on the mahogany desk top like a thunderclap, loud enough to cause Ingrid to jump. "Don't take that tone with me, child!" he growled. "That old bitch Oakheart played you for a fool. For twenty years I went to Stone Mountain and brought back *dozens* of garou —"

"And what does Stone Mountain have to show for it?" Ingrid took a sip from the cup and bared her teeth at the liquor's bite. "Every solstice we go to them with

the same damned story, father. Did you honestly think we could keep it up forever? Oakheart and the rest are many things, but they're not stupid."

"Oakheart and the rest of the elders were too smart for you, so you went and found three mangy *ronin* to fight for you instead. Is that what you're telling me?" Karl was shouting now, his deep voice ringing from the plaster walls.

Ingrid tossed off the last of the coffee and let the China cup fall onto the drink tray with a clatter. "At least they look like they can handle themselves in a fight. The rest are a just another bunch of wide-eyed cubs!"

"Those cubs are the future of the Protectorate!" Karl roared back. "If we don't win their allegiance, Stone Mountain will!"

Rage and frustration boiled up in Ingrid's chest. The wolf inside her, absent since the end of the moot, was suddenly back in full force, straining at its bonds. For a dizzying instant, she could see herself lunging over the table at her father, fanged jaw agape, *Donnerkeil* flashing into her hand...

"What in Gaia's name happened to you?" she said. "After everything you've done. After everything you've lost. Now it's all just a *game* to you."

"Don't you *dare*," Ironhand snarled, rising from his chair. His voice was rougher now, almost more wolf than man. "You have no idea what I've done for this city. What I *continue* to do, each and every —"

An insistent buzzing cut through the tension-laden air. Karl's smartphone burred loudly across the desktop. Her father snatched it up and threw it across the room.

Ingrid smiled coldly. "One of your new friends in Atlanta, I presume?"

The comment brought Karl up short. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Gaia weeps!" Ingrid exclaimed. "There was a reporter in this room not twenty-four hours ago who told me you were one of the biggest — and most secretive — power brokers in the state. What I don't understand is *why*. And now I can't help but wonder what else you've been keeping from me."

Swift footsteps echoed in the hall outside. The pocket door slid open again. Charlotte stood at the threshold, her expression pale. "M-master, there is a call —"

"*Out!*" Ironhand roared, his face a mask of rage. "You come in here again, you stupid cow, and I'll —"

"Who is it?" Ingrid demanded. *And where in the hell is Eleanor?*

"It's the police."

• • •

The home had been in Eleanor's family for more than a hundred years: a tall, red brick Italianate on a quiet street in the midst of the Victorian district, just west of the park. A police cruiser and an unmarked car were parked out front, blue lights flashing, the glare reflecting from the house's tall windows and white lace curtains. A boxy ambulance from the local fire station sat a few doors further down and on the opposite side of the street, its rear doors open and a pair of blue-gloved EMT's working inside.

"Let me out here," Ingrid said, as the town car pulled alongside the police cars. She'd had one of the staff drive her over, not trusting herself in the state she was in. The young man, still in his white kitchen livery, nodded once and eased the big car to a stop. Moving as though in a dream, Ingrid fumbled for the door latch and emerged from the car's climate-controlled interior into the oppressive summer air.

A detective stood at the wrought-iron gate in front of the house, beads of sweat standing out on his high, rounded forehead. The blue latex gloves on his hands clashed with the brown of his rumpled suit jacket and the faux leather of the notebook tucked under his arm. Faint worry lines marked an otherwise impassive, heavy-boned face. He was a distant cousin, one of a handful of kinfolk working in the city's police department.

Ingrid stepped quickly between the two police cars and glanced left and right along Waldburg Street, searching for her pack. She caught sight of Darius at once, his imposing figure weaving through the small crowd of onlookers that stretched along the sidewalk for nearly a block. Anna appeared a moment later, coming from the opposite direction, an expression of concern on her round, freckled face. Their presence offered some comfort against the terrible dread building in her chest.

"Detective Palmer," Ingrid said quietly, approaching the gate. She was surprised at the calm, almost distant tone in her voice.

"Mistress," Palmer replied with a respectful nod. "I'm sorry to have to call you out to something like this."

"What happened?" Ingrid stared past the detective, up at the two-story house. Nothing was out of place. It looked as though Eleanor would open the door and step out at any moment to water the impatiens on the front porch.

"The next-door neighbor called it in," Palmer said. "She's in her 80's. Mrs. Eastwood's son was supposed to drive her across town for her hair appointment at about one. When he didn't show up she went to the house to check on him, and found the bodies." The detective nodded in the direction of the ambulance. "The paramedics are trying to get her calmed down now."

Ingrid felt her guts turn to ice. She'd dared to get her hopes up when she'd first seen the ambulance. "So, no one..."

Palmer shook his head. "They're all gone, mistress. I'm sorry." From the look in the kinfolk's eyes, it was clear that he wished there was some small comfort that he could give her, but there was none to be had. Which meant that whatever they'd found inside the house was very bad indeed.

Darius and Anna joined her at the gate. The Theurge laid a comforting hand on Ingrid's shoulder, while the broad-shouldered Ahroun scanned the streets with narrowed eyes, searching for threats. The presence of her packmates was a bulwark against the grief.

"Do you have any leads?" the war chief inquired.

The detective's jaw tightened. "It wasn't human. I can tell you that much. I suspect you'll be able to find out more than we will."

Ingrid sighed, steeling herself. "We'll go up then, if you don't mind."

Palmer nodded. "I've held off making my calls as long as I could. I figure we've got another five minutes before someone notices, and I've got to call in the crime scene folks. Then this street turns into a circus." The kinfolk's expression grew pained. "I can't keep this quiet, mistress. There's too many bodies, in too high-profile a neighborhood. The feds might even get involved."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Ingrid told him. "Right now I just need to see my people."

Palmer pulled the gate open without a word and stood aside. The war chief squared her shoulders and crossed the short path up to the painted, wooden porch. Anna and Darius followed close behind. As Ingrid climbed the steps to the front door, she stole a glance over her shoulder at her pack mates.

"Marcus and Joshua?"

"Joshua was sound asleep when I called," Anna replied. "He's on his way now. Marcus isn't answering his phone. I've left about a dozen voicemails."

I'll have his hide for a new pair of shoes, Ingrid promised herself. Her jaw muscles bunched as she laid her hand on the antique doorknob. With an effort of will she turned the knob and pushed the door wide.

Late afternoon sunlight spilled over the threshold and across the polished hardwood floor of the entry hall. There was blood everywhere. It made a trail in streaks and spatters down the main stairway and across the hall into the sitting room to Ingrid's left. Still more streaks stained the hardwood down the length of the hall, in the direction of the kitchen. The air was thick with the charnel stench of spilled blood and torn entrails – the scent of violent death.

Anna's breath caught in her throat. "Bright goddess," she murmured, pointing at the floor. "Look."

Ingrid bared her teeth in a snarl. Huge, clawed tracks had been left in blood all along the hallway, as well as up and down the stairs. High up, near the second-floor landing, a gory handprint stained the pale wall fabric. Long talons had dug divots out of the plaster beneath.

A garou has done this, she thought, rage blooming in her chest.

The war chief crossed the threshold. "Close the door," she growled.

She had begun to change even as Darius pulled the door shut behind them. Ingrid shifted to *glabro* and fought to hold herself there. The rage was like a sudden, swift tide, threatening to pull her under. Claws pricked her palms as she clenched her fists and held them tightly until the urge to frenzy had passed.

"Darius, check upstairs," she growled. "Anna, search the rear of the house. Find out everything you can."

Her packmates slipped past her, their bodies shifting as they picked their way through the gore. Ingrid took a deep breath. Her sharpened senses sifted the odors of the house, adding more layers of detail to what she already knew. The blood on the floor and walls were hours old, and there were bodies upstairs, as well as in the kitchen and dining room. The corpses had the bitter, adrenaline reek of terror and pain.

A single garou had done this. Young, male, full of rage and tainted by a sickness that verged on corruption. *Not a Black Spiral Dancer*, she decided. *The taint doesn't run quite that deep.* A garou could hide this sickness, if he were careful. That conjured up even more worrisome thoughts.

We could have a traitor in our midst.

Moving slowly, Ingrid headed left, following the blood trails into the sitting room. Furniture lay in broken heaps, smashed aside by angry swipes of the garou's powerful arms. Pictures had been torn from the walls and ripped apart by razor-sharp claws. Bits of broken glass and porcelain dusted the wooden floor.

The dining room could be reached through an open archway at the rear of the sitting room. When Ingrid saw what had been left there, an anguished whine rose in her throat.

The dining room table had been set for breakfast. Now the plates and bowls had been scattered, and the white, Damask tablecloth hurled aside in tatters. In their place, six heads had been arranged in a rough semicircle atop the antique cherry table: two women, a man and three teenage children, their faces masked with drying blood. Their wide, staring eyes were turned upon the lone figure slumped in a chair at the foot of the table, her back to Ingrid.

Eleanor's frail arms and legs had been bound to the chair with lengths of electrical wire torn from the lamps in the sitting room. The floor around her was awash in blood and bits of torn flesh. Claws were not quite as precise as knives, but they could flay a person to the bone just as effectively, given enough time and patience.

The garou had left Eleanor's head and neck untouched. Her face was a rictus of agony, her eyes depthless wells of pain. A tiny sigil had been drawn in blood on her throat, just above the larynx. More tiny drops glistened on her cheek.

Ingrid stood at Eleanor's side for a long moment, staring down into her eyes. Death had not brought any sign of peace. No sense of blessed release. Just darkness.

A howl built within Ingrid, brimming with sadness and a longing for what had been lost forever. *Harano*, her people called it.

"Goddess keep you, Eleanor Eastwood," Ingrid said, her rough voice mournful. "I will remember you in song, for you were like a mother to me."

Darius and Anna joined her moments later. The Theurge growled as she entered the dining room and saw what had been done. "The foe entered through the back door, while two of the kin were making breakfast," she said. "They were taken by surprise, and were struck down in moments."

Ingrid nodded and turned to Darius. The Ahroun, huge and imposing even in *glabro* form, stood just beyond the archway, his gaze fixed on the gruesome tableau left on the dining room table. Pain shone in his dark eyes.

"I found the bodies of one of the women and two of the children in the upstairs bathroom," he said. "The kids were still in pajamas. She had a phone in her hand, but never had time to use it." Darius paused, showing his teeth in a grimace. "The last child tried to hide under her parents' bed. I think she was the last to die."

"No. Not the last," Ingrid said, glancing back at Eleanor. "Not by a long stretch." The war chief tried to swallow her own grief and look at the kinfolk dispassionately, like any other corpse. "She's still wearing the same clothes from earlier this morning." A quick check revealed her ubiquitous leather-bound planner, tossed into a far corner. "When did she finish with the new arrivals?"

Anna thought for a moment. "Five-thirty. Quarter to six. Somewhere around there."

Ingrid nodded. "And by the time she makes it home, the garou has killed her children and grandchildren, and is waiting for her." She turned to the severed heads. "Why was she tortured, but not them?"

Darius nodded his head at the gruesome tableau. "Those tracks in the hall suggest that the killer brought those heads down one at a time. He made a damned spectacle out of it."

"They were part of the torture," Anna declared. "Look at this."

She tapped a claw on the polished surface of the table. Symbols had been carved there, where Eleanor could see them. There were a several more strange glyphs, similar to the garou's written language but there was something about the odd curves and jagged lines that both intrigued Ingrid and repelled her. They surrounded a larger symbol: a crude set of nested circles, like a target. *Or perhaps an attempt at a spiral?*

"There is a message here," the Theurge mused. "But what it means is beyond me."

"Do you recognize the symbols?" Ingrid asked.

Anna sniffed. "Spirit glyphs," she observed. "Symbols representing potent mystical truths."

"Such as?"

The garou shaman's expression turned guarded, as all Theurges do when prodded with questions about the spirit realm. "I don't know. And I'm not sure I want to know." She shook her head. "I don't like the way they...call to me."

Ingrid scowled at the glyphs. She reached down and, one by one, scratched through each symbol. She was surprised – and more than a little unsettled – at how hard it was to bring herself to do it, but the last thing she wanted was to let some fool of a mortal get a good look at them.

"You have his scent?" the war chief asked as she finished her work.

Her packmates nodded. "He left the same way he came in," Anna told her. "Out the back door and down the alley, heading north."

Ingrid nodded, heading past Anna toward the kitchen. Darius fell in behind her.

"What now?" he asked.

Ingrid was shifting again, feeling the rage burning along her bones. When she spoke, her voice was more beast than human.

"Now we hunt."



Chapter Seven: Old Blood

Ingrid broke from the alley at a dead run, nose low to the ground, her pack-mates racing silently in her wake. The three huge wolves darted like shadows across Gaston Street, near the north end of the caern, dodging traffic and bounding the low retaining wall fronting the town houses on the opposite side.

Brakes screeched; a woman pushing a stroller a few yards away let out a terrified cry. But the garou were already gone, vanishing between the tall houses as silently as they'd appeared.

Tomorrow the residents of the Historic District would be talking about the frightening pack of stray dogs prowling the streets, though the details would already be fading from memory, blurred by the power of the city's shrines. It was reckless, Ingrid knew, but at that moment she could only think of vengeance, of running Eleanor's killer to ground and tearing out his throat.

The garou's trail ran through alleys and across tree-lined avenues, over fences and across the sheltered gardens of the city's elite. He had taken wolf-shape upon leaving Eleanor's home, just as Ingrid had; now and again she spied his paw-prints in the churned earth of a flower bed, or leaving muddy tracks up the back wall of a town home. The same spiritual energies that now shielded her and her pack-mates had worked to the killer's advantage as well. The realization left her sick at heart.

Did I do this? Did I bring Eleanor's murderer back from Stone Mountain? She didn't want to believe it, but the timing of the attack was hard to deny. Ingrid cursed herself for not taking note of the newcomers' scents during the trip back to the caern. *None of them are old enough to carry the kind of taint I smelled back at the house,* she thought.

None except for the ronin.

The wolf-scent, overlaid with the coppery reek of human blood, led the Shadow Lords north and east, towards the city's older wards. The trail passed within a block of Reinhardt House, on the west side of Monterrey Square, and then skirted the edges of the College of Art and Design further north. The wolves dashed across the parking lot of St. John's church and through Madison Square, then up Drayton Street and across Liberty. The garou wove nimbly between the slow-moving traffic, onto

the tree-lined median and then across the far lane, amid a chorus of surprised shouts and blaring car horns.

Just a few blocks ahead lay the old Colonial Park Cemetery. Ingrid suspected that the trail would end there, amid the moss-covered trees and the weathered headstones, and as she led her companions through the cemetery's south gate she steeled herself for battle.

The scent wound its way amid the graves, seeming to linger at times around one ancient plot or another. Ingrid slowed her pace, stalking from one patch of deep shade to the next, nose twitching and ears erect. She inspected each of the old mau-soleums in turn, expecting each time to find claw-marks on the pitted stone and signs that the killer had forced his way inside, but each time she was disappointed. To her surprise, the trail continued northward, eventually paralleling the winding path that led to the cemetery's main gate.

Perplexed, Ingrid clung to the killer's scent, racing past a milling crowd of tourists at the cemetery gate and across the tree-lined lanes of Oglethorpe Avenue. The initial flare of rage she'd felt back at the house was fading, and now she was becoming acutely aware of how exposed she and her companions were. What if the trail led all the way to the river? The bars and restaurants along the riverfront would be teeming with people at this time of the day.

They were coming up on Oglethorpe Square now. Grimly, Ingrid pressed on, conscious now of every passing stare as she led her pack-mates down Habersham and across York. A vague sense of dread began to gnaw at her as she tracked the killer's scent through a small, tree-lined parking lot and across the narrow street beyond.

Ingrid's sense of foreboding deepened as she came upon a high, vine-covered wall on the street's far side. She caught the killer's scent amid the thick, green creepers and leapt without hesitation, her claws finding purchase in the pitted masonry and propelling her over the top.

She plunged through a tangle of greenery on the far side, her legs thrashing through more vines and the branches of a wild, unruly hedge. More branches slapped at her face as she fell, then an instant later she was through, landing roughly in a tall patch of weeds on the far side. Anna and Marcus followed moments later, landing only slightly better than she.

Ingrid leapt to her feet, shaking twigs and bits of leaves from her fur. The thick weeds pressed in around her, higher than her head in wolf form. Her keen nose smelled brackish water and old stone. The killer's scent was all around her.

Warily, she pressed forward, parting the weeds with her snout. The air was preternaturally still. The sounds of the city had faded to silence, as though she'd crossed the threshold to another world.

After just a couple of yards, the weeds thinned out. Ingrid found herself at the edge of what had once been a large parterre garden. The hedges that once defined the garden were now tall and misshapen, and wild creepers covered the old planting beds and wound about the decorative trees. Water bubbled sickly from an overgrown fountain at the garden's center.

A tall, dark house loomed at the west end of the garden, its walls and elegant, curved stairs covered in vines. At the east end was a huge carriage house, nearly as large as the manor itself. Faded streaks of soot stained the old brick above the carriage house's gaping, second-story windows. Charred, skeletal timbers showed though gaps in the building's slate roof.

Ingrid's eyes widened. She glanced back at the old manor house and felt her hackles rise. The dread she felt sharpened to a knife's edge as she realized where she was.

The war chief rose, letting her body shift back to human form. Her pack-mates followed suit. Darius was tense, his shoulders hunched as he studied the garden's many shadows. Anna stared up at the manor, her dark eyes haunted. *She looks as though she's seen a ghost*, Ingrid thought, feeling a sudden chill. She reached out and touched Anna's arm and the theurge gave a start, her eyes briefly widening in fear.

"Call the others," Ingrid said grimly. "Tell them we've tracked the killer to Stirling House."

• • •

The carriage house was little more than a shell, its lower floor heaped with blackened brick and bits of charred timbers. Shards of broken beer bottles glinted dully amid the dirt and ash, and layers of graffiti covered the interior walls. Most of it was little more than a set of initials and a date, going back as far as the early '90s. Ingrid's own initials were there, on the wall facing the old manor; she'd scrawled them on a dare when she was 10, back when all she knew of Stirling House was just the ghost stories her schoolmates told at slumber parties.

Joshua slipped into the carriage house from the alley out back, boots crunching softly on slivers of glass. Darius, leaning against one of the empty window frames, gave the Galliard a brief glance over his shoulder, then went back to watching the manor house. Anna sat in a cleared space on the cement floor, legs folded and her hands resting on her knees. Her eyes were closed, her expression one of careful concentration, as though she were listening to a sound that none of the others could hear. Ingrid sat atop a pile of debris against the southern wall, where she could keep watch on the manor house and the alley alike.

"Where the *hell* is Marcus?" she snapped, rising to her feet.

The question took Joshua aback. "I thought he was with you."

Ingrid cursed under her breath. "Anna?" she said, glancing over at the theurge.

After a moment, Anna shook her head. "No spirits about. Well, none that concerns us, anyway."

"Then let's go. We've wasted enough time as it is." Ingrid moved to the open doorway on the west side of the building. "Darius, I want you outside, watching the front of the main house."

The Ahroun frowned. "I should be going in with you, chief."

"No. I want you in position in case he rabbits on us. I don't care how tough he is, if he goes out the front door there's no way he's getting past you."

"I know that's right," Darius said.

"One more thing. No one is killing this bastard except me. My duty, my right. Understood?"

The garou nodded in unison. Satisfied, Ingrid slipped from the carriage house into the waning afternoon sunlight.

It took only a few minutes to cross the overgrown, weed-choked garden. They moved quickly and quietly, trying to draw as little attention as possible. Every few steps, Ingrid's gaze rose to the old house's windows, expecting to see a snarling face looking down at her. By the time they reached the foot of the grand rear vestibule, Ingrid's heart was hammering in her chest.

The war chief came to a halt. Darius broke off from the pack and disappeared around the corner of the house. Ingrid waited, studying the rear of the manor while the Ahroun got himself into position. The house's main floor was almost a full story above ground, accessed by a pair of curving stairs that ascended to the columned vestibule. Access to the house's basement level, where the storerooms, kitchens and servants' quarters were located, was through an iron door set in an alcove directly below the vestibule. Steel bars covered the lower level's narrow windows, and the iron door's hinges had been welded shut many years ago.

Ingrid gave Darius a count of ten, then started up the vestibule stairs. The air in the shadow of the old house was strangely cool and dank, despite the muggy day. Stirling House had sat empty since the takeover; her father had arranged to quietly purchase the property from the city a few months later, and sealed the place up. She had no idea what she would find inside.

A fine layer of dirt and grime covered the granite of the vestibule. A heap of steel chain had been tossed among the leaves and junk food wrappers piled in one corner, along with the broken bits of a heavy padlock. The house's tall, double doors were slightly ajar.

Ingrid's lips drew back from her teeth as she pushed the doors wide and let slip her rage. Bones stretched and muscles swelled. By the time she crossed the threshold, the back of her shoulders brushed against the top of the old house's doorframe. Clad in her war form, towering and terrible, she stood in the ruins of a once-grand foyer and sniffed the air for signs of her prey.

Stirling House smelled like an unearthed grave. Blotches of mildew stained the foyer's elegant green wall fabric, and tendrils of rotting plaster hung like giant cobwebs from the high ceiling. A collection of debris was scattered across the marble floor, covered in a thick layer of dust: rotting books; a smashed telephone; a woman's high-heeled shoe. They rested atop dark, irregular blotches on the cream-colored stone. The stains, a darker, rusty brown beneath the mostly gray dust, spread across the floor in dried pools, coin-shaped drops and long, looping arcs. Fainter lines of smudges might have once been footprints, crossing and re-crossing through the gore.

Off to Ingrid's right, through an open doorway, lay a formal reception room. Chairs lay overturned or smashed to kindling, amid torn sofas and sprays of broken crystal. An oil painting in a gilt frame had been ripped from the wall opposite the

doorway and sat facing Ingrid. Its subject, a dour-looking man in a severe, dark suit, had been defaced by the raking sweep of a garou's claws.

The house had been left exactly as it was on the night of the attack, twenty-five years ago. All that was missing were the bodies.

Joshua and Anna slipped through the doorway behind Ingrid, assuming their *crinos* form as she had. The war chief sent Anna to check out the reception room with the twitch of a claw, then pointed Joshua towards the doorway at the opposite end of the foyer, which led to the house's main stairway. Ingrid went left, where a broken door hung askew in its splintered frame.

She placed a huge hand against the surface of the door and pushed it gently inward. Beyond was a large, high-ceilinged room that in better times had been used for parties and formal dinners. Now it was packed with old furniture, most covered by mildewed canvas sheets. There were bloodstains here as well, weaving amid the covered wardrobes and chests of drawers.

Ingrid entered the room, ears straining to hear the slightest sound of movement. She worked her way through the crooked aisles created by the covered furniture, towards two open doors along the curved wall at the far end. The trail of old blood reached almost to the center of the room, disappearing beneath the shredded, stained sheet of a massive oak desk. Ingrid knelt and pulled the stiff fabric aside, peering into the desk's chair well. Claw marks had gouged the wood in dozens of places, and the shadowy space was coated in gore. A teddy bear, its fur stiff with dried blood, lay in a forlorn heap in a back corner of the well. The war chief turned away from the ghastly scene and continued her search.

The first door she came to opened onto a small storage space, filled with shelves of moth-eaten place settings and tablecloths. The second door led to a much smaller and less formal dining room that had been reduced to wreckage during the Shadow Lords' vengeful attack. The heavy dining table had been flipped over and many of the antique chairs smashed to kindling. Broken China and shattered glass covered the floor, and splashes of blood stained the walls.

A swinging door stood at the far end of the room, and an open door to Ingrid's right led out into the house's front hall. As she passed the doorway, she caught sight of Anna moving through the hall, nose twitching.

The swinging door led to a small, modern kitchen. Orderly ranks of dusty, canned foods on the shelves contrasted with the smashed plates and silverware scattered across the tile floor. Ingrid studied the room from the doorway for a few moments, and then withdrew to the front hall. Anna was just emerging from the doorway opposite, passing through shafts of afternoon sunlight slanting through the faded curtains to either side of the manor's front door. Ingrid could tell from set of Anna's shoulders that the theurge was deeply disturbed.

"Anything?" the war chief asked. She spoke softly, the word coming out in a low, growling rumble.

Anna grimaced, showing her powerful fangs. "Just a bedroom and...a children's room. His scent is there, but nothing looks disturbed."

Ingrid nodded. There were traces of the killer's scent everywhere, but the house was silent as a tomb. "Upstairs," she growled.

The garou headed back down the front hall to the main stairs. Joshua stood at an open doorway to the left of the staircase, peering into the darkness beyond. The Galliard caught Ingrid's eye and pointed downward. He'd found the basement stairs. She gestured for him to stay where he was, and led Anna up to the second floor.

If anything, the damage upstairs seemed more extensive than below. Five doors led off from the upstairs hall, and all of them had been broken down. More portraits of the Stirling family, some going back centuries, had been pulled from the walls and clawed apart. The dank smell of rot was stronger here, and much of the plaster ceiling had fallen in.

The old hardwood floors groaned beneath the werewolves' heavy tread as they searched each of the bedrooms. The Stirlings or their servants had tried to barricade themselves in two of the rooms; from the look of the wreckage, the piled furniture had barely slowed Ironhand and his pack. More pools of faded blood showed where the desperate occupants met their ends.

By the time they searched the last of the bedrooms, Anna was visibly subdued. "How many?" she asked, as she and Ingrid returned to the upstairs hall.

"Twenty-two," Ingrid growled. "Family and kin. Plus five more over the course of the night, at other homes across town."

"Gaia have mercy."

"The Stirlings brought this on themselves," the war chief said coldly.

"Even the children? Most weren't even garou."

"Fruit from a poisoned tree." Without waiting for a reply, Ingrid turned her back on Anna and headed downstairs.

Only the basement remained. Ingrid had suspected that was where the hunt would end. She knew the story of the Shadow Lords' attack by heart, and what Karl and his pack-mates had found there.

Joshua still stood at the doorway, arms folded across his chest. "Nothing moving down there," he said as Ingrid approached.

The war chief nodded, nose twitching. The killer's scent was fresh here, descending into the darkness. Growling deep in her throat, Ingrid moved past Joshua and started down the stairs.

The stairwell was narrow and the risers creaked alarmingly under Ingrid's weight. She descended slowly, senses straining to penetrate the subterranean blackness below. After a moment she emerged into a dank, low ceilinged corridor that stretched off to her left and right. Moving slowly and hunched nearly on all fours, she moved to the opposite wall and worked her way right, feeling her way along. Moments later her claws scraped against wood, and her fumbling hand dropped to a metal doorknob. Ingrid pushed the door open, blinking in the wan sunlight that filtered through the half-sunk windows in the room beyond. She had found the house's original, long-abandoned kitchen, its dusty counters covered in spiderwebs and rat tracks. An open doorway to the left led to a bakery and its rusting, cast-iron ovens.

Ingrid continued down the central corridor. There was now just enough light coming from the kitchen to see by. More doors on her right opened onto a storeroom and a fully stocked wine cellar. The war chief gave them little more than a cursory inspection. She had her bearings now. The door she was looking for was halfway down the hallway to her left.

At some point during the last century the old house's servants' quarters had been quietly and extensively altered. The single entrance was a heavy, iron door, secured from the outside by a heavy padlock. The lock itself had been recently torn free, twisting the metal tongue like taffy and leaving bright scars on the hasp. The door's hinges were rusted nearly shut; they groaned like tortured souls as Ingrid leaned against it and pushed inward.

Chill air wafted from the room beyond, bearing the faint but unmistakable odor of death. Ingrid's hackles rose as she crossed the threshold and found herself in a medium-sized room that had been stripped down to the bare brick and garishly lit by the red-painted windows set in the opposite wall. An old surgical table stood along the wall to the left, flanked by white metal cabinets containing a comprehensive assortment of surgical tools. Thin, steel hooks hung from the ceiling along the wall to the right, and a scarred butcher's block sat in the center of the room, next to a grimy drain set in the concrete floor. On the far side of the room, beneath the blood-colored windows, were an elegant, antique love seat and a cherry wood end table. An opened bottle of wine and a dust-covered glass still sat atop the table where its owner had left it, twenty-five years before.

Here is where Wyatt Stirling made the pages for his books, Ingrid thought grimly, and the goddess alone knows what else. To her right, through an open doorway, lay the cells where his victims were kept. *Where my aunt was kept drugged and repeatedly raped.* The thought kindled her rage anew.

A door – antique oak this time – stood ajar to her left. She knew where it led. Ingrid crossed Wyatt's chamber of horrors in two swift steps and smashed it open with a sweep of her hand.

Wyatt's inner sanctum was almost decadent compared to the harsh, clinical furnishings next door. Two of the wood paneled walls were lined with bookshelves, and an antique writing desk with an overstuffed chair took up almost a third of the room. A small sideboard held glasses and bottles of brandy, and a small divan lay along the wall to the right of the door. In the center of the room, sitting atop a pedestal of dark marble, was a wide copper bowl full of fresh, clean water.

The killer's scent filled the room, but the garou was nowhere to be seen. Ingrid's gaze fell to the mirror-like surface of the water, and knew at once what had happened. Snarling, she knocked the bowl from its pedestal with a swipe of her claws.

Anna was right behind Ingrid, her bulk filling the human-sized doorway. "What is it?"

"He's gone," Ingrid growled. She gestured at the upended bowl. "The bastard's crossed into the Penumbra."

The Theurge entered the room and crouched over the bowl. Any garou could cross over into the spirit realm by staring into a reflective surface, such as a mirror or a calm pool of water. There would be no scent to track in the Penumbra; without a connection to the killer's essence, like his name or a lock of hair, the trail had gone cold.

"I don't understand," Anna said, shaking her head. "Why go to all this trouble? He could have filled a sink and stepped sideways at Eleanor's house."

"He's sending us a message." Ingrid clenched her fists. Rage was giving way to frustration, and her body was starting to shift, returning to human form. "He killed our people and then drew a line from there to here, knowing we'd follow." She swayed on her feet as the change ran its course, her energy spent. "This is about what we did to the Stirlings, twenty-five years ago."

Seeing their alpha shift, Joshua and Anna did the same. The Theurge swept her hair back out of her eyes and frowned at the sanctum's bookshelves. Both had been thoroughly and none to gently ransacked in the distant past. She slid around the corner of the old writing desk and began poking through its drawers. "What he did to Eleanor was more than just revenge. And what about those symbols he carved into the table?"

"I don't know, Anna. Maybe it was part of the torture. Whoever did this is corrupt to the core."

Anna gave her a strange look. The Theurge started to reply but was interrupted by the sound of Ingrid's phone. Irritated, Ingrid dug the phone from her pocket, darkly hoping that it was Marcus.

It was her father. And by the look of things, he'd tried to call her nearly a dozen times since she'd left Eleanor's house.

"Yes?"

Karl's voice erupted from the phone's tiny speaker. "Where in the *hell* have you been, child? I've been calling —"

"I know. I've been away from my phone —"

"*Don't take that tone with me!*" The intensity in her father's voice took Ingrid aback. She'd never heard him sound so upset before, not even when her aunt had died.

"Now, look —"

"Eleanor raised you. She was like a mother to you. *How could you have let this happen?*"

The words stung. Ingrid's breath caught in her throat. "I didn't —"

"You *knew* never to bring ronin into the city. Now look at what's happened. Their blood is on your hands, child. You may as well have killed Eleanor yourself."

"Don't you *dare* —"

"Palmer says you just up and left the house without so much as an explanation. What have you been doing for the last hour?"

"What the *fuck* do you think I've been doing?" Ingrid snapped. "We tracked the killer over half the damned district. And you know where he went? Stirling House."

It took a long moment for Karl to reply. When he did, his tone was strangely subdued. "That's impossible."

"Really? Because I'm standing in the middle of Wyatt Stirling's old sanctum right now."

"You've got no business being in there," Karl said sharply. "You hear me?"

"No business? Do you want me to find out who did this or not?"

"I told you who did this! It was the ronin!" Her father's voice rose with each word, until he was nearly shrieking into the phone. "Liars and thieves, the lot of them!"

"You're jumping to conclusions –"

"Then why have they disappeared?"

Ingrid frowned. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I sent Marcus and your pitiful bunch of volunteers to go and round them up, but their apartment was empty. It looked like they'd never spent so much as an hour there. Marcus thinks they might have stolen a car, so they could be anywhere in the city by now."

Ingrid's eyes went wide. "You did what?"

"I sent Marcus –"

"You don't give orders to my pack," Ingrid snarled. "*Ever*. Do you hear me?"

"If you were a better leader, I wouldn't have to," Karl shot back.

"Says the garou *who got his whole pack killed*." The words came out in a furious rush. She knew as soon as she said it that she'd crossed a dangerous line, but there was no turning back now.

Her father didn't speak for several moments. When he did, his voice was cold. "The ronin are a threat. I want them dealt with. Marcus understands this. Do you?"

The call terminated. It was all Ingrid could do not to throw the phone against the wall.

Anna caught the look on Ingrid's face and came around the desk, her face full of concern. "What's happened?"

"The ronin have gone missing. My father thinks they're behind the killings."

Joshua folded his arms across his chest. "Goddess above," he sighed. "I knew we shouldn't have brought them."

Anna reached out and placed a reassuring hand on Ingrid's arm. "Do you think it's true?"

"Why else would they have disappeared?" Joshua said.

Ingrid scowled. *We were headed for the coast*, Euryale said, back at Stone Mountain. *Catherine's a Muscogee, and her people were from around there, back before the Trail of Tears. A lot of their sacred sites were lost, and she's trying to find them.*

Marcus thinks they stole a car.

Anna squeezed her arm gently, interrupting her thoughts. "What do you want us to do?"

Ingrid considered her pack mates. "Go find Marcus," she said. "He and the newcomers are out hunting the ronin."

"What about you?" Joshua asked.

"I've got to go back to the house and speak to my father," she said.

It was a plausible enough lie given the circumstances. With luck, it would buy her enough time to get to the ronin before anyone else.

Chapter Eight: Green Island Road

Ingrid called the house for a driver to pick her up at Telfair Square. Rush hour was well underway by the time the town car arrived, and the return trip passed at a frustrating crawl. By the time they reached the far end of Bull Street, her patience had worn dangerously thin. She ordered the driver to pull over and left him there, nervous and bewildered, as she turned west, headed for Martin Luther King Boulevard. From there it took another half hour to reach 204 and then turn back east. It was a longer and more roundabout route than she wished, but she didn't want the driver giving her father – or anyone else – a clear idea of where she was heading.

The further she went from downtown the worse traffic became. Every time the car came to a stop she found herself glancing at the clock, gauging how much time she had left. She had to make it back to the caern by sundown, when the garou gathered for the night's hunt. Karl's meddling had undermined her authority with the new packs, and encouraged Marcus's ambitions. She had to reassert her leadership quickly and forcefully, or there was going to be trouble. *As if I didn't have enough of that already*, Ingrid thought sourly, glaring at the line of cars in front of her.

Ingrid's mood only worsened as the stop-and-start procession wore on, until it genuinely felt like she was in danger of losing control. Her driving skills were rusty and the town car handled like a cruise ship, drawing more than one angry glare from the drivers around her. At one point, passing through Oakhurst, she nearly hit a green SUV as she tried to merge into the right lane. The woman driving the SUV blared her horn and darted into the passing lane. As she pulled even with the town car she started yelling obscenities. Ingrid gave the human such a murderous glare that the driver blanched and hit her brakes, dropping nearly a car length back to escape the garou's ire.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as she edged her way eastward into the suburbs. Anger over Eleanor's death was roiling inside her like a storm cloud, eager for release, but after exploring the remains of Stirling House she was even less certain who the murderer might be. She didn't believe it was one of the Stone Mountain garou. Most of them were young, barely past their First Change; the attacks on Eleanor's family suggested a degree of experience and a depth of malice beyond their years.

That left the ronin. Ingrid had been shocked at her father's insistence that they were responsible. Garou society in general viewed ronin with suspicion and disdain, but Karl's hostility verged on outright paranoia. *And their sudden disappearance certainly didn't help*, she mused.

Certainly, it was possible for Kevin to have followed Eleanor home and then attacked her and her family, though why he would do such a thing was a mystery to Ingrid. Was it possible that he had a connection to the Stirling family? It was a matter of record that none of the family survived, but what if someone, a distant relative, had been overlooked?

Ingrid shook her head. It still didn't add up. If the whole point was to slip into Savannah, attack her family and then vanish, why go to all the trouble of talking their way into an apartment and a commitment to help protect the city? And what motive could Euryale and Catherine possibly have for going along with such a thing?

She would know the truth soon enough, if her hunch about their disappearance was correct. One taste of Kevin's scent was all she needed to prove his innocence.

Of course, if I'm wrong, then I'll be confronting a murderer and his two conspirators out in the middle of nowhere, all by myself.

If so, may Grandfather have mercy on the bastards, because I damn well won't.

It was another twenty minutes to get from Oakhurst to the barrier islands. She could feel the change in her bones as she crossed over the marshlands on the Diamond Causeway; this was a different sort of Penumbra, the uneasy border between land and the shifting sea. It was familiar and yet forbidding, full of hidden currents and ancient animosities that her people only dimly understood. The Uktena who lived here centuries ago had made it their home, though Gaia alone knew why.

The traffic started thinning out as she made her way into the upscale suburbs of Skidaway Island. Past apartment complexes and gated communities with their tree-lined streets and McMansions, she turned off 204 onto Green Island Road and followed it southwest.

It had been many years since she'd been this way, and Ingrid was dismayed to see how much new construction had gone up since she was a teenager. Near the end of Green Island Road she turned west, into another subdivision with huge, soulless houses crouched amid the thinning trees. At length, she found the street she was looking for – an essentially private lane that connected Skidaway to three tiny islands sitting along the curve where Burnside River and the Moon River met. The first island supported a private dock, while the second held a house and pool. The third, a narrow spit of tree-covered land, was yet undeveloped. The road ended abruptly there, surrounded by sawgrass and moss-covered trees.

Ingrid saw the other car at once. The yellow Volkswagen had been parked just off the road, in the shade of a scrubby oak. The car had a SCAD parking sticker and its driver's side window was down – or perhaps broken in. The ronin had been put up in an apartment near the college, where a lot of students lived. Unless she missed her guess, this was the car they'd stolen earlier this morning. She permitted herself a grim smile of satisfaction that her hunch had proven correct.

The ronin had gone to Green Island. From where she sat, she could see it through the trees: a densely forested piece of high ground that rose from the marsh almost a mile to the south. She tapped the steering wheel absently, considering her next move. The ronin would be difficult to track through the marsh, as the water would have already dispersed their scents. The smart thing to do would be to wait until they returned to their car and confront them – but there was no way of knowing when that would be, and time was running short.

“Screw this,” Ingrid muttered, getting out of the car. She wanted answers, and she wanted them now.

Tucking the keys in her pocket, the war chief crossed the road and worked her way through the sawgrass on the other side. From the edge of the tree line she paused, surveying her surroundings. The marsh was silent in the waning light – almost eerily so. The only living things she could see were a flock of herons, more than a hundred yards away. Ingrid drew a deep breath and shifted into *crinos* form. She would need the height and the extra muscle to move quickly through the dense grass and the deeper parts of the marsh.

With a last, quick glance back the way she’d come, the war chief crossed the narrow shore in three, long strides and disappeared into the murky water and the tall reeds beyond.

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The going was far tougher than she imagined. Even in her towering, powerful war form, the marsh fought her at every turn. More than once she had to stop and retrace her steps when she came upon a narrow creek or a patch of deeper water, and all the while the sun sank lower in the sky. Finally, after being forced on a long, circuitous route to the west, she clambered out of the muck and into the trees at the edge of Green Island.

Grateful to be on solid ground once more, Ingrid paused amid the shadows to collect her thoughts and sniff the muggy evening air. There was scarcely a breeze, and the only scents she could catch were the stink of mud and rotting plants. Orienting herself as best she could, she set off to the southeast, towards the center of the island.

The Uktena and their Muscogee kin had lived in a settlement on the island – a large one, if the old stories were true. There had been a caern as well, she recalled, but it had gone untended since the Fianna’s treachery, hundreds of years ago. Now there was only wilderness: dense, trackless, and full of thorns.

Ingrid stalked warily through the forest gloom. The island’s wildlife had fallen silent, sensing a predator in their midst. *Was it this quiet when I first got here?* She crouched at the base of a mossy oak, claws digging deep into rough-edged bark. *You’re out of your element. Slow down. Listen.*

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The moments stretched. At first, all she could hear was the pounding of blood in her temples. Then, abruptly, the rhythm changed, and she realized she was hearing the distant beat of a drum.

Ingrid’s eyes snapped open. The drumbeats were coming from up ahead, perhaps thirty or forty yards through the trees. She crept forward, keeping to the shadows, ears straining to follow the sound.

The ground sloped gently upward as she drew closer to the center of the island. She took her time moving through the dense undergrowth, conscious of every small sound she made. Finally, after ten long minutes, the trees started to thin out a bit, and she came to the edge of what appeared to be a wide, bowl-shaped depression, perhaps twenty yards across. There were just enough trees growing within the depression to create a thin canopy overhead, shot through with dusty shafts of sunlight. Within this rough clearing stood three ranks of rough, moss-covered stones, arranged in roughly concentric circles with the largest closer to the center. The drumbeats were coming from within the stone circles, moving slowly from left to right.

Ingrid knelt at the base of a tree and watched for signs of movement. A light breeze rattled the leaves overhead and brought her a pair of scents. *Two females. Euryale and Catherine?* There was also the faint sound of chanting, rising and falling with the wind. She could not make out the words, but the meaning was clear. *They're performing some kind of rite.*

Try as she might, she couldn't see the ronin beyond the inner ring of standing stones. *Got to get closer,* she thought, studying the position of the stones and looking for a way to approach the inner ring unseen.

Crouching low, Ingrid edged forward. *One ring at a time. Slow and easy. They'll never know you're –*

A tremendous blow smashed into Ingrid's side, hurling her backwards against the tree. She hit the trunk with bone-crunching force, causing an explosion of white-hot pain in her shoulder. Ingrid roared in rage and pain as a huge figure reared out of the undergrowth next to her.

The *crinos* garou's fur was a deep reddish-black, like the smoke of a roaring fire. Ingrid caught a glimpse of glowing, green eyes and then a blur of motion. Claws raked at her face; she threw herself to the right, and the blow tore splinters from the tree instead. Ingrid hit the ground hard, touching off another hot flare of pain, but her shoulder was already healing, muscles pulling broken bones back into place. The garou leapt after her, jaws gaping wide. Ingrid bared her own fangs and lunged up off the ground, into his path.

The two werewolves crashed together in a tangle of claws and teeth. Ingrid took a swipe at the garou's head, but he saw the blow coming and twisted in her grasp, avoiding most of the impact. Fangs snapped hungrily, just inches from her throat. She twisted and kicked, knees driving like pistons into the garou's ribs and mid-section. Bones cracked like kindling, and the garou snarled in pain. Then he lunged forward, breath hot against Ingrid's cheek, and his jaws closed around her throat.

Fangs pricked Ingrid's skin. For half an instant she felt a cold rush of fear – and then called to *Donnerkeil*. The grand klaive blazed in her fist, its point pressed against the garou's side.

"Stop!"

Another *crinos*, broad-shouldered and black as night, shoved between Ingrid and her attacker. The werewolf seized Ingrid's wrist and shouldered the other garou aside. *"Peace, both of you!"*

The voice was Euryale's. Though smaller in stature than the giant, green-eyed Fianna, she had a commanding presence and a voice as sharp as any klaive. There was a sprinkling of silver in the black hair of her muzzle and the ruff at the base of her neck, and her left ear was pierced with three polished copper rings. She turned to Kevin, baring her teeth. "*Change, Kevin. Now!*"

The two werewolves locked stares. For a moment it looked as though Kevin might defy her, but then he gave a low *whuf* of assent and his body began to shift. Seeing him begin to change, Euryale let go of Ingrid's wrist and began to do so as well, returning to human form.

It was a gesture of goodwill that Ingrid was expected to reciprocate. After testing her arm and shoulder to make sure they had completely healed, she grudgingly shifted too.

The moment Euryale had completed her change she rounded angrily on Kevin. "What in blessed Luna's name do you think you were doing?"

"You said to keep watch," Kevin said. He rose to his feet. "She was hiding up here, spying on you and Catherine. What did you expect me to do?"

"Not try to kill her, that's for certain!"

Kevin let out a snort. "I was just going to restrain her. If I'd wanted her dead, she'd be dead already."

Ingrid bared her teeth and raised *Donnerkeil*. "The only thing you were going to restrain was my klaive. Between your ribs."

Euryale rolled her eyes. "Ahrouns. Gaia have pity on us all." She glanced down at Ingrid, still prone on the sandy ground. "What the hell are you doing out here, sister?"

"Oh, no." Ingrid shook her head. The Shadow Lord rose to her feet. "You've got this backwards. This is my domain. I ask the questions, and you answer. What are you doing out here?"

The ronin's expression turned guarded. "Helping Catherine pay respect to her ancestors."

Ingrid glared at Kevin. "Paying respect involves setting a guard and attacking other garou on sight?"

"Only the ones sneaking through the shadows and spying on us," Kevin growled back.

Euryale silenced Kevin with a hard look of her own. "Savannah is under attack, right? For all we knew, there were Wyrmspawn out here, too. You live off the land like we do, you learn not to take chances."

Ingrid scowled. It was a reasonable enough explanation, but Euryale's body language hinted that there was more to it than that. "I heard chanting. It sounded like you were performing a rite."

"That was Catherine, not me. Some kind of ancestor rite. You're welcome to ask her about it, but I doubt she'll say much. It's an Uktena thing." Euryale folded her arms across her chest. "How did you even know we were here? Have you been following us?"

"The only question you had when you got here was about transportation," Ingrid replied. "A few hours later, a car was stolen near your apartment. I had a hunch the two were connected, and I figured that if you were heading out of the city, then Green Island was the most obvious destination."

The ronin gave her an appraising look. "So you're familiar with the history of this place?"

"A little," Ingrid admitted. "I know that the massacre happened here, back in 1830. The Stirlings and their kin attacked on a moonless night, killing the Uktena and as many of their people as they could find. The survivors were rounded up by the army and sent west."

"That's it?"

Ingrid shrugged. "Pretty much. Everything else died with the Uktena."

"And the Stirlings." Euryale pointed out.

"I suppose."

The ronin started to ask something, then abruptly changed her mind. "Look, I thought we had an understanding. We would help you patrol the city at night, but what we did on our own time was our business."

"That was before someone murdered seven of my kinfolk this morning."

The news shook the ronin. Euryale and Kevin exchanged looks. Her expression was pained. "You think we –"

"It was a male garou," Ingrid said coldly. She glared at Kevin. "And I've got reason to believe he was a Fianna. So you can imagine the list of suspects is pretty fucking short."

"How do you know it was a garou?" Kevin pressed.

"If you'd seen the victims, you wouldn't have to ask. Besides, I've got his scent."

"If that's true, then you know damn well it wasn't me."

Ingrid paused. During their brief struggle she'd gotten as good of a taste of Kevin's scent as she could ask for. "You're right," she said. "Not that it makes much difference."

"Excuse me?"

"My father's convinced you did it. He's got every garou in the city out hunting for the three of you."

"Because we're ronin?"

"And because you happened to turn up missing right after the murders were committed."

"I told you –"

"It doesn't matter what you told me," Ingrid said, cutting her off with a wave of her hand. "Father's made up his mind. As far as he's concerned, you're guilty."

"But you know the truth." Euryale persisted. "You're his daughter. He'll listen to you."

Ingrid shook her head stubbornly. "It's not that simple. I broke one of the city's cardinal laws just bringing you here. If I took your side now, my own pack might turn against me."

The ronin narrowed her eyes. "I get the sense you're not telling us everything."

"There's a lot of that going around, it seems."

Euryale sighed. "Well, what do you expect us to do? We can't just leave."

"I'm not telling you to go," Ingrid replied. *Though I'm curious why you're not, under the circumstances.* "But you can't return to the city, either. By now, my father's tied you to the car theft and given your descriptions to the cops, so they'll be looking for you, too."

"You've got ties to the police?" Kevin said.

"My family has been in Savannah for more than two hundred years. It's a small Southern city. *Of course* we've got ties to the police."

The ronin shook his head. "You sound like a bunch of leeches."

"You sound like a bog-hound in need of some manners," Ingrid growled, her hand tightening on the grip of her klaive.

"Bright goddess!" Euryale glared at the two Ahroun. "Can we just cool it with the dominance games and focus on the problem at hand?"

Ingrid stared at Kevin a moment longer, then relented with an exasperated sigh. "I'll need a body to convince my people," she said. "Until I catch this bastard, you'll need to lie low somewhere."

"Fine. We can do that."

"Have you got a phone?"

Euryale gave Ingrid a bemused look. "Seriously?"

"Get a phone. One of the cheap, disposable ones. Eleanor should have given you my number before she left you this morning." The thought stung Ingrid with a sudden pang of grief.

"Yeah, I've got it."

"When you get the phone, call me so I can grab the number. I'll be in touch when I know more." She stared up at the fading light leaking through the canopy. "Providing I live through the night, of course."

The packs would be gathering at the caern within the hour. Normally she let the newcomers spend a week patrolling the Historic District, letting them get accustomed to the sights and smells of the city, but they couldn't afford that luxury now. The Wyrmspawn nests surrounding Forsyth Park had to be dealt with quickly, before they grew too strong. She would need every garou available – including her insubordinate beta, Marcus – if they were to have any chance at all of survival.

The war raged on, heedless of the living or the dead.

Chapter Nine: Fault Lines

Donnerkeil slashed and hacked in sizzling, blue arcs, splitting rubbery flesh and cleaving rotted bone with every stroke. The bodies of a dozen Wyrmspawn crowded the dirt floor of the tunnel around Ingrid's feet, but still more came charging out of the darkness to tear at her with filthy claws or jagged teeth.

She met the next charge with a furious howl and a baring of blood-slick teeth. The tunnel was narrow and low ceilinged, and wound like a worm's track through the dank earth. There was not enough room to fight in *crinos* form, but *glabro* still lent her strength and stamina, as well as the garou's swift healing powers. She tore at the face of the first Wyrmspawn to reach her with the claws of her left hand, and split the skull of the next one with her blade. The rest crashed into her like a wave, seizing her legs and fumbling for her arms, trying to bear her to the blood-soaked ground.

Ingrid staggered against the press of bodies but did not fall. Through the red haze of rage she dimly felt the pain of bites along her hips and upper thighs. Claws tore at her chest, leaving shallow, bleeding scratches. A fomor with gray skin and a fanged mouth like a lamprey seized her left arm and clamped its sucking maw onto her shoulder. The weight on her body mounted steadily, bending her backwards like a tree in the grip of a storm.

Another Wyrmspawn lunged for Ingrid's right arm. She buried *Donnerkeil* in the side of the taint's head, its milky eyes fluorescing as the weapon's storm-spirit cooked its brain from the inside out. Ingrid tore the klaive free and hammered the skull of the fomor at her hip with end of the blade's antler hilt. The taint fell, twitching out its death throes. Freed of its weight, Ingrid pinned her other attackers against the wall of the tunnel to her left. She killed the two fomori with quick thrusts to the head and then staggered backwards as the smoking bodies toppled to the floor.

The Shadow Lord spun, seeking more prey, only to find the tunnel suddenly empty. The rest of the fomori had passed her by in the confusion, seeking other foes. The darkness echoed with gibbering cries and the howls of garou as the battle raged within the nest.

"Joshua! Anna!" she shouted into the din.

Instead of one or two large chambers, the nest had turned out to be a collection of small spaces connected by a maze of noisome, dripping tunnels. The taints had attacked from all sides, and the garou had quickly gotten separated in the chaos.

They were right behind me just a second ago. Ingrid tried to think past a rising tide of dismay. Garou fighting as a pack were a fearsome, nearly unstoppable force. Alone, for all their power, they could be overwhelmed and destroyed – something the Wyrms excelled at.

This was the third nest they'd hit since nightfall. Ingrid was determined to clear out the sites closest to the caern, but the fighting had grown more intense with each successive attack. This time, the enemy had been waiting for them, and in large numbers. Her body was stiff and aching from a dozen minor wounds, and she imagined the rest of her pack was in similar shape. Gaia alone knew what shape the newcomers were in.

A cry echoed down the tunnel from where she'd come. It sounded like Anna. Ingrid tightened her grip on *Donnerkeil's* blood-slick hilt and charged off after the sound.

The tunnels were nearly pitch-dark except for occasional patches of luminescent fungus, leaving the garou nearly blind. Ingrid's enhanced senses were strained to the utmost to try and build a picture of her surroundings. She knew where the tunnel walls were by the smell of raw earth and the air pressure against her face. Drafts from left or right revealed intersections. The sudden thumping of footfalls and the stench of corruption warned her that an enemy was near.

A pair of taints stumbled into her path from a tunnel opening to her right; she crashed into them without breaking stride, slashing with her blade. She decapitated one of the fomori with a backhand swipe, and then ripped the other open from shoulder to hip. The bodies toppled in her wake, already forgotten.

"Anna!"

"Here!"

The reply was a deep-throated snarl, coming from just up ahead. Ingrid knew Anna well enough to hear the desperation in her voice.

A moment later Ingrid raced around a bend in the tunnel and into another tangled melee. There was a crowd of foul-smelling taints packed into a small, irregular chamber, throwing themselves at a snarling, snapping figure in its center. Anna was in *hispo* form, turning in tight circles and snapping at the enemy with her powerful jaws, protecting Joshua's prone form.

The fomori were so rabidly intent on their prey that for a handful of heartbeats they didn't realize Ingrid was in their midst. The Shadow Lord was a blur of deadly motion. *Donnerkeil* flared with every strike, until it seemed as though a summer storm had been loosed in the confines of the cave. She split skulls and severed limbs, smashed bones and splashed blood onto the earthen walls. Ingrid howled as the bodies fell around her, and the rest of the taints reeled in terror, scattering down side tunnels to escape her wrath. It took a monumental effort of will to suppress her instinct to chase after them and instead kneel down by Joshua's side.

The Galliard was unconscious and had reverted to human form, leaving him especially vulnerable. There was no way to tell how badly he was injured, but his clothes were tacky with blood. Anna stood to one side, flanks heaving, her snout matted with gore. There were wounds on her right shoulder and down the side of her neck, and her right foreleg was trembling.

"We were separated," Anna gasped in wolf-speech. "By the time I got back to him —"

"Help me get him up," Ingrid growled back. "We've got to get out of here."

Anna blinked in surprise. The very idea of retreat galled Ingrid to the core, but she didn't see any other choice. Trading the lives of a hundred taints for even a single garou was a losing proposition. She gritted her teeth, then threw back her head and howled for the packs to withdraw. Ingrid repeated the howl twice more, then grabbed Joshua's arm. Anna quickly shifted to *glabro*, and between the two of them they began to drag the Galliard back towards the entrance to the nest.

It felt like an eternity of twisting tunnels and brief clashes with fomori before they made it back to the dimly lit chamber where the attack had begun. Ingrid had repeated her call every few yards, praying to the goddess that the other garou would heed her. The sounds of fighting continued, but after a while it seemed as though they were getting closer instead of farther away. Ingrid helped Anna up through the ragged hole in the chamber's ceiling, and together they lifted Joshua's limp form out of the nest. Then the war chief waited in the darkness for the Stone Mountain garou and the rest of her pack to return.

Sara Summer's Run arrived first, stumbling from a side passage with blood on her face. Though in *glabro* form, the look of fear in the Child of Gaia's eyes was easy to read. Tom Three Leagues, her Fianna packmate, came next, snarling angrily back the way he'd come. He was in *hispo* form, an ancient dire wolf of Celtic legend, limping but still eager to fight. Then came Darius, carrying the unconscious form of Natasha Falcon's Cry, the teenage Silver Fang, in his powerful arms. Darius had shifted to *glabro* form to move more quickly through the tunnels, and his fur glistened with fresh blood.

"Is she okay?" Ingrid called.

"She'll live," he said through gritted teeth.

Three fomori burst into the chamber right on Darius's heels, their grotesque faces alight with triumph. Ingrid rushed them, swinging *Donnerkeil* in a sizzling arc. Two of the taints fell, and the third retreated with a gibbering shriek.

Marcus and the pack of Stone Mountain Get appeared moments later, crowding into the chamber from another side passage. They were all in *lupus* form, huge and shaggy but swift, racing out of the darkness with raised hackles and bits of gray flesh matted into their fur.

"What's happening?" her beta asked. "Why are we running?"

Just the sight of Marcus was enough to make her blood boil. He had been late to the caern that evening as well, offering no explanation about his absence earlier in the day. She'd meant to deal with him after the hunt, away from the eyes of the other

packs, but things weren't working out the way she'd planned. Ingrid glanced back over her shoulder. Marcus was lifting Natasha up into the arms of her packmates. If anything, she looked to be in even worse shape than Joshua. "Just go!" she snarled.

Sounds of pursuit came echoing out of the tunnels: manic laughter and maddened screams, thudding footfalls and the thin, scratchy sound of claws raking against packed earth. Ingrid gritted her teeth and backed towards the exit. She wanted to stay and fight, to spill blood and tear the rotten flesh of her enemies. To kill and, perhaps, be killed in return. Just then, with the sting of defeat still fresh, she craved a clean death rather than another moment of uncertainty and loss.

But that was not the privilege of a war chief. A warrior could fall in battle, but a chief must live on, until the bitterest end.

Beneath the hole in the ceiling her body began to change. When the first of the Wyrmspawn burst into the chamber she faced them in her war form. Her howl of rage shook dirt from the walls and stopped the enemy's charge dead in its tracks. Before they could recover she leapt upwards and out of sight.

Ingrid landed on the filthy cement floor of the storeroom above. As soon as she appeared, Darius lurched forward and dropped a steel door – ripped from the storeroom entrance – over the hole with a flat, hollow *clang*.

She crouched in the darkness of the dank room, chest heaving. The mocking cries of the enemy could still be faintly heard from below. The panting of the wounded echoed in the musty air, lost at times beneath the rush of traffic along the street outside.

"Johnny, get over here," Anna said, her voice tense. She had returned to human form and had her hands pressed against Joshua's chest. Her bare arms were red up to her elbow. One of the Get, a young Theurge from Mobile, shifted quickly and scooted over to join her, his eyes wide. She grabbed his trembling hands. "Here," she said, laying them over a pair of deep gashes on the Galliard's shoulder. "Remember what the spirit taught you, Johnny. Concentrate."

Ingrid grappled with her own emotions, struggling to see past her rage and focus on the matter at hand. She tried to let go of her war form, but her blood was still boiling from the fight.

"How bad is it?" She managed to say.

"I can't believe Josh is still alive," Anna replied, her voice tight with strain. "Natasha has a cracked skull and goddess knows what else. It's going to take pretty much everything Johnny and I have got to get them stabilized. The rest we'll have to deal with at the caern."

Curt Hammerfang, the Get pack leader, forced himself to his feet. He was tall and lean, with sun-browned skin and a broad-shouldered, muscular frame. He'd been crouching with his back to one wall, and the cement floor around him was spotted with heavy drops of blood. "My people are *fine*," he insisted. "We can still fight."

"So can we," Tom Three Leagues said through clenched teeth. The Fianna's bearded face was pale, and his right leg was stretched out on the floor in front of him. He looked to his packmate, Sara Summer's Run, for confirmation. "Right?"

"S-sure," the Child of Gaia said. She had a hand pressed to the side of her head. Blood leaked between her fingers and matted her strawberry blond hair. "Just...just give me a minute."

"No," Ingrid said. "We're done here." She spoke slowly, trying to make herself understood, which just angered her even more.

"She's right," Darius said. The Ahroun had shifted back to human form and knelt on top of the makeshift cover he'd placed over the hole. "There's no telling how many are still down there. If we get separated again –"

"We won't," Curt said.

"Nobody asked you, pup," Darius growled back.

The Get shook his head. "This is *bullshit*," he said sourly. "Are we here to fight or not?"

"We've been fighting all damn night," Darius shot back.

"Give me a fucking break! Every time we've got them on the run, *she* tells us to fall back!" Curt jabbed an accusing finger at Ingrid. "We haven't taken out a single goddamned nest!"

"You want to go chasing taints through those tunnels, shit-for-brains? 'Cause that's *exactly* what they want," Darius snapped, though it was clear that even he was uncomfortable with the reply.

"If that's what it takes." Curt shook his head in disgust. "Wotan's nuts, no wonder you people are in such trouble." Abruptly, he turned to Marcus, who had been watching the whole exchange from a shadowy corner a few feet away. "You're the only one who's talked any sense since we got here. What do you think?"

Ingrid was on the Get in a single bound, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and jerking him off his feet. "I don't give a shit what Marcus told you!" she roared, shaking Curt hard enough to crack his head against the cinderblock wall. The words came boiling out in wolf-speech, nearly unintelligible to human ears. She raised *Donnerkeil*. "As long as I carry this, you listen to me, understand –"

"Luna's mercy! *Stop it!*"

Darius shoved between her and the Get, trying to push them apart. Anna was close behind. "Let him go!" she yelled, trying to pry Ingrid's clenched fist open. The shock and dismay in Anna's voice was like a slap in the face. The killing rage that had gripped Ingrid vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Curt drooped like a rag doll in her hand, and there was fresh blood on the wall behind him. Slowly, carefully, Ingrid lowered him to the floor. Anna bent over the young Get, gingerly feeling the back of his skull.

"Is...is he?"

"He'll live," the Theurge said tersely. "We need to get him to the caern. *Now.*"

The rest of the Get were on their feet, faces set and fists clenched. Tom and Sara were staring at her with a mix of horror and outrage. Marcus, his face half-hidden by shadow, wore a carefully crafted expression of concern – but there was no missing the cold, hungry glint in his eye.

He's been whispering in their ears the whole damned time, she thought, and felt the embers of her anger start to flare again. She wanted to storm across the room, grab her beta by the throat and beat him within an inch of his miserable life – but she knew that would only make a bad situation worse. *I'll deal with him later, when he doesn't have an audience to play to.*

Ingrid bent and gathered Curt in her arms. “Let’s go,” she said, and headed for the storeroom stairs. Above was an abandoned store that was just two blocks east of the park. They could be at the Old Fort within minutes.

For several awkward seconds, no one else moved. Ingrid climbed the stairs, feeling her authority grow more tenuous with each step she took.

“Come on, you heard the chief,” Anna said, breaking the tension. “I’ll get Joshua. Darius, you take Natasha. We’ll need someone to go ahead and make sure the route is clear. Sara, you up for it?”

There were murmurs of assent, and the garou got moving. Ingrid passed through the doorway at the top of the stairs, muttering a silent prayer of thanks as they navigated the store’s trash-strewn aisles. For the moment at least, Savannah’s handful of garou were still with her.

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They reached the safety of the Old Fort without incident, dashing across deserted streets under the waning light of the moon. Anna started working on Curt at once, while Johnny was put to work evaluating the condition of the walking wounded. Nearly everyone was injured to some degree, though true to Curt’s word, the Get – and Marcus, who had been assigned as their minder – had come through the battle relatively unscathed. Ingrid found herself wondering if her beta had intentionally held them back to ensure that his allies would be in better condition to support him if he decided to supplant her. Or perhaps he hoped that by holding back during the fight, the taints would take care of her for him? The sudden stab of anger she felt nearly sent her over the edge. Only the sight of Curt’s unconscious body kept her from doing something rash.

Bright goddess, you’re losing it, Ingrid thought. *You’re starting to sound as paranoid as Father.*

After a moment to calm her breathing, she took Darius by the arm and pulled him aside. “Take over here,” she said in a low voice. “I’ve...I’ve got to get out of here for a bit.”

The big Ahroun frowned. “You all right?”

“If I stay here another minute I’m going to skin Marcus and nail his hide to the wall.”

Darius saw that Ingrid wasn’t joking. The Ahroun winced. “Yeah, okay. I hear you.” He nodded at Curt’s prone form. “What do you want me to tell him when he wakes up?”

Ingrid gave his arm a squeeze. “I already feel bad putting you between me and Marcus. I’m not going to have you apologizing for me as well. I’ll talk to Hammerfang tomorrow, after we’ve both had a chance to calm down.”

“Okay, chief.”

Darius nodded a farewell and went over to check on Johnny’s progress. Ingrid surveyed the gathering one last time. Tom and Sara were crouched anxiously next to Natasha. Across the chamber, just at the edge of the lantern light, Marcus and the other Get were whispering intently to one another. The war chief bared her teeth in a silent snarl.

Not here. Not now. It will just end in blood.

Moving as quietly as she could, Ingrid withdrew and slipped out into the night.

• • •

For a while she was just another one of Savannah’s troubled spirits, wandering the deserted streets in the dead of night. Shifting into wolf form, she loped silently through the darkness, letting her mind work as she made her way north, towards the river. She paid homage at several of the city’s shrines, and padded softly through its cemeteries. She listened to the city as it slept, and contemplated its fate.

Curt Hammerfang had been right. They hadn’t won a single battle that night. There were simply too many of the Wyrmspawn, and the garou she had were too inexperienced. The addition of the ronin might have made a difference, but the attack on her kinfolk had prevented that.

The murders might, in fact, be the beginning of the end, Ingrid thought. That one blow, perfectly timed, had cracked the Coastal Empire down to its foundation. There was no reasoning with her father now, not until the killer was caught. Until then, a witch-hunt would rage across Savannah, dividing the garou at a time when they could least afford it.

That left Ingrid with few options, and each one only made the situation worse. All of them came down to challenging her father, a decision that could only end in blood.

Four hours later she was no closer to reaching a decision. The wind had picked up, and a line of clouds was streaming in from the east, like hounds chasing after the moon. Reluctantly, Ingrid turned her steps back towards home.

There was no light above the door to welcome her as she climbed the stone steps. The old doorknob creaked in the predawn quiet, a strangely plaintive sound.

The bench in the vestibule was empty. Ingrid stood over it, listening to the clock tick in the parlor, and suddenly Eleanor’s death was utterly, irrevocably real. The pain was so sudden and sharp it took her breath away.

“Where have you been, child?” Her father’s voice, deep and portentous, rose from the darkness of the study.

Ingrid turned, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “Hunting,” she answered.

“You left your people at the caern hours ago.”

“Is that some kind of accusation?” Ingrid felt her hackles rise. She crossed the vestibule and leaned into the study, one hand on the wide doorframe. “Have you got Marcus keeping track of my movements now?”

Karl Ironhand sat at his antique desk, a silhouette darker than the surrounding shadows. A bottle from the room's sideboard rested on the blotter by his elbow. Judging by the smell of spirits, he'd been working at its contents for most of the night.

"Where did you go?" he asked. The words came out slowly, as though rising from a great depth. "Tell me the truth."

"I took a walk. I needed to think. What does it matter?"

Karl didn't answer at first. She watched him raise a glass to his lips and knock back whatever was left. "That goddamn house," he growled, reaching for the bottle. "Tried to tear it down for years, but those bitches on the Historic Commission wouldn't let me. Why in Grandfather's name did you have to go there?"

Ingrid frowned, stepping further into the room. "The Stirling House? Because that's where the trail led —"

"There's nothing there. I'll tell you that right now. We cleaned it out that very night." Karl poured another glass and knocked it back. "You won't find anything. I promise you that."

"Eleanor's death is connected to the Stirlings," Ingrid pressed. "But there's more to it than that. If someone from the family survived —"

Karl's fist slammed down hard on the desk. "*They're dead!*" he snarled. "We made damn sure of that. Every last man, woman, and child." She could feel the weight of her father's stare as he reached for the bottle again. "You think I'm stupid enough to spare my enemies? Is that what you think?"

"Of course not —"

"You think I'm weak?" Ironhand lurched from his chair. "You think I've forgotten how to fight?" He grabbed his heavy cane and brandished it like a blade. "I'll kill anyone who tries to take this city from me! *Anyone!* You think I won't, you just try me!"

Her father towered over her, cane raised as if to strike. In her human form, a blow to the head could kill her just as easily as anyone else. A deadly calm settled over Ingrid. She became aware of *Donnerkeil's* weight resting in her hand. Silence stretched between them, punctuated by the ticking of the clock.

"I think," Ingrid said carefully, "that you've had enough for one night. Don't you?"

Karl glared at her. After a moment his body started to wobble, forcing him to lower his cane. He leaned against it, his breathing ragged.

"I'm watching you," he warned. "I'm watching every move you make. You hear me?"

Ingrid said nothing. Instead, she reached over and very deliberately plucked the bottle from the desk, then turned her back on her father and headed up to her room.

Chapter Ten: Storm Warning

She woke to a gust of wind and the drumming of rain against the windows. A quick glance at her phone showed that it was the middle of the afternoon, and her head was fuzzy with lack of sleep and her father's whiskey. The sour taste in her mouth reminded her of the confrontation in Karl's study just a few hours before.

Her clothes from the night before were still wadded up in a heap next to the door, and no new ones had been brought up. The old house creaked in the grip of the wind, but its halls were eerily quiet.

After a moment's thought she eased from the sheets and put on yesterday's clothes. The conversation with her father played out again and again in her mind.

That goddamn house. Why in Grandfather's name did you have to go there?

There's nothing there. I'll tell you that right now. We cleaned it out that very night.

You won't find anything. I promise you that.

Ingrid stood at the French doors and looked down on the square as she raked her fingers through her hair and drew it back into a ponytail. Gray thunderheads were piling up over Savannah, driven before a wild east wind. The streets were damp, but the rain was only coming down in fits and starts, a precursor for the real storm to come.

What is it about that house? Ingrid thought. *What did you think I was looking for there?*

She'd wondered about that for hours after she'd returned home, sitting out on her balcony with her father's whiskey bottle in her lap, watching the cloudy skies pale with the dawn. The liquor had offered little inspiration, and there wasn't anyone she could go to for answers.

Except one. It was a long shot, but at this point, she didn't know where else she could turn.

Ingrid checked to make sure she had her keys, and then opened the bedroom door as quietly as she could. If her father was downstairs in the study, she didn't want him wondering what she was up to. With a quick check to make sure none of the house staff were upstairs, she crept down the hall to the attic door.

She climbed the narrow stairs slowly, wincing at each telltale squeak. There was the muted sound of a TV playing on the far side of the upper door; it fell abruptly silent as she began to work the locks.

“Eric?” she called softly as she pushed the door open. The air inside the attic apartment was stuffy, smelling of old paper and animal musk. Wind whistled through the eaves, but did little to stir the turgid air.

A dark figure stepped from behind a bookshelf and into a shaft of dusty light. “Here, cousin.” Eric spread his hands in welcome and offered her a lopsided grin. “I caught your scent on the stairs and thought it best to change.”

Ingrid attempted a grin of her own. “Thank you, Eric. That’s...very polite of you.”

Eric’s grin widened. “Oh! Are you hungry?” The metis limped heavily across the apartment, causing the old boards to creak beneath his tread. He went to a small table crowded with a stack of books and a covered dish on a small, metal tray. “I think there is still some meat left from breakfast.”

“N-no. I couldn’t eat anything. Thanks.” The wind gusted again, and a handful of raindrops spattered against the dormers. One of the dormer windows flew open with a crash, and set books and papers fluttering. Ingrid rushed to close it, stumbling over more books as she went. She pushed the panel shut and fumbled with the latch, hoping that the metis hadn’t taken to sneaking out of the house again.

“There’s a storm coming,” Eric told her, as he limped back across the apartment and started gathering up the windblown papers.

“It’s about time. We haven’t had a decent afternoon shower all month.”

The notion made Eric chuckle. “Afternoon shower. That’s good.” He carried a teetering stack of old tomes to a nearby couch and set them precariously on one end. “Is that an Ahroun thing? Laughing in the face of disaster?”

Ingrid scowled at him. “Disaster?”

“The hurricane, of course.”

“The *hurricane*?”

Eric blinked at her. “Well. Yes.”

“But the hurricane season just started!”

“I thought the same thing. Strange times indeed, eh?”

“How did you find out? A dream? Some kind of omen?”

The Theurge gave her a strange look. “The Weather Channel. It’s all they’ve been talking about since this morning. They say they’ve never seen a hurricane develop so quickly. There wasn’t even a tropical storm out there twenty-four hours ago.”

“And it’s coming here?”

“Oh, yes. It’s expected to make landfall in forty-eight hours. People are starting to leave the city now.”

Ingrid wondered if that was why it was so quiet downstairs. Karl wouldn't evacuate, of course, but perhaps he'd given the staff leave to get their families out of town. "That's going to complicate things."

"How so?"

Ingrid sighed. "Have you heard about what happened to Eleanor?"

"Oh. Yes." Eric's face fell. "Your father was talking to someone on the phone about it. I heard it through the heating grate. If I sit very still and listen closely, I can learn a great many things. Did you know?"

"No. That's...very interesting." Ingrid paused. "Actually, speaking of learning things...I was hoping you might be able to answer some questions I have about glyphs."

Eric's eyes widened. "You mean you...you need my help? Really?"

"I really do."

The metis beamed. "I know about glyphs. I know everything about them! Mother taught me secrets when I was still in my cradle. Did you know?"

"You mentioned that before. That's why I'm here." She looked about the cluttered apartment. "Do you have some paper and a pencil anywhere?"

"Of course!"

The metis limped to a desk near the west dormers and began pawing through the mess covering it. Ingrid looked around for a place to sit, finally scooping a stack of old leather-bound tomes from a dusty sofa and taking their place.

"Here you are!" Eric hurried over and pressed a wrinkled legal pad and half a number two pencil into her hands. "There's no eraser. I'm a bit of a chewer."

"That's okay," Ingrid assured him. Eric's enthusiasm was almost painful to watch. She flipped pages on the legal pad until she got to a reasonably smooth one, then paused to collect her thoughts.

"Eleanor was killed in a very particular fashion," she began. "The way things were arranged leads me to believe that she was being interrogated."

"Interrogated about what?"

"I don't know. But the killer took pains to show her a series of sigils."

Ingrid visualized the glyphs as best she could and tried to reproduce them. The memories were like quicksilver – she could call them up easily enough, but when she tried to focus on the sigils themselves, the details turned slippery. The harder she tried to focus, the worse the effect became.

It took several minutes and numerous failed attempts, but finally she felt like she had an approximation of what they looked like. "This last one here," she said, finishing the sketch. Of the whole series, it was ironically the easiest by far. "We think is a stylized version of a spiral."

Eric studied the drawings for a moment. "Wait here," he said at last, and went to a dusty alcove in the furthest corner of the apartment. Ingrid listened to him shift more piles of books, and then the rattle of a lock. Hinges creaked.

"Here we are!" Eric appeared from the alcove with a triumphant smile, a bulging, leather-bound folio in his hands. He brought it over to Ingrid and squeezed onto the sofa beside her.

"These were my mother's," he said, reverently tugging at the cord that kept the folio shut. Inside was a thick stack of loose, hand-cut pages, their yellowed surfaces covered in neat lines of handwritten text and sketches in a fine, precise hand. As Eric carefully turned each page, Ingrid realized that nearly all of the pages had been charred to some degree.

"Was there a fire at some point?"

"The day Mother died, Karl threw all of her books into the fireplace," Eric replied. "He said he never wanted to see them again. But they were all I had of her. As soon as he left the room, I went and pulled them out. The bindings were destroyed, but most of the pages survived."

Ingrid studied her cousin out of the corner of her eye. "What about you?"

"The burns healed eventually."

The Theurge turned one page after another. Ingrid caught glimpses of detailed rituals, ritual circles and descriptions of their effects. There were fanciful sketches of spirits, and the profile of a young man with handsome features and a patrician nose. There was a page of twisting lines that looked like some sort of maze, and then page upon page of glyphs. Many of the sigils Ingrid recognized, but then Eric reached another section and suddenly the symbols were much more complex and potent. Ingrid felt a chill race down her spine.

Eric perused each page, scrutinizing the glyphs. Finally, he tapped one lightly with the tip of his finger. "Is that one?"

Ingrid grimaced and forced herself to study the symbol. "Yes," she said, quickly looking away. "What... what is it?"

The Theurge's brow furrowed. After a moment, he said, "Do you know what a ritual is?"

"Of course I do."

"No, I mean on a fundamental level. Do you know why ritual is important?"

"I always thought it was something the spirits demanded for their help."

Eric nodded. "That's a common belief. Certainly most rituals invoke spirits as part of the process. But it's got much more to do with the person performing the ritual. Imagine..." He glanced about the cluttered apartment, searching for something to use as an example. "Okay. Imagine you could create a book just using the power of your mind."

"All right."

"Think of all the little details involved. Imagine the paper, and the writing on each individual page."

"I hope this is a short book."

"If that's what you wish," Eric said with a grin. "But there's more. Imagine the binding. The glue and the stitches holding pages and cover together. Now imagine an

image on the cover, and the title. Once that's done, hold it all together in its totality, using just your imagination. Can you do that?"

Ingrid closed her eyes. "More or less."

"Not more or less. Anything other than an exact image, and you'll just end up with a mess of paper and ink."

"Okay, fine." She tried again. "Yes. I can manage that."

"I'm impressed. Now imagine creating a car the same way, or your smart phone."

Ingrid gave him a sidelong look. "It's impossible. There are too many parts, and I don't even know what half of them do."

Eric smiled. "Exactly. That is what ritual is for. It's a blueprint, a set of instructions to guide the shaman in creating the effect she desires. That's also why many of the most complicated rituals invoke the aid of spirits. Sometimes you need to call in a specialist for really detailed work."

"All right," Ingrid conceded. "I can see that. But what does that have to do with the glyphs?"

"Rituals take a great deal of focus. The chants, the dances, the music – they're all just mnemonic devices that help the shaman visualize the effect she is creating. And the more potent the ritual, the more steps, and the longer it takes to complete. But what if there were a way to shorten the process? What if there were specific, unique symbols that were so charged with meaning that they did much of the ritual work for you? That's what a glyph does."

Ingrid's eyes widened. "How powerful can they get?"

Eric searched through the folio until he found a glyph so large and complex it took up nearly an entire page. "With this glyph, your father drove the vampires from Savannah in a single night."

"Wait – my *father* used this?"

"Of course. How else do you think he managed it? The most potent glyphs are almost rituals unto themselves. They require tremendous will and clarity of vision to use, but Karl Ironhand lacked for neither. Mother taught him the rest."

Eric leaned close. "I could teach you, too, if you like. Mother showed me how. Did you know?"

Ingrid's mind reeled at the thought. Just looking at the glyphs felt wrong; the longer she studied them, the stranger she felt, as though the lines on the page were somehow worming their way into her brain.

And yet, if they really are that powerful...

"No." Ingrid stood, tearing her gaze away from the page. "There's something... I don't know, something *wrong* about those things. Can't you feel it?"

"The power of the glyph works both ways, cousin. It facilitates the effects of a ritual by ordering the processes of the mind. That is what you're feeling. Your consciousness is being...expanded."

"I like my consciousness just the way it is," Ingrid said.

The smile faded from Eric's face. "Well. I understand. Still, if you change your mind –"

He was interrupted by the faint murmur of voices. The sound rose to fill the attic space, as though a chorus of ghosts had gathered in their midst. Ingrid frowned. "What in Gaia's name is that?"

Eric carefully set the folio aside and crept softly across the apartment to stand over an iron heating grate set into the floor. "It's your father," he whispered. "He's talking to Marcus and the rest of your pack, down in his study."

Ingrid felt a flash of anger. Her beta had gone too far this time. *We'll settle this tonight*, she decided. *I'll call him out in front of everyone. And if he doesn't back down, then I'll give him the beating of his life.*

She moved closer, trying to listen to the muddled voices. Finally she shook her head. "I can't make out what they're saying."

Eric cocked an ear over the grate. "They've returned with the surviving kinfolk and the rest of the garou from Stone Mountain. They'll be staying here at the house until the ronin are caught."

"The *surviving* kinfolk?"

The metis gave her a bemused look. "Well. Yes. There was another attack sometime before dawn. The new girl – was her name Charlotte? She and her family were killed. Your father was talking to Marcus about it early this morning. It sounded terrible."

"Bright goddess," Ingrid said. "*And he just let me sleep?*"

Eric stared at her. "He thinks you were a part of it, cousin. You and the ronin. You left the others at the caern last night and went off alone, didn't you?"

The floor seemed to shift beneath her feet. "Mother's mercy," she gasped, shaking her head. "This can't be happening."

"Karl was waiting for the rest of the garou to arrive before they came to get you," Eric continued. "Hear that? They're coming up the stairs now."

Ingrid called to *Donnerkeil*. The grand klaive appeared, its crackling aura in keeping with the mounting storm clouds outside. Instinctively, her body began to shift. Eric straightened, a growl rising from his human throat.

I can't do this, she thought, fighting against her mounting rage even as her body took on its war form. *I can't fight them. We're all the caern has left.*

They would reach her room in seconds. Where would they go once they found it empty? *If they check the attic door and find it unlocked...*

"I have to get out of here," she told Eric.

As she spoke, the metis shifted, returning to his natural form. "The window," he said, pointing a wicked-looking claw at the line of dormers along the east side of the house. "It's not sealed. You can get out that way."

There was a crash of splintering wood from below. *Leave it to Marcus to kick down an unlocked door*, she thought sourly. She wanted to go storming down there and raise hell, but she knew that if she did, it would end in blood. Gritting her teeth, she dashed to the windows and pulled the closest one open.

“Cousin?”

Ingrid glanced back at Eric. The metis was still standing by the couch, his long hands clasped anxiously over his chest. Despite his massive frame, his hunched posture made him seem smaller, even pitiful. “Can I come with you?”

The question caught Ingrid by surprise. “What? No –”

“Please. I want to help.” He took a tentative step towards her. “Just...just give me a chance. I know things. I can be useful –”

“No,” she snapped, and immediately hated herself for doing it. *Gaia forgive me, she thought. I know he means well, but I can't have him slowing me down.*

“You...you’ve already been a great help to me, Eric. I can’t ask you to do any more. It’s too dangerous.”

Eric’s ears drooped. “I see,” he said, crestfallen.

“Look, the whole city is against me,” Ingrid continued. “If you leave with me, Father won’t forgive you.”

“You should go.” The metis turned his back on her and limped towards the door. “If Marcus and the others come up here looking for you, I will try to hold them for as long as I can.”

Ingrid watched him go. She tried to think of something to say, anything that might salve his injured pride. But then she heard the attic door bang open, and there was no time for anything but to climb through the window and pull it shut behind her.

Out on the roof, the wind beat at her with its fists. The roof tiles were dark and slick from the rain. Ingrid looked out over the back of the house and her aunt’s tangled garden. She felt dreadfully exposed, easily within sight of the upper floors of the houses to her left and right. All she could do was trust to the power of the shrine just a few yards away, and get to cover as quickly as she could.

She focused her will and shifted back to *glabro*, making herself smaller and lighter than her massive war form, then crouched and slid carefully down the rain-slick tiles to the edge of the roof. From there it was an easy drop to one of the upper-floor balconies, and then down onto the veranda in back. There were figures moving in the solarium at the rear of the house – haggard-looking kinfolk carrying in cots and blankets to transform the large room into a makeshift dormitory. One of them, still wearing his kitchen whites, locked eyes with her and then quickly looked away. Cursing under her breath, Ingrid ran for the far side of the veranda, vaulting the stone balustrade and dropping to the lawn below. From there it was a short dash into the wild maze of the rose garden.

Ingrid prayed to the garden’s spirits as she ran, asking them for aid. She had no idea if they would pay her any mind – or worse, actively hinder her just out of spite. None of the curving paths seemed familiar, so she ran blindly, taking one left turn after another and hoping for the best. After several long minutes, she came around a bend and stumbled out into the center of the garden. Her aunt’s marble features studied her inscrutably from the edge of the pool. Those same features that had once comforted her now seemed sinister and strange.

With this glyph your father drove the vampires from Savannah...

Ingrid took shelter in the shadow of the ruined gazebo and fought to control her breathing. She listened for sounds of pursuit, but the old house and the grounds were silent. Gusts of wind hissed through the thickets, tearing blood-red petals from the rose bushes and scattering them through the air.

She forced herself to take a moment, to pause and to think. She had few options, and none of them good.

Ingrid forced herself to shift, returning to human form. She dug in her pocket for her phone and looked up the number Euryale had left for her. Thinking quickly, she tapped out a text message, and then called the ronin's number.

The phone picked up on the fourth ring. Ingrid heard what sounded like a muffled argument, and then Euryale's voice came through loud and clear. "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon," she said.

"Remember that problem we were talking about yesterday? Well, it just got worse. Have you still got that car?"

"You told us to get rid of it."

The wind shifted. When it did, Ingrid heard the sound of voices at the rear of the house. She broke into a run, circling the pond and heading for the path at the far end. If she was lucky she could make it to the back wall of the house before Marcus and the others could make it through the maze.

"Grab something else, then," Ingrid said. "Check your texts. I need you to meet me at that address in an hour."

"Ah, okay. Care to tell me what the hell is going on?"

The entrance to the path was nearly invisible, a narrow cleft in an imposing wall of thorns. Ingrid took it at a run, letting it take her where she needed to go. "I've got an idea that might clear your names," she said. "But you're probably not going to like it."

Chapter Eleven: The Forlorn Hope

“Attack a Blight. The *four* of us.” Euryale’s dark eyes narrowed in disapproval. “That’s your brilliant idea?”

A gust of wind beat against the side of the old pickup, rocking it on its springs like a ship at sea. The rain had picked up, drumming steadily on the cracked plastic camper top that covered the truck bed. The four garou had taken advantage of its dubious shelter, stretching out their legs and squirming uncomfortably on the bed’s unyielding surface. They’d left the tailgate open, letting in the warm, wet air as they sat by the side of the road just inside the entrance to a small golf course northwest of town. It was getting dark, and sickly yellow sodium lights burned from the towers of the industrial plants north and east of where they sat. A steady stream of heavy trucks came and went along the access road just outside the golf course, as the plants worked feverishly to get as much of their product on the road as possible ahead of the storm.

Off to the north, past the bustling access road and the glare of the hissing lights, the dark bulk of the derelict paper mill could just be seen through the mist.

Ingrid grimaced. She and Euryale sat closest to the tailgate, where they’d been able to survey the distant mill for five whole minutes before the rain had started in earnest. “I didn’t say it was brilliant,” she protested. “Only that it’s *necessary*. That mill is more than a hundred years old. It’s the source of the Wyrms’ power in Savannah. If we can clear it out —”

“A *big* damned if,” Euryale interjected.

“*If* we can clear it out, the fomori in the city will be crippled. We could finally break the siege!”

The ronin was unimpressed. “If it was that easy, why haven’t you done it already?”

“I didn’t say it was going to be *easy* —”

“You know what I mean.”

Ingrid squirmed uncomfortably. “I’ve been trying to go after the Blight for years, but my father wouldn’t let me. He’s convinced it’s a trap.”

“Really? Imagine that.”

Kevin, who was stretched out across the truck bed next to Euryale, had spent the last ten minutes with his head against the camper shell and his eyes shut, as though he were taking a nap. “Look, I get why hitting the Blight is good for you and the caern,” he drawled. “What I want to know is how does it help *us*?”

Ingrid shrugged. “It’s politics. My father’s accused us of murdering kinfolk. Marcus, my shit-eating weasel of a beta, supports the accusations because it gets him control of my pack. Anna, Darius and Joshua are going to be under a lot of pressure to follow Marcus’s lead, and the Stone Mountain garou are going to follow *them*, because they just got here and what do they know? Evidence is optional so long as everyone is willing to go along with the narrative.”

“So we hit the Blight and put a spin on things,” Euryale said.

“Exactly. We pull this off, and suddenly things aren’t so cut and dried. Are we heroes or criminals? We insert that germ of doubt, and suddenly Karl’s support isn’t so secure. For once, the small number of garou in the city works in our favor, because we only have to pull a few of them away to divide opinion and put up a serious challenge to my father’s accusations.”

Kevin frowned. “It sounds like it would be a lot simpler to just challenge Karl Ironhand and be done with it. You Shadow Lords still believe in trial by combat, right?”

Ingrid glared at him. “Wow. Why didn’t I think of that? Just kill my *father* and everything will be all better.”

The ronin shrugged. “I thought you folks did that sort of thing all the time. He doesn’t seem to have any problem killing *you*.”

“You son of a bitch –”

“*That’s enough!*” Euryale snarled, baring her teeth at the both of them. “As of *right now* I have officially hit my limit on Ahroun bullshit. If the two of you want to kill each other, get the fuck out there in the rain and get to it. If not, then *lay off*. Understand?”

It suddenly felt about ten degrees too warm inside the camper shell. The ronin had leaned forward until she was more or less between Ingrid and Kevin, and her hands were clenched into fists. Catherine, sitting in the back corner of the truck bed, watched the confrontation with wide-eyed alarm. Ingrid felt her hackles rise.

Kevin gave her a sidelong look. “Whatever,” he said sullenly, folding his arms. “I thought it was a valid question.”

Ingrid held her tongue. Silence fell, punctuated by the sounds of traffic and the falling rain. Euryale studied the two Ahroun for several long moments before slowly leaning back against the camper shell.

“You mean to tell me that no one’s ever attacked this place?” Euryale said, peering out at the mill through the gathering gloom.

“Not in the twenty-five years we’ve held the city,” Ingrid replied. “The mill shut down back in ’72, after a big industrial accident. The place was so toxic no one

wanted anything to do with it, and my father said the Stirlings just pretended it didn't exist. I've often suspected that the mill was part of some deal the family had with the Wyrms, giving it a foothold in return for Gaia only knows what. Things got steadily worse in Savannah after that, but it really exploded once the Stirlings were gone."

Euryale nodded thoughtfully. "So you've got no idea what could be waiting for us in there."

Ingrid scowled at her. "I've never actually attacked a Blight before. Have you?"

"Once or twice," Euryale said. Her manner was nonchalant, but there was a haunted look in her eyes.

"Then why don't you tell me?"

"If the place is as toxic as you say, then there will be elemental banes. Powerful ones. Packs of scraggs, too, subjugated by the elementals and put to work protecting their sources of power. In the physical realm, you can expect a small army of fomori, fanatically devoted to serving the greater banes."

Kevin straightened. "You've never seen any Black Spiral Dancers around?"

Ingrid shook her head. "No. Never."

"Well, if there are any in Savannah, you're guaranteed to find them over there," Euryale said. "And then, if we're really, *really* unlucky, at the center of it all will be a Nexus Crawler."

Ingrid laughed weakly. "Is that all?"

Euryale leaned in close. "Have I, at any point, given you the idea that this is a fucking joke?" she hissed. "I'm trying to impress upon you the simple fact that if this place is half of what you say it is, the best we can hope for is *certain death*."

Ingrid looked away, out into the rain. She knew that what Euryale was saying was true. She could see it in the ronin's eyes. "It doesn't change anything," she said at last. "My father's declared me an outlaw. I've got nothing left to lose except my honor, and I'll be damned if I throw that away too."

The war chief glanced back at the ronin, studying each of them in turn. "This isn't your caern. I get that. If you don't like your chances, I won't ask you to go. But *I'm* going. It's the only real option I've got."

No one spoke at first. Finally, Kevin cleared his throat. "Sounds like a hell of a fight," he said. "I'm in."

"Idiot," Euryale muttered, more out of admiration than scorn. She glanced meaningfully at Catherine. "What do you think?"

The young garou's face was inscrutable. "It's worth taking a look."

Euryale sighed, shaking her head. "And the elders wonder why we're a dying people," she said. "All right. But since we've established that no one else here has the faintest idea of what we're up against, we're going to do this *my* way."

• • •

The wind grew stronger as night fell, shaking the trees that bordered the golf course and lashing Ingrid's face with stinging drops of rain. The hurricane was com-

ing on fast – too fast, she thought, to be something entirely natural. *Eric said there wasn't even a storm out there twenty-four hours ago. How is that possible?*

She was standing out in the elements, waiting on the manicured lawn of the course just a few yards from the back of the truck. Euryale had asked for a few moments to confer with Kevin and Catherine before they headed for the Blight. Ingrid watched as they huddled together in the back of the truck, speaking in low tones despite the rushing wind and the constant sounds of traffic to the northwest.

Just what kind of rite were you performing out on Green Island? Ingrid wondered. *And more importantly, why?*

It wasn't a question of trusting the ronin. She knew she couldn't trust them for a moment. They had come to Savannah with an agenda of their own, and she didn't believe it had anything to do with helping Catherine honor her ancestors. At the moment, however, they were all she had. *And I'd rather keep you close until I know what you're really after.*

The ronin stirred, climbing out of the truck and into the rain. Euryale turned her face skywards and closed her eyes, her lips moving in a silent prayer. Kevin still had that sleepy look on his face, but there was a tension in his movements that wasn't there before. Catherine paused with her legs hanging over the tailgate, head bent as she pawed through the contents of a capacious leather shoulder bag.

Euryale finished her prayer and went to join Ingrid. "Any second thoughts?" she asked, wiping rain from her face.

"Yeah. I wish I'd brought an umbrella."

The ronin gave her a sardonic grin. "Don't worry. In a few minutes the rain will be the least of your problems."

"So, what's the plan?"

Euryale rested her hands on her hips and eyed the distant mill. "Fomori we can deal with. Black Spiral Dancers we can deal with, as long as there aren't too many of them. The real danger of a place like this isn't the physical threats, but the spiritual ones. We need to cross into the Penumbra and deal with them first."

"And how do we do that?"

"We go after the source of their power," Euryale explained. "If we can cleanse the spiritual corruption from the area, the banes will be crippled, and the lesser spirits may flee entirely. Catherine knows the rite. We just have to get her close enough to use it, and keep her safe until it's done."

Ingrid gave her a dubious look. "And the banes are going to let us walk right in?"

Euryale grinned. "They just might."

The ronin beckoned to Catherine, who came forward and handed Ingrid a small object hung from a raw leather cord. It was smooth and oval, like an oversized scale made from fired clay. A tiny scrap of gray cloth, like a fleck of ash, was embedded into the clay. It felt heavy and cold in the palm of Ingrid's hand.

"There is a fragment of a bane spirit bound into the clay," the Theurge told her. "Wear it around your neck. When the talen is awakened, you will appear as a kindred spirit to the servants of the Wyrms for a short time."

Warily, Ingrid pulled the leather loop over her head. The talen settled against her skin, just beneath the hollow of her throat. "How long?"

Euryale shrugged. "As much as twenty minutes, depending on the strength of the spirit. Really powerful banes might see through it in seconds, while a nexus crawler might not be fooled at all."

"That's...encouraging."

"It's better than charging through the front door, believe me," Euryale said. "If the mill's never been hit before, there's a good chance the Wyrmspawn won't be expecting any trouble. So long as we keep our heads down and don't draw any attention to ourselves, we should be fine."

"And when we find this power source?"

"That's when things get interesting. As soon as Catherine starts the rite, every Wyrmspirit in the area is going to know about it. We'll need to hold them off until she's done."

Ingrid eyed Catherine. "How long will that take?"

"Does it matter?" Kevin said, joining the group. "Anything over five seconds is going to feel like an eternity."

"True enough," Euryale agreed. "Ingrid, you're up front with me. Catherine is in the middle, and Kevin brings up the rear. Don't touch *anything*, and for Gaia's sake don't start any fights until we have to. If one of the spirits tries to interact with us, Catherine will do the talking. Clear?" She waited for nods of assent from the three garou. "All right. Let's get this over with. Catherine, if you'll do the honors..."

"Link hands," the Theurge said. When the garou had formed a circle, Catherine began to concentrate. Within moments, the wind fell silent, and the rain dwindled to nothing. Color faded from the world, replaced by an effulgent silver glow like winter moonlight. From one heartbeat to the next, they had crossed the Gauntlet into the spirit realm.

At once, the ronin began to shift, assuming their war forms. Ingrid looked about, taking in her surroundings. They were in the Penumbra, the dim reflection of the physical realm that existed just beyond the Gauntlet. The shadowy landscape of the golf course surrounded her, bordered by the skeletal outlines of trees, but the access road and the stolen pickup were nowhere to be seen. Off to her left, the train tracks that ran past the golf course could be clearly seen, but not the trains that had been sitting upon them. Only objects imbued with spiritual power – usually accumulated over many years of human interaction – left an impression in the Penumbra.

Ingrid looked in the direction of the industrial park. Just a handful of buildings could be seen, and then only as ghostly outlines against the silver-hued landscape. The mill, however, was as solid and foreboding as its real-world counterpart.

"No need to awaken the talens until we get closer," Euryale said. Her voice echoed strangely in the Penumbra, as though she were speaking from the bottom of

a well. The ronin gripped a double-bladed silver axe in her powerful hands, which seemed to blaze in the cold light of the spirit realm. It was a labrys, a fearsome weapon favored by the warriors of the Black Fury tribe, and to Ingrid's eyes it appeared to be very old indeed. "Everyone keep your eyes open. And if anything should go wrong and we get separated, find yourself a reflective surface and cross back over into the physical realm." She surveyed the small group one last time and sighed. "Gaia have mercy on fools such as we. Let's go."

The garou set off towards the mill, their eyes searching the unearthly shadows for signs of danger. The vault-like silence of the Penumbra was unnerving, and Ingrid kept looking nervously over her shoulder to make sure they weren't being followed. At one point she thought she saw a flash of movement in the trees back at the golf course and she froze, her hand tightening on *Donnerkeil's* hilt. She stared at the spot, trying to catch a glimpse of what might be hiding there, but when nothing moved for several moments she put it down to her imagination and hurried to catch up with the rest of the group.

After what felt like just a few minutes of walking they reached a dark ribbon of road – the fading image of the old dirt road that had served the mill back in the early 1900's. They were close enough now that Ingrid could see the main building clearly, its brick walls swathed in the faded, gray webs of the weaver-spirits that had been drawn to the mill during its working life. Long-abandoned and left to rot, the building was a crumbling ruin, and the spirits had left their webs to seek out newer construction elsewhere in the city.

The ground surrounding the main building was black and crumbly, like packed cinders. Wisps of sickly, greenish-yellow flame leapt from cracks in the sickly earth and drifted in curling ribbons through the air. Strange lights flickered coldly from the mill's broken windows.

Euryale signaled for the garou to halt. She studied the grounds of the mill carefully and then turned to her companions. "No spirits prowling about," she said softly. "That's good. It means they've gotten complacent."

She glanced at Ingrid. "You said there was an industrial accident?"

Ingrid nodded. "One of the chlorine tanks exploded. Thirty workers died."

"That will be the main source of the taint," Euryale declared. "Take us there."

Ingrid's ears went flat. She barely remembered the history of the mill, much less its layout. "It's at the far end of the building," she said. *I think*. "Follow me."

She touched a claw to the talen around her neck and willed the spirit fragment to awaken. At once, the tiny scrap of cloth glowed like an ember, and began to give off a thread of noxious greenish-gray smoke. The smell of it coated the back of Ingrid's throat with the taste of death and decay. She fought the urge to retch. From the looks on their faces, the ronin were doing the same thing.

Ingrid followed the ghost road through the faint image of an old, chain-link fence and up to the far end of the mill's main building. Two huge loading doors, their wooden faces covered in layers of dingy webbing, were parted just wide enough for a *crinos* to slip past. Her hackles rising, the Shadow Lord edged up to the gap and pushed her way inside.

Beyond was a vast loading dock, still piled with fading drums of paper. Webs stretched between the towering stacks of drums, and more wisps of greenish flame flickered and raced across the stained concrete floor.

There was movement up in the rafters. Ingrid peered into the shadows there, and caught sight of a score of large, slug-like creatures, each limned in a pulsing, rusty-colored light.

“Corrosion spirits,” Euryale said, coming up behind Ingrid. “They’re feeding on the metal decay in the building’s girders. Don’t worry about them. They don’t even know we’re here.”

Ingrid nodded and headed down the closest aisle between the drums. The fabric on the talen was smoldering steadily, but for how long? She fought the urge to quicken her pace.

Beyond the dock was another set of smaller loading doors, which opened onto a long, cavernous room crowded with web-coated industrial machines. Corrosion spirits glimmered balefully from many of the massive constructs, covering their scarred, metal sides with faintly glowing trails of rust. A thin, greenish-yellow mist lay ankle-deep through the aisles between the machines.

As they entered the room, something stirred up in the rafters. A long, sinuous shape, like a massive snake, lowered itself from a rusting girder. As it drew closer to the garou, a third of its length opened like an obscene flower, revealing a pulsing, circular mouth filled with jagged teeth. Long, whip-like tentacles unfurled from the edges of the spirit’s fleshy hood, their barbed tips flicking malevolently through the air. Caustic fog oozed from the spirit’s maw, washing over Ingrid.

The spirit edged closer, until the tips of its slender tentacles were just inches from Ingrid’s face. The snake-like body was easily as large as a terrestrial anaconda, and the mouth looked wide enough to swallow a human whole. Ingrid stood completely still, holding *Donnerkeil* in a white-knuckled grip.

Once, twice, the tentacles flicked through the greasy smoke of the talen. The spirit paused, tasting the scent, then slowly withdrew. Ingrid watched it go, not daring to breathe until it had disappeared up into the rafters.

“What in —”

Euryale silenced her with a fierce grip on her shoulder. “Careful who you call upon in a place like this,” she warned. “We’re in disguise, remember?”

“What was that?”

“A caustic bane,” the ronin said. “A young one, judging by the size.”

Ingrid summoned up her resolve and pressed on, keeping a wary eye on the rafters. Her throat was starting to burn from the caustic fog, and it felt like blisters were forming on her legs and feet.

The garou made their way down the central aisle between the old rolling machines, alert to the slightest hint of movement. Several times Ingrid heard the scrape of chitin and the hissing of voices, but it was hard to tell where the sounds were coming from. There were dozens of narrow alleys running between the machines, creating a maze of passageways that a pack of spirits could use to their advantage.

Ingrid glanced back at Euryale. "Something is stalking us."

"Probably scraggs," the ronin growled. "Keep going," she said, tapping the talen around her neck. "We're running out of time."

They moved from one room to the next, deeper into the depths of the mill. Ingrid caught glimpses of more elemental banes coiled like snakes up in the cobwebbed rafters. The burning in her throat had moved into her lungs, and pain lanced through her legs with every step. And the scraggs were moving closer, pacing the garou along side passages to left and right. She saw their angular shadows cast against the inner walls of the mill: horned heads and bladed arms, spiked legs and lashing tails. Sometimes they climbed atop the derelict machines and scuttled down the frayed conveyor belts, hissing and snarling to the rest of their pack.

The poisonous mist was getting thicker. Ingrid coughed, tasting blood in her mouth. She turned to check on the others, and found Catherine leaning against Euryale. The Theurge was panting, and there were open sores on her muzzle and down her neck. Euryale and Kevin were clearly suffering as well, their eyes glassy with pain.

"Is she going to make it?" Ingrid said.

"She'll be fine," Euryale said through clenched teeth. "Keep moving."

The scraggs were very close now. Ingrid could hear them just on the other side of the machines to left and right. Up ahead was another set of loading doors, but these were scorched and splintered, as if from an explosion.

Ingrid limped forward, breathing in shallow, painful gasps. She was just short of the loading doors when a pair of elemental banes uncoiled from the ceiling girders and descended upon the garou. These were much larger than the one they'd encountered before.

"Ignore them," Euryale said tightly. "We're almost there."

One of the banes let out a warning hiss as the garou sidled through the gap in the broken doors. The room beyond was a scene of devastation. Ranks of giant metal tanks had once been arrayed along the length of the huge room. One or perhaps more of them had exploded, filling the room with debris and poisonous gas. The rest of the tanks had toppled over, spilling their contents as well, which over time had eaten through the room's concrete floor. Now a massive hole, lined with twisted metal and hunks of broken stone, opened onto the basement floors below. Clouds of gas roiled in the depths, lit from within by a pulsing, greenish glow.

Ingrid came up short at the edge of the pit. There was no telling how far down it went: at least thirty feet, perhaps more.

"What now?"

Euryale joined her at the edge of the hole, still supporting Catherine. Behind them, the two banes were forcing their way through the doors, hissing angrily.

"We go down," she said grimly. "Down into the breach."

Edging forward, Ingrid tested the broken concrete with her foot. Though seemingly precarious, the rubble was solid enough to take her weight. Using her free hand

to steady herself, she climbed down into the fog with Euryale and Catherine close behind. Kevin brought up the rear, with the hissing banes close behind.

The mist burned Ingrid's nose and brought tears to her eyes. After an agonizing few minutes, she reached a kind of rough ledge, perhaps fifteen feet down. As near as she could tell, she'd reached the floor of a sub-basement, and the bottom of the hole was another floor below. Gritting her teeth, Ingrid bent her knees and jumped.

She fell another fifteen feet and landed roughly on a pile of crushed metal and broken stone. The sickly light was pulsing from a point on the floor just a few feet away, bright enough to shine through the caustic fog that hung thickly about the space.

Euryale, Catherine and Kevin landed just moments later. Angry hisses echoed through the fog above them.

The ronin lowered her snout to Catherine's ear and whispered something. The Theurge coughed, showing red-stained teeth, and nodded emphatically in reply. Euryale let go of Catherine and stepped away, readying her axe. She stared up into the mist, waiting for the approaching banes, and bared her teeth in a savage grin. "Get ready."

Ingrid limped closer to Catherine, who had knelt and was scratching a set of glyphs into the concrete with a claw. Her breath came in searing gasps, and her nerves were aflame.

The banes dropped down through the fog, barbed tentacles lashing furiously. They reared like cobras above Euryale and Kevin, their hisses rising to a venomous shriek. One of them lunged at Euryale. She responded with a howling battle cry and buried her silver *labrys* into what passed for the monster's face.

Kevin howled at leapt for the second bane, sinking his talons into its bulk just behind the fleshy hood. The spirit thrashed, spitting gobbets of venomous bile, but the ronin's weight dragged it down to the floor. Heavy, serpentine coils more than thirty feet long crashed down around Kevin and squeezed tight, seeking to crush him even as he tore the creature open.

Catherine began her rite, head up and arms raised, her voice filling the chamber. At once, the caustic fog thinned, as though scattered by a sudden breeze. Ingrid blinked away tears of blood and leapt at the bane constricting around Kevin, howling out a war cry of her own. *Donnerkeil* flashed, and her blade bit deep, nearly severing one of the spirit's coils. Kevin leapt clear, his claws and chest splashed with the bane's acidic blood, but his feet had no sooner touched stone than he was leaping back into the fray again, slashing at the spirit from a different angle. "*Watch it!*" he cried.

Ingrid heard the warning and ducked just as the bane lunged at her. Barbed tentacles lashed at her shoulders, flaying off skin and fur in jagged strips. She slashed at them with her *klaive*; yellow pus splashed across her shoulder, and the spirit recoiled with a shriek. Then Kevin struck at the same terrible wound that Ingrid had made in the creature's side, digging in with his claws and tearing the bane in two. The severed parts thrashed for barely a second before the spirit dissolved into a cloud of poisonous vapor.

Euryale was still fighting the second bane. The spirit bore half a dozen terrible wounds from the garou's axe, and was visibly weakening. Ingrid realized that the yellow glow filling the chamber was diminishing, like a flame starved of air, and the mist had been reduced to thin, roiling tatters. Catherine's voice was stronger now, rising in volume as she continued the Rite of Cleansing.

Then came a chorus of whistling shrieks, and a rattling tide of bone that came rolling down the hole towards them. A dozen scrag's came bounding down the sides of the hole, mandibles clashing and bladed arms hissing through the air.

Three of them were on Kevin before Ingrid could shout a warning. But the ronin had heard them coming, and was already moving even as the first blades darted for his throat. The sweep of a powerful hand sent one of the scrag's sideways, crashing into the path of its packmates; a second blow, precisely aimed, crushed its skull. The other two went past Kevin and landed in a heap. The ronin sprang on them and tore a scrag's head from its armored shoulders before the spirits could disentangle themselves.

Euryale screamed an oath and swung her *labrys*, catching the bane in the side and cutting it nearly in two. The spirit wailed and turned to vapor. Five scrag's were bounding across the broken stone towards her, while the rest came at Ingrid. Exultant, the Shadow Lord bared her teeth and prepared to charge.

She felt the bane coming before she could see it. The tendrils of mist scattered, driven before a spectral wind. Then came the furious shriek, like a ruptured boiler, loud enough to make the spirit world tremble.

The bane was enormous, rushing down the hole at the garou like an oncoming train. Its tentacles raked the sides of the pit, showering friend and foe alike with broken rubble as it plunged straight for Catherine.

Ingrid had barely a moment to react. Without hesitation she leapt straight at the oncoming spirit, aiming for its tooth-lined maw. She struck with bone-breaking force; for all its fleshy appearance, the bane felt solid as oak. At the moment of impact, Ingrid watched her weapon-arm sink up to her shoulder down the creature's tooth-lined gullet. The point of her blade struck the creature's throat, digging deep, and there was a hungry crackle as *Donnerkeil's* storm-spirit vented its rage against the bane.

A gust of poisonous fog blew into Ingrid's face as the bane's maw closed about her arm and then recoiled in agony. Hundreds of jagged teeth tore into her flesh, and the whiplash of the spirit's motion threatened to tear her arm from its socket. Tentacles like steel cables stabbed at her as the bane's hood snapped shut. Through the pain, she felt herself being drawn upward as the creature recoiled from the attack. Ingrid howled in rage as the spirit savaged her arm, but she drove the blade deeper with all of her might.

The bane thrashed, smashing itself against the side of the hole in its torment. Ingrid twisted the klaive deeper, and abruptly the maw relaxed. She started to pull her mangled arm free, raking *Donnerkeil* down the spirit's throat as she did so – but then a trio of tentacles smashed into her back, shoving her head first into the bane's

mouth. Hooked teeth dug like knives into her side, dragging her forward. In two swift gulps the spirit swallowed her whole.

Pain crashed over her like a wave. Teeth raked her from every angle, until it felt as though she were being ground apart. Furious, Ingrid lashed out with tooth, claw, and blade, raking at the spirit's insides even as it tried to devour her. Flesh parted under the onslaught, and she forced herself blindly through the tear, hacking her way through the bane's corpus.

Ingrid stabbed and tore – and suddenly she was falling, flung from a jagged rent in the spirit's side. She opened her eyes just in time to see the concrete floor rushing at her; she hit hard and rolled, tumbling for a dozen yards until she crashed into the side of a derelict paper press.

The bane's agonized bellows cut through the fog of shock and pain that threatened to overwhelm her. Ingrid blinked, trying to gather her wits. Her body was pulped and broken, but she could feel it trying to heal itself. The bane's struggles had lifted her clear of the hole and flung her partway back the way she'd come. Sounds of fighting still echoed from below, but the yellow light had gone out, and the mist all but vanished. The giant bane she'd fought still survived, but its wounds were terrible. It lingered above the hole, screeching in frustration, frantic to save the source of its power yet fearful of the garou's terrible wrath.

Ingrid managed a bloody, wolfish grin, but her triumph was short-lived. There were sounds of movement all around her: bone scraping against metal and stone. More scraggs were coming, drawn by the bane's distress and the ritual unfolding below.

She clenched her teeth and tried to move, but her limbs were weak and her movements disjointed, like a broken marionette. There was a clatter above her as a scrag leapt atop the paper press. It saw her and let out a malevolent hiss. Other scraggs responded; they rushed towards her from all sides, hungry for slaughter.

Ingrid managed to raise *Donnerkeil*. She caught her reflection in the blade's polished silver surface, and remembered what Euryale had said. *If anything should go wrong and we get separated, find yourself a reflective surface and cross back over into the physical realm.*

She stared at the blade and concentrated, and the world went dark around her.

Chapter Twelve: The Prodigal

The physical world swept over her in a gust of wind, water, and the scent of damp stone. Ingrid found herself lying in a pool of rusty water, her back to the slumped wreckage of the paper press. Outside, the storm was gathering strength. Streamers of water fell from holes in the mill's ceiling, pattering against steel and concrete.

Biting back a groan, Ingrid rolled onto her knees and struggled to breathe. The pain in her lungs and throat was fading. Her bones ached, but at least they felt whole once again.

There was no sign of the ronin. She glanced back at the jumble of fallen chemical tanks – now reduced to little more than rusting shells – and the rubble-lined pit. Had the rite been successful, or was there a desperate battle unfolding just a few yards away, unseen and unheard by her physical senses?

Got to go back, she told herself. They need you. Get on your feet.

Her strength was returning. With an effort of will, she forced herself to her feet. Blood and water ran in rivulets from her mangled flesh, but the wounds were stitching themselves together as she watched. *Another minute and I'll be whole again, she thought. But do I dare wait that long?*

As she was deciding, a huge figure leapt atop one of the paper presses nearby and sniffed the damp air. She saw at once that it was a *crinos* garou, silhouetted in the sickly glow cast by the distant industrial plants. As the massive head turned her way she found herself staring into a pair of glowing, green eyes.

Ingrid straightened, sighing with relief. "I was just about to go back for you," she said, walking unsteadily towards the Fianna. "Where are the others?"

The garou leapt from the top of the press. A cry of rage – part howl, part tormented shriek – ripped through the ruined space. Ingrid caught a flash of white teeth and upraised claws and realized her peril just a half-second too late.

She threw herself backwards as the killer struck. The swipe of the Fianna's claws missed her throat by inches and flayed open her shoulder instead. Fiery pain stoked the furnace of her rage and lent her a burst of strength; she lashed out with

Donnerkeil, aiming for the garou's chest, but she was off-balance and the swing went wide. Another blow smashed into her side, ripping open freshly knit wounds. She staggered, roaring in anger.

Hard-won experience told her to retreat when every instinct shouted for her to attack. She backpedaled, swinging wildly with her *klaive* to get some distance between her and her foe. The *Fianna* came after her relentlessly, easily dodging the un-aimed blows. A deep, dry laugh echoed from the mill's rafters.

"Praise be the Destroyer," the garou rasped. "This is sweeter than I ever imagined." He gave Ingrid a toothy leer, eyes blazing with triumph. "Dweller in the Darkness, thank you for this gift."

Ingrid halted her retreat and lunged forward with all her strength, thrusting her *klaive* at the center of the *Fianna's* chest. But the garou was not surprised by the sudden move; like a serpent he bobbed to the right, out of the path of the blow, and raked her outstretched arm with his claws. Another blow, too fast for the eye to follow, struck her wrist and sent *Donnerkeil* spinning into the darkness.

A clawed hand closed around Ingrid's throat. The *Fianna* pulled her towards him. His breath reeked of carrion, and his fur was matted with mud and filth. The scent of corruption oozed from his skin.

"You look just like her," he snarled. "Or perhaps it was you I dreamt of all along. Perhaps the Dweller was showing me your face, so I would know you when the day of reckoning came." The *Fianna's* grip tightened, claws digging into her neck. "Assassin. Thief! Whore!"

Ingrid growled and clawed at the *Fianna's* face. The garou brought up his left arm to block the blow; when he did she brought up both feet and planted them in the garou's chest. She kicked herself free of his grasp and hit the concrete hard, rolling across the floor. The *Fianna* charged after her. When he did she rolled into a crouch and clawed at his legs. The swipe struck the garou's right thigh, but her wounded arm betrayed her, leaving only superficial cuts behind.

A tremendous blow struck her on the side of her head, shredding her cheek and fracturing bone. For a moment the world dimmed, and the floor seemed to tilt beneath her.

When she regained her senses she was lying on her side, the taste of her own blood filling her mouth. The *Fianna* was walking towards her, an icy glimmer of silver in his hand.

"I am going to send you back to your murdering father a bit at a time," he told her. "You'll suffer for weeks. Or –" he brought up *Donnerkeil* – "you can tell me what I want to know, and I'll end it quick."

Ingrid glared up at him. "I don't know what in the hell you're talking about," she growled, trying to push herself upright.

"Stop lying!" he cried, kicking her in her injured shoulder and knocking her onto her back. "I want what you stole from me, you Shadow Lord bitch."

His foot came down on Ingrid's left wrist, pinning it to the floor. The *Fianna* bent over her, *Donnerkeil's* point glinting just inches from her face. "I already know

where the Dweller waits. Oh, yes. I saw it in my dreams. What I need now are the keys, and you are going to tell me where they are.

"But before we go," he said, staring down at her trapped hand. "We're going to leave a little piece of you for your pack mates to find." The klaive rose and fell in a blurring arc.

"*Donnerkeil!*" Ingrid screamed, flinging up her right hand, and there was a flash as the blade vanished from the Fianna's grip and appeared in hers. With a savage roar she drove its silver point into the killer's side.

Again, her mangled arm failed her; the wound was deep but not fatal. The Fian-na leapt back, howling in agony, a clawed hand pressed to his abdomen. A challenging snarl rose in reply from the direction of the pit at Ingrid's back. The killer looked past her, at the source of the sound, and his face became a mask of fear and thwarted rage. He gave the Shadow Lord a brief, hate-filled glare, then leapt for the mill's steel rafters and out through a gaping window frame, into the rain-swept night.

The ronin reached her moments later. Euryale leapt atop one of the derelict paper presses and stared after the Fianna, her *labrys* held before her in a two-handed grip. Kevin padded further on into the shadows, ears erect and nose sniffing for other threats. Both of the garou were wounded, torn by teeth or claw or marked by the touch of a blade, but the injuries seemed minor and were healing even as Ingrid watched.

A figure knelt beside her. Ingrid glanced up and saw that it was Catherine. The Theurge was unhurt, but even in *crinos* form she looked drained after the rigors of the cleansing rite. She began to probe gently at Ingrid's injuries.

"I'm fine," Ingrid rasped, trying to push Catherine's hands away.

The frown that the Theurge gave her reminded her instantly of Anna. "A bane literally chewed you up and spat you out."

"I wasn't spat out," Ingrid protested. "Not exactly. As for the chewing..." she grimaced. "Yeah, okay. You got me there."

Euryale glanced over her shoulder at Ingrid. "That was the stupidest, most reckless thing I've ever seen – and keep in mind I've been travelling with Kevin for three years, so that's saying something."

"It was very brave," Catherine declared. "Like something out of the legends. She saved my life. Probably all our lives."

"Never mind that," the Shadow Lord interjected. "What about the rite?"

Euryale ignored her. Kevin returned, padding silently out of the darkness. "Anything?" she asked.

The Fianna shook his head. "The place is deserted."

"Damn it."

Ingrid scowled at the ronin. "What does that mean? Did the rite work or not?"

"Yes, it worked," Euryale said irritably. "Catherine severed the link to Malfeas and deprived the spirits of their source of strength. The surviving banes fled, and the scraggs with them. The plan went perfectly."

"Then why are you acting like that's a bad thing? We might have just broken the siege!"

Euryale leapt down from the ruined machine and landed at Ingrid's feet. "Look around you, Ingrid. Where are the Black Spiral Dancers? Where are the breeding pits? This place ought to be crawling with Wyrmspawn." She spat into the dust. "This isn't a siege camp. In fact, I'm starting to think there was never a siege at all."

"I don't understand."

The Black Fury reached down and gripped Ingrid's uninjured arm. With Catherine's help, they pulled the Shadow Lord to her feet. Euryale's eyes were sharp as flints, but there was a measure of sympathy in her reply.

"Someone's been lying to you."

• • •

Downtown was in chaos as the people of the city scrambled to prepare for the storm. Tourists and those residents who could afford to leave sat in long lines of traffic on the highway, while the side streets were packed with locals hunting for plywood, sandbags, food and liquor. It took two hours to travel as many miles into downtown. After the fourth traffic jam Euryale lost patience and they abandoned the stolen truck, continuing into the city on foot.

Ingrid led them through the rain to Telfair Square, searching every side street and alley for signs of pursuit. The killer was wounded but still dangerous, and now there was Marcus and the rest of the city's garou to consider. She had no doubt that they were hunting for her and the ronin even now. Though the rain would wash away their scent, a chance encounter – especially near one of the shrines – was a very real possibility.

Fortunately, the square was empty when they arrived, and the garou took what shelter they could beneath the dripping branches of a spreading oak. Catherine sank immediately to the soggy ground and closed her eyes in meditation, drawing from the spiritual energies of the shrine. She would need to regain her strength before attempting to heal Ingrid's injuries.

The Shadow Lord leaned against the rough, wet bark, hair plastered to her face, and tried to think of anything besides the burning pain that wracked her from cheek to hip. Kevin moved a few paces away and stood watch, his restless gaze roaming the square and the surrounding streets. Euryale settled onto her haunches between Catherine and Ingrid, her expression troubled.

They had made the journey from the paper mill in near silence; now, with nothing left to do but wait, Ingrid could no longer ignore the questions worrying at her mind.

"None of this makes any sense," she said. "We've been under attack for twenty-five years. The Wyrmspawn *had* to have come from the Blight."

Euryale shook her head stubbornly. "You're going to have to trust me on this, sister. The spirits there were potent, but a war camp would have been a whole other matter entirely. After a quarter-century that place should have been a fortress."

"Why would my father lie about such a thing? What possible reason could he have?" Yet even as she voiced her denial, she recalled her talk with Karl in the garden, just two nights before. *The war serves our purposes...so long as it can be kept under control.*

"All I'm saying is that the fomori are being drawn here by something else." Euryale stared up at Ingrid. "Anything come to mind?"

"Besides Stirling House?" Ingrid shook her head, dismissing the notion at once. If the place had been tainted enough to become a Blight, they would have known it the moment they'd stepped inside. Then she recalled her battle with the Fianna, and frowned. "He said something about a dweller."

"Who?"

"The garou at the mill. The Fianna. He kept referring to the 'Dweller in the Darkness'."

Euryale's eyes narrowed. "Any idea what that might be?"

"No, but he certainly seemed to think I did." She shook her head. "He called my father a murderer, and said he wanted what I'd stolen from him. But then he also had me confused with my aunt, who's been dead for twenty years. He's obviously insane."

"Or obsessed," Euryale mused. "Your aunt was kidnapped by the Stirlings, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's a Fianna. Could he be a Stirling himself?"

Ingrid wiped rainwater from her eyes, wincing as she pulled at the scabs across her cheek. "I don't see how. Father said there were no survivors."

Euryale raised an eyebrow. "Your father. The one who lied to you about the Blight."

Catherine let out a long, slow breath and rose gracefully to her feet, then went to Ingrid and laid her hands on the Shadow Lord's ravaged shoulder. She began to chant softly to herself, and healing energies suffused Ingrid's body.

The Shadow Lord sighed. The popping of nail guns echoed across the square as people worked feverishly to get plywood sheeting in place before the hurricane hit. The skies flickered, and thunder boomed to the east.

"I've got no idea if my father told me the truth about the Stirlings or not," she said, turning her face to the stormy sky. "But I can think of someone who might."

• • •

The Marshall House was the oldest hotel in Savannah, and had at times been used as a hospital, both during the Civil War and through the course of two terrible Yellow Fever outbreaks. Its reflection in the Penumbra was solid and substantial, its brick walls and second-story balcony wrapped in the silvery webs of Weaver-spirits. The pattern-spiders stirred as Ingrid approached, a few even emerging from their burrows and raising their forelegs threateningly. She returned their baleful stares

with one of her own and showed them *Donnerkeil*, and the spirits scuttled back into the safety of their webs.

The balcony railing was an easy leap for her in *crinos* form. She swung her legs over the rail and crouched low, studying the windows that opened at regular intervals along the balcony's length. Ingrid counted them off from left to right, and when she reached the ninth one, she edged forward and slipped into the room beyond.

The reflection of the hotel room was muddled, with fading impressions of a four-poster bed, wardrobe, and washing-stand overlaid with the hazy barriers of new walls, a smaller bed and more modern amenities. Making sure she was on the right side of the room's newer floorplan, Ingrid stared into the klaive's polished blade and willed herself back into the physical world.

She found herself in a narrow space between the window and the room's queen-sized bed. A wing-backed chair was tucked into the corner just behind her, and a small table was set against the wall to her left. The room's single door was set in the wall opposite, and an antique wardrobe stood alongside. A TV on the wall facing the bed was turned to the Weather Channel. The sound was turned down, but the forecasters were clearly discussing the oncoming hurricane. A radar image showed the storm's track aiming straight for the city. The crawl at the bottom of the screen read SAVANNAH RESIDENTS URGED TO EVACUATE AS 'STORM OF THE CENTURY' LOOMS.

The new walls in the room enclosed a small bathroom to Ingrid's right. The whirring of a fan and the sound of running water came from within.

There was a stack of folders and a pair of notepads arranged neatly on the table-top. Ingrid shifted back to human form and turned on the table lamp, then began examining the folders in turn. There were copies of police reports, newspaper articles – even photos of several of the crime scenes. Several gory photos showed victims that had been torn apart; others showed men and women slumped on the floor of their homes, shot neatly through the head.

The bathroom door opened. Nathan Carter stepped out, dressed in a white bathrobe, scrubbing at his wet hair with a towel. He saw Ingrid and jumped, letting out a startled cry. "Jesus! How the hell did you get in here?"

"Surely you can do better than that, Mr. Carter," Ingrid said coldly. "You're a trained journalist, after all. Focus on the details. Ask me *why* I'm here, and what I'm doing carrying this *very* large knife."

She raised the klaive. Carter's eyes widened.

Ingrid gestured at the foot of the bed. "Have a seat."

"Can...can I get dressed first?"

"No."

"What about my glasses?"

"You don't need glasses to talk." Ingrid edged forward, her expression hard. "Sit. Down."

Carter hesitated for a moment, weighing his chances, then his shoulders slumped in surrender and he sidled to the foot of the bed. "How the hell did you find me?"

"I made a few phone calls. You should know by now that the Reinhardt name opens a lot of doors here in Savannah."

She glanced at the table and picked up one of the folders. "This is some riveting political analysis, Mr. Carter. Your editors at the Atlanta Business Journal must think the world of you."

"It's a legitimate line of inquiry," Carter said defensively. "I think candidates have a right to know that the man who's orchestrating their campaigns also happens to be a mass murderer."

"Do you happen to have any proof of that, Mr. Carter?"

"You think I'd tell you if I did?"

Ingrid took a single step forward, bringing up *Donnerkeil* in a smooth, swift arc. The point of the klaive sank an eighth of an inch into the skin just below Carter's left eye. The human gasped, trying to flinch away, but Ingrid moved with him, pressing the blade into Carter's cheekbone. A tiny teardrop of blood coursed down his cheek.

"As a matter of fact, I do," she said in a quiet, measured voice. "And if I don't like what I hear, I'm going to start spreading you all over these walls. Do you hear me, Mr. Carter?"

"Y-yes."

"Now, judging by that stack of paper over there, I'm guessing you've been digging into this story for a while now. Am I right?"

Carter started to nod, then remembered the blade in his face and thought better of it. "S-since April, when my editor first suggested interviewing your father."

"Then I expect you know everything there is to know about the murders."

"If you say so."

"How many people died that night, Mr. Carter?"

The reporter blinked. "Uh...twenty-seven. Most were at Stirling House. Five others who worked for the family were killed in their homes between 9:00 PM and midnight."

"And none of the family survived?"

"No. That's...I mean, that's common knowledge. The police found the bodies of all eight members of the family at the house. Most of them had to be identified by their dental records. At the time, people speculated that Wyatt was smuggling drugs into the country through the Port of Savannah, and he made some nasty enemies down south." He eyed Ingrid warily. "Then there were rumors of bad blood between the Stirlings and the Reinhardts, though nobody seemed to know the reason why."

Ingrid withdrew her klaive. "What about the house staff?"

"The servants? All dead. The ones at Stirling House were mangled nearly as badly as the family members. The others were shot to death." Carter reached up with a trembling hand and wiped away the blood, leaving a red smear across his cheek.

"One of the last ones to die, a young guy by the name of Caleb Morris, was supposed to be out of town that night, but got in a fight with his girlfriend at the last minute and decided to stay home."

"Girlfriend?"

"Yeah. Emily something...Carstairs, I think. She was from Athens, and had been studying illustration at SCAD. Anyway, she was home on summer break, and he was planning on driving up to see her, but they got in a big fight over the phone and he decided not to go. Three hours later, he was dead." He shook his head. "Never got to see his kid."

Ingrid straightened. "What?"

"Emily had found out she was pregnant. That's what the fight was about."

"And how do you know all this?"

"It was in the case file. The police interviewed her after checking Morris's phone records."

I want what you stole from me, you Shadow Lord bitch.

"Damn." Ingrid tried to think through the implications. "You said she lived in Athens?"

"Yeah. Dropped out of SCAD after Morris died, and never set foot in Savannah again. Stuck close to her parents because she needed the help raising the kid."

"So you checked up on her?"

"Sure I did. She was the closest thing to a witness in the whole damn case. But I was too late. She was murdered back in '04." Carter's gaze fell to the blade in Ingrid's hand. "Somebody broke into her apartment and tore her apart, just like the Stirling murders."

"What about the child?"

Carter sighed. "Nobody knows. He just vanished. According to the police report, he was last seen walking from school that day, but there was no indication he ever made it home. The cops thought he was a runaway at first, then a possible suspect, then finally a victim, just like his mother."

I suspect it was a combination of all three, Ingrid thought grimly. She did the math. The boy would have been around fifteen when his mother was killed. Right around the time of a garou's First Change.

If he grew up in Athens, someone damn sure knows what happened to him.

"Did this kid have a name?" Ingrid asked.

Carter gave her a speculative look. "You think he's still alive?"

"Never mind what I think. What's his name?"

"Richard."

Ingrid nodded and took a step back, giving Carter a moment to breathe. She considered the stack of folders on the desk.

"I'm not going to waste my time burning all this," she said. "If you got your hands on it once, you could do it again, and if you're smart you probably have digital

copies of it anyway. So here is my dilemma. Do I trust you to destroy your notes and forget about this story, or do I kill you instead?"

"You wouldn't —" Carter began, and then went pale when he saw the look in Ingrid's eyes.

"What's it going to be, Mr. Carter?" She laid *Donnerkeil's* edge against the side of the human's throat. "Live or die? No one saw me come in here, and no one will see me leave. In the chaos of the storm, they might not find your body for days." She put a tiny amount of pressure on the blade.

"Let me live! Please!" Carter gulped. "I'll get rid of my notes, I swear!"

"And then you're going to get into your car and get the hell out of Savannah," Ingrid told him. "Go home. Stop trying to peel back the surface of the world and see what lies beneath. You won't like what you find." She drew back her *klaive*, lifting it to her face. "Now close your eyes and count to five. And pray we never meet again."

• • •

The storm and the ensuing evacuation were already overloading the cell network. It took Ingrid three tries to get a connection.

She stood on the third floor of a deserted parking garage, just a block away from the hotel, seething quietly as she watched the rain pour down through the yellow glow of the streetlights. Down below, a pickup truck plowed through a patch of standing water along Broughton, kicking up a spray of white nearly twelve feet high.

It was nearly midnight. Ingrid counted six rings and started to think that she was going to get a voice mail, but then she heard a familiar voice.

"Hello?" Ellen Oakheart said. Her tone was brusque, and slightly befuddled, as though she'd just drifted off to sleep.

"You hateful, shriveled-up *bitch*. You knew all along, didn't you?"

"I happen to know a great many things, Ingrid Stormwalker," Oakheart replied, alert now but unfazed by Ingrid's hostile tone. "Perhaps you could be a bit more specific."

"Richard *fucking* Carstairs. Ring any bells? Fianna garou, father was from Savannah? Murdered his mother during his First Change and then disappeared? You expect me to believe you don't know anything about that?"

"I..." Oakheart began. "There was a lost cub by that name. The local sept found him wandering out in the country, about ten years ago. You say his father was from Savannah?"

"Cut the bullshit! The second Carstairs was found, the sept would have done everything it could to uncover the boy's lineage. That would have taken about five minutes and a Google search to identify his mother, and another five minutes on the phone with her parents to find out about the father. You knew *exactly* who he was descended from."

Oakheart sighed. "Are you disappointed we didn't inform Karl Ironhand, so he could come down to Athens and tie up loose ends? If he'd known who Richard was,

the boy wouldn't have lasted a week, and you damned well know it. That's how a coup works."

"And now your precious lost cub is here, murdering my kinfolk," Ingrid snarled. "Is that what you meant at the Grand Moot, when you said that a lot could change in a year? You were going to wait for Carstairs to kill as many of us as he could, then try to take the city from us?"

"Richard is there?"

"He's killed at least seven of my people. A few hours ago he was promising to send me back to my father in *pieces*. He thinks Karl is a murderer, and that I've stolen something from him. And I can't help but wonder who might have put that idea in his head."

The line went silent. Ingrid paused, listening. "Hello?"

"He was lost," Oakheart said. Her voice was subdued, barely audible over the howling wind. "His mother was dead, and he didn't know who he was. We were just trying to help him. To protect him."

"So he could one day grow up and take his revenge?"

"Spare me the self-righteousness, girl. Your father murdered his entire bloodline. He had a right to vengeance." She paused. "But we didn't encourage it. In fact, we told him nothing of his origins."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Ask anyone on the Grand Council. They'll tell you the same thing. We were just trying to teach him the ways of his people, like any other young garou." She paused. "Richard was...deeply disturbed. He complained of terrible dreams, and was prone to wild fits of rage. For a long time we believed that guilt over his mother's death had left a wound on his soul. Perhaps we were wrong. Perhaps it was something much worse."

"The Stirlings were corrupted by the Wyrms."

"So your father said."

"I've seen Richard up close. I've smelled the taint on his skin."

"It grieves me to hear that," Oakheart said. "We did everything we could, but the more we tried to help him, the more violent and withdrawn he became. Then, one morning, he was gone. That was nearly five years ago."

Ingrid cursed under her breath. As much as she hated to admit it, Oakheart sounded like she was telling the truth. "Well, if you didn't tell him about the Stirlings, who did?"

There was no reply. After a long moment Ingrid's phone sullenly beeped. The call had failed.

Gritting her teeth, she turned her back on the storm and walked across the parking level toward the stairs. The ronin were waiting by the stairway door, speaking to one another in low voices.

"Oakheart confirmed it," Ingrid said to Euryale. "The killer's named Richard Carstairs. The Protectorate took him in after his First Change and raised him as a lost cub."

Euryale frowned. "They didn't tell him who he really was?"

"Not according to Oakheart."

"And you believe her?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Ingrid sighed. Exhaustion was setting in, and her brain felt like a lead weight. She pinched at the corners of her eyes and tried to concentrate. "She said he was never all that stable, and his mental state continued to fall apart as time went on. Eventually, he just ran off. That was almost five years ago, so who knows what happened to him after that?"

Kevin pulled a clasp knife from his pocket and began cleaning his fingernails. "From everything you've said about the tunnels around here, he could have been under your noses the entire time."

"Only if he knows he's a Stirling. Otherwise, why come here at all?" Ingrid shook her head. "There's a piece missing here. Someone got to Carstairs while he was still in Athens and filled his head with lies about what happened to his family. Maybe those lies were what corrupted him, or maybe he was susceptible to corruption because of who he was."

"There you go again," Euryale said.

"What?"

"Assuming that Carstairs was lied to. What if his version of events is the truth?"

Ingrid's hackles rose. "What, that my father robbed and murdered the Stirlings like a common thief? *Fuck you.*"

Kevin stiffened at the tone in Ingrid's voice, but Euryale was undaunted. "I didn't say there was anything *common* about it. When a man steals money, it's called robbery. When he steals a city, it's called *politics*."

"My father didn't steal anything. He saved this city from the Wyrn."

"History is written by the victors."

"Gaia weeps. Now you sound just like Oakheart." Ingrid threw up her arms. "It was twenty-five years ago. What does it matter now, one way or another? Unless you know a way to turn back time, there's no way we're ever going to learn the truth."

Euryale gave Ingrid an enigmatic look. "I can't turn back the clock," she said. "But it just so happens that Catherine can."

Chapter Thirteen: Ghost Dance

They walked the two-and-a-half blocks from the parking garage to Stirling House, heads down and shoulders hunched against the lashing rain. Past midnight, the streets were mostly empty now. The tourists had fled, and the locals who had chosen to remain in the district were hunkered down in their townhomes to wait out the storm. Sirens wailed off to the west, the notes rendered thin and wavering by the shifting wind. Drifts of green leaves and ragged streamers of moss covered the sidewalks and collected in the corners of boarded-over buildings.

Every so often, Ingrid turned and glanced back the way they'd come, checking for signs of movement. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. Marcus and the others were out there, hunting for them. It wasn't hard to imagine one of the Stone Mountain packs loping along in their wake, keeping tabs on them and whispering directions into a cell phone so the other packs could close in for the kill. Or what if it was Carstairs, limping from shadow to shadow, watching and waiting for the right moment to strike? She tried to dismiss it as just her imagination, but a glance at Kevin confirmed that he felt it, too. His expression was calm and disinterested as ever, but his shoulders were tense and his eyes were constantly in motion, scanning every rooftop and alleyway along their path.

Euryale walked out in front with Catherine. The two were huddled together and speaking in low, urgent tones. The Theurge was clearly unhappy with Euryale's plan. Ingrid wasn't sure how she felt about it herself. She felt as though she were edging along a narrow, crumbling ledge, with a long fall into darkness waiting beneath her feet.

What are you afraid of? The truth?

She wasn't prepared to believe that Karl had lied to her about the Blight. The place's corruption was a matter of record going back decades. Perhaps it was nothing more than a false assumption; a reasonable enough error, given everything else. He was being overly cautious, nothing more.

But if he *had* known, and lied to her about it...what did that mean? What was he hiding? And where did that leave her?

They reached the corner of Abercorn and State. Oglethorpe Square was just across the street, its trees thrashing angrily in the grip of the storm. Lighting flashed,

painting the scene in stark blue and white, and Ingrid glimpsed a ragged group of figures pacing along the western edge of the park some twenty yards away. Several of the figures saw the garou at the same time and turned to face them, and Ingrid realized they were fomori.

There were eight of them. Their clothes were little more than filthy rags, and their faces were twisted into bestial expressions of hunger, lust, and depravity. They leered at Ingrid, licking their crusted lips.

Donnerkeil blazed in Ingrid's hand. Kevin stepped up beside her, a low growl rising in his throat. The fomori hesitated at the sight of the grand klaive. For a moment the two groups stared at one another through the rain. Baring her teeth, Ingrid started towards the Wyrmspawn, and the fomori ran, scattering into the darkness like a pack of hyenas. Maddened howls and gibbering, blasphemous cries echoed after them, taunting the garou and daring them to follow.

Kevin was all too happy to oblige, but Ingrid halted him with a hand on his arm. "Let them go," she said through gritted teeth. The taints were growing bolder, using the storm to venture out in numbers. How long before they felt bold enough to strike? "Marcus and the others will have heard the cries. They could be here at any moment.

Ingrid and the ronin hurried east, around the perimeter of the square. Stirling House crouched behind its walls at the corner, hiding its secrets behind dark windows and forbidding stone.

Instead of scaling the garden wall this time, she led the garou down State to the mansion's back alley and through the shell of the old carriage house. The garden beyond was slick and tangled, full of deep shadows cast by the blurry glow of the streetlights. The sight of the mansion beyond was more menacing to Ingrid at that moment than it had ever been in her life.

When she emerged from the carriage house into the rain she was in her war form. *Donnerkeil* glowed in her right hand, its storm-spirit exultant in the midst of the raging elements. The ronin followed close behind, also now in *crinos* form.

They crossed the garden without incident, and climbed the steps to the main entrance. Ingrid pushed one of the old doors open and stepped inside, sniffing the damp air. The sound of dripping water echoed through the house.

"What now?" she asked as the ronin filed into the house.

Catherine stepped past Ingrid into the middle of the foyer and surveyed the room. "Where did the attack begin?"

"Well, technically it started back at the carriage house," Ingrid said. "Father and his pack came up the back alley and surprised a few of the Stirling kinfolk working in the garage. Then they crossed the garden and burst in here, looking for Wyatt and my aunt."

Catherine turned in place, taking in every detail of the ruined foyer, her expression haunted. She nodded, half to herself. "This is where we will begin."

Ingrid watched the Theurge shift back to human form and take a few items from her shoulder bag. Chanting in a low voice, Catherine opened a small, leather bag and

poured out a thin stream of salt onto the floor with a careful, steady hand. She formed a circle, then began filling it in with precise, interlinked symbols.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Ingrid asked. "I thought garou didn't linger as ghosts."

Catherine ignored her, focusing on the preparations for the rite. Euryale sidled up to Ingrid and answered instead.

"This doesn't have anything to do with ghosts," the ronin said in a hushed voice. "Violent events leave impressions behind in the physical realm. If the place where the events occurred remains relatively undisturbed, those impressions can linger for a long time. If the impressions are strong enough, and a person is sensitive enough – or has some personal connection to the events – it's possible to experience them again." She eyed the Shadow Lord. "I'd say your connection to what happened here is about as personal as it gets."

Ingrid nodded, suddenly uneasy. "What do I do?"

"Catherine will guide you. Just do what she says, and keep your eyes open. Kevin and I will stay close by."

Across the foyer, the Theurge completed the ritual circle and put away the salt. Then she placed a pair of small objects in its center and began to chant again. Her voice rose in volume until it filled the room, and the wind outside seemed to respond, rattling the old windows and moaning through the eaves.

The chant went on for several minutes. At the end, Catherine clapped her hands and straightened, taking the objects from the circle. She walked over to Ingrid. "Close your eyes."

Ingrid did as she was told. Catherine murmured something in her native tongue, and then traced a symbol on each of Ingrid's eyelids with a small, rough object.

"Take this," Catherine said, and touched something to Ingrid's lips. The Shadow Lord took it and chewed. It was a root of some kind, tough, fibrous, and bitter.

Chewing, Ingrid opened her eyes in time to see Catherine place the second root in her mouth. The Theurge turned away, reaching into her shoulder bag and drawing out a small drum. Catherine gave Euryale a momentary glance, then bent her head and began to tap on the drum.

Ingrid swallowed. The drum was not much bigger than Catherine's hand, but the sound it made reverberated through the whole house. The Theurge began to chant again, keeping time with the drum.

Not knowing what else to do, Ingrid waited for instructions from Catherine. Wind gusted in through the open door, ruffling her fur. The drumming went on, slow and steady, almost like a heartbeat. Then a rush of recognition sent a shiver down Ingrid's spine.

This is the rite she was performing at Green Island.

Was this a trick? She turned to Euryale – but before she could say anything, the foyer echoed with shouts and the sounds of running feet.

"Fire! The carriage house is on fire!"

Ingrid whirled, seeking the source of the voice – and saw three ghostly figures running towards her from the direction of the formal dining room. At first glance they seemed little more than silhouettes, but as Ingrid focused on them the apparitions took on more detail and substance. Three men, all middle-aged, dressed in the white uniforms of house staff. An excited babble of voices washed over her.

“Harry’s out there, working on the car!”

“What do we do? Call the Fire Department? What if they ask to come into the house?”

“We’ve got to get out there!”

The figures dashed across the foyer. One passed right through Kevin, who noticed nothing at all. He and Euryale were watching her instead, observing her reactions.

“Susan, Andrew, you come back to the table right this minute!”

Two smaller apparitions appeared, right on the heels of the kinfolk. A boy and a girl, neither much older than ten: she in a skirt and a simple white blouse, he in khakis and a button-down shirt. They looked similar enough to be brother and sister, their pale, sickly faces flushed with excitement.

More figures were rushing into the foyer from the front hall: a man and two women in kitchen attire, wringing their hands on their aprons. Then a slender apparition appeared in the wake of the children; Ingrid saw a pretty young woman not much older than she, with big, blue eyes and streaks of premature gray in her black hair. She was wearing a green dress and a string of pearls, like a Southern matron-to-be.

“You two get back here right now!” she told the children. There was an exasperated tone in her voice, but an edge of real fear as well. *“If you disturb Uncle Wyatt, he’ll skin you alive!”*

“We want to see the fire!” the boy exclaimed. His sister said something as well, but it was lost in the rising tide of voices in the room. Everyone was speaking at once, trying to decide what to do. The young woman was pleading with her kids to come back to the dining room. The servants were distraught, fearing for the safety of their kin, but fearing to disturb their master even more.

One of the men was speaking quickly into a telephone, reporting the fire. The remains of the phone were still there, a quarter-century later, sitting amid the debris on the floor at the apparition’s feet. Ingrid felt her guts turn to lead, knowing what was about to happen.

A woman’s voice cut through the babble. *“What’s that?”*

Everyone fell silent. The young woman darted forward, placing herself between the children and the main entrance. And then came a howl, hungry and terrible, from just the other side of the doors.

Ingrid turned just as the first of Karl’s pack came bursting into the foyer. She did not see or hear the doors smashing inward, but saw the apparitions react to it. They recoiled, throwing up their arms – and then the Shadow Lords were among them, slashing with their claws. One of the kinfolk spun around, his face and throat ripped

open. Another sat down hard, holding his guts in his hands. A third man turned and tried to run, his face a mask of terror. He seemed to reach for Ingrid, a scream rising to his lips, but a snarling *crinos* werewolf smashed in the back of the man's skull with one swipe of his hand. Ingrid blinked as ghostly brain matter sprayed at her face.

The young woman did manage to scream, a cry of pure, heartbreaking terror. "Run!" she shouted, pushing the children away and leaping at the closest garou. The Shadow Lord bared his teeth in a merciless grin and ripped her open from shoulder to hip, smashing the slight figure to the ground. The children, their pale faces speckled with gore, ran shrieking into the formal dining room.

There were now three garou in the foyer, their fearsome apparitions nearly close enough to touch. They seemed exultant, reveling in the slaughter. *By this point Aunt Elizabeth had been Wyatt's captive for three days*, Ingrid reminded herself. Yet this felt nothing like the stories she'd been told as a teenager. There was no sense of justice here, no act of righteous retribution. This was a pack of wolves loose among the lambs.

The young woman – Wyatt's sister – was dragging herself across the floor, trying to get to her children. The garou started after her, and the cooks got in the way, attacking the werewolves with their bare hands. The Shadow Lords tore the kinfolk limb from limb, but their deaths bought enough time for Wyatt's sister to escape. The foyer rang with screams, throaty snarls and the wet-gristle sound of snapping bones and ripping flesh.

Arms red to the elbows, the werewolves went in search of fresh prey. One of the garou went after Wyatt's sister and her children, while a second went down the main hall towards the front of the house. The third, fangs bared in a feral grin, headed for the stairs to the second floor.

"Ingrid," Catherine warned in a low voice. The Theurge was staring at the main entrance. Ingrid turned, and her breath caught in her throat as her father came stalking through the doorway.

Karl Ironhand was in his war form, like the rest of his pack, and the ghostly image of *Donnerkeil* hung loosely in his right hand. She saw him as he was in his prime, not yet scarred by decades of war. He carried himself with the arrogance of a conqueror, his eyes alight with triumph.

For a moment Ironhand paused amid the carnage, his expression calculating. The sound of splintering wood echoed from upstairs. Wyatt's sister screamed from the formal dining room, her voice rising to a hysterical shriek. "*Not my babies! Not my babies!*" Then, with an almost imperceptible nod, the Shadow Lord crossed the foyer and went straight to the basement stairs in the main hall.

Ingrid watched him go. *He knows exactly where he's going*, she observed. *And he waited to make sure he was alone*. A cold sense of foreboding settled over her like a shroud. *He always told me they went down in a pack to confront Wyatt*.

She glanced at Catherine. "I've got to know what happens downstairs. What do I do?"

“Just follow him,” the Theurge said. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Karl had already vanished. Ingrid raced after him, nearly yanking the basement door off its hinges in her haste. She could see her father’s apparition clearly in the darkness below. As she watched, he left the stairs and turned down the main corridor, heading for Wyatt’s sanctum. She followed as quickly as she dared, expecting the old steps to give way beneath her at any moment. The beat of Catherine’s drum filled the narrow stairwell as the ronin kept pace just behind her.

Karl moved warily down the corridor, the grand klaive held at the ready. At one point, just short of the sanctum door, he turned with a start and stared back the way he’d come. Their eyes met, and for a fleeting instant Ingrid thought that he could somehow see her, his gaze reaching across the gulf of years. The calculating look in her father’s eyes sent a chill down her spine.

Satisfied that he wasn’t being followed, Karl went to the sanctum door. After a moment to steel himself, the Shadow Lord vanished inside. Ingrid ran down the hall, finding her way solely by feel. A feeling of dread settled over her as she fumbled at the latch and pushed the rusted door open.

She was greeted by the sound of laughter: melodic, boyish and entirely mad.

A ghostly tableau awaited her beyond the sanctum door. Where the foyer and other parts of the house had been unchanged by Catherine’s rite, here the entire room looked fresh and new, and shone with a faint, eerie glow. The entire space had been so saturated with blood and human misery that it was an apparition unto itself, resonating to the beat of the Theurge’s drum. There was a twitching, ravaged corpse stretched out on the surgical table, and a pair of glistening human hides hung from skinning hooks along the wall to the right of the door.

Karl stood just inside the doorway, his massive shoulders scraping the room’s ceiling. Facing him was a naked young man whose alabaster skin was streaked and speckled with freshly spilled blood. Wyatt Stirling had a dancer’s build, all lean muscle and not an ounce of fat, and a handsome, square-jawed face framed by thick, auburn curls. He was a vision of beauty with deep-set, soulless blue eyes, and a knife of roughly shaped obsidian was clutched in one long-fingered hand. Tendrils of foul, inky smoke curled from the edges of the blade, and the air around Wyatt’s head shimmered darkly, like heat distortion on a summer’s day.

Wyatt spread his arms in welcome and gave her father a madman’s smile. “Oh, the look on your face!” he had a lilting, high-pitched drawl that was entirely at odds with the darkness in his eyes. “Did you honestly think you were going to surprise me, Karl Ironhand? Why, we’ve been waiting on you for *hours* now.”

“Where is she?” Karl took a step towards Stirling. “If you’ve hurt her –”

Stirling laughed again. The sound was sweet and pure, and set Ingrid’s nerves on edge. “I gave her no more than she asked for, Ironhand. And I assure you, she loved every moment of it.”

Karl roared in fury. He leapt for Stirling, but as he did so, Wyatt spat a string of syllables that stung Ingrid’s ears. Shapes coalesced out of the darkness around Ironhand and seized him by the arms and throat. They were banes, Ingrid saw at

once, with skin like bubbling tar and ropy tentacles for arms. The stench of spiritual corruption hit her like a blow, and she watched Karl's flesh burn beneath their touch. He struggled against them with all of his might, but there were too many of them to overcome.

Stirling's expression turned cold. "You're like a child, grasping for things you can't possibly comprehend. My family has sought to master the glyphs for more than a century. It took generations before someone like me was born who had the genius to unlock their secrets."

He smiled, showing perfect white teeth, and walked over to Karl. The banes' ropy arms constricted, and the Shadow Lord let out a strangled groan. *Donnerkeil* tumbled from his nerveless grip.

Stirling bent low, his face inches from Karl's snout. "Do you want to know the best part? The sweetest, most ironic part of your whole pathetic scheme?" He leaned close. "I couldn't have done it without your sister. Her insights solved the final pieces of the puzzle. Now the spirits of the Wyrms serve me, as any other spirit would. When I speak, my voice carries the authority of the Malfeans themselves."

He straightened and went to the doorway of his inner sanctum. "The Apocalypse is at hand," he said over his shoulder. "Everyone knows this. Gaia is dying, and the forces of the Corrupter are ascendant. There is no denying the inevitable. One can either adapt or die."

At the doorway, Stirling beckoned, and a figure emerged, bearing a golden bowl. Ingrid's breath caught in her throat. It was Elizabeth Reinhardt, regal and enigmatic, clad in a silken robe that hung carelessly open to reveal the flesh beneath. Wyatt took her gently by the elbow and led her to Karl, who watched his sister's approach with dawning horror.

"You see, Karl? She told me you were coming. She told me *everything*," Stirling laughed. "And do you know why? Because she *loves* me."

Elizabeth bowed her head to Wyatt and offered him the bowl. It brimmed with a dark, oily liquid that gave off the same, tainted vapors as Stirling's knife. He accepted the bowl with a ceremonial nod and handed her the blade. Then he stepped up to Karl and brought its golden rim nearly to the Shadow Lord's lips.

"My sweet Elizabeth tells me that you can be persuaded," he said to Karl. "She says that you can be a good and faithful servant, once you have seen the truth. So, for her sake, I give you this. Drink, and gaze upon the face of Malfeas. See the world that is to come, and know that I will be its king." Stirling's eyes rose to the banes, and his voice hardened. "Open his mouth."

Ironhand struggled, but the banes forced their searing tentacles past his lips, and slowly, inch by inch, his jaws parted. Ingrid's heart clenched.

Elizabeth smiled beatifically and went to Wyatt's side. As he raised the bowl, she pressed her lips to his bloodstained cheek – and then drew the obsidian knife across his throat in a single, swift motion. Blood fountained from the gaping wound, spraying Karl and Elizabeth alike. Wyatt staggered, his eyes widening in shock. The bowl tumbled from his fingers, and the banes writhed, their forms growing less

substantial by the moment. Karl tore free from their grip as Wyatt spun, reaching for Elizabeth. She dropped the knife and grabbed the dying garou by the arms, her expression pitiless. Karl snatched up *Donnerkeil* and drove the blade into Stirling's back. The Shadow Lord pulled the klaive free and Elizabeth threw Wyatt's body to the floor.

Karl recoiled from his sister, eyes wide with dismay. "What in Gaia's name have you done?" he hissed.

"What I had to." Elizabeth's expression was cold and unyielding as marble, but her dark eyes were haunted. She turned her back on Karl, snatching her robe shut and belting it around her waist. "You think gaining the trust of a madman is easy? Or cheap?" She folded her arms tightly across her chest. "What does it matter now? We've won."

Karl wiped the back of a clawed hand across his snout. "And the glyphs?"

"In there." Elizabeth indicated the inner sanctum with a nod of her head. "We'll take everything. It'll just be one book among many. The rest of the pack won't know the difference."

Ironhand fell silent for a moment, gazing at Stirling's bloodstained corpse. "I think we should burn them," he said at last. "We have the caern. What more do we need?"

Elizabeth rounded on her brother, her eyes blazing. "Don't you dare!" she snarled. "The Uktena hid these glyphs for hundreds of years! Now they're finally ours, and you want to throw them away? After all I've —" Her voice broke. She paused, gritting her teeth against a sudden surge of tears. Then, with a deep breath, the mask of iron self-control slipped back into place. "Not after all I've sacrificed to get them. You'll have to kill me first."

Karl raised a placating hand. "Please! There's no need for that. But what good did the glyphs do the Stirlings? Or the Uktena, for that matter?"

"Wyatt Stirling was a monster. He was *weak*. We're nothing like him." She stared up at Karl. "You have no idea how powerful these glyphs are. We could transform the city overnight. Think of it!"

Ironhand matched his sister stare for stare, but the battle of wills was never really in doubt. The Shadow Lord sighed. "We do this for the city. For the *caern*. That's all. Do you understand?"

"Of course," Elizabeth replied. She gave her brother a dazzling smile. "I wouldn't have it any other way. Now let's think. The others will be here any moment, and we need to get our stories straight."

Ingrid did not hear her father's reply. Catherine's drum had fallen silent, and the apparitions were fading like morning mist. She watched them go, her mind numb and her heart aching.

Everything she'd been told was a lie. *Everything*. Could one feel *harano* for something that never truly was?

All at once, her knees felt weak. Ingrid sank to the floor. Belatedly, she realized that she'd shifted back to human form. When had that happened?

She became aware of a ghostly white glow flickering somewhere above her. For a moment she thought that the apparitions had somehow returned, but it was only a mote of faerie light gleaming in Kevin's hand. Catherine knelt, laying a hand on Ingrid's shoulder.

"Come back to us, Ingrid Stormwalker," the Theurge said, peering into her eyes. "Come back to the here and now."

Euryale stared expectantly at the two women. "Did it work this time? What did you see?"

Ingrid couldn't tell whom the ronin was speaking to at first. Then she remembered: *this was the same rite Catherine was performing at Green Island.*

The Shadow Lord gazed wonderingly at Catherine. "You lying little bitch," she said faintly, and then lunged for the Theurge's throat.



Chapter Fourteen: Liars and Thieves

Catherine went over backwards with a strangled yelp, her eyes widening as Ingrid's hand closed around her throat. *Donnerkeil* flashed, its curved point just inches from the Theurge's face.

"*Honoring your ancestors my ass,*" Ingrid growled. The rage came upon her like a fever, scalding her skin and setting her nerves on fire. She could feel it starting to get away from her, but at that moment she didn't particularly care. "It was about the glyphs all along, wasn't it? *Wasn't it?*"

Euryale shouted something, but the words barely registered. Then powerful arms slipped beneath her armpits and lifted her bodily into the air. She kicked and thrashed, roaring in anger, her heels connecting with hard muscle. Kevin grunted with each blow, but didn't relent. "Calm down," he said into her ear. "*Calm down, before you kill someone!*"

The klaive was still in her hand. Her arms were pinned in a full nelson, but she could jab over her shoulder, maybe hit the bastard in the face or neck. Then she realized what she was doing and froze, clamping down on her anger with every ounce of her will. Kevin waited, holding her off the ground as though she weighed nothing at all, while she concentrated on her breathing. After what felt like an eternity, she started to relax.

Ingrid glared at Euryale. "You didn't drag me back here for my benefit," she managed to say. "You did it for *her*. You've been working for Catherine all along."

Euryale rolled her eyes. "If only. That would mean I was actually getting something in return for all this nonsense."

"Cut the bullshit!" Ingrid snapped. "I didn't see it before, but you've both been deferring to her all along." She stared at both women in turn. "Is she even a ronin? Are you?"

"Now look, there's no need to get personal –"

Ingrid tried to twist out of Kevin's grip. "Put me fucking down and I'll give you *personal* –"

To her surprise, Kevin did exactly that. Her heels hit the floor hard enough to jar her teeth. Before she could recover from her surprise, the lanky ronin came up beside her and spoke to Catherine.

"Tell her," he said to the Theurge. "If you don't, I will."

Catherine's eyes narrowed. "You gave me your oath. Both of you did."

"Then you better understand I'm not saying this lightly. *Tell her*. If you can't trust her now, you never will."

Catherine scowled at the ronin, angry at having her hand forced once again. Finally, she gave the smallest of sighs.

"You're right," she said reluctantly. "I am still Uktena. Euryale and Kevin are both ronin, but... we share common interests."

Ingrid stared at the Theurge, expecting more. Catherine stared back, her expression inscrutable.

"You're going to have to do better than that."

The Uktena sighed again. "What do you want to know?" she said, clearly uncomfortable.

"Are you here for the glyphs?" Ingrid asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes."

Euryale folded her arms and gave Catherine a pointed look. The theurge pretended not to notice.

"Blessed goddess," Ingrid growled. "Is there *more*?"

Catherine's discomfort grew. "Yes."

"Tell. Me. *Everything*," Ingrid snarled. "All of it. From the beginning. *Now*."

The Uktena closed her eyes and muttered something in the Muscogee tongue. The tone sounded almost like an apology. Finally she drew a deep breath and opened her eyes.

"A month ago, I was in a lodge in Oklahoma, seeking the wisdom of the spirits. During my meditations, the Great River Spirit came to me. She shared with me a story of my ancestors, one that had been lost when my people had followed the Muscogee westward along the Trail of Tears. This is what the spirit said to me:

"Many hundreds of years ago, long before the coming of the white man, there was a young shaman among the Sept of the Seven Rivers named Hunts-With-Ghosts. He was much esteemed by his people, for his mind was swift and strong, and his affinity with the spirit realm was great.

"But the path of the Theurge is not like that of the warrior, or the judge, or the tale-spinner; true greatness requires patience and wisdom, which only comes with time. But Walks-With-Ghosts was not patient. His sharp mind and natural talents made him prideful, and he scorned the caution of his elders. Eager for renown, and possessed by the recklessness of youth, he often went alone into the far corners of the Umbra, into deep and dark places where few ever tread, searching for secrets and knowledge that would set him above other garou.

"It is said that his pride and ambition led him, in time, to the fringes of Malfeas itself, stalking the desolate borders of the Wyrms' own realm in search of power. There he came upon a Wyrms-spirit, ancient and clever, that fled from him across the wasteland like a deer. Walks-With-Ghosts gave chase, as any wolf would, and the hunt tested the shaman's skills to the utmost.

"The spirit tried many cunning tricks to throw Walks-With-Ghosts off the scent, but the young Theurge was relentless. Such was his pride that it never occurred to him that he was doing just as the spirit intended.

"Finally, Walks-With-Ghosts cornered his prey in a splinter realm of deep shadows and strange, skeletal ruins, where ground was ash and the sky the color of blood. But instead of taking the spirit in his teeth and rending it, Walks-With-Ghosts bargained with it instead, offering to spare it in exchange for the secrets it possessed. Great was the battle of wits that followed, as the spirit tried to twist the terms of the contract in its favor, but once again, Walks-With-Spirits triumphed. Or so the prideful garou was led to believe.

"Over time, the spirit shared deep and terrible knowledge with the young Theurge. He learned how to summon potent spirits, to bind them, and to compel them. He grew wise in the ways of the Wyrms. Swift and sure was his rise to power, and soon he was greatly renowned among his people. But the more power Walks-With-Ghosts gained, the more he desired. And the greater his greed, the deeper into corruption he went. The Wyrms-spirit was in fact an ancient force of temptation, a giver of gifts and a bringer of ruin called Abbazû, and he had fallen completely under its sway.

"Soon, the mastery of spirits wasn't enough; Walks-With-Ghosts began to dream of mastering his fellow garou as well. By this time his influence within the sept was great; he had many supporters and allies, and young Theurges sought him out for his wisdom in matters of the spirit world. Though still too young himself to take on students according to tribal law, Walks-With-Ghosts defied the elders and taught a select few students in secret. He cultivated their devotion, forcing them to compete with one another for his favor and the Wyrms-spirit's poisoned gifts. And so corruption spread among the people, and the tempter fed on their desires and grew strong.

"Too late, the sept realized its peril. Shadow Chaser, the great elder, called a moot and demanded that Walks-With-Ghosts appear and answer for his actions. The Theurge refused, declaring that the elders had no power over him. Warriors were sent to seize him, but Walks-With-Ghosts and his followers slew them.

"The spilling of blood tore the people in two. Walks-With-Ghosts claimed that the sept elders acted against him out of envy and spite, and such was the power of the Wyrms-spirit's allure that many young Uktena took up his cause. Shadow Chaser declared the young Theurge an outcast and a servant of the Wyrms, and condemned him to death for his crimes. Brother fought brother, and war ravaged the land.

"The fighting went on for many, many years, and great was the people's suffering. Outnumbered but defiant, Walks-With-Ghosts turned more and more to the Wyrms-spirit for support, and unleashed many horrors upon the earth. He gave to his followers many powerful but tainted glyphs, giving them mastery of the Wyrms-

spawn he summoned. When his corruption became so evident that even his own allies began to desert him, Walks-With-Ghosts summoned Abbazû itself, allowing it to inhabit him and share with him its unspeakable strength.

“Now the Wyrmspirit was free to work its corruption upon the whole earth. Shadow Chaser and the surviving elders saw the danger and called to their brothers and sisters across the land, even to the Wendigo in the far north. The moon bridges were opened, and garou from many distant septs gathered to fight the ancient foe.

“Great Shadow Chaser, now old and scarred from many battles, led the hunt against Walks-With-Ghosts and Abbazû. They fought with the Wyrmspawn for a day and a night. The blood of heroes soaked the earth, and the servants of the Corrupter sensed victory. But then darkness fell, and a full moon rose in the summer sky, and the garou rose up in their wrath. Walks-With-Ghosts was cast down, pierced by Shadow Chaser’s spear, and a great circle of shaman bound Abbazû and imprisoned him, so that he would tempt the people no more.

But the war was won at a bitter cost. The Muscogee lands were ravaged, and haunted by evil spirits. Many brave garou had fallen, and their kin faced a long winter without food to eat. Shadow Chaser sent as many of his people as he could to other septs, where they would be safe. The rest he took to Green Island and made a new home, where he and what remained of the Sept of the Seven Rivers would watch over Abbazû’s prison and ensure that the spirit would never escape.”

Catherine fell silent. Ingrid blinked at her, trying to wrap her head around what she’d been told.

“Did I just hear you right? Are you telling me that Abbazû is imprisoned on Green Island?”

Catherine’s eyebrows rose. “No. Of course not,” the Theurge said. “It’s here. Underneath Savannah.”

Ingrid felt as though she’d been kicked in the stomach. She stared at Catherine. “But you just said —”

“Shadow Chaser took his people to Green Island to keep them apart from Abbazû’s prison,” the Theurge explained. “He had seen the spirit’s corruptive power firsthand, and knew the risk was too great.”

“So, what? The Uktena gave the caern to our people in hopes that they would be corrupted instead?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. By the time your ancestors arrived, Shadow Chaser and the other elders had been dead for centuries. The sept’s garou were dying out, isolated as they were on Green Island, and they feared that soon they wouldn’t have the strength to keep the prison secure.” Catherine shrugged. “I don’t know for sure, but I suspect that they ceded the caern to your ancestors in the hopes of passing on the responsibility once they became too weak to tend it themselves.”

“But *no one knew*! They didn’t tell anyone!”

Catherine shifted uncomfortably. “I believe the elders meant to, when they felt the time was right. I’ve been studying the city’s shrines, and it’s clear that at least some of the spiritual energy they collect is being funneled into Abbazû’s prison, to

help keep its wards secure. The Stirlings and the sept bound themselves to those shrines with blood and sacred oaths. It was more than just a gesture of peace and community – it was a failsafe in case disaster befell the sept. Which happened – ironically, at the Stirling’s hands.”

“Because apparently the Uktena decided to keep Abbazû’s glyphs.” Ingrid clenched her fists. “Blessed goddess! And you people call *my* tribe untrustworthy?”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” Catherine replied. “The only way you know how to deal with a spirit is with your klaive. The sept’s elders believed that they were wise enough to use the glyphs cautiously, and avoid corruption. And they were right. They worked great wonders, and kept their people safe for centuries.”

“Until the Stirlings found out about them,” Ingrid pointed out. “How did that happen?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the glyphs themselves called to them. Maybe Abbazû reached through them and seduced the Stirlings.”

Ingrid rolled her eyes. “Or maybe one of your vaunted elders got complacent. Gaia weeps! Is nothing *ever* your peoples’ fault?”

Euryale stirred. “That’s enough of that,” she warned. The ronin turned to Catherine. “Tell her the bad news.”

“The *bad* news?”

Catherine gave Ingrid a level stare. “The Great River Spirit ended its story with a warning. Since the destruction of the sept, there has been no one to perform the periodic rites necessary to maintain Abbazû’s prison. It’s been slowly weakening since the time of the Civil War. It would take little effort now to set the Wyrmspirit free.”

“The Dweller in the Dark,” Ingrid hissed. “That’s what Carstairs was talking about. Can the glyphs be used to set Abbazû free?”

“With the proper knowledge...yes,” Catherine said.

Ingrid stared at the three garou in turn. “You could have told me all of this back at Stone Mountain,” she told them. “But you didn’t.”

“We suspected that Karl Ironhand killed the Stirlings to get the glyphs,” Catherine said. “It was just a question of how far the corruption went.”

“You didn’t trust me.”

“Of course not,” Catherine said. “And even if we had, would you have believed us?”

Ingrid sighed. “Probably not. I’m still not sure I believe Father’s been corrupted. He tried to burn the glyphs the day my aunt died. Said he never wanted to see them again.”

“Sounds like guilt to me,” Kevin observed.

“You said he *tried* to burn them?” Euryale interjected.

“My cousin Eric pulled them out of the fire,” Ingrid said. “He wanted them because they’d belonged to his mother. He was only five.”

Catherine’s eyes widened. “His mother? Oh, goddess, is Eric –”

"He's Wyatt Stirling's son," Ingrid said gravely. "No one ever talked about it, but we all knew. Father's kept him hidden away his whole life."

"And he has the *glyphs*? Blessed mother –"

"He's not corrupted," Ingrid told her. "He's *not*."

"He's Wyatt's *son*."

"And he's done nothing with the glyphs except study them for twenty years," Ingrid said. "You just told me the Uktena kept them for *centuries* without harm."

"That's different –"

"The hell it is," Ingrid snarled. "Forget Eric. Richard Carstairs is the danger here. He's the one who tortured Eleanor – and tried to do the same to *me* – to get his hands on the glyphs." The confrontation at the paper mill came back to her in a rush, and suddenly she remembered: "He said he already knew where the Dweller waits. All he needs are the keys."

Catherine grimaced. "Then he's found the capstone."

"The what?"

"Abbazû was bound in an underground lake, where the pure waters would weaken it and confound its senses. After the rite, the entrance to the cavern was sealed with a flat stone inscribed with powerful wards, then hidden from sight using the most cunning tricks that the Muscogee shaman knew."

"Sounds like a perfect place to hide," Ingrid mused. "Especially if you've been wounded. Do you know where this capstone is?"

"No," Catherine said, chagrined. "We went to Green Island to try and find out, but too much time had passed. The echoes of the sept's elders were long gone."

"Then we start searching the tunnels, like I've been saying all along," Kevin declared.

Ingrid shook her head. "The tunnels run for miles, and no one knows how deep they go. We could be looking for years and never find anything."

"Not to mention they're probably infested with Wyrmspawn," Euryale said. "They're being drawn to Abbazû as his prison weakens. If we go down there blind, we'll walk right into a nest and get torn to pieces – or worse."

Kevin shook his head in disbelief. "There have been garou here for, what, almost three hundred years, and no one ever thought to make a map of the tunnels?"

"You don't understand," Ingrid said. "It's a maze down there –" Her eyes widened. "Goddess above. There might be a map after all. Come on!"

She pushed past Kevin and Euryale and made her way back to the basement corridor, heading for the stairs. Catherine and the ronin hurried after her.

"Where are we going?" Euryale said, her voice echoing down the corridor.

"I've got to get back to the house," Ingrid replied. She paused at the foot of the stairway, putting together a plan. "It's better if I go alone. There's an apartment near here where the three of you can go to ground and wait. I don't have the key, so you'll just have to find your own way inside."

“That won’t be a problem,” Euryale replied. “But I can’t say I like the idea of you going back there by yourself.”

Ingrid started up the stairs, taking them two at a time. “I can’t take you into the house with me,” she explained, “and you don’t want to be outside twisting in the wind with every other garou in the city looking for you.”

“We can take care of ourselves.”

“That’s not the point,” Ingrid said. She reached the top of the stairs and pushed the basement door wide. Lightning flashed, casting long shadows down the main hall. “If Marcus and the others catch you, no matter what happens, we all lose. There’s been enough garou blood shed over these damned glyphs. I’m not adding one drop more.”

“I hear you, sister. I just don’t think your father is going to give us a choice.”

They headed for the foyer. After the horrors revealed by Catherine’s rite, the atmosphere in the old house seemed even eerier and more oppressive than before. Ingrid quickened her pace, suddenly desperate for the feel of wind and rain on her face. By the time she reached the main entrance, she was nearly at a run.

Ingrid was almost halfway across the garden before she slowed to let the others catch up. The wind was gusting hard from the east now, and the raindrops stung her exposed skin. Lightning flickered overhead, throwing the garden and the carriage house into stark relief – and revealing the massive forms of four *crinos* were-wolves crouching in the shadows around her. Their bared fangs shone like silver in the storm’s light.

“Hello, cousin,” Marcus growled over the howling wind.

Chapter Fifteen: Truth and Consequences

"Ironhand thought you'd turn up here sooner or later," Marcus said, as Catherine and the ronin came up behind Ingrid. She could hear the sound of crackling ligaments and deep, breathy growls as her companions shifted to meet the sudden threat.

"Remember what I said," she hissed over her shoulder. "No one is dying here tonight."

"Tell that to your former packmates," Euryale said. She stepped up beside Ingrid, towering over her in *crinos* form. The ronin held her *labrys* at her side, blade down, but the threat of the silver weapon was apparent.

Ingrid glanced back at her companions. "Just follow my lead. Catherine, whatever happens, just hang back and be ready to take us across the Gauntlet. Understand?"

The Theurge nodded. "Of course."

Marcus rose from his haunches just a few yards ahead of Ingrid. Anna was right beside him, and a little to Ingrid's left. Joshua crouched further off to the left, watching her intently, while Darius kept an eye on the ronin off to Ingrid's right. Except for Marcus, the Shadow Lords looked ill at ease, unhappy with the task set before them.

"I don't suppose it would make any difference if I said you were making a big mistake," Ingrid said to them.

To her surprise, Marcus threw back his head and laughed. It was a ghastly sound, coming from a *crinos*. "You know, we had a little bet going. A hundred bucks on the first thing you'd say when we found you. And damned if Joshua didn't get it right." His grin widened. "Me, I thought you'd try and claim you were innocent."

"I don't need to *claim* anything," Ingrid snapped. She took a step towards Anna. "You can't honestly think I'd murder my own kin."

Marcus eased forward, putting himself between her and the theurge. "It doesn't matter what we think," he said, still showing his teeth. "The Lord of Savannah and the Coastal Empire has spoken. Our kinfolk are dead, and you're going to pay the price."

Ingrid took a step closer. "Fine. Take me to the caern. Let my father, the Philodox, judge me in front of every garou in the city. I'll demand a trial by combat, and then maybe you and I will settle things between us once and for all."

"You'd need the support of the elders for that," Marcus said. "By which I mean Karl Ironhand. And that, dear cousin, just isn't going to happen."

"So you're just going to murder me instead?" Ingrid took another step closer. "Is that it?"

Anna's expression grew pained. "She's right —"

Marcus rounded on Anna. "You stay out of this —"

It was the moment she had been waiting for. As her cousin turned, she shifted to *crinos* in the blink of an eye and leapt, propelled by the power of a spirit-gift she'd learned shortly after her First Change. The world seemed to stand still as she flashed past Marcus and crashed into Anna, knocking the Theurge to the ground.

Forgive me, sister. Before Anna could react, *Donnerkeil* struck. The grand klaive's antler hilt struck the Theurge right between her eyes. Bone cracked, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

Lightning split the sky overhead. Thunder crashed, and all hell broke loose.

Marcus leapt at Ingrid with a furious roar, slashing with his claws. She rolled to the left, anticipating the blow, and caught a glancing strike on her shoulder instead. She bared her teeth at the fiery pain and took a wild swing at Marcus's legs, forcing him back.

A moment later Ingrid was on her feet again and whirled, blade at the ready. Marcus threw back his head and howled at the raging sky. Darius and Kevin circled one another, teeth red and blood dripping from their claws. Euryale was driving Joshua across the garden, keeping him at bay with blurring sweeps of her *labrys*. The Galliard gave ground, biding his time, waiting for the opportunity to strike.

Distant howls answered Marcus's call. The other packs were coming. Ingrid cursed under her breath and leapt at the Philodox.

Marcus was ambitious and sometimes reckless, but he was as much a veteran fighter as Ingrid. He ducked aside from her lunge and tore at her with his claws, raking long furrows down her right flank as she went by. Ingrid curled in on herself in midair, barking in pain, and clipped the back of Marcus's thigh with her klaive before she crashed shoulder-first into the ground. The Philodox reeled away, hand clasped to the smoking wound in his leg.

They had to get out of here. If they stayed much longer, someone was going to die. "Catherine!" Ingrid called. Claws scrabbled over dirt and paving stones as she got her feet underneath her. Blood was flowing freely down her side, and her right arm felt weak. Marcus was turning to face her, his face a mask of rage, but his right leg looked ready to give out at any moment.

Catherine was just a few yards away. Kevin took a wild swipe at Darius and connected with the Shadow Lord's muzzle, stunning him long enough to give the ronin space to retreat. Euryale broke off from Joshua and charged at Marcus, screeching one of her bone-chilling war cries. The Philodox retreated a step and fell onto his

back as his wounded leg betrayed him. Euryale abandoned her feint and rushed to Ingrid, grabbing her by the left arm and hauling her to her feet with surprising strength.

The Theurge rushed forward to meet them. Ingrid grabbed hold of the Uktena's muscular arm and the world was flooded with cold, silvery light.

"Are you all right?" Euryale asked. It took a moment for Ingrid to realize she was talking to Kevin, not her.

"Oh, yeah," Kevin panted. His chest, arms and upper thighs were covered in blood. "None of this is mine." He started to laugh, then sagged heavily against Euryale. "Okay. *Some* of this isn't mine."

"Get him out of here," Ingrid said. She gave Euryale the address to the apartment. "It's not four blocks from here. Get inside and get him patched up. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"You're hurt, too," Catherine said, frowning at the deep gashes along Ingrid's side.

"I'm fine," she insisted. "No time to argue. Anna's going to recover any second, and they'll be after us. Get moving!"

Without waiting for a reply, Ingrid broke away and loped toward the carriage house, pain flaring along her side with every jarring step. By the time she plunged through the tattered pattern-webs covering the building's open doorway, she'd begun to put together a plan.

No one would expect her to go back to Reinhardt House. That was the one advantage she possessed. She just had to make it there in one piece.

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Ingrid covered a couple of blocks before she crossed back into the physical world. Though it was tempting to stay in the relative quiet of the Penumbra, she knew that the darkness and the storm would offer better concealment. The rain stung her injuries, but they washed away the blood and muddled her trail.

Marcus had hit her hard, but her injuries weren't crippling. She shifted to *hispo*, knowing she could move faster on four legs instead of two, loping painfully down dripping alleys and through the back lots of empty town homes and shuttered restaurants. The rain was pouring down, crashing over the city in waves. The sharp bang of blowing transformers echoed across the district as tree branches were forced into power lines. Sirens echoed across downtown, rising and falling with the wind like a chorus of the damned.

Once, off in the direction of the arts college, Ingrid heard a scream and then the gibbering cry of a fomor. The scent of the taints was everywhere, setting Ingrid's teeth on edge. The Wyrmspawn were rising from the tunnels in numbers, and with Marcus using the garou to hunt her, there was no one to stop them.

The power was out south of Liberty Street, transforming the close-set buildings into towering, funereal shapes and plunging the roads into canyons of deep shadow. Here Ingrid began to encounter signs of destruction: broken windows and vandalized cars, upended trashcans and broken-down doors. A couple of blocks past Lafayette

Square she came upon a group of people – mostly men, ranging from teenagers to middle age – who had broken into a corner café and were eagerly demolishing it. Their faces were flushed and their eyes were fixed and glassy, as though in the depths of a trance. An unseen tension seemed to link them together, like they'd all been wired up to the same spiritual circuit. *They're being influenced by Wyrmspirits*, Ingrid reckoned. *Not possessed outright, but driven to act on their worst impulses.*

She thought of all the hurricane parties going on across the city, and imagined servants of the Urge-Wyrms circling them like sharks, looking for minds to prey upon and drive to acts of horror. Each act of corruption would roil the spiritual landscape, drawing the attention of more powerful Wyrmspirits in a sort of feeding frenzy that would soon cover the entire district.

The stage is being set for the coming of Abbazû, Ingrid realized. The gathering of taints beneath the city, the attacks by Carstairs, the sudden appearance of the storm – it was all connected. *The question is, can it be stopped?* All she knew for sure was that she'd die trying if that's what it took. The Wyrms weren't going to get Savannah without a fight.

Ingrid gave the bane-ridden mortals a wide berth, slipping silently through the darkness in the direction of Monterey Square. The alley that ran behind Reinhardt House stank with Wyrms-taint, but there were no fomori about. Images from her nightmares, of her kinfolk dragged out into the streets and slaughtered in the square, leapt unbidden to her mind. The horror they evoked nearly paralyzed her with their intensity.

Don't give in, she told herself. *That's just what the enemy wants. Keep going.*

She shifted to *glabro* and managed to scale the house's back wall. The warm glow of lantern light shone from the windows of the kitchen and the solarium. The attic windows were black. *They wouldn't trust Eric with an open flame*, Ingrid knew. The metis was up there, alone, surrounded by darkness.

Ingrid took a moment to study the rain-swept garden and the veranda, making sure there were no guards about. The climb to the third floor was going to be hard enough without interference from a well-meaning kinfolk standing watch. Her shoulder and right arm were stiff, and her right side from mid-ribcage to just below her hip was a constant, throbbing ache.

Once she was certain there was no one about, she shifted to *crinos* form. Her scabbed-over wounds tore open again as her body stretched, touching off fresh waves of pain. She clenched her teeth and forced herself to breathe until the worst of it had passed, then made her way carefully to the rear of the house. Setting her sights on one of the rear-facing upper balconies, she crouched, gathered her strength, and leapt.

Even with the height and extra strength of her war form, she nearly didn't make it. The balcony rail was just within reach at the apex of her jump; she reached for it with her right hand and fumbled for a grip. Her fingers, clumsy and slick with fresh blood, slipped on the wet iron, and for a fleeting instant she felt herself beginning to fall. At the last moment, her flailing left hand connected with one of the balco-

ny's iron bars, and she grabbed hold all her might. Ingrid hung there for a moment, toe-claws finding purchase in the brickwork below the balcony. Then, slowly and painfully, she began to pull herself up.

The wind buffeted her as she climbed, threatening to tear her away from the side of the house at any moment. Lightning flashed, seemingly close enough to touch. The roll of thunder was like a drumbeat against her skin. The fury of the storm quickened Ingrid's blood and lent new heat to her rage. *Grandfather Thunder's blessing*, she thought, baring her teeth in a lupine grin.

Finally she reached one of the attic windows and pressed her hand against it. It refused to budge. The space beyond was dark as a tomb. She tapped her claws against the pane. Rain began to thin away the bloody handprint she left on the glass.

Moments later a dim, hulking shape could be seen moving through the darkness, coming towards the window. Eric's face loomed before the glass, then a clawed hand worked the latch. The metis pulled the window open tentatively. "Cousin?"

"It's me, Eric. Let me in!"

"Yes. Yes, of course." He drew back, giving her room to climb inside. "Careful of the papers."

Ingrid pulled herself into the attic and settled onto her haunches, her shoulders heaving. Eric shut the window and latched it quickly behind her.

"I smell blood," the metis said, kneeling by her side. "You've been injured."

"It's nothing," Ingrid panted. "Keep your voice down. What if Father hears you?"

Eric waved her concerns away. "I talk to myself all the time. No one notices anymore." He bent down next to her, peering at the wounds in her side. "This looks bad. I wish I could do something for it, but Mother never taught me the healing arts."

The memory of Elizabeth Reinhardt slicing open Wyatt Stirling's throat leapt to Ingrid's mind. She grimaced, pushing the vision from her mind.

"How did your mother die, Eric?" Ingrid asked.

The metis grew still. "She fell. Down the attic stairs. Did you know?"

"Yes," Ingrid said. "But *how* did she fall?"

Eric looked away. His hairless ears flattened against his skull. The metis drew a deep, rattling breath. "Karl pushed her. They were arguing with one another." His massive hands trembled as he raised them to his head. "It was so loud. I hid in the corner and covered my ears."

"What were they arguing about?" Ingrid asked. "Was it you?"

Eric shook his head. "No. It was about Mother's books. He said she'd tricked him. Made Wyrmspawn of us all." The metis smiled faintly. "He didn't mean me, of course. I didn't count. But he was very angry at the thought that you might be tainted as well."

With this glyph your father drove the vampires from Savannah in a single night. Ingrid's guts turned to lead. "Fruit from a poisoned tree," she said faintly.

"Mother got up and slapped Karl across the face." Eric grinned ruefully. "Everyone in the house was afraid of him, except her. She called him a coward. She said he was weak, just like the Stirlings. She made him so mad that he grabbed her by the arms and threw her." The metis stared across the cluttered apartment, in the direction of the staircase. "Karl had left the attic door open when he burst in. It seemed like she hung there forever, poised at the edge of the stairs, hands scrabbling for purchase. And then she was gone."

"What happened then?"

"He tore the attic apart," Eric replied. "At first I thought he was looking for me, but he was really after the books. Mother's books. Finally he found them and stormed downstairs. By that point the staff had come up to see what was wrong and found Mother's body. There was a lot of screaming and yelling. No one was paying any attention to me, so I shifted and went downstairs in the confusion. I watched Karl throw Mother's books into the fire."

Eric fell silent. The bones of the old house creaked and groaned, caught in the grip of the storm. Tentatively, Ingrid laid a hand on her cousin's humped shoulder.

"Do you remember what you said to me, after you came to my room? That something terrible was coming?"

"Yes."

"You were right. And it's nearly here."

"I know," the metis said softly.

Ingrid drew a deep breath. "I need your mother's book, Eric. The big one, with the glyphs. Can you get it for me?"

The metis studied her, his expression unreadable. "What do you want it for?" he asked.

"There's a page I need to see. That's all."

"Oh." The metis sounded almost disappointed. "All right." He rose to his feet and disappeared into the depths of the dark attic. Ingrid listened to him shuffle through his books as she shifted back into human form.

Eric returned quickly, holding the folio against his misshapen chest. "What is it you're looking for? A glyph, perhaps?"

"No. One of your mother's drawings. There's one that looks like a maze. Do you know it?"

The metis smiled. He undid the cord binding the folio together and laid the book open in front of Ingrid. With a single claw he lifted the corner of a page a third of the way through the stack and gently turned them over. The profile of the young man with the aristocratic features appeared. Ingrid's skin crawled as she recognized Wyatt Stirling's handsome face. *All of the beauty, but none of the madness*, she thought, trying to conceal her revulsion.

If the metis noticed her reaction, he gave no sign. His claw lifted another few pages, and there was the maze she'd seen earlier that day. She lifted the page gin-

gerly from the stack, studying it carefully. There were dozens of tiny notes in the margins and on the back of the page: descriptions, directions and measurements, plus what appeared to be the words to a rite in a language she didn't understand.

At the center of the maze a circle had been drawn, covered in tiny glyphs. *The capstone*, Ingrid reckoned. *Did Elizabeth learn about the Wyrmspirit from Wyatt, or discover it through the glyphs? How deep does the corruption go?*

She looked up at Eric. "Do you know what this is?"

The metis nodded. "Of course. It's a map of the tunnels. Mother spent years making it." He tapped the disk drawn at the center. "She said the Uktena hid something there, long, long ago."

"Something terrible," Ingrid told him. "A powerful Wyrmspirit that ravaged the land and nearly destroyed the local septs, centuries ago. It's been under our noses this entire time."

Eric frowned. "How do you know this?"

"It's been an eventful night." She leaned forward. "Listen. This circle, at the center of the maze? I think that's the capstone sealing the Wyrmspirit's prison. The garou that killed Eleanor and the others is there. He's been trying to find the glyphs so he can set the spirit free."

"The glyphs?"

Ingrid nodded. "The Wyrmspirit made them. They were created to tempt and corrupt the garou."

"Like the Stirlings."

"And us."

Ingrid stared up at Eric. The metis was silent for a long moment. She steeled herself, unsure what to expect. Anger? Denial? Guilt?

The metis crouched down and laid a massive hand on her shoulder. "You're not corrupt, Ingrid Stormwalker," he said solemnly. "You're the best garou I know."

All at once, there were tears in Ingrid's eyes. She forced a laugh, wiping at her cheeks. "Clearly you don't get out enough."

"I've been saying that for some time." The metis smiled. "Perhaps I can be of service now."

"You can." She offered him the page. "Tell me everything you know about the map, and the writing on the back. We're going after the garou that killed our people."

"We?"

"Me and the ronin." Ingrid gave Eric an apologetic look. "I need you to stay here, cousin, in case something goes wrong down in the tunnels. Guard these glyphs with your life. We cannot let the Wyrmspawn get their hands on them. Do you understand?"

The metis scowled fiercely, but after a moment's thought, he relented. "I understand," he said, taking the map from her hand. "We'll need to get you a pencil and some paper. You're going to want to make notes."

“Thank you,” Ingrid said. “For everything. I know this is hard for you, but you’re the only one in the family I can trust.”

“Truly?” Eric said, surprised.

“Truly.”

A slow smile crossed Eric’s face. He stared down at the folio, scratching under his muzzle thoughtfully. “Then perhaps there’s something more I can do to help.”



Chapter Sixteen: Shadow of Doubt

Something big was burning off to the east, in the direction of the port and the industrial parks at the edge of town. It tinged the horizon a blurry yellow, silhouetting the tops of the buildings downtown despite the shifting curtains of rain. There had been other fires, other emergencies in the small hours of the morning; Ingrid had stood watch at the apartment's front window and listened to the sirens wail for hours. The streets were silent now, but she knew better than to confuse quiet with calm. It was more likely that the city's emergency services already had more than they could handle, and the system had broken down under the strain. *The same could be said for us*, she thought, feeling more tired and hungry than she'd ever felt in her life.

A sudden, loud *bang* from downstairs made Ingrid jump. It was followed by drunken laughter and human howls, echoing up the apartment building's main stairwell.

She turned to Catherine and Euryale. The Uktena was sitting on the couch in the apartment's small living room, studying Eric's papers by candlelight. Euryale was stretched out next to her, dozing, her *labrys* propped next to her head. Kevin was off in one of the apartment's bedrooms, recovering from his wounds.

The Theurge gave Ingrid an apprehensive look. "That sounded like it was inside the building," she whispered.

There was another crash downstairs, followed by jeers and more laughter.

"They're breaking into the apartments downstairs," Euryale murmured. Her eyes were still shut, but her expression was intent, as though she could hear things that Ingrid and Catherine couldn't. "Are we sure everyone in the building is gone?"

Ingrid shrugged. "Pretty sure. The place has been quiet since I got here."

There was a muffled crash. Someone shouted in pain, followed by more laughter. Then came the pounding of feet up the stairs.

Euryale sighed irritably. "I'll take care of it," she said, swinging her legs off the couch.

"No," Ingrid warned. "Leave them alone."

The ronin waved away her concern. "Relax. I'm not going to hurt them. Just give them a good scare."

"Hurt them?" Ingrid snorted. "If it were up to me, we'd still be culling humans, like the good old days." She sobered. "But we can't risk causing a disturbance. Marcus and half the city's garou could be close by." The Shadow Lord turned, folding her arms and facing the door. "If they get inside, we take care of them. Otherwise, we keep quiet."

Euryale started to protest, then thought better of it. She settled back onto the sofa with a grudging nod.

Footsteps echoed down the second-floor hall. Ingrid heard voices, and then something banged hard against the apartment door, causing them to jump. Kevin, shifted into *crinos* form, appeared at the end of the bedroom hallway, fangs bared. Ingrid stopped him with a raised hand and a curt shake of her head.

The doorknob rattled. Euryale straightened, a hand going to her axe. The four werewolves watched with trepidation as the knob began to turn.

A small part of Ingrid's mind reflected on the absurdity of the situation. For the first time ever, she found herself grateful that there wasn't a Galliard around to bear witness.

There was a shout from downstairs. The human on the other side of the door gave the knob one last twist, and then the vandals were heading downstairs and back into the storm. Their howls rose and fell with the wind as they went off in search of easier pickings.

The garou listened in silence as the cries faded to the west. Kevin glanced at the others, his brow furrowed in consternation. "Did we just *hide* from a bunch of humans? Did that actually just happen?"

"No," Euryale said in a low voice. "That is most emphatically *not* what just occurred. And if anyone ever says otherwise, *especially* within earshot of a Galliard, I will hunt them to the ends of the earth. Are we clear?"

"Whatever," Kevin said with a yawn. He turned and headed back down the hall to his room. "Next person that wakes me up is dead. I don't care who they are."

"I'm with you." Euryale rose stiffly to her feet. To Ingrid, she said, "Wake me in a few hours, all right? We'll trade off."

"I'm not tired."

"I don't care," the ronin said. "Your body needs the downtime, even if you're too stubborn to admit it."

Ingrid sighed. Her hand went unconsciously to her ribs. Catherine had done everything she could once Ingrid had made it back from Reinhardt House, but after taking care of Kevin, the Theurge had little left to give. Her shoulder was mostly healed, but the deep gashes down her side were still raw and aching. She gave a curt nod and watched Euryale slip off down the hall to one of the empty rooms.

Catherine had returned to her studies the moment the humans had withdrawn. The Uktena's face was troubled. Ingrid gave another surreptitious glance out the

front window, checking for signs of trouble, then went and sat stiffly on the sofa beside her. "Do you think we can make it?" she asked.

The Theurge grimaced. "I don't know," she said wearily. "Finding the capstone chamber won't be a problem. We know it's underneath the caern, so we've already narrowed down the physical location. And the notes on the back of the map tell us how to circumvent the wards concealing the chamber entrance."

"But?"

"The tunnels are going to be crawling with Wyrmspawn. I doubt we'll get more than a dozen yards before we're spotted." Catherine paused, rubbing at her tired eyes. "I wish we hadn't used up the baneskin talens attacking the paper plant, but that's water under the bridge now."

"We'd been told for years that was the Wym's source of power in Savannah," Ingrid protested.

Catherine raised a placating hand. "I know, I know. I'm not casting blame. It just makes our task a lot harder now."

"That's why Eric gave us this." Ingrid leaned forward and tapped the yellowed page marked with the sigil. "He said it was the most powerful abjuration glyph in the book. It should repel even the strongest Wyrmspawn."

"Are you willing to bet your life on that?" Catherine gave the page a sidelong glance and shook her head. "I don't know what half of those symbols mean, Ingrid. It's beyond anything I've ever studied before. We've only got your cousin's word to go on here."

"You don't trust him?"

Catherine blinked. "Is that some kind of a joke? He's Wyatt Stirling's son."

"And I'm Karl Ironhand's daughter," Ingrid shot back. "We know he used at least one of the glyphs when he took over the city, years ago. If the sins of the parent are passed to the child, then I'm as corrupt as you believe Eric to be. But I saved your life back at the paper mill, didn't I?" She spread her hands. "So what does that make me, Catherine? Where does it all end?"

The Uktena shook her head. For a fleeting moment, her stoic demeanor slipped, and Ingrid saw the strain in Catherine's eyes.

"I don't know," the Theurge said in a hollow voice. "I'm just twenty-two, Ingrid. I don't know *anything*. Ever since the Great River Spirit came to me, nothing's made sense."

The fear and uncertainty in Catherine's voice struck a chord with Ingrid. "What did the elders say?" she asked, as gently as she knew how.

The Theurge gave a half-hearted laugh. Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes. "They didn't believe me. I was too young. They said I'd been in the sweat lodge too long, and saw only what I wanted to see."

"But you knew better."

"Oh, goddess, no. I didn't know what to think." She wiped her cheeks and drew a shuddering breath. "But I couldn't take the chance. I was a garou. I had a sacred

duty.” She managed another laugh. “The Galliards make it sound so noble at the moots. When I say it, it sounds ridiculous.”

“So you decided to come here on your own.”

“Didn’t know what else to do.” Catherine sighed. “I’d never been farther than Tulsa my whole life. Thank Gaia I crossed paths with Euryale and Kevin, or I probably never would have made it.” The Theurge gave Ingrid a rueful smile. “So here I am. A thousand miles from home, in the middle of a hurricane, with a terrible Wyrmspirit about to break its shackles and walk the Earth. If you’re looking for wisdom, Ingrid Stormwalker, you’re talking to the wrong person.”

Ingrid put her arms around Catherine and hugged the startled Theurge tight.

“You’re not ridiculous,” Ingrid told her. “You’re tight-lipped and mistrustful, and infuriatingly enigmatic, but you’re also honorable and brave.”

“Thank you. You’re...not ridiculous, either.”

Ingrid grinned. “That’s all?”

Catherine thought it over. “Well...you’re hot-headed and arrogant. You bite first and ask questions later –”

“You know, let’s just stop while we’re ahead –”

“No. Let me finish. You’re also judgmental and overbearing, when you’re not crippled by self-doubt. In fact, you’re your own worst enemy.” Catherine pulled away and stared up at her. “But you’ve got the heart of a hero. Even Euryale says so, and she doesn’t think much of *anyone*.”

“Then there’s got to be more to us than just our blood and our tribe,” Ingrid said. “Maybe it’s in spite of those things. It’s the choices we make, regardless of everything else, that makes us who we are.”

“Like your father.”

“You saw and heard the same things I did, back at Stirling House. I still believe he thought he was acting in the best interests of the caern.”

Catherine shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. Assuming we survive the next twelve hours, you’re going to have to make some hard choices about the future of Savannah – and Karl Ironhand.”

Ingrid turned away. “I know,” she said softly. “That’s why I need you to do something for me.”

• • •

Savannah is burning. Her kin are dead, and she is at the bottom of a pit, drowning in darkness.

The four wolves watch and wait at the edge of the pit, teeth gleaming in the firelight. She calls to them for help, and their smiles only widen. They start to change as she sinks deeper, their bodies shifting bonelessly, like oily, black tar.

Her aunt Elizabeth is first. She is naked and achingly beautiful, her dark hair unbound and her skin luminous as moonlight. When she speaks, her voice bubbles up from cancer-ridden lungs.

"Time to get our stories straight," she says, perfect lips drawing back to reveal oil-slicked teeth.

"It's the apocalypse," Marcus Shadow-Dancer adds. The usurper leers at her, his eyes fever-bright. "Adapt, or die."

Her father crouches next to Marcus, his expression cold and calculating. He is youthful and strong, but his muscular body is marked with livid scars.

"You can be persuaded," Karl insists. "You can be a good and faithful servant, once you've seen the truth."

The fourth garou crouches at the edge of the pit like a gargoyle. He beams down at her, his expression kindly.

"I can teach you," Eric says. "Mother whispered secrets to me in my cradle. Did you know?"

Her strength has failed her. The poison has reached her heart, clenching it tight. Helpless, she feels her body shift, giving up her war form.

It is the end. She relents, giving herself up to the abyss. Death will follow swiftly, she hopes. Her soul can take no more.

The darkness rushes in. Slender arms reach from behind her, closing in a lover's embrace. Warm lips brush softly against her ear. A hand cups her breast.

"There is no denying the inevitable," Wyatt Stirling whispers.

• • •

"Hey! Hey! Wake up!"

Ingrid woke in darkness. Strong hands gripped her shoulders. A figure loomed above her, barely visible in the gloom.

She snarled like a trapped animal, thrashing and kicking in blind terror. The figure bore down harder, pressing her into the bare mattress. Instinctively, she drew back one leg and planted her foot hard against her assailant's chest, shoving the figure away.

Donnerkeil blazed in her hand, filling the bedroom with angry light. She lurched from the bed, still drunk with sleep, rebounding from the wall and lunging after the prone form just a few feet away.

It was Kevin. The glow of the blade illuminated the ronin's shocked face as she stabbed for his heart.

Both of them shouted at once. Ingrid tried to pull the blow, and Kevin rolled, striking at her wrist. The two efforts combined to save the garou's life, burying the point of the *klaive* in the bedroom floor and leaving a smoking cut across Kevin's chest.

"What the hell?" Kevin shouted.

Ingrid recoiled in horror, the *klaive* falling from her hand. "I'm sorry," she gasped. The darkness of the dream still clung to her like tar. She fought the urge to be violently ill.

"I tried to knock —"

"It was a dream," Ingrid blurted, pressing a trembling hand to her face. She wasn't sure if she was trying to reassure Kevin, or herself. "A terrible dream."

Suddenly, Euryale was standing in the doorway, axe in hand. "What in the actual *fuck*?" she growled.

Kevin grimaced and rose to his feet. "I woke Ingrid up and she tried to kill me," he said matter-of-factly.

"I didn't mean to," Ingrid protested.

"Like hell you didn't," the ronin said, but then he gave a rueful grin. "Don't worry about it. No harm done. Not much anyway."

Euryale scowled at Ingrid. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Ingrid said, though she felt anything but. "I'm fine." She took a deep breath, steadying herself. "What time is it?"

"Almost six."

"Blessed goddess," Ingrid groaned. "You let me sleep for *twelve hours*?"

"You and Catherine needed the rest. Though if I'd known you'd go on a murder spree when you woke up, I might have changed my mind."

"How bad is it outside?"

Euryale shrugged. "There's seven kinds of hell blowing outside. The hurricane's made landfall, or close to it."

Ingrid cursed under her breath. After everything she'd seen over the last twenty-four hours, it felt like the storm was anything but an act of nature. If it had been summoned as part of the plan to free Abbazû, then the final act was nearly at hand.

She bent and retrieved *Donnerkiel*. A strange sense of foreboding came over her as her hand closed about the antler hilt.

Just a dream, she told herself. *It was just a dream*. "Come on," she said tersely, trying to drive the darkness from her mind.

Catherine was waiting for them in the living room. The map and the glyph had been tucked away in her bag, and she seemed to be meditating in the flickering glow of candlelight. The Uktena took a deep breath and opened her eyes as Ingrid and the ronin appeared.

The Shadow Lord gave her a pointed look. "Ready?"

Catherine nodded gravely. "All set."

Ingrid drew a deep breath. The die was cast. She turned to her companions.

No. Not companions, Ingrid corrected herself. *Packmates*.

"Let's get this done," she said without preamble. "There's an entrance to the tunnels in the basement of an abandoned market, about a block from the caern. Catherine thinks she's got the location pinpointed on the map. That'll cut the amount of time we're in the tunnels to a bare minimum.

"We'll shift to *hispo* and make our way there under cover of the storm. If we run into humans or taints along the way, we'll do our best to slip past them. We can't afford to get bogged down in a hundred little battles between here and the capstone chamber. Understood?"

Catherine and Euryale nodded. Kevin made a sour face, but followed suit.

"Anything to add, Euryale?"

The ronin gave Ingrid a wry grin. "If we make it back from this, you're going to owe us all a drink."

Kevin snorted. "*A* drink? Oh, no. *All* the drinks. It's the least she can do after she just tried to kill me."

Catherine looked from Ingrid to Kevin, and back again. "She tried to kill you?"

Ingrid rolled her eyes. "Gaia deliver me from smartasses in wolf's clothing," she said. "Just follow me."

• • •

There had been no one to board up the abandoned store on Abercorn Street, and it had suffered under the wrath of the storm. The storefront's plate glass windows had been shattered, and the aisles filled with pools of dirty water and debris.

The shop's old, wooden door was ajar. Ingrid pushed it open with her nose and padded warily inside. Water ran in streams from her thick coat, leaving puddles on the tile floor. Lightning flashed, throwing stark shadows across the mud-smeared linoleum. The thunder, when it came, was all but lost in the constant rumble of the wind.

The hurricane was at the peak of its fury now. Savannah had been plunged into darkness, its streets transformed to churning rivers and its buildings shrouded in curtains of stinging rain. The raging storm had brought the Wyrmspawn out in force. Dozens of fomori were roaming the district, testing the limits of its wards and leaving a trail of destruction and defilement in their wake. There were so many that Ingrid feared that she and her pack would be discovered at any moment, but the storm that gave the enemy so much freedom had concealed their movements as well. Despite a number of close calls, the garou had reached the entrance to the tunnels undetected.

The sight of so many taints had filled Ingrid with a growing sense of rage and dismay. *Everything I've done for this city has been a joke*, she thought. *So many years, so many hunts, and we weren't even scratching the surface*. The darkness from her dreams welled up again, threatening to overwhelm her.

Maybe that's because Father and I have been doing Abbazû's work all along?

Euryale crept into the store on Ingrid's heels, followed by Catherine. Kevin bounded over the jagged sill of one of the store's window frames, landing amid a sparkling sea of broken glass. Still in *hispo* form, he shook himself like a dog, spraying the walls – and his companions – with a shower of water and mud.

The filthy rain shook Ingrid from her reverie. "Payback's a bitch, bog-hound," she growled, giving him a sidelong glare – just as a trio of fomori emerged from the storeroom at the back of the shop.

Euryale snarled a warning, but Ingrid was already in motion, leaping at the first of the taints to come through the doorway. Doubt and despair vanished as she crashed into the fomor as her powerful jaws closed about the spongy skin of his

throat. The Wyrmspawn let out a choking cry as he fell, the sound vibrating through Ingrid's teeth. She bit down hard, tearing flesh and crushing vertebrae as the fomor clawed at her sides. Foul blood filled her mouth, but she reveled in it, letting her doubts dissolve in a flare of pure, murderous rage. She shook the taint savagely in her teeth, sending his head bouncing across the floor.

The other two fomori had been knocked sideways by Ingrid's charge, but were already spitting curses and surging back onto their feet. Euryale reached one in two, long strides, shifting to *crinos* form between one step and the next. Her *labrys* fell, splitting the Wyrmspawn in two. A half-second later Kevin was on the third fomor, crushing the taint's skull in his jaws.

The fomori had died in moments, the sounds of battle lost amid the rumble of the storm. Ingrid's relief was short-lived, however, as she caught a flicker of movement in the storeroom beyond. The Shadow Lord bounded to the doorway, shifting to her war form and summoning *Donnerkeil* to her hand.

It was too late. From halfway across the darkened storeroom Ingrid saw a fourth taint dropping through the hole into the tunnels below, shouting a warning at the top of his lungs.



Chapter Seventeen: Walking in Dark Places

The fomor's frantic shouts echoed from the tunnel below. Ingrid bit back a savage curse. *Catherine didn't think we'd get more than a dozen yards. Turns out she was being optimistic.*

Euryale joined Ingrid at the doorway. "So much for stealth," she growled. "What now?"

The Shadow Lord bared her teeth. "We've still got surprise on our side," she said. "We move fast and kill anything that gets in our way. If we're lucky, we can reach the capstone chamber before the Wyrmspawn can organize a defense."

"And then?"

"We kill Carstairs any way we can and put an end to this," Ingrid said darkly. "The rest is in the hands of the goddess." She glanced back at Catherine. "Have you got the glyph ready?"

The Theurge had shifted to *glabro* and was peering closely at Elizabeth's map. "I can get to it if we really need it," she said, not looking up from the yellowed page.

"You don't think it might be useful *right fucking now*?" Ingrid asked.

Catherine looked up from the map. "When things are desperate enough that I'm compelled to risk my soul to use a Wyrms-tained glyph, you'll be the first to know."

Ingrid scowled at the Theurge. "Fine. Everyone stay close. Euryale, you're with me. Catherine in the middle, and Kevin, you cover her and bring up the rear. Let's go!" Without waiting for a reply, she dashed across the storeroom and dropped through the tunnel entrance.

She landed with a splash of slimy, gray water. Runoff from above was seeping through the packed earth walls of the chamber and saturating the tunnel floor. The air was dank and thick with the stench of decaying flesh. Ingrid's lip curled as she saw the bloated bodies of the two fomori she'd killed just two nights before, left by the Wyrmspawn to rot where they'd fallen. The warning cries of the fomor could still be heard over the steady trickle of rainwater, echoing from the tunnel to the north.

Euryale was right on Ingrid's heels, dropping down into the water at the Shadow Lord's side. Catherine and Kevin followed mere moments later. Kevin sniffed the fetid air, grimaced, and spat against the near wall.

"Catherine?" Ingrid prompted.

The Uktena pointed to a passageway on their left. "That way."

Ingrid broke into a run, shoulders hunched and klaive held low. Euryale fell in at her right shoulder, the ronin's axe glimmering coldly in the gloom. Clawed feet slapped at the wet earth as they raced down the winding tunnel, their senses straining to penetrate the darkness up ahead.

She could hear more shouts now – cries of alarm and angry, gibbering oaths – but the nature of the tunnels made it hard to tell if they were coming from ahead of the garou or behind them. *Or both*, Ingrid thought grimly.

They followed the tunnel for nearly a dozen yards, and then came to a branching passageway on their right. Ingrid slowed, glancing back at Catherine. The Theurge came to a stop, frowning down at the map.

"Bright goddess, do *not* tell me you're lost already," Ingrid snapped.

"This isn't on the map! It's been at least twenty years. There's no telling how much has changed since then."

"Catherine – "

"Just keep going! There will be a passage to your left a few more yards further on."

Ingrid choked back her misgivings and pressed on, watching for the side-passage Catherine described. If the Theurge was wrong, and they lost their bearings, it would only be a matter of time before the Wyrmspawn surrounded them.

There! The side-passage was just ahead, right where Catherine said it would be. Ingrid picked up the pace. The shouts of alarm had given way to bloodthirsty howls and frenzied hunting cries that grew louder and closer with every passing moment.

A group of fomori burst from the side passage right into Ingrid's path. Wyrmspawn and garou crashed together, but the werewolves' size and rage-fueled speed gave them the advantage. Ingrid smashed one of the taints against the muddy wall with her shoulder and spilled his guts with a sweep of her klaive. There was a look of triumph in the Wyrmspawn's eyes as he died. Ingrid knew that the bane possessing the man's body would broadcast their location to every Wym-spirit it could reach.

Teeth sank into Ingrid's left arm. She turned on the second taint with a snarl, chopping *Donnerkeil* into the fomor's chest and shaking the corpse loose with a violent shrug. Close behind her, metal rang against bone as Euryale chopped into another taint's skull. Ingrid pressed on, charging down the side-passage and trusting the others to follow.

They were heading in the direction of the caern now; Ingrid could sense the change in Gauntlet with every step she took. She stole a quick glance over her shoulder and saw that Catherine and the ronin were still with her. Euryale was a vision of terror, her silver axe and her black pelt splattered with gore.

“What now?” Ingrid called out.

“Right fork, ten yards ahead!”

The sounds of pursuit were louder and more focused now. The Wyrmspawn were on their trail. Ingrid raced for the next turning point. A trio of fomori appeared out of the gloom, running directly for them. Ingrid howled in fury and hit them like a runaway train. She shoulder-checked one of the taints, pulping flesh and crushing bone, and then spat another on the point of her klaive. The third fomor reeled away, gibbering in terror, and ran back the way he came. Ingrid shook the dead taint from her blade without breaking stride and ran on.

The passage forked a few seconds later. The panicked fomor ran left, and Ingrid led the garou to the right. The tunnel ran for another five yards, then curved gradually to the left. A fitful greenish-yellow glow suffused the passageway up ahead, seeping from a widening seam that ran at knee-height along the right wall.

Ingrid followed the curving passage for another few yards – and came up short in front of a grimy, crumbling foundation wall. “It’s a dead end!” she shouted.

“We go down from here,” Catherine explained, pointing to the glowing seam.

Ingrid knelt beside the fissure. It was wide enough now for a *glabro* to wriggle into, and sank crookedly out of sight. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You wanted the shortest, most direct route,” Catherine said. “We could have taken another approach, way up by the river, but we’d have had to fight all the way across the district to get here.”

“Are we arguing, or climbing?” Euryale asked pointedly.

Ingrid gritted her teeth and shifted forms. If there were something waiting for them at the bottom of the fissure, they wouldn’t know it until it was far too late. “How far?”

“All the way to the bottom. Fifty or sixty feet.”

“What’s the glow coming from?”

“The map doesn’t say.”

Of course not, Ingrid thought sourly. She eased herself feet-first into the fissure and started to work her way down. The others clambered quickly after her, as the sound of fomori hunting parties drew steadily closer.

The jagged nature of the fissure provided ample handholds and no danger of a long drop to the bottom. Ingrid made her way down quickly, alert for signs of danger below.

After forty feet, Ingrid ran out of footholds. The fissure ended above a chamber of some kind. She peered into the pulsing glow at her feet, but couldn’t see how far she was from the floor.

There wasn’t any time to dither; Euryale was just above her, coming down fast. Ingrid took a deep breath and let go.

She dropped almost fifteen feet, landing hard on damp limestone worn flat and smooth by the passage of countless feet. Ingrid found herself in a cavern some twenty feet across, lit by patches of phosphorescent mold that covered the walls and ceil-

ing. There was a strange tension in the air, a sense of wrongness that knotted Ingrid's guts and set her teeth on edge.

A shower of loose dirt and bits of rock rained down around Ingrid. She stepped aside just in time, as first Euryale and then Catherine landed where she'd been standing. Kevin followed moments later. His head and shoulders were spattered with gore. "They're right behind us," he warned, glancing up at the fissure as though he expected fomori to start dropping through at any moment.

Just then, a terrible, discordant howl reverberated down a tunnel that stretched off to their right. The sound sent a chill down Ingrid's spine as she shifted back to *crinos* form. The others quickly followed suit. "That's a garou," she said.

Euryale stared off in the direction of the sound. "No, it's not," she said darkly. "Not any more."

A Black Spiral Dancer, Ingrid realized, feeling a sudden sense of dread. All at once the odds arrayed against them seemed overwhelming, the prospect of death very real.

Euryale caught the look in Ingrid's eye. "We've got to be close now," the ronin said. "Catherine, which way?"

The Theurge pointed to a tunnel opening on the far side of the cavern. "That way. Ten yards, then turn right."

More dirt showered down from the fissure. Discordant howls echoed through the gloom. Ingrid resolved herself to her fate and broke into a run.

The sense of wrongness grew worse as the garou crossed the cavern and entered the passageway. It built like a psychic pressure behind Ingrid's eyes, making it difficult to concentrate. Abbazû was straining at his bonds, trying to force his way into the physical world. A sense of unreality threatened to overwhelm her, causing her to nearly miss the turn. At the last moment she caught herself and headed right, deeper into the storm.

The passage wound this way and that, twisting like a worm's track through the soft stone. Suddenly, Catherine shouted for them to stop.

Ingrid lurched to a halt. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The Theurge faced the tunnel wall to her right. "This is it. We've reached the entrance to the antechamber."

Wild howls rang down the passageway, rising swiftly to a fever pitch. The Wyrmspawn were close enough now that Ingrid could hear the pounding of their feet along the stone.

"Your mind's playing tricks on you!" she shouted over the din. "There's nothing there!"

Catherine shook her head stubbornly. "The way ahead is hidden," she said, handing the map to Kevin. She closed her eyes and after a moment, began to chant.

The enemy was almost upon them. Euryale went to join Kevin, blocking the path back the way they'd come.

Catherine raised her hands. She spoke a single word – to Ingrid, it sounded like a name – and clapped her hands together. A section of the tunnel wall right in front of the Theurge simply vanished, roiling away like smoke. Beyond was a narrow tunnel, glowing with baleful light. The Theurge opened her eyes, and recoiled at what she saw.

Once, long ago, the tunnel had been carved from the limestone by human hands. But the malign force of the Wyrmspirit had corrupted it, transforming the stone into something gelid and faintly translucent. Black veins ran along the walls and ceiling like tangled roots, pulsing with unnatural life. A foul stench, like mortifying flesh, gusted from the opening and struck the garou full in the face.

“Merciful goddess!” Catherine choked, covering her face with the back of one hand.

The first of the Wyrmspawn came charging around the bend. Euryale knocked the fomor off his feet with an upward sweep of her *labrys*. “We’re out of time!” she shouted.

Ingrid tightened her grip on *Donnerkeil* and charged down the tunnel, howling a challenge as she went.

The floor of the tunnel was slick and yielding, like rotting flesh. Her broad shoulders brushed against the walls, and she could feel the life surging in the black veins as she went past. The animal part of her brain rebelled at the sheer, unnatural spectacle, urging her to escape before she was corrupted as well. Instead, she surrendered herself to her rage, letting it drive her onward, right into her enemy’s heart.

The tunnel sloped gently downward. After little more than ten yards it opened onto a wide, vaulted cavern. *The antechamber*, Ingrid thought. Here the servants of the Wyrms had gathered in secret to worship at the threshold of Abbazû’s prison, waiting upon the day of his release. Between their efforts and the foul energies leaking past the ancient wards, the cavern had been transformed into a blasphemous shrine to the Corrupter itself.

A vast spiral had been etched onto the cavern floor, shining darkly against the gelid surface like a tattoo on a drowned man’s skin. Hundreds of human corpses, some decades old, were scattered around the cavern, contorted in poses of suffering and death. Their rotting flesh sagged from their bones and merged with the surface of the floor. Still other victims had been forced to hold metal basins filled with balefire and made to kneel at different points along the spiral until the poisonous flames killed them and the heat mummified their bodies. Their leathery faces were elongated masks of agony, lit from below by the unnatural light of the lamps they bore.

We’re right under the caern, Ingrid thought. *This was going on right under our feet the entire time*. Torn between rage and revulsion, she stalked across the cavern, searching for the entrance to the capstone chamber.

She was halfway across the cavern when she heard the sound. It was the crackle of old gristle and the wet slither of rotting skin. One of the corpses off to her left was moving, bones shifting beneath putrescent flesh. As she watched, the body seemed to slough off its grey skin like a caul, exposing a monstrous shape made of spasming muscle and dagger-like bone.

A skrag! Ingrid's hackles rose. Such was the Wyrms' power here that its minions could take shape in the physical world. The ghastly sounds of transformation filled the cavern around her as the skrag's packmates found dead flesh to use for their own. She would be surrounded in seconds. Ingrid whirled, looking everywhere for a passageway that might lead to the capstone chamber, but it was nowhere to be found.

The first warrior-bane let out a whistling screech and charged at her, scuttling across the cavern like a spider on six blade-like legs. Snarling, Ingrid leapt to meet it, slashing at the Wyrmspawn's skull with her blade. The skrag dodged the blow and stabbed at her with its forelegs. Ingrid twisted out of the path of one leg and slashed with her klaive at the other. There was a spark of pure, angry light as the blow connected and *Donnerkeil* severed the limb with a sharp *crack*, and the skrag shrieked in fury.

Searing pain flared across Ingrid's back. A second warrior-bane had entered the fray, dashing up behind her and slashing with its legs. The Shadow Lord spun, trying to keep both foes in sight. Still more were closing in from different directions: a dozen, she guessed, perhaps more.

The skrag with the severed limb tried to take advantage of her distraction and lunged again. Ingrid saw the attack coming and sidestepped the enemy's lunge. A backhand sweep of her blade shattered the monster's skull. As the skrag's body collapsed into a pile of greasy bone and rotting sinew, the Shadow Lord rounded on her second attacker, determined to bring it down before she was overwhelmed.

But the warrior-bane had retreated out of reach, hissing angrily and slashing at the air with its forelegs. The other skrags were holding back as well, snarling and snapping at her, or scuttling from side to side in frustration. They glared at Ingrid with helpless, thwarted rage.

No. Not me, Ingrid realized. She glanced over her shoulder, back the way she'd come.

Catherine stood at the mouth of the tunnel, her face a mask of grim determination. She brandished Eric's glyph at the skrags. Behind her, Euryale and Kevin fought to hold a mob of fomori at bay inside the tunnel.

"Go, Stormwalker!" she commanded, her voice tight with strain. "We're right behind you!"

"Where?" Ingrid spun about, searching the cavern walls once more.

"There!" Catherine pointed with her left hand at a spot on the far wall opposite the tunnel entrance. "The path is hidden, like before. Just run through it!"

Ingrid hesitated. The wall looked just as solid as the floor she was standing on. *The same floor that's slowly eating all these corpses.*

The sounds of fighting at her back were growing louder and more desperate by the moment. Gritting her teeth, Ingrid dug in her heels and ran at the wall. The skrags gave way before her, screeching furiously. As the gelid surface loomed before her, Ingrid shut her eyes and tried to focus on the wall turning to smoke before her.

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The jarring impact Ingrid feared never came. Instead, the sounds of battle were suddenly muffled, and she could sense the weight of unseen walls pressing close to either side. Her sense of relief lasted barely a heartbeat before her foot came down on empty air, and she was falling.

The shock barely had time to register before she hit hard, unyielding stone. Ingrid rolled, tumbling down a short set of steps that ended at a circular cavern floor.

She found herself in a rough-hewn chamber barely twenty feet across, lit by four hissing braziers of flickering balefire. The floor beneath Ingrid's feet was cool, reassuring stone, as were the cavern's walls and ceiling. An ancient mural had been painted on the curving surface, depicting a great battle between garou and Wyrmspawn. The pigments had faded over the centuries, but the figures and the story they told were still powerful. Huge wolves fought with misshapen creatures under the light of a great moon. Shadows etched in charcoal merged with the real shadows of the chamber, and the flickering light of the balefire lent the fading shapes a semblance of life. Across the centuries, the great battle still raged.

In the center of the room, inset into the cavern floor, was a wide, circular stone of polished basalt. Dozens of complex glyphs had been carefully inscribed into its surface in a series of nested circles. Seeing them, Ingrid suddenly recalled the symbol etched into the surface of Eleanor's table. *It wasn't a spiral at all. Carstairs was referring to the capstone.*

"The Dweller told me you'd come."

Carstairs' voice rasped from the shadows at the far side of the chamber. A mound of rags and soiled cushions had been piled there; the sort of nest a desperate, wounded animal might make. The Fianna sat with his back propped against the cavern wall. Above him, the climactic battle between Shadow Chaser and Walks-with-Ghosts raged, the Uktena elder's spear poised to strike the possessed garou's heart.

The Fianna leaned forward. He was in human form, and there was no mistaking the Stirling bloodline. Carstairs had the same delicate, boyish features and slender build, but the light of the balefires emphasized the hollowness of his cheeks and the fevered look in his green eyes. He wore ragged jeans and a grimy t-shirt that was tacky with old blood. The faint smell of infection hung in the dank air.

"I didn't believe it at first." Carstairs pressed a bloodstained hand to his side. "Perhaps I didn't *want* to believe. But now the Dweller says you've seen the truth. Is that so?"

Ingrid rose slowly to her feet. "I've got no idea what the truth is anymore," she growled. "The only thing I know for certain is that you killed my kin."

Carstairs frowned. "You haven't brought the keys? You haven't come to atone?"

The Shadow Lord bared her teeth. "I'm here to cut your goddamned heart out."

"Oh?" Carstairs' lips twitched in a death's head grin. "Praise the Destroyer. That's going to simplify things."

The Fianna's green eyes flicked upwards. Ingrid spat a curse and started to turn, but the Black Spiral Dancers were already upon her.

The two Wyrmspawn had been clinging to the walls of the cavern like bats, just above the entrance to the chamber. At Carstairs' signal they leapt on Ingrid, seizing her arms and forcing her to her knees. They were tall and impossibly gaunt, even in *crinos* form, with hollow bellies and mottled gray skin stretched tight at shoulder and hip. What little fur they had was matted and filthy, and their exposed skin was livid with scabs and open sores. Their eyes, milky with cataracts, reflected the baleful light of the cavern. Ingrid struggled furiously, bellowing with rage, but for all their cadaverous appearance, the tainted garou were fearsomely strong.

Carstairs rose from his bed of rags. Joints popped and skin stretched as he began to shift, taking on his war form.

"The last thing I want is for you to see the error of your ways," he said. "To realize, at this late hour, how alike we truly are. To come crawling here on your belly and *beg* for the Dweller's favor. No. I won't have it." He stalked towards her, across the dark surface of the capstone. "I dreamt of you for *years*. Dreamt of all the ways I'd make you suffer."

Carstairs seized her by the jaw, lifting her head so that their eyes met. "After everything you've taken from me, I have a *right* to your pain." He gave her another twitch of a smile and raised a filthy talon to her left eye.

The cavern rang with a furious howl. The Black Spiral Dancers started in surprise at Euryale's battlecry. Carstairs glanced up, snarling at the ronin's sudden appearance – and Ingrid made her move. She surrendered herself to her rage, forcing her body to shift from *crinos* to *lupus* in the blink of an eye.

The sudden change in size and mass caught the Black Spiral Dancers off-guard. They fell against one another, snarling in surprise. Ingrid twisted in their grasp; with a snap of her jaws she bit an ear off one of the Wyrmspawn and clawed herself free.

The sight of the Shadow Lord breaking free brought Carstairs out of his shock. He leapt at her with a maddened snarl and a slash of his claws. Ingrid made no effort to dodge the blow; instead, she focused her anger and shifted once again, swelling in size from *lupus* to *hispo* and lunging for the Fianna's throat.

The two werewolves crashed together and fell, thrashing, to the cavern floor. Claws raked at Ingrid's side, but her teeth found their mark. She bit down hard, twisting and tearing with her powerful jaws. They rolled across the stone, Carstairs spitting desperate curses in her ear. The back of her head cracked against the cavern floor, blotting out her vision in a white flare of pain.

Flesh parted under her teeth. Hot blood poured into Ingrid's mouth. Carstairs tore at her in desperation, his claws flaying her to the bone, but the Shadow Lord was implacable. Consumed with rage, she twisted her powerful body beneath the Fianna and forced him onto his back. He reached for her with bloodied hands, trying to get hold of her neck, but it was too late. Planting her wide paws against his chest, Ingrid threw back her head and tore out Carstairs' throat.

The Fianna thrashed in his death throes, blood pouring from the ragged wound and pooling beneath him. As he died his body shifted one last time, returning to its natural state.

Ingrid stared down into Carstairs' eyes and gave him a red-toothed smile. "This is all you deserve from me and mine," she growled. "Nothing more. And nothing less."

Richard Carstairs' last breath hissed from his ruined throat. *It's done*, Ingrid thought. *The caern is safe, and my kin avenged. If I die in the next few minutes, at least I'll go into the next life with my honor intact.*

Her triumph was short-lived, however. All at once, the cavern shook, and the stone beneath Ingrid gave a bitter, hollow *crack*. She glanced down. Her eyes widened as she realized that Carstairs' body lay atop the ancient capstone. Just in time, the Shadow Lord leapt clear as the basalt shattered, dropping with the Fianna's body into the darkness below.

Ingrid turned. The Black Spiral Dancers lay dead, brought down by Kevin and Euryale. Catherine stood just inside the cavern, a look of shock and dismay upon her face.

"What just happened?" Ingrid said.

The Theurge shook her head. "I don't know!"

A gust of air rushed through the hole in the cavern floor, like bad air from the depths of an ancient crypt. The temperature in the chamber plunged.

Euryale shook her head. "Something's wrong," she growled. "*Bad* wrong. We've got to get out of here."

There was movement at the cavern entrance. A Black Spiral Dancer appeared, creeping down the steps toward Catherine. A jagged blade of oily, dark metal was clenched in his clawed hand. Three more of the tainted garou slinked like hyenas from the tunnel at his back.

"*Catherine!*" Ingrid rushed forward, shifting quickly into *crinos* form.

The Uktena whirled, raising Eric's glyph. The Black Spiral Dancers froze.

"Stay behind me!" Catherine shouted to Ingrid and the ronin. She took a step towards the Wyrmspawn. "I can drive them back –"

Grimacing cruelly, the first Black Spiral Dancer stepped forward to meet her. Gibbering laughter filled the cavern as he drove his jagged blade into Catherine's chest.

Chapter Eighteen: *The Dweller in the Dark*

He was sitting on the attic floor, poring over his mother's papers by candlelight, when the moment finally arrived. It started as a tickle in the back of his brain – the faintest of ripples crossing the fabric of the Gauntlet from the spirit world – but it grew in strength from one heartbeat to the next, until Eric could think of nothing else. The first threads of the old ritual failed, increasing the strain on their neighbors until they, too, gave way. The metaphysical chain-reaction grew in speed and intensity, sweeping across the Historic District from the oldest shrines in the north to the caern in the south. The wind outside rose to a howling crescendo, and he howled along with it, knowing that all his plans had come to fruition at last.

The uproar was over as swiftly as it began. The wind lost all its fury, and a strange stillness settled over the city. Eric found himself on his hands and knees, panting heavily, his mind whirling. He'd dreamed of this moment every night for the last twenty years – but now that it had finally arrived, all his meticulous planning deserted him. The notion made him laugh, a ghostly, exultant sound that rang from the rafters and echoed from the house's heating grates.

After a moment he composed himself, wiping the froth from his lips with the back of one hand. Lighting flickered through the attic windows, and the rain started up again, pattering softly against the glass. The rite he'd used to summon the hurricane had just been broken, and he could sense that the storm was swiftly losing strength. That was just as well. It had served its purpose. The streets would be his for as long as he needed them.

Eric filled his aching lungs and blew out the candles. The old, familiar darkness calmed his mind and helped him think. First, he gathered up his mother's papers and bound them back in their folio, then returned them to their proper place on the shelf by his bed. They would remain behind, safe from the rain. Every line of every glyph he would need had been committed to memory many years ago.

Then he went to the place where brick column of the living room chimney rose from the attic floor and began shifting the tall stacks of books that had been piled around it. He felt a nervous flutter of anticipation as he cleared away a section of dusty floorboards that hadn't been disturbed since he was a child. With trembling claws he pulled up the section

of board his mother had showed him. She'd warned him never to touch it, never to even go near it, until the time was right. Carefully, reverently, he reached into the narrow cavity and lifted out the cloth-wrapped bundle she'd left for him.

The blade within was black glass, darker than night. It felt good in his hand.

Eric's steps were light as he crossed to the attic door. The locks clicked open with a touch and a whispered word. The years seemed to roll backwards as he descended the narrow stairs. In his mind's eye he saw his mother after the fall, her eyes glassy and her limbs askew. He remembered how he'd crept down the stairs while his uncle had stomped and swore around the attic, and held her hand while she died. That was when he'd learned of his birthright. That was the day he learned who he truly was.

The house's second floor was quiet. The murmur of voices rose up the stairwell, coming from the rear of the house. Twenty-two kinfolk, members of the house staff and their families, had been moved into the solarium; he'd listened at the grate for hours and counted the voices with care. The children were restless, and the adults were afraid. Ironhand had told them nothing, but between the storm and the killings, they knew something terrible was happening. All they could do was huddle in the darkness and wait like lambs.

There was no sound from his uncle's study. Ironhand had grown moody and withdrawn after Ingrid's escape, refusing meals and brooding at his desk as the storm broke around him. Eric wondered if his uncle had felt the wards come unraveled, and knew that his doom was approaching. He hoped so. He hoped the realization was coming upon his uncle like the point of a knife, sliding slowly between his ribs.

Eric took the main stairs slowly, savoring the way the treads groaned beneath his feet. His uncle couldn't help but hear, couldn't help but know it was he. His lips drew back from his muzzle in an executioner's grin.

The doors to the study were shut. Eric paused at the threshold. Never in his life had he been allowed inside. The antique oak panels rumbled like thunder as he slid them open.

The study was dark, as he expected it to be. A single lamp burned atop the huge desk. Empty liquor bottles lay scattered across the expensive rugs. The smell of despair hung over the room like a shroud.

Eric stepped inside. "I'm here, Uncle." He raised his knife to the lamplight. "I've come for what is mine."

He expected a fight. He expected denials and bitter accusations. He even expected tears. The scene had played out countless times in his mind since his mother's death.

But Karl Ironhand wasn't there. The chair behind the desk sat empty.

Frowning, Eric searched the dimly lit room. He had gone so far as to peer behind the desk, thinking that his uncle might be passed out on the floor – when a gasp from the doorway caught his attention.

One of the house staff stood in the doorway, dressed in kitchen whites. He was middle-aged and balding, and his eyes were wide with fear. "He – he's not here, master," the man said.

Eric stalked around the corner of the desk, knife held low. "Where is he?"

The kinfolk blanched. Eric took a breath and tried again in a friendlier tone. "Where has my uncle gone?"

"To the caern, master. He left hours ago to join Marcus and the others. They feared the Wyrmspawn might try and attack under the cover of the storm." Trembling visibly, the kinfolk took a step towards him. "I'll be happy to tell Master Karl that you were looking for him," he said. "If you could just go back upstairs and wait in your room –"

Eric's hand clamped over the kinfolk's face. The obsidian blade met little resistance as it sank into the man's belly. Eric spilled the cook's guts onto the Afghan rug and then moved on to the kinfolk's genitals. He sawed and stabbed until the muffled screams stopped and the blood stopped pumping, and then tossed the shredded remains aside. Seething, he left the study and crossed to the front door, leaving a trail of bloody footprints along the hardwood.

They were waiting for him outside the wrought-iron gate, drawn by the collapse of the city's shrines. Six tall, gaunt figures, silhouetted by darkness and rain: they would be his bodyguards and champions, the captains of his army. His *pack*.

The Black Spiral Dancers eyed him warily, ears back and shoulders tense. They knew his face from the depths of their fever-dreams, but they did not trust him yet.

Eric descended the steps and approached the gate. The Wyrmspawn watched in silence, nostrils flaring. His deformities meant little to garou such as they. Of far more interest was the blood and viscera that matted his black fur.

He showed them the bloody knife, and spoke to them in the tongue of the Corrupter, as his mother had taught him in the cradle. "A feast has been prepared for you," he told them. "Go inside, and eat your fill. We have a long night of work ahead of us."

The fallen garou listened, but made no reply. After a long moment, the first of the Black Spiral Dancers reached a claw through the gate and undid the latch. It swung open with a groan. The Wyrmspawn slunk past him, breaking into a trot as they caught the scent of the warm flesh waiting inside the house.

Eric stood at the gate and listened as the first screams rose from the solarium. The sounds mingled with the distant cries of fomori as the Wyrmspawn emerged from their tunnels and began to desecrate the now defenseless shrines.

Everything had not gone entirely according to plan, he mused, but perhaps that was for the best. Karl Ironhand would live just long enough to watch Savannah die.

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The Black Spiral Dancer tore his blade free. Catherine snarled, spitting blood, the glyph tumbling from her hand as she reached for the Wyrmspawn's throat. Her legs buckled and she fell backwards, a patch of mangy fur clutched in her fist. Another of the tainted garou leapt on her, gray lips drawn back in a lunatic grin.

Ingrid gave a furious shout and charged the Wyrmspawn, trying to force her way to Catherine's side. A Black Spiral Dancer stepped into her path; claws raked her

chest as she shoulder-checked the taint, knocking him aside. The enemy pack leader saw her coming and sidled to the left, his expression calculating.

The Wyrmspawn on top of Catherine had sunk his teeth into her shoulder. Ingrid slashed at his snout with *Donnerkeil*, forcing him back. When she did, the knife-wielding pack leader made his move, lunging forward and stabbing at her side. Too late, he realized that Ingrid's move was a feint. She spun, the dagger gouging a furrow across her ribs, and drove her blade into the pack leader's heart.

The other taint was on her before she could pull her klaive free. Fearsome jaws closed on her right forearm, and claws tore at her arms and chest. The Black Spiral Dancer pushed against her, trying to drive her onto her back, but she dug in her heels and grappled with him. The enemy wrenched his head back and forth, teeth ripping deeper into her arm. Claws swiped at the side of her face.

Ingrid dropped *Donnerkeil* into her left hand and stabbed him in the groin. The taint let go of her arm and staggered backwards with an agonized howl, and she finished him off with a cut to his throat.

The other two Black Spiral Dancers had fallen, brought down by Kevin's claws and Euryale's axe. Scraggs were appearing at the tunnel mouth now, slashing at the air with their blade-like legs. Ingrid lurched over to stand above Catherine's prone form. The Shadow Lord's right arm hung limply at her side, and blood streamed freely from a dozen deep wounds.

The scraggs started forward – then froze at the sound of an eerie, high-pitched wail.

Kevin advanced on the Wyrmspawn, jaw agape, shrieking like a spirit of the damned. The banshee sound made Ingrid's blood run cold, and it drove the scraggs mad with fright. The warrior-banes all but trampled one another retreating back into the antechamber. Kevin chased after them as far as the mouth of the tunnel, then stopped.

Euryale stared at him in shock. "When did you learn how to do *that*?"

Kevin shrugged. "I've always known the trick. I just don't like to use it much. Hard to fight someone when they're trying to run away from you." He glanced over his shoulder at Catherine. "See what you can do for her. They won't stay gone for long."

The Uktena had rolled into a fetal position, shoulders heaving, arms curled against the wound in her chest. Ingrid sank to her knees beside Catherine, and was joined by Euryale a moment later. The ronin took the Theurge by the shoulders and gently rolled her onto her back.

Catherine groaned. "Bastard stabbed me," she said, to no one in particular. Her breath was coming in thin, ragged gasps.

Euryale pulled Catherine's arms away so she could examine the wound. The tainted blade had left a jagged puncture between her ribs. Fresh blood bubbled from the tear with every breath she took. The ronin grimaced. "You've got a punctured lung, but you probably know that already." She shook her head. "Why didn't the glyph work?"

"It should have," Catherine said through clenched teeth. "If it worked on the scraggs, it should have worked on the Black Spiral Dancers."

Euryale frowned. "I don't understand."

But Ingrid did. "Oh, goddess. You were right all along." Her guts turned to lead. "Eric set us up."

"How?"

"Think about it. Catherine just said that if the glyph worked on the scraggs, it should have worked on the Black Spiral Dancers. It didn't, so the converse is also true. If it didn't work on the Black Spiral Dancers, *it didn't work on the scraggs, either*. They just *acted* like it did." She snatched up the fallen glyph and showed it to Euryale. "This was just a message to the Wyrmspawn to let us through, so we could kill Carstairs."

"Why would he want Carstairs dead?"

Catherine's eyed widened. "Because of the failsafe!"

"The failsafe? You mean the shrines?"

"Yes!" She grabbed Ingrid's wrist. "The Stirlings were bound to the shrines by a sacred pact. A failsafe, in case the Sept of the Seven Rivers died out. Carstairs was the last of the Stirling line. Now that he's dead, the pact has been dissolved."

"But Eric is Wyatt Stirling's son!" Euryale protested.

"He's a *metis*. He doesn't count."

Ingrid felt sick. "So we just brought down the wards protecting the Historic District."

Catherine nodded. "And the flow of power that was reinforcing Abbazû's prison. It was probably the only thing holding the capstone together."

Ingrid shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Catherine. I should have listened to you. I just didn't want to believe –"

"Apologize later," Euryale growled. "Let's focus on living through the next few minutes instead."

Catherine squeezed Ingrid's wrist. "You three get going," she said. "I'm dead weight at this point. I'll just slow you down."

"That's not an option, and you know it," Ingrid said hotly. "I'll carry you out myself."

"With your one good arm?"

"I'll use my fucking *teeth* if I have to!"

"For once, I agree with the Ahroun," Euryale said. "No one gets left behind. Quit wasting what little breath you've got trying to convince us otherwise."

"If one of us is carrying her, the other two will have to do all the fighting on the way out," Kevin said.

"What about that howl of yours?" Euryale asked.

"I can manage another. Maybe two. But then I'm tapped out. You want to gamble on that?"

Catherine stirred. "Maybe we don't have to. We could try crossing over into the spirit world instead."

Euryale frowned at the Theurge. "How does that help us? This place has to be crawling with Wyrmspirits."

The Uktena shook her head. "Maybe not. When the pact was broken, it tore the network of shrines apart. That unleashed a lot of trapped spiritual energy. The tremor we felt earlier was a metaphysical bomb going off on the other side of the Gauntlet."

"You think it cleared out any Wyrmspirits nearby?"

"The ones not anchored to a physical body, yes. But there's no telling for how long."

"If we can just get past the antechamber, it could make a big difference," Ingrid said. "I say we do it." She started to rise, but Catherine held onto her wrist.

"Wait," the Theurge said, closing her eyes.

A rush of healing energy flooded through Ingrid's body, mending her minor wounds and improving the rest. Her eyes widened, and she tried to pull her hand away. "Don't! You need to save your strength –"

"If I can't use the gift on myself, I can at least make you whole enough to get us out of here," Catherine chided. "Now shut up and let me work."

The Uktena could not concentrate for long, but it was enough. Ingrid's cuts were scabbed over, and she was able to use her right arm again. The Shadow Lord switched her klaive to her right hand and beckoned to Kevin.

"You carry her. I'll take point. Euryale will bring up the rear." To Catherine, she said, "Shift to *glabro*. You'll be easier to carry that way."

The Theurge nodded. After a moment's concentration she had changed form, and Kevin lifted her easily in his arms.

A chorus of angry shrieks rose in the antechamber beyond. Euryale laid a hand on Catherine's shoulder. "Now or never," she said.

Ingrid gripped the Theurge's arm. Catherine drew a thin, bubbling breath, and the scrag's hunting cries faded away. Silvery light suffused the cavern, illuminating gauzy curtains of dust that drifted in the still air.

Euryale and Ingrid spread out, weapons ready, searching the cavern for threats. The chamber was empty. "So far, so good," the ronin said.

Ingrid dashed down the tunnel and peered into the antechamber. After the tension of the running battle to reach the capstone, the silence and stillness on this side of the Gauntlet was unnerving. "Dust and more dust," she observed, sweeping the antechamber a second time. "Let's move."

The garou set a swift pace, loping across the antechamber and into the passage beyond. It was fifteen to twenty yards back to the fissure, Ingrid recalled, then a sixty-foot climb up the fissure. She was debating in her mind whether to attempt the climb with Catherine, or try to find another way out, when Kevin spoke up.

"If your cousin's been trying to free Abbazû this entire time, why didn't he just have the Wyrmspawn kill Carstairs? Why go to all this trouble?"

The answer was self-evident to Ingrid. "Revenge. What else? Eric wanted to make my father suffer for what he'd done. Oakheart told me that Carstairs complained of terrible dreams – what if Eric was the one sending them?"

"It's possible," Catherine said weakly, her head resting against Kevin's chest. "If Eric understood how the shrines worked, it would have been obvious to him that one of the Stirling line had survived the massacre. And he had a blood tie to Carstairs, so reaching into his dreams would have been simple."

"Then he could manipulate Carstairs without ever leaving his apartment," Ingrid said. She thought of her own nightmares, and felt her blood run cold. "Bright goddess. I think he did it to me, too."

"So he gets into Carstairs' head, winds him up, and turns him loose on your family," Kevin said.

"He knew what it would do to me. Knew what it would do to my father. He was probably feeding information to Carstairs about where and when to hit us the entire time." Ingrid shook her head. "He exploited my fears, my father's insecurities and the tensions within my pack to turn us against one another. He even tried to tempt me into using the glyphs myself. It almost worked."

"Then he gives you the tools to finish off Carstairs and pave the way to free Abbazû. Unbelievable."

"He *is* half Shadow Lord," Ingrid pointed out.

They were at the fissure a few moments later. Ingrid and Euryale leapt into the opening and had Kevin hand Catherine up. Together, they hoisted the Uktena behind them as they climbed, while Kevin went ahead to scout the passageway at the top.

"Does Eric need to be in the capstone chamber to free Abbazû?" Ingrid asked Catherine as they climbed.

"No," the Theurge said, her voice tight with strain. The ascent up the narrow fissure must have been excruciating, but the Theurge made no complaint. "Technically, he could do it from his room at the house, but the closer he is, the better."

"So the caern would be a good compromise."

"Yes. It's right above the prison, and it's got power he can tap if he needs it."

"You think he's headed there?" Euryale asked.

Ingrid nodded. "It's got everything he needs, and he gets to desecrate our most prized possession in the bargain," she said. "How could he resist?"

"All clear!" Kevin called down. "Hand her up!"

The garou heard howls and distant cries as they reunited at the upper tunnels. "We've pushed our luck on this side long enough," Ingrid said. "Catherine, take us back across. We'll make our way out through the physical world from here."

Euryale gave her a dubious look. "You think it's safe?"

"I think every Wyrmspawn on the other side is out on the streets right now," Ingrid said. "Eric knows how weak we are. He's getting ready to make his move."

It took more than a minute for Catherine to gather her strength for the transition.

Darkness rushed in, followed by the stink of wet mud and the sound of dripping water. They were alone.

They met no resistance on the way back to the storeroom. Catherine was barely conscious as they lifted her out of the tunnel. The wound from the Black Spiral Dancer's blade had never closed, and she had lost a great deal of blood. Outside, the storm was still raging, though it had lost much of its strength.

"What now?" Euryale asked.

"We get to the Old Fort as fast as we can," Ingrid said darkly. "And then we go looking for my father."





Chapter Nineteen: Apocalypse

The corpses were laid against the sides of the white monument with care, while the fomori capered and screamed at the churning sky.

Eric observed the desecration with ritual solemnity. It wasn't everything he'd hoped for - in his dreams, the Reinhardt kinfolk were dragged alive into the square and their brains dashed out against the marble - but it couldn't be helped. Things were happening very quickly now, after so many years of preparation. Time was short, and there was much to be done.

His pack played their part eagerly. It was easier than he'd expected to convince them to give up their feast and carry the offerings to the square. Caught up in the orgy of defilement, they smeared blood and brain matter on the stone and shouted imprecations at Gaia and her children. The same scene was playing out at every shrine across the district, transforming the squares into scenes of horror as an offering to the spirit that even now strained at its bonds, eager for release.

Yet no angry howls rode the storm wind. There were no signs of vengeful wolves stalking the city streets. Savannah's defenders had yet to show themselves, despite the carnage he'd wrought in Karl Ironhand's own house. It was a sign that the garou were desperate and weak, and the Wyrmspawn knew it.

If Ironhand and his curs wouldn't show themselves, Eric and his army would go to them.

When the offering was arranged to his satisfaction, Eric barked an order to his pack, and the Black Spiral Dancers leapt to obey. They scattered among the fomori, snarling and snapping, and soon the first mobs were shambling southwards in the direction of the caern. Discordant howls called to other Wyrmspawn across the district, summoning them to battle. Scores of fomori - perhaps two hundred in all - began to converge on the north end of Forsyth Park.

Eric followed in their wake, his packmates loping obediently at his heel. The power at his command was intoxicating - all the more so because he knew that it was just a foretaste of what was to come.

The garou were waiting for them beneath the trees at the north end of the park, just as he expected they would be. The fighting had already begun by the time Eric

and his pack got there, as the Shadow Lords and their allies ambushed his scouts. The air rang with shouts of rage and the screams of the dying, and the muddy ground at the edge of the park was already thick with blood.

The enemy fought in three separate packs: four iron-gray Get to the left, the Shadow Lords in the center, and a mixed pack of three garou led by a Silver Fang off to the right. Between them they had accounted for nearly twenty fomori, their torn bodies piled at the werewolves' feet.

Karl Ironhand fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Marcus and the other Shadow Lords. Huge and terrible, his sable pelt marked with dozens of faded scars, he tore at the enemy with fatalistic vigor, as though each blow he dealt might be his last. The old wound in his leg had slowed him somewhat, but his savagery and skill was undiminished; as Eric watched, Ironhand crushed the skull of fomor with a slap of his hand, knocking the corpse into the path of another charging Wyrmspawn. The attacker stumbled, and Ironhand tore his throat out. The old Shadow Lord was in his element, claws dripping and gray muzzle streaked with gore, and for the first time Eric saw in his uncle the legendary warrior he'd once been. His towering presence heartened his kin and filled his opponents with dread.

Eric's lips drew back in a feral grin. Towering over the fomori, he spread his arms wide and howled a challenge to his uncle.

Ironhand flattened another fomor with the back of his hand and then straightened, seeking the source of the howl. Eric locked eyes with him, and watched his furious expression change to one of shame and dismay.

I've waited twenty years to see that look on your face, Eric thought.

A fomor lunged at Ironhand, leaving claw marks on his chest. The Shadow Lord barely seemed to notice. With a shout born more out of pain than rage, he threw himself into the midst of the fomori, trying to claw his way to Eric. The sudden onslaught took the Wyrmspawn by surprise. One fomor toppled with the side of his face caved in; another spun away in a welter of blood. The rest fell back in confusion, trying to escape the garou's claws.

The Black Spiral Dancers saw the danger and started forward, but Eric halted them with a rasping growl. "Let him come," he ordered, and his pack reluctantly obeyed.

Ironhand plunged like a blade into the mass of fomori, leaving carnage and chaos in his wake. His sudden charge took the other Shadow Lords by surprise, and for a moment they wavered, uncertain what to do next. Reluctantly, Marcus set off after Ironhand, trying to reach the old garou before he was surrounded, and the rest of his pack had little choice but to follow suit.

Eric stood his ground before Ironhand's implacable advance. Caught between the oncoming Shadow Lords to their front and the Black Spiral Dancers to their rear, the fomori fought and died in droves. Twenty yards became fifteen, then fifteen dwindled to ten. But for every fomor that died, two more rushed in to take his place. The Shadow Lords were completely surrounded now, and their charge had left the other packs isolated and without support. Eric watched a mob of fomori rush forward and pull down one of the Get; his packmates, beset on three sides and suffering from

dozens of small wounds, could do nothing to save him. On the right, a young Child of Gaia crouched over the torn body of a Fianna, trying with the last of her strength to staunch the flow of blood from his ravaged throat. A lone Silver Fang, regal and fierce, fought a losing battle to keep the encroaching Wyrmspawn at bay.

Ironhand was less than ten yards away now, but his advance was losing steam. The old hero's relentless charge had come at a bloody cost, and now his strength was flagging. Bolstered by fresh reinforcements, the fomori sensed their foe's weakness and started to push back. Three Wyrmspawn threw themselves at Ironhand. Two died within moments, but the third got his arms around the Shadow Lord's waist. If not for the swift action of Darius Stoneheart, who broke the fomor's neck and suffered a wound of his own in the process, Ironheart might have been pulled down and slain.

Eric saw the despair and frustration build in his uncle's eyes. He waited until the moment that Ironhand realized his charge had failed, and then unleashed the Black Spiral Dancers.

The air shook with maddened howls as Eric's pack leapt into the fight, cuffing and snapping at the backs of the fomori as they tried to force their way through the press to reach the embattled Shadow Lords. The fomori reacted with shouts of surprise and fear, sending ripples of confusion through their ranks. The Wyrmspawn surrounding the Shadow Lords hesitated, thinking for a moment that they were being attacked from two different directions.

It was the briefest of reprieves, but for the garou it was the difference between life and death. As the fomori hesitated, the Shadow Lords saw their peril and fell back, dragging Ironhand along with them. Enraged, the Black Spiral Dancers clawed their way through the fomori in an effort to catch them, which only made the situation worse. The Wyrmspawn faltered, and the Shadow Lords broke free of the encirclement and retreated deeper into the caern. A moment later, the Get fell back as well, howling in confusion and despair.

A single garou was left behind, surrounded by her foes. The Silver Fang fought alone, refusing to abandon the bodies of her packmates. She sang a dirge for them as she fought, howling their names to the sky. *Tom Three Leagues. Sara Summer's Run. My friends, brave and true. My pack. They are gone, into the darkness, and soon I will follow.*

A fomor rushed at her, jaws snapping. The Wyrmspawn died beneath her claws, but another foe saw his chance and leapt upon her back. The Silver Fang staggered, but did not fall. Two more of the enemy died to fang and claw before the rest pulled her down, and her song was silenced forever.

• • •

A hundred yards away, Ingrid ran for the Old Fort through a pitiless rain, her heart aching as Natasha Winter Howl's death song came to an end. She wanted to add her voice to Natasha's, to let the proud young Silver Fang know that she'd been heard, and that the deeds of her and her pack would not be forgotten. It took all of her will to resist and let the howl fade into the night sky. *Eric thinks we're dead*, she told herself sternly. *Hold onto that advantage as long as you can. It might mean the*

difference between victory and defeat. It was the right choice, she knew, but one she would regret to the end of her days.

From the sound of it, Marcus and the others had fought the Wyrmspawn at the edge of the caern and lost. One pack was gone, and Gaia alone knew how many more. She scanned the shadows beneath the trees to the north, expecting a horde of fomori to appear at any moment.

Ingrid gestured to Euryale to keep watch, and then ran for the fort's rear door. Kevin followed, his expression grave. Catherine was growing weaker by the moment. She'd lost her glabro form and now hung limply in the ronin's arms.

She kicked open the metal door and navigated the pitch-black interior by memory, going to each of the lanterns left behind from the solstice and coaxing them to life. "Set her here," Ingrid said, indicating a spot against the wall that was relatively clear of water and debris, "then get back outside and help Euryale. I'll be right there."

Kevin frowned. "Someone should stay with her –"

"No." The word was barely a whisper. The Uktena blinked, struggling to focus. "*Euryale...needs you. Just...let me...rest a bit.*"

The ronin looked ready to argue the point, but did as Catherine wished. He made the Theurge as comfortable as he could, and then knelt beside her. "You're going to be okay," he told her. "I'm going to find someone to take care of you. Just hang in there a little longer, okay?"

Catherine managed a faint smile. "*If you...insist.*"

"Damn right I do." The ronin reached out and gently brushed her cheek. "Hang in there, sister," he said, and then headed back out into the storm.

Ingrid watched Kevin go, waiting until the steel door had clanged shut again before she turned back to Catherine. She set *Donnerkeil* aside and carefully took the Theurge's hands in her own.

The Uktena tried to laugh. "*Never thought...I'd miss...Oklahoma. Not...in a...million...years.*"

"I'm sorry, Catherine."

"*I know.*"

"There's just one more thing –"

"*I know.*"

"Can you do manage it?"

The theurge nodded slowly. "*If it's...the last...thing I do.*"

"Was that supposed to be a joke?"

"*Sorry. It...sounded funnier...in my head.*" Catherine's smile faded. "*You should go.*"

Shouts rose from outside. Ingrid gave the Uktena's hands a gentle squeeze. "Goddess keep you, Catherine Stalks-the-Deer," she said softly, then gathered up her klaive and ran for the door.

Curt Hammerfang landed on his neck and skidded across the muddy earth, fetching up against the sprawled bodies of his packmates. Kevin loomed over the three garou, shoulders heaving. Blood flowed from fresh cuts on his chest and arms. The ronin was calm and composed as ever, but when he spoke there was steel in his voice.

"I'm not in the habit of killing pups," he growled, "especially not when there's worse things to fight. But so help me, if you idiots try that again, I *will* put you down."

The warning was addressed not just to the Get, but to Karl Ironhand and the Shadow Lords as well. Ingrid's father and her erstwhile pack stood in a rough semi-circle just a few yards away, hackles raised and teeth bared at the ronin. Euryale stood at Kevin's shoulder, her *labrys* held ready.

Hammerfang and the other Get scrambled to their feet. There were only three of them now, Ingrid realized, and their eyes were wild with rage and grief. *Battered, bloody, and desperate*, she observed. *They've had their first real taste of defeat.*

The Shadow Lords weren't in much better shape. Ironhand could barely stand, his arm draped over Darius's ravaged shoulder while Anna did what she could to try and heal him. Marcus stood next to her father, his face wracked with indecision, while Joshua looked tired and grief-stricken, as though he'd been witness to things too painful to bear.

"Traitors!" Ironhand hissed. He pushed away from Darius and staggered a step in the direction of the ronin. Anna put a hand on his arm, but he angrily shook it away. "Assassins! You murdered my kin, and now you've come to stab us in the back!"

"That's a damned lie," Ingrid said coldly. She stepped into view from the shadow of the Old Fort's doorway. "If anyone here is responsible for the deaths of our people, it's *you*."

Karl whirled at the sound of her voice. "*You shut your mouth, you treacherous bitch!*" he snarled.

Her father's words cut deep, but Ingrid refused to yield. "I've been back to Stirling House," she told him. "I know what really happened there."

"The Stirlings were corrupted by the Wyrml!"

"Because of the secrets they stole from the Uktena," Ingrid countered. "Secrets that you and your sister conspired to steal for yourselves. Elizabeth seduced Wyatt Sterling, and when the time was right, she betrayed him to you."

Her words brought Ironhand up short. "That's outrageous!" he protested, but a bit of the fire had gone from his eyes.

Ingrid pressed on, her expression implacable. "You left your pack upstairs to slaughter the Stirling kinfolk, and went to confront Wyatt alone," she said. "Wyatt turned the tables on you, but Elizabeth cut Stirling's throat with his own knife."

"Shut up," Ironhand hissed. The old Shadow Lord looked at her as though he'd seen a ghost. "You hear me? *Shut up*."

"All that was bad enough, but to make matters worse, the secrets you killed the Stirlings for were cursed," Ingrid said. "Elizabeth had already been corrupted by them, and she convinced you to use them, too. You drove the vampires out of Savannah in a single night, and Gaia alone knows what else." She glared at her father. "By the time you learned that she was pregnant with Wyatt's child, there was no turning back. If Stone Mountain had learned the truth, it would have been enough to unite the packs and bring them down on your head. So you played along. You built the lie about the paper mill and the siege, and you told it again and again, year after year.

"The glyphs left their mark on you, but you tried to channel your lust for power in other directions. Not Elizabeth, though; she understood what the glyphs were, and where their true power came from, and went looking for their source. Worse, she began grooming her son to follow in Wyatt Stirling's footsteps. So when Eric was five, you pushed his mother down the attic stairs and threw her papers in the fire."

"It's not true!" Ironhand protested, but his face looked stricken.

"The irony is that, had you been a bit more ruthless, we wouldn't be here right now. I don't know if you spared Eric out of guilt, or simple arrogance. Maybe you thought that with Elizabeth dead, you were safe. But Eric retrieved the glyphs from the fire, and he spent the next twenty years learning how to use them. Now the rest of us are paying the price."

Ironhand fell silent, his chest heaving. Ingrid could see the strain evident on his face as long-buried secrets rose to haunt him again. It was a painful thing to watch her father come undone before her eyes, but Ingrid gritted her teeth and kept her expression resolute. *He has to break*, she told herself. *If he doesn't, this is going to turn into a bloodbath.*

Anguish filled Ironhand's eyes. He started to speak – but Marcus cut him off.

"Where is your proof?"

Oh, goddess. "Stay out of this, Marcus," she warned.

"Karl Ironhand has ruled this city wisely for twenty-five years," her former beta said, pitching his voice to make sure everyone could hear. "You expect me to believe he's a murderer and a thief? I'll need proof."

"My word of honor isn't enough?"

"You're going to have to do better than that," Marcus sneered.

Kevin scowled at the Shadow Lord. "It's not your call to make, asshole."

"Kevin, please –" Ingrid began, but it was already too late. Ironhand's expression had turned calculating and cold. It reminded her of how he looked at Stirling House, many years ago.

"Marcus is right," he said slowly. "You have no proof. It's your word against mine. *And this is my city.*"

"No," Ingrid said. *Damn you, Marcus. Damn you to hell.* She steeled herself and met her father's angry glare. "You're done. I'm challenging you, here and now, for control of sept and caern. Let these garou and Grandfather Thunder himself bear witness."

Ironhand bared his teeth. He stalked towards Ingrid. "You think you can fight me, child?"

"That's up to you," Ingrid replied, sounding calmer than she felt. "Name a champion if you like. I don't care. Just don't waste my time."

Her father came to a halt, just out of arm's reach. "If that's the way you want it," he said. "A challenge of this magnitude must be approved by the elders present – and *I refuse*." He pointed a bloody claw at Ingrid. "You're no daughter of mine. You're nothing but a traitor, and you deserve a traitor's death." He turned to Marcus. "Kill her!"

No one moved. Marcus Shadow Dancer was frozen in place, staring up at the Old Fort behind Ingrid in wonderment and fear.

Ingrid glanced over her shoulder. Figures had appeared along the building's upper works: huge wolves, silent and intent, silhouetted against the stormy sky.

Goddess keep you, Catherine.

"A challenge has been issued," said a deep voice from within the Old Fort. Cole Foe-Render, Stone Mountain's Master of the Challenge, emerged through the open doorway at Ingrid's back. He was a fearsome sight in his war-form, his broad chest and arms marked with dark tattoos that spoke of his deeds on the battlefield. "Karl Ironhand has made his views known. What do the other elders say?"

Ellen Oakheart stepped through the doorway. Behind her came the entire Elder Council, followed by garou from all across the Protectorate. Nearly forty strong, they gathered in an arc behind Ingrid.

"The Elder Council has heard the accusations made by Ingrid Stormcaller," Oakheart replied. Her eyes were locked on Karl Ironhand, and her expression was pitiless. "We find that the challenge has merit, and will allow it to proceed."

Karl stared at the Stone Mountain garou in shock. "What is this?" he demanded. A flicker of fear glinted in his eyes. "What's happening?"

"I had Catherine Stalks-the-Deer send a message to Stone Mountain this morning," Ingrid said. "I asked the Protectorate for help. Oakheart and the others were just waiting for a Moon Bridge to open so they could come through."

Her father's expression turned desperate. "No. I won't allow it." A murderous glint came into his eyes. "*This is a closed city!*"

"Not anymore."

Karl Ironhand leapt at Ingrid with a furious shout. She reacted without thinking, her body operating on pure, animal instinct. *Donnerkeil* rose as her father's claws reached for her throat. They crashed together, falling to the muddy ground.

Cole Foe-Render was beside them a moment later, shouting for them to stop. Ingrid heard none of it. All she could focus on was her father's head slumping against her shoulder, his last breath sighing in her ear. His body was already starting to shift as the Master of the Challenge pulled them apart, her blade buried to the hilt in Ironhand's chest.

Strong hands gripped her, pulling her to her feet. Ingrid realized dimly that Euryale and Oakheart were standing next to her. She couldn't take her eyes from Ironhand's body. Part of her kept expecting him to slowly sit up and pull the blade from his chest. *He's my father*, she thought. *How can he be dead?*

The Master of the Challenge bent over Ironhand and carefully closed her father's eyes. Then, with a murmured prayer, he gripped the grand klaive and drew it free.

It felt as though the blade were being pulled from her heart instead. A strangled sob rose from her throat.

Euryale squeezed her arm. "He didn't give you a choice," she told Ingrid.

"Does it matter? He was my father, and I killed him."

"What's done is done," Oakheart said gently. "Mourn later, war chief. The caern needs you."

Off to the north rose the sound of chanting. The triumphant cries of Wyrmspawn filtered through the trees.

Foe-render came forward, offering *Donnerkeil*. Her father's blood had been cleaned from the blade.

"We're with you, sister," Euryale told her. "What do you want us to do?"

Ingrid reached out and closed her hand around *Donnerkeil's* hilt.

"Follow me."



Chapter Twenty: Stormwalker

The grand fountain at the north end of Forsyth Park was perfect for summoning up the Wyrmspirit. Abbazû was bound in an underground lake some seventy feet below; the water in the fountain, Eric reasoned, would be a perfect sympathetic link to the spirit's prison.

Eric's army had suffered significant losses fighting off Ironhand and the rest of his pitiful band, but he still had the Black Spiral Dancers and almost a hundred and sixty fomori. Though the Wyrmspawn were eager to pursue the retreating werewolves, Eric had held them back. He knew Ironhand would lead the survivors back to the Old Fort – there was nowhere else as defensible anywhere in the park. It pleased him to imagine his uncle and the others cowering in that crumbling, stone shell and waiting for the end to come.

The Wyrmspawn were arrayed in a ragged line between the fountain and the fort, creating a barrier to keep Ironhand and the others at bay while he finished his work. The bodies of the slain garou had been dragged to the fountain and dumped inside, so that now the waters ran red with the blood of Abbazû's foes. Then he created a summoning circle around the base of the stone feature, painting the necessary glyphs in blood – his own, this time – atop the wet concrete. Each symbol was perfect, drawn entirely from memory. He had practiced the rite so many times that he could have created the complex circle in his sleep.

The wind had risen again while he worked. The hurricane's fury was spent, and the rain had tapered off, but now fresh rumbles of thunder shook the air off to the east. It sounded ominous, he thought with a smile. *And well it should be.*

When his preparations were complete, Eric stepped carefully over the painted glyphs and into the bloody waters of the fountain. The red water was warm, and rose nearly to his knees. Corpses bumped gently against his legs as he waded to the fountain's central column. Eric's heart quickened with anticipation as he dipped his hands in the crimson waters and raised them high. Drawing as deep a breath as his malformed lungs would allow, he began to chant the summoning rite. The eldritch words rolled across the flat expanse of the park, and the Wyrmspawn bellowed in triumph at the sound.

The link to Abbazû's prison was easy to forge, just as he expected. Without the steady flow of energy from the city's shrines, the wards binding the Wyrmspirit were brittle and weak. It would take little effort now to break them.

As Eric set his mind to unraveling the first of the wards, a howl, lonely and defiant, rose from the direction of the Old Fort. The fomori laughed at the sound, answering it with mocking cries of their own. A handful of the Wyrmspawn, impatient and full of bloodlust, broke away from the rest and charged off after the garou. The rest of the fomori started to follow, but were brought up short by snarls and savage threats from the Black Spiral Dancers.

Baying like hounds, the Wyrmspawn disappeared into the shadows beneath the trees to the south. A moment later the hungry cries became screams of surprise and pain.

There was a flash of lightning, startling in its brightness. Thunder growled overhead. When it had faded, the shadows were silent once more.

A stir went through the fomori battle line. The Black Spiral Dancers edged forward, warily sniffing the air.

Warning shouts rose along the line. Misshapen fingers pointed to the south. Massive silhouettes could be seen moving among the cypresses and oaks, their broad shoulders parting the curtains of Spanish moss. Here and there, glowing green eyes shone balefully from the darkness.

The garou formed a rough crescent some twenty yards from the fountain – not a beleaguered dozen werewolves like before, but close to fifty strong. Get of Fenris and Uktena, Fianna and Silver Fangs, Red Talons and Children of Gaia, seasoned warriors led by battle-wise elders of great renown. Lightning flickered again, picking out tribal tattoos and polished torcs, dark war paint and gleaming ivory fangs.

A shocked silence fell over the Wyrmspawn. Thunder rolled, and six of the garou took a step forward, hurling projectiles into the enemy battle-line. A half-dozen severed fomori heads sped like cannonballs through their ranks, knocking several taints off their feet. One of the Uktena let out a chilling war cry, and the rest of the werewolves erupted in furious shouts and battle-howls. Like a pagan army of a distant age, they lunged and snarled, beat their chests and bared their teeth in challenge at their ancient foes.

The wall of ferocious sound crashed over the Wyrmspawn. The fomori wavered, shouting in dismay, and the garou broke into a run. The ground trembled beneath their charge. The Black Spiral Dancers screamed at the panicked fomori, stiffening their backs with acid oaths and punishing blows.

For the first time in twenty years, Eric felt a glimmer of fear. He redoubled his efforts, focusing all his attention on the rite. The first ward came undone, and he moved quickly on to the second.

A few minutes were all he needed. After that, the garou would be powerless to stop him.

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Ingrid led her pack up Drayton while the Stone Mountain garou launched their attack. The roar of their battle cries was stunning; from two blocks away she could feel it in her bones. The sound set her heart racing and filled her mind with awe. *They'll be talking about this night at the solstice moot for many years to come.*

They raced up the middle of the darkened street in *lupus* form, heading north. Kevin and Euryale were close by her side, with Darius, Joshua and Anna bringing up the rear. There had been no time to waste on regrets or recriminations; that would come later, if any of them survived. She commanded, and the Shadow Lords followed, and for the moment, that was enough. All except for Marcus; she had made her feelings clear to her former beta with a single, pointed stare. He'd remained behind with Curt Hammerfang and the surviving Get. If he were smart, he would return with them to Stone Mountain once all this was done.

A gust of wind blew against their faces. Lightning arced across the sky, close enough to set Ingrid's hair on end, followed by a martial roll of thunder. Ingrid didn't know if the resurgent storm was the work of the Stone Mountain Theurges, or if there might be some other power at work. She said a silent prayer to Grandfather Thunder just in case.

They reached the corner at Gaston and turned left, paralleling the north end of the park. The battle plan was a simple one: the Stone Mountain garou would shock the Wyrmspawn with a ferocious assault and draw all of their attention to the south, while Ingrid swung wide and came at Eric's ritual site from the north. From the sound of it, everything was going according to plan.

Ingrid crossed back onto the caern grounds, halting in the shadows beneath a live oak tree. She focused her will and shifted to her war form, and the rest of the pack followed suit.

"There shouldn't be a single fomor between us and the fountain at this point," Ingrid said, "but we can't count on that. If anything gets in our way, we make a hole and keep going. Eric is the sole priority here. Questions?"

"What if we're too late?" Kevin asked. "What if he frees Abbazû before we can get to him?"

"The Wyrmspirit has been trapped for hundreds of years," Euryale pointed out. "It'll be weak. If the Uktena could bring Abbazû down, so can we."

"If we move fast enough, we won't have to find out," Ingrid said. She broke into a run, head low and blade ready, and her pack fell in at her heels, forming a hollow wedge with her at the point.

They hadn't gone more than ten yards before they ran into their first Wyrmspawn, and everything went to hell.

A trio of wounded fomori, fleeing in panic from the battle to the south, stumbled from the shadows right into Ingrid's path. She chopped through the neck of one with her klaive, and was surprised by a brilliant flash and a loud *POP* as *Donnerkeil's* storm spirit blew the Wyrmspawn's head from his shoulders. The surviving fomori shrieked in terror and scattered in different directions. Euryale clipped one with her axe and sent his body crashing into the bole of a nearby cypress. The other turned and ran ahead of the werewolves, in the direction of the park's fountain.

Ingrid cursed under her breath and ran harder, trying to catch the fleeing Wyrmspawn before he attracted any attention. Just a few yards short of the wide promenade that ran from the north edge of the park to the fountain, she hurled *Donnerkeil* at the fomor's back. The blade struck the Wyrmspawn square in the back, and once again the klaive's storm spirit reacted with surprising strength. With a sizzling *CRACK*, the fomor staggered and burst into greasy flame. Yet still the taint wouldn't fall. Wailing at the top of its lungs, arms windmilling, it kept going, out into the open ground of the promenade.

Snarling, Ingrid called the klaive back to her hand. The fomor collapsed onto the pavement, burning fiercely. She burst from cover a few moments later. The fountain was to her left, less than twenty yards away. Eric was standing in the still water, his back to her, arms raised to the sky. Beyond the fountain a fierce melee was raging as the Stone Mountain garou tore their way through the Wyrmspawn's ranks.

There was a pack of Black Spiral Dancers trying to hold the fomori battle-line together. One of them glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of the burning fomor, then locked eyes with Ingrid.

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Buzzing cries and howls of alarm shook Eric's concentration. His focus on the rite faltered for a fraction of a second, and the third ward slipped from his mental grasp. Irritated, he risked a momentary glance at his surroundings, trying to ascertain what was happening.

The fomori were holding off the garou assault, but were getting torn to pieces in the process. It looked as though the line would break at any moment. His eyes widened as he saw his pack abandoning the line and racing past him, heading back northward.

Was he being abandoned? He glanced over his shoulder, snarling in rage – and saw Ingrid coming right for him. She had a mixed pack of garou at her heels and murder in her eyes.

With an effort of will, Eric turned his back on Ingrid and focused his full attention on the completion of the rite. The third and last ward took shape in his mind again. He only needed a few seconds more.

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Thunder crashed over Forsyth Park. The Black Spiral Dancers leapt at Ingrid and her pack, claws slashing.

Two of the fallen garou came right at Ingrid. Kevin stopped one with a fearsome blow to the Black Spiral Dancer's shoulder, knocking it back. She ducked the swipe of the second foe and slashed it across the chest. Electrical discharges crackled across the Black Spiral Dancer's torso and it staggered, howling in agony. She shouldered the enemy aside and kept going, heading for the fountain, but a hand closed around her ankle and she stumbled, landing hard on the pavement.

The Black Spiral Dancer she'd cut hauled on her leg, dragging her backwards. Snarling, Ingrid rolled onto her back and kicked at the taint with her free leg. Claws

raked long furrows down her thigh. She tried another kick, aiming at the fallen garou's wrist, and the blow connected, tearing her free. When the Black Spiral Dancer lunged for her again, she bent forward and stabbed at his face. The klaive caught the taint in the left eye. The exultant storm spirit lashed out again, wreathing the enemy's skull in a corona of blue fire and frying the fallen garou's brain.

Ingrid yanked the blade free and rolled onto her knees. Eric was just a few yards away now. She gathered her feet beneath her and leapt, reaching for his throat.

She was in mid-air, claws mere inches from the back of Eric's neck, when the air turned icy cold and stank of an open grave. In a moment of awful clarity, Ingrid saw the bloody water churn around Eric's legs, and knew that she was too late.

Eric's body seemed to blur around the edges, his misshapen body vibrating at a frequency almost too fast to see. One moment he had his back to Ingrid; the next, he was facing her, and his hand was closing like a vise around her wrist. Eric's touch sent vibrations howling along her bones, curdling her blood and turning her guts to jelly. Then she was being whipped through the air as Eric spun again and smashed her against the central column of the fountain. Bones crunched and the vision in her right eye went red. Laughter, harsh and inhuman, filled her ears.

Dimly, she felt herself land in the bloody water at Eric's feet. Something bumped against her: the mangled body of Natasha Winter Howl, her ashen lips parted and her black eyes staring up at her in a kind of silent plea. With her one good eye she saw Euryale take the head off one of the Black Spiral Dancers and then charge at Eric. Kevin tore the throat out of another taint and ran to join her, his expression grim.

Ingrid tried to move. Her right shoulder was crushed, and her arm refused to work. Belatedly, she realized that Eric had *Donnerkeil*. He held it behind his back as the ronin launched their attack.

Euryale reached the edge of the fountain and leapt. Eric blurred – and Ingrid called *Donnerkeil* back to her. The klaive vanished from Eric's hand, and the *labrys* flashed past his guard to bury itself in his left shoulder.

The metis hardly seemed to notice. He grabbed the haft of the silver axe and wrenched it free, tearing it from Euryale's grip in the process. As Kevin lunged at Eric, the metis smashed the *labrys* into the ronin's side. Blood burst from Kevin's mouth and he collapsed face-first into the fountain.

Euryale screamed, raking her claws at Eric's face. The metis laughed, ignoring the ragged wounds along his cheek and neck, and threw the *labrys* at Darius, who was still locked in battle with one of the surviving Black Spiral Dancers. The curved blade smashed into his hip, knocking the Ahroun off his feet.

Ingrid felt her shoulder grind back into its socket. She switched the klaive to her left hand and lunged at the back of Eric's leg. The blade punched into his thigh; electricity crackled hungrily and this time the metis let out a cry of pain. There was a blur of motion and another crunching impact, and she was tumbling through the air, landing in a broken heap a few yards from the fountain.

Euryale pressed her attack, her jaws locking around Eric's throat. The metis grabbed her by the side of the head and tore her free, leaving a ragged wound in his

neck. Snarling, he smashed her head against the stone lip of the fountain. Blood and stone chips sprayed. The ronin convulsed once, and then went limp.

Darius was still down, thrashing in pain. Anna and Joshua were too far away to help, isolated and beset by three Black Spiral Dancers. Ingrid drew in a painful breath, feeling splintered bones shift inside her chest. She tried to force her body to move as Eric slowly turned to regard her.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, his words carrying easily over the tumult of battle. Eric stepped gracefully over the lip of the fountain, his body blurring between steps. "I hoped I would see you again before it was all over. Did you know?"

Ingrid tried to work her broken jaw. Muscle and bone shards slipped painfully into place. "I...know you're a murderer. A traitor."

Eric spread his arms. "I am a child of the new world," he said. "Just as you are. As you have always been." He walked towards her. "I tried to show you. I offered to teach you. Do you remember?"

"You lied to me." She rolled onto her side, gritting her teeth in pain.

"No. You just refused to accept the truth." Eric smiled at her. "There is a place for you in the new world, cousin. Abbazû has shown me. We will rule the Earth together, and you will bear me such beautiful children..."

Ingrid uttered a prayer to Grandfather and threw *Donnerkeil* with all her strength. The grand klaive blurred through the air, right for Eric's heart.

The metis caught the blade with ease. Burning arcs of electricity crackled along the klaive as the storm spirit writhed angrily in Eric's grip.

Eric laughed, shaking his head at her. "The spirit of Abbazû resides within me, cousin. I am like unto a god. Do you really think -"

A bolt of lightning split the sky, arcing from the klaive to the angry skies above and bathing the scene in sharp, actinic light. Eric stiffened in agony, his skull haloed in fire. The crash of thunder overhead was like the voice of judgment itself.

The metis fell to his knees, smoke rising from his blackened body and billowing from his mouth. *Donnerkeil* tumbled from his grip.

Ingrid forced herself painfully to her feet. A stunned silence hung over the battlefield. She limped to her stricken cousin and picked the grand klaive from the ground, then stared down into Eric's bloodshot eyes.

"I'm no god, cousin." She raised her silver blade. "I am a garou. A wolf of the old world. And here is the truth as I know it."

Her klaive fell like a thunderbolt, and the storm rumbled in reply.

Epilogue: What the Rain Left Behind

Ingrid heard the soft crunch of paws on gravel, and a great, black wolf emerged from one of the narrow paths into the center of the rose garden. The garou paused for a moment, taking in the weed-choked pond and the statue at its edge, then padded over to where Ingrid sat on the steps of the old gazebo.

Euryale shifted from one stride to the next, becoming human once again by the time she reached Ingrid's side. The ronin settled down on the faded wooden step next to her.

"Anna said I might find you here." Euryale frowned. "She failed to mention that the garden would try to get me lost every chance it could. If I hadn't tracked your scent I'd still be going around in circles."

"The spirits here aren't keen on strangers," Ingrid said quietly. Thirty-six hours after the hurricane, the winds were still restless, and banks of clouds were scudding westward across the sky. Bright summer sunlight waxed and waned, and shadows sped across the grass. They passed lightly over the freshly dug graves that filled the north end of the clearing and disappeared from sight.

Diesel engines rumbled out on Bull Street – trucks from the electric company most likely, trying to restore power to the district. Savannah had been declared a disaster area by the governor, and the National Guard had been sent in the morning after the battle in response to reports of vandalism and rioting. By the time the troops arrived, the bodies of the Wyrmspawn had all been dragged away, and a steady rain had washed away most of the blood. There would still be questions, of course, but few answers, and in time the events of the hurricane would become another of the city's strange legends.

Ingrid glanced at Euryale. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

The ronin nodded. "It's time," she said. "Kevin is fit enough to travel, and he's getting restless. There's talk of a pack of lost cubs raising hell up in Nashville. We thought we'd head up and check them out." She met Ingrid's gaze. "You could come with us if you want. A trip might do you good."

The Shadow Lord gave her a faint smile, but shook her head. "I can't. There's too much to do here. Savannah's an open city now. There's four new packs to get settled in, and work to be done at the caern."

"I know. I just don't like the idea of you being here all alone."

Ingrid looked away, across the grassy clearing. Her eyes, as ever, were drawn to the graves. The whole bloodline gone, save for her and Marcus, who was dead to her too, for all intents and purposes. He'd left with Oakheart and the rest of the Protectorate's garou, not long after the battle, and she never expected to see her cousin again. She still couldn't quite grasp the enormity of it all. She wondered if she ever would.

"I'll be fine," Ingrid managed to say. "I've got my pack. And Catherine has promised to stay, once she's up and about." The Theurge had been barely alive by the time Oakheart and the Stone Mountain garou arrived. She was convalescing in one of the upstairs bedrooms now, under Anna's watchful eye.

"I'm glad to hear it," Euryale said. "Maybe the two of you can restore the shrines one day."

"Is there a point?"

"Always." Euryale said.

Tears welled in Ingrid's eyes. "I don't know," she said, wiping her cheeks. "From where I sit it feels like the end of the world."

The ronin gripped Ingrid's arm. "Not while we live, sister," she said gently. "Not while we fight. As long as one of us draws breath, the world will turn a little longer."

The Shadow Lord nodded. "I'll miss you when you're gone," she said. "Kevin, too, but for Gaia's sake, don't let him know that."

"My word of honor," Euryale said with exaggerated solemnity.

"Don't wander far, all right? This is your home now, for as long as either of us live."

Euryale smiled. "That means more to me than you know. Truly." She stood, holding out her hand. "Now leave the dead to their rest, and walk me to the door."

Ingrid stared up at the ronin for a long moment, then let Euryale help her to her feet. "There's just one thing I need your help with before you go."

"What's that?"

"First we need to start a fire. There's a bunch of old papers upstairs I need to burn."

THE POISON TREE

Savannah is under siege.

For 20 years the minions of the Wyrms have threatened the Coastal Empire, checked only by the courage and cunning of the Shadow Lords. Every year, the septs of the Southern Protectorate send young warriors to aid in the defense and to prove their mettle in the pressure cooker of the port city.

It's not enough.

Every night, the Wyrms grow stronger, its forces more bold. Now, young cubs are dead and a hidden foe reaches out its claws to exact revenge against Savannah's Garou.

Ingrid Stormwalker, war chief of the Coastal Empire, must defy her sept's law, her family, and her pack to uncover the root of the rotten vine that chokes her beloved caern.

Time is running out for the historic city — and the entire Southern Protectorate.

