Earth Shaken
by Bracketyjack

Summary

A long AU Mercyverse novel of action, manners, cooking, and hope, featuring assorted wolves, fae, and Elder Spirits, a serious dire wolf, an equally serious cloak, a lot of phone calls, some cracking music, and even more national TV.

Notes

Patricia Briggs purists, take heed — this one spun way out of control, like one of those faery beasts from which one realises one should not have accepted a ride.

It was a simple enough idea. In Night Broken Gary Laughingdog tells Mercy he senses the manitou of the Columbia River. So what if it woke up? That might be fun, but what sort of manitou would it be? The Columbia River is very old — it cut through the Cascades as they were pushed up — and very large, and it has been horribly messed with by human beings, who have loaded it and its major tributaries (especially the Snake and Flathead) with scores of dams and dumped vast amounts of radioactive contaminants into groundwater that enters it around the Tri-Cities. Moreover, Mercy could only beat Guayota because that psychotic old manitou was way off its home ground in Tenerife, anchored by its mortal tibicenas, but this manitou would be in its own place — and hence, I figured, unkillable, unstoppable. So it had to be on Mercy’s side. There are limits, even if I’m given to pushing them. But what might our favourite coyote girl manage with a very old, very powerful manitou at her back, besides necessarily becoming increasingly OOC?

That was one problem, and spiralling events provided others. I’m well aware I’m playing a little fast and loose with everything from US law and politics to the storage of nuclear waste, but I kept going (with one long hiatus and one shorter one) because I was having fun, and trying a first-person voice was interesting — even though the whole has turned out more than twice as long as a first-person novel should be. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you. And I’m sometimes playing fast and loose with trans-Atlantic vocabularies as well, particularly when it comes to ‘trousers’ — sorry, speakers of American English, but ‘pants’ has so many other senses in British English that it just had to be ‘trousers’, however
culturally incorrect. By way of atonement, I’ve used ‘gray’ throughout, not ‘grey’, though it makes me itch, but I’ve stuck to ‘-our’ because I’m damned if I’ll be non-U, and I also draw the line at ‘programme’ — ‘program’ just looks too short to me. I’ve also tried quite hard to get the few words of Salish right, though some characters (such as the IPA marker for a glottlestop) may well not post accurately.

I started before ‘Hollow’, Fire Touched, and Silence Fallen were out, and have ignored them (in the case of Fire Touched with some relief, as I liked Lugh’s walking stick), as I have also ignored Dead Heat (without difficulty) and Burn Bright (with some distress — I liked Sage too) ; I have, though, tried to be reasonably canon-compliant as far as Night Broken. I also reached the first scenes involving a POTUS long before the present incumbent was elected, and after some soul-searching decided to ignore him too, hard as that is ; in this AU, my pointedly nameless POTUS may deserve some of Adam’s ire, but he doesn’t sell snakeoil, and I have contented myself with being rude about a different Donald for good plot reasons.

Oh, and in telephone conversations, the distant speaker is in angle brackets — — and the present speaker, usually but (given wolf hearing) not always Mercy, is in standard inverted commas.

B’jack, January 2019.
I’VE never much liked Golfs, however popular they might be in Europe, and this one had seen better days. It had also last been worked on by an idiot who thought brute force a working substitute for competence, and I was cross enough to document the botched job that had resulted in a loose gear wrecking the transmission. The owner was a new intern at the hospital and I doubted she’d have much luck getting a refund, never mind damages, but at least she’d have the evidence and I thought Kyle would be willing to draft a letter that would at least get the idiot’s attention.

I’d also sent photos of the wrecked transmission to Zee when I called him to vent and he’d come by to see the grisly details for himself. And to help me seat the new transmission — I’m strong enough, just, but it wasn’t so long since I’d been able to return to work at all, and the help was welcome. It had also given me a soundtrack of increasingly guttural German curses as he took the old transmission apart while I buttoned up the Golf and washed my hands.

“I told you, Zee. Whoever did that was a butcher, not a mechanic, and a cack-handed butcher at that.”

“Ja.” He grunted, poking another twisted bit of what had once been a cog loose with a hard finger. “This could have been very bad, Mercy. If she’d been going any faster when it went …” He looked up, eyes glinting. “You should make sure Kyle knows the work was dangerous, not just shoddy and stupid.”

“I will. I’ll contact the state authorities too, not that it’ll do any good.”

“Because?”

“California.”

Frank Zappa had been exactly right about flakes forty years ago and California still had the most of them.

“Ah.” Zee shook his head darkly. “Useless behördenkramarbeiteren.” He fished out another fragment and straightened, looking at me. “Still, liebchen, you are looking better than you did two weeks ago, and you have your strength back.”

It was my turn to grunt. Being pretty much killed by a psychotic volcano god had meant my second serious convalescence in a year, which was two too many. And I’d been very lucky — if Coyote hadn’t somehow fixed my broken neck I’d have been dead, but while I was properly grateful I also had more sympathy for Mary Jo’s disgruntlement after Baba Yaga fixed her dead body sufficiently for her spirit to take up residence again. In one of the novels I’d read while convalescing someone who had a god do that for them thought the god had stuffed his spirit back in upside-down, and I knew how he felt. The burns on my foot had also been a stone bitch — volcano gods are hot — and I’d been damned if I’d spend any more time in a wheelchair but, luckily for me, the walking stick had been very helpful, and actually seemed quite cheerful at being used mundanely for a while.
“Mostly. Not much stamina, though. I need to put in gym time I don’t have. A bit like the garage.”

I’d managed to get the holes Guayota had left in and under the building patched and filled before it fell down, but it needed a lot more work that I couldn’t afford.

“You should be more careful what you fight. And stop escalating.”

“Escalating?”

“Ja.” He wagged a finger at me. “It was bad enough when it was only humans, vampires, wolves, and fae. Now it’s native monsters and foreign fire gods. And though you are coyote enough to have survived, Mercy, the margins are getting very thin.”

“I do know.” I shrugged. “But what can I do, Zee? It was Yo-Yo Edythe who set Adam and me up with the River Devil, and it was Christy who dragged Guayota here. I just play the cards I’m dealt as best I can.” I scuffed grumpily at an oil stain on the concrete. “And honestly, you’d think people would learn. Two wolves, four vampires including The Monster and Gauntlet Boy, with a demon thrown in, one Fairy Queen, one ninety-foot River Devil, and a volcano god — all losers. I’d give me pause.”

Zee frowned.

“And I know who I’ve left off but I try not to think about him.”

He nodded. “Ja. It wasn’t that, liebchen. And you are not wrong — both Edythe and Gwyn ap Lugh have cautioned that you are … a true daughter of Coyote and not to be meddled with lightly.”


He gave me a glare. “Not so, Mercy. It means they are thinking about you. And ap Lugh is not happy that the walking stick has returned to you again.”

“His problem, Zee. He offended it. And though he apologised to me, I bet he never bothered to apologise to it.”

Zee’s eyebrows, always pretty bristly, were outdoing themselves.

“Gwyn ap Lugh apologised to you?”

“Yes he did.” I told him the story. “Anyway, he didn’t recognise its new powers and cleverness and implied it was a fake. So he doesn’t deserve it. And I actually needed a walking stick while my foot healed.”

He grinned, but only briefly. “Maybe not and maybe so, but he’s unhappy all the same. What are its new powers?”

“I’m not sure. Coyote said he’d taught it to hide itself better and some other tricks. But what it learned from killing Blackwood or the River Devil and the otterkin I don’t know. Why don’t you ask it, if it’s willing?”

I looked over to where I’d propped it by the office door, but it was already in Zee’s hands. He gave me an unreadable look and gravely thanked the stick before tracing a finger over its silverwork and slowly down its length. Something else came back to me.

“Coyote also asked me if I knew what its original magic was, so I told him about Lugh’s three
walking sticks and that this one was twin lambs, not finding home or seeing truly. That’s what Arianna’s book said, and she ought to know. But Coyote said either there was only ever one stick or it had learned what its brethren could do.”

Zee gave me another look, finger still resting on the stick.

“There were certainly three sticks, but he’s right this one now has all three powers, and more. Quite a lot more. And certainly killing the River Devil quenched it as a weapon. It has learned … ambition.”

He lapsed into very archaic German, almost crooning to the stick, and the only word I caught was ‘Excalibur’.

“It wants to be like Excalibur?”

Zee laughed. “Not exactly. I don’t believe it thinks very highly of my swords. Too few uses. But it would like that one’s fame, maybe, and besides liking you, liebchen, it feels serving you is a good way to gain it.”

“Huh. I wouldn’t offend it for the world, but I hope not.” I took a breath. “And speaking of Excalibur, Zee, I meant to tell you that I saw it, and so did the walking stick. It’s beautiful.”

“You saw Excalibur?”

Zee didn’t often sound that surprised, and I nodded.

“And Carnwennan. The Marrok has them. Apparently the Gray Lords gave Carnwennan to Anna, Charles’s wife, to kill Dana Shea after her oathbreach in Seattle, and she had Excalibur so Anna took that too. Bran was expecting someone to collect them but no-one has. Adam and I were up in Aspen Creek with Joel because Bran wanted to look at the pack bonds I forged, and I asked him if I could see them. And when he showed them, the stick turned up.”

He was nodding slowly. “Ja. I heard about Seattle. They did not expect Anna to succeed, only to serve as a warning to Dana. There was some amusement at their discomfiture.” He frowned, thinking. “That explains what I feel from the stick, but I am very surprised they have not reclaimed them both. It is true Anna would have a claim on Carnwennan, and those blades belong together, but still.” He shrugged. “The Marrok has as much right to them as any now living.”

My eyes widened. “Bran really was Sir Marrok, then?”

“No. Bisclaveret. Malory stole the story and made up the name. But the tale is not the one the Frenchwoman told. And no, I am not telling it to you. Ask him yourself, if you must.”

I grinned. “I did, but he’s not saying either. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you I’d seen it. Is Carnwennan one of yours too?”

“Ja. And she has done good service, that one. I don’t like witches, and I didn’t like Dana.”

“Me either, from what Anna and Charles said.”

He looked an invitation and I was repeating some of Anna’s deadpan snarking about Dana and Ladies of the Lake who thought far too much of themselves when a huge, rushing tingle of magic washed over us that had Zee snapping upright, glamour vanishing as a sword appeared in his hand and the walking stick jumped into mine. But the magic passed as abruptly as it had come, a wave passing on, and when I looked at him again Zee’s glamour was back in place and the sword
nowhere to be seen.

“What was that?”

“Not fae.”

“Nor pack. Nor vampire. Witchcraft?”

He shook his head. “Nothing I know.”

“Did it do anything?”

“Not here. It was overflow, I think.”

“That was a lot of overflow, then. Huh.”

I fetched my phone from the office and hit the speed dial. Adam had set ‘Bad Moon Rising’ as my ringtone, mostly to annoy me enough to forget about my poor foot, and he answered on the second bar.

<Mercy?>

“Adam, did you feel that just now?”

<Feel what?>

“Then you didn’t. I’m at the garage with Zee and a couple of minutes ago there was a rush of magic, like a wave. Made us both jump. Nothing’s wrong here, but something probably is somewhere.”

<Somewhere local?>

“I’d think so, given the strength. Zee thinks it was overflow of some kind, so whatever happened was very strong. But it wasn’t pack magic, or fae, and we don’t think it was vampires or witches either.”

<Doesn’t leave much. I’ll give Elizaveta a call.>

“That would be good.” I pondered a little. “It might have been something native. It felt … I don’t know, elemental maybe? Zee’s nodding.”

<Hostile?>

“Not to us, but to someone or something.”

<Alright. I’ll make some enquiries.> I heard Adam’s fingers drumming on his desk. <I’m busy until three but I can come pick you up after that. No-one else is free today. Can Zee stay until then?>

“Ja, Adam, I can stay.”

Zee’s hearing is as good as any werewolf’s, and I sighed softly.

“Ja, Herr Hauptman, at once, Herr Hauptman.” Zee grinned. “Any more orders?”

<No.> I could tell Adam was smiling. <Just be careful, if you can. We’ve had enough trouble for
one year. I’ll see you after three.>

“Alright. You be careful too.”

<Always.>

As I put the phone away Zee gave me a thoughtful look.

“So little protest, liebchen? Maybe you are learning.”

I bared my teeth at him but he was right. My most recent brush with death hadn’t been much fun for me, but it had been very hard on Adam. Leaving me behind while he and the other pack members Arianna had fire-proofed went to fight Guayota had been basic sense, and so had leaving Darryl and Auriele to cope with the rest of the pack if Adam had died. And when everything went south and Guayota turned up at Honey’s it had been basic sense for me to get Stefan to take Jesse, Lucia, and Christy to safety, because they were only human, and defenceless against him. But that meant it was very un-fire-proofed Darryl, Auriele, and me who’d had to fight him until help arrived, and as man and Alpha Adam was not at all happy about that, especially as he and everyone else had thought for a while that I wasn’t going to make it. So his protectiveness was in overdrive, and on top of that Christy was still staying with Darryl and Auriele, and trying to rip at him whenever she could. And at Jesse, which I wasn’t going to tolerate for much longer. Nor did it help that I’d managed to disable Guayota’s magic by bringing Joel as one of his tibicenas into the pack, and though Joel was now managing to stay human for four or five hours at a stretch, his presence in the pack was doing something none of us understood to the pack bonds — and that left everyone a bit edgy, with Adam as Alpha again bearing the brunt of it.

Hence our recent trip to Aspen Creek with Joel and Lucia, because Bran had wanted to see us away from the rest of the pack. It was fortunate that both Bran and Charles were more intrigued than appalled by what I’d managed to do, but there were levels and implications to it that mattered. The church said a married couple were one flesh, but no other Alpha’s wife, even if a werewolf herself, had ever used their own flesh to bring a new wolf into the pack, never mind a man who turned into both a presa canario and a tibicena the size of a polar bear. Bran had asked me a lot of questions about what exactly I’d done, rolling his eyes at Coyote’s involvement. He’d also had Joel’s account in one of his brief spells in human form, but all he could say was that he’d been despairingly fighting the bonds Guayota had put on him as best he could, even while his tibicena form worried at the burned flesh on my arm, when he’d understood that I was offering him a hope of escape, a chance to reclaim himself and rejoin Lucia, and he’d assented. Fiercely. It had hurt, but he’d simply known that the other tibicena had to die, so he’d seen to it. Then he’d gone back to his presa canario form and settled at Lucia’s feet. Bran had stared at them both for a while with a look that told me he wasn’t only seeing them with his eyes, and then sighed gently.

“The pack bond with Joel is no different from any other pack bond, save that it runs through Mercy to Adam rather than the other way around. Joel wanted it badly, he was Mercy’s friend anyway, and he remains deeply grateful to her. But his mate bond to Lucia is also very strong, so I can’t see that there’s anything Adam and Mercy can’t handle. But” — he held up a finger — “there is a complication in that Joel is indifferent to and outside the pack hierarchy, as an omega would be. I don’t know enough about presa canarios to judge how that form plays in, but tibicenas clearly don’t have dominance issues, and as a man he is far more invested in his mate bond with Lucia than in anything resembling a pack. This is probably a good thing as in tibicena form he could take any single wolf, but it will take the pack a while to get their heads around it. And there is a second, more interesting complication in that when Mercy claimed Joel in tibicena form she apparently claimed a fair chunk of Guayota’s magic too. I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but magic has always worked oddly around her, and that manitou magic is running through the ordinary pack
bonds. And so is Mercy’s in a way it wasn’t before.”

He tapped a foot lightly a few times and looked at both me and Adam, face unreadable.

“It might be just a matter of time, and your mate bond settling in, but I think the new magic’s doing something too. I find it interesting that Joel can shift forms as fast as Mercy, and I’d like to know if you find your changes becoming easier, Adam. It may be that hostile magic will also have a harder time affecting you than it did. And Joel, when you’re able to stay human for longer, you might want to do some experimenting. I suspect you’ll be remarkably fire-proof even in human form.” Bran’s gaze lost focus for a second, and returned. “Your Mary Jo might get some benefit too — I don’t know if it’s Joel pushing it because he knows she’s a fire fighter, or if the magic has made its own decision, but it’s stronger in the bond that leads to her. And I think it was that, not Coyote, that helped with your burns, Mercy. They were made by tibicena fire magic and partly unmade by it. And though your scent hasn’t changed, your magic has, which is also part of what has Adam on edge. With everything else.”

Then he’d given me a real smile that reached his eyes.

“Mercy. Never a dull moment. And this time something of real interest and value. Who knew there could be an interspecies pack? The publicity has been very positive for wolves, you’re all safe and well, a bad enemy was vanquished, and the Columbia Basin pack is the stronger for a very potent and loyal new recruit. No harm, no foul.”

The Marrok’s word was law, but that didn’t mean the wolves had to like it, and quite a few of them didn’t. Paul in particular — he already hated it that a gay wolf and a coyote were pack, and he was beside himself at a foreign dog being added, magical or no. His tough luck. But enough of the others were half-listening to him that the jangle in the pack was another drain on Adam, which didn’t help his stupid guilt about me or his nagging, instinctive disquiet at the change in my magic, whatever it was and even though he couldn’t sense it directly. So I was cutting him all the slack I could, even when it grated, and even when Zee teased me about it.

“He doesn’t need more problems just now, Zee. The pack’s unsettled because of Joel, and we’re all still hurting from Peter’s death anyway.” I took a breath. “And given what all’s out there, I don’t really mind being protected that much.”

There were even times it made me feel quite warm and fuzzy.
Chapter 2

Chapter Two

It was all of three hours before the next problem showed up. I’d sent emails to Kyle and the California Road Safety people and was refitting a Bug fender Zee had straightened out when a Pasco PD car drew up outside. I didn’t know the man driving, but the passenger was Clay Willis, who was a senior homicide detective with Kennewick PD. I’d met him at the site of Guayota’s mass kill in Finney, and my heart sank.

“You know them, Mercy?”

“I know the passenger. Kennewick PD homicide.”

Zee didn’t much like policemen and vanished into the office. As Willis and the driver approached I put a smile on my face and offered a reasonably clean hand.

“Detective Willis. Have you changed forces?”

He didn’t smile, which didn’t surprise me as I could smell blood on both of them, but he nodded as he shook.

“Ms Hauptman. This is Jerry Riebold, my opposite number in Pasco PD. He has a request.”

“Detective Riebold.” His handshake was brisk and firm. “What can I do for you?”

“Ms Hauptman.” Tired eyes looked me over carefully. “I know something about you from the papers, and the grapevine at work. All good. I know Tony Montenegro thinks very well of you and your husband. And Clay tells me you were more than helpful with that thing that killed all those women in Finley.”

“I didn’t have a lot of choice, given that it was trying to kill me too.”

“But you helped at the murder scene and later you … drove it away?”

“I did what I could at the scene, yes. The pack drove it away. We managed to scramble the magic that let it live away from its home, and so far as anyone knows it had to go back there.”

“Meaning Tenerife?”

“Yes.”

The Kennewick PD brass hadn’t been happy to have no-one to arrest for ten murders, and after being polite for a while I’d told them they were welcome to apply to the Spanish government to extradite an active 24,000-foot volcano but I didn’t recommend it. It had amused and calmed Adam, which was the point, but the story had done the rounds, and Tony had told me my credit with the KPD rank and file was good. They’d certainly been doing more drive-bys since I’d been back at work.

“So. I have a problem, Ms Hauptman. Something very disturbing happened at Sacajawea State Park
this morning. Two people died, badly, and because I’ve seen the file on the Finley murders I called Detective Willis, who came to have a look and suggested asking you.”

I looked at Willis. “Died badly as in Finley?”

“Not in detail, but yes. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Alright.” I wasn’t keen, but if it was bad enough for them to be asking, giving help was sensible as well as right. Then a thought struck me, because as the crow flies Sacajawea SP wasn’t that far away. “You said ‘this morning’, Detective Riebold. Would that have been about 11:15 or so?”

Both their faces tightened, and Riebold stared at me.

“How did you know that?”

“I didn’t. But right about then I felt a … rush, a wave, of strange magic. Someone who was here with me felt it too. It wasn’t anything either of us recognised, but it was strong.”

“Magic?”

Riebold sounded almost plaintive.

“I’m afraid so. Definitely not werewolf or fae, and I don’t think it was witchcraft.”

“Why not?”

Zee and I had talked about it a bit as we worked.

“This is just an impression, but it didn’t feel … nasty enough for witchcraft. Angry, yes, but not mean. Black witchcraft always stinks of its evil. White witchcraft is a possibility, but it didn’t feel right.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Night and day, Detective Willis. Witchcraft works by sacrifice. White witches sacrifice some part of themselves. Black witches sacrifice others, animal or human.”

He nodded. “OK. That makes sense. Can you come now?”

“As soon as I’ve made a call.”

Zee agreed to mind the garage for customers due to collect their cars and any drop-in business, and Adam said he’d meet me at the park. I explained that to Willis and Riebold, who both shrugged.

“His nose is as good as yours, right?”

“Oh yes.”

It wasn’t, quite, but as far as they knew my abilities came from being mated to a werewolf, not from my own furry self.

“Then a second opinion can’t hurt, and your husband isn’t the sort of man who blabs.”

“No he isn’t.” I hesitated. “This isn’t a condition, but he also said that if you were going to use me as a consultant you should pay me as one. I’m all for civic duty but I’ll have to pay the person who’s looking after the shop for me, so I’m already out of pocket.”
They both grunted, and Willis turned to look at me.

“Only fair, but the brass will probably be sticky about it. I’ll try.”

“I’ve got a bit in the slush fund, Clay. We can at least cover your costs, Ms Hauptman.” Riebold was a good driver, and using lights but not siren he was taking us up Chemical Drive pleasingly fast. His eyes met mine briefly in the mirror. “Can you tell me how you know so much about the supernatural? I’ve met someone else who was married to a werewolf and there was no indication she knew the things you seem to.”

“A werewolf here?” He nodded. “Who?”

“A woman called Laura Vestman. She’s moved away now.”

“I know.” I’d never met her, but her husband was one of those who had real problems taking orders from Darryl and Warren, and had happily accepted a work posting to San Diego. “There are several answers to your question, Detective Riebold. Laura’s husband was not high in the pack, while mine is the Alpha. As I’m sure you’re aware he does a lot of … liaising with both state and federal government, and I’ve had dealings with several Cantrip people.” Almost all of them stupid, scared, and dangerous, but that was Cantrip for you. “Another answer is that I grew up with werewolves, so I knew about them long before they were out, and I’ve seen them from the inside. I was also employed by a fae before he came out, and we’ve stayed friends, so I’ve picked up some things along the way.”

“That would be Mr Adelbertsmiter?”

“It would.”

“Mmm. Grew up with werewolves, you said. Official records show you grew up in Portland with your mother and stepfather, neither of whom are known as wolves. But then your records are remarkably sparse.”

After Guayota I wasn’t surprised they’d been looking.

“Because neither is a wolf, any more than I am. And my records in Portland are sparse because I only lived there from sixteen until I went to college.”

“So where were you before?”

“Somewhere else, that is werewolf business I’m not allowed to discuss with anyone.”

He gave me a sharp glance in the mirror.

“Tony Montenegro warned me there were things you’d clam up about, but what you did say was straight up.”

“I try. Werewolves are very hard to lie to, and don’t like it, so speaking truth and keeping shtum are both habits. And yes, there are things I know which are not mine to reveal.”

“Werewolf things?”

“Mostly. But you both know there are more things out there than fae and werewolves. Mad foreign volcano gods, for one. And if you’ve seen the video of Guayota you’ll understand that having them angry with you is not a good idea. So no, I can’t promise you that I’ll tell you everything I might know, but I won’t lie and if innocents have died I’ll do my damnedest to stop the bad guys.”
“Fair enough.”

Riebold lapsed into silence as he negotiated the 10th Avenue Bridge and turned onto Ainsworth. Sacajawea State Park is on the naith formed by the confluence of the Snake and Columbia, a triangular parcel of a bit under three hundred acres of woods and scrubland. I’ve run there once or twice as a coyote, just for a change, but the activities are geared towards the double river frontage, and neither fishing nor boating are my thing. Towards the tip there’s a visitor centre, and behind it a mound with some dense trees that was familiar as a view across the Columbia, but I knew more about the Shoshone scout who guided Lewis and Clark than I did about the park named after her. As we entered the industrial and warehousing zone that ran along the Columbia towards the confluence I asked Riebold if there was anything he could tell me.

“The people who died were a geologist and a botanist. According to the senior ranger they’ve been aware for some years that there’s something odd about the land at the confluence. He said it doesn’t seem to erode the way the scientists think it should, and though it’s no kind of priority the question seems to have worked its way to the top of someone’s inbox, so these guys were sent out. They’ve been fossicking about for the best part of a week, looking from the water. Today they went to start checking the trees, because they’d decided it might be root systems somehow resisting the erosion. Does any of that help?”

“Maybe. Oddly non-eroding might go with weird surge of magic.”

“I suppose. But I’ve been up on that mound before and there’s nothing to see except some fine red and white alders.”

“Alders, huh? That might fit too. There are stories about alders.”

“There are?”

“Mostly European black alders, though. Have you heard of the Erlking? Poem by Goethe?”

“Vaguely.”

“Erl means alder. I’m pretty sure he’d have been fae, so I doubt he’s relevant, but there are medicine sings in some Yakama traditions that feature alders or alderwood.”

Willis snapped his fingers. “That’s right. Your father was Native American, wasn’t he?”

“Joe Old Coyote, Blackfeet, out of Browning, Montana. He died in a car wreck about two days after I was conceived.” And Coyote was reborn next morning, but they didn’t need to know that. “I was raised pretty whitebread American, werewolves aside, but I had a phase of looking for my roots and I know some native people.”

A speculative look came into Willis’s eyes and he spoke carefully. “The Feds sent a circular last year about that thing that was killed in the Columbia Gorge. It said some Native Americans had managed to kill it. Would you know anything about that?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes, I really plead the fifth.”

“Hot damn.” Riebold’s eyes met mine again in the mirror. “Did you and your husband kill that thing?”
“I plead the fifth.”

The eyes in the mirror were thoughtful.

“Details of that case are classified, and the Feds weren’t giving much. But they had to say something to the Governor’s Office and some stuff leaked down. It reckoned that monster was a good seventy feet long.”

There was a question in his voice.

“How would I know? In the version I heard, it was more like ninety-five feet.”

“Shit.”

“That’s what I thought too. But please don’t swear in front of my husband, Detective Riebold. I couldn’t care less — mechanics understand Power Words — but my husband is a bit old-fashioned about things like swearing in front of women. He won’t do or say anything but it’ll tick him off, which isn’t wise.”

“Old-fashioned, huh? He looks to be in his late twenties, but his service record says he fought in Vietnam.”

“Uh huh. Fifties morality fits him like a glove.”

He might have said more but he stopped to speak briefly to the police guards at the park entrance, and a few moments later we were pulling into the parking lot of the Visitor Centre. Adam was already there, Joel in presa canario form beside him, and as I got out I raised an eyebrow.

“Not a good day,” Adam told me. “He saw some dogs that reminded him of his own, and he’s been canario ever since.”

“Oh.” I knelt to give Joel a hug, marvelling as I always did at the sheer power and strength of the breed. “Not on you, Joel, any more than Tim is on me.” He whined and I tightened my grip.

“Truly. And they would be happy you won through against an enemy of the pack.”

He leaned into me for a moment with another whine, then I straightened.

“Adam, you’ve met Detective Willis of Kennewick PD. This is Detective Riebold of Pasco PD.”

They nodded and shook, but the detectives’ attention was on Joel. It was Willis who spoke.

“This is Mr Arocha?”

With the man missing and the tibicena anchored to Adam’s side while I was hospitalised, Joel’s story had become known, and I nodded.

“It is. He’s regaining control, but he has good and bad days. This has been a bad one.”

Willis took a deep breath. “And he has a bigger form than this one, I understand. Could we see it?”

I sent Adam a glance that asked *Joel been with you all day?*, and received a strong *Yes.*

“Sure. Joel, could you go tibicena, please?”

He gave me a look, but complied. As a presa canario he weighed about 140 pounds, which was oversize for the breed; as a tibicena he weighed something like 1,500 pounds and stood more than
five foot at the shoulder. Willis and Riebold both took a step back, but Willis’s voice was level, if
strained.

“Sh—ugar. He’s big. Could we see the dentition, Ms Hauptman?”

“Joel?”

He opened his mouth revealing a set of teeth no natural animal had ever boasted. Willis and
Riebold stared, then looked at one another.

“Fine. Thank you, Mr Arocha. I’m sorry I had to ask, but given what happened here it was
necessary. Please take whatever form you’re comfortable with.”

Points to Willis, and Joel morphed into a man for a second.

“I have killed no human, only the tibicena and my own dogs, cursed as I am.”

Then there was only the presa canario, looking hangdog as only a short-muzzled breed can, and I
knelt to hug him again.

“A blessing to us as well as a curse to you, Joel. Hang in there. Remember Lucia understands it
wasn’t you but Guayota that killed them.” I let him go and stood but then had a thought and caught
his eye. “Joel, from what I’ve been told the murder scene up there is bad, and I can smell it on
those who’ve been there. You can wait here if you want.”

He pressed against my leg and shook his head, and while I still thought seeing what had to have
been a slaughter wouldn’t do him any good it was his decision. As we set off on the trail that led
round the Visitor Centre to the mound Willis looked a question at me, but it was Adam who
answered.

“As a wolf blood doesn’t bother me. And Mercy has seen wolves hunt deer, and worse. But Joel
isn’t really a predator in any of his forms — presa canarios are farm and guard dogs, and the
tibicena is a guard animal too. Guayota did his own killing.”

That left out a lot but satisfied their curiosity, and I thought they approved. The police knew about
looking out for your own. I might have said something but as I ducked under the police tape strung
across the path to the mound the wind at my back dropped, and I came to an abrupt halt. The reek
of blood was strong, but the magic was stronger, fizzing and unfamiliar, with undertones of earth
and water and something else.

“Mercy?”

I started walking again. “Sorry. The magic smells very strong.”

Adam wasn’t good with magic, but breathed in carefully. “The earth and water thing?”

“Yes.”

Willis and Riebold exchanged looks, and I knew the line that I got my nose from being Adam’s
mate wouldn’t satisfy them for much longer, but that was tomorrow’s problem. Today’s was
smelling worse with every step, and I felt Adam tensing at the charnel reek. Just before we reached
the top of the mound Riebold stopped.

“The site’s been photographed but not properly searched yet, because we haven’t moved the
bodies, so don’t contaminate it.”
Adam and I nodded, Riebold led us the last few steps, and my breath hitched. The top of the mound was a copse of alders, and by one of them four legs were lying as if they’d toppled over, still wearing boots with National Park Service green working trousers tucked into them. The two nearer me had been severed a little above the knee, the others nearer the top of the thigh. Not far from them were two upper torsos with heads and upper arms, one extending as far as the heart, some of which was visible, the other almost to the hips. And what should have been between those legs and torsos was splattered in an arc on ground and trees, being photographed by four suited-up techs. My heart was beating hard but I’ve seen shredded people before — it happens around werewolves — and the deep breath I took through my nose was to scent. Beneath the smells of magic, body parts, bones, and blood there was a trace of wood sap and something metal, and my eyes found a hand-drill the men must have been using, lying at the base of the tree nearest the legs; there was still a hand with a forearm holding it, and a few feet up the alder had a small wound in its bark. The scent of the magic was still earth and water, but this close there were also pine trees and snow, and faintly a hot smell that made me think of Guayota’s magma. I sniffed again, carefully, but one of the smells that should have been there wasn’t, and I forced myself to look again at the legs and torsos, seeing the pattern I didn’t want to believe. Riebold and Willis had been watching me and being good cops they saw something in my eyes.

“Well?”

I rested a hand on Adam’s arm and made myself speak calmly. “Whatever magic happened here smells most of earth and water, with some forest, snow, air, and what I think is magma. And what I don’t smell at all is human terror. Those men died before they had a chance to be afraid.” I took a breath. “And that’s because whatever it was killed them both with a single bite. The different levels are because its jaw is tapered. They were drilling into that tree — you can see the borehole they’d started — and the drill’s immediately below it. It just dropped straight down.”

Riebold followed my finger and his face tightened.

“They set the drill to the tree and something they never saw bit them both into thirds and spat out their middles.” I stopped to think. “And that’s weird. The purpose must have been only to kill, not to eat. If you can do that Dexter thing from where the blood and bits landed you could probably get the height and the movement of its head.” I looked again at the arc of organs and guts. “But you’re not going to like the answers because whatever it is, it’s huge. Way bigger than any werewolf. Bigger than Guayota was in his dog form. And no living canid I know of has a jaw tapered quite like that — not wolves, or coyotes, or any breed of dog I’m familiar with.”

Riebold looked at me sharply. “Was there a dead kind that did?”

Growing up in Aspen Creek I’d read a lot about canids, and I liked prehistory as well as history. It was also a welcome distraction.

“Dire wolves had a jaw that was almost stepped rather than tapered, and a much stronger bite than timber wolves, but they’ve been extinct for ten thousand years or so. And they were never big enough to do anything like this. I can’t think of a land mammal that could.”

He nodded heavily, looking around the scene and seeing what I’d seen with my nose to guide me.

“You’re right I don’t like it, Ms Hauptman, not one bit, but that’s a better reading of this scene than Willis or I had managed. And for their sakes I hope you’re right about it being over before they knew it. Could it be fae?”

I liked him the better for his hope, but shrugged. “There might be fae with a form that could do such a thing, though I’ve never seen or heard of one. But there is no smell of fae here at all that I
can detect, and I’ll swear the magic involved isn’t fae. But I don’t know what it is, and I’ve never come across anything quite like it.”

He nodded again. “Have you, Mr Hauptman?”

“No. And I agree with my wife’s assessment. I smell fear very keenly and these men did not die afraid. It must have been quick, and her reconstruction fi—”

He broke off, tensing and moving in front of me. I felt it at the same instant and my hackles rose too while Joel snapped into tibicena form and took a step forward.

“What is it?”

Adam was searching for the threat and the sense of being watched intensified. So did the elemental smell of the magic. I answered Riebold so the techs could hear as well.

“We are being watched. Please don’t speak or move.” Willis and Riebold both reached for their guns and my response was instinctive. “No. Guns are no use.”

Pack magic couldn’t control humans but they must have heard the truth in my voice because their hands stopped. I tried to pinpoint the watcher but the threat was everywhere — except it wasn’t quite a threat. It felt more like interested surprise, without any clear sense of the hunt, and I reached to rest one hand on Joel’s hot ruff and the other on Adam’s shoulder. He growled, and I knew his eyes would have gone wolf-yellow.

“Adam, I don’t think it’s stalking us. It’s … curious.”

“Feels like stalking to me.”

“But to watch, not to hunt.”

“Maybe.”

His voice was less of a growl so I knew he felt it too, but he was still an Alpha in the presence of something that could hurt his mate and pack. Logic didn’t usually have much say in any Alpha’s reactions, but Adam had more of it than most as well as better control.

“If it’s as big as we think, we really don’t want to fight it. Let me try politeness first?”

I felt him thinking about it, and though he didn’t stop searching he took a half-step aside to let me stand between him and Joel. I tried to open myself as much as possible, despite my own coyote instincts to fight or run.

“We feel your presence. Will you show yourself?”

The pressure of something’s gaze intensified, and my life among werewolves made me look down and tilt my head to offer my neck submissively. I sensed Adam’s surprise but it felt right, and my impression of curiosity deepened before the magic surged. I looked up again and between one breath and the next a vast form appeared maybe fifty feet away.

In one horrified second of staring I took in a brindled cinnamon wolf that stood at least fifteen feet at the shoulder. It wasn’t a timber wolf, and despite the size it looked a lot like some reconstructions I’ve seen of dire wolves. But its eyes were not a wolf’s — they were silver-on-gold, and glowing with intelligence — and the visible teeth weren’t a wolf’s either. I forced my gaze back down, and tightened my grips on Joel and Adam.
“Don’t shoot, don’t run, and don’t meet its eyes. Joel, stay still. Adam, please.”

Submission is by definition not something Alphas do, except to significantly more dominant Alphas. Bran was the only wolf I’d ever seen Adam bow to, and I could feel the struggle in him, but he knew as well as I did that even in wolf form he wouldn’t stand a chance against this thing, and after what seemed an eternity but was probably only a few seconds I felt rather than saw him drop his gaze and tilt his head. I kept my voice to a friendly suggestion.

“Copying our posture would be good. I know looking away is hard but staring is a challenge.”

I couldn’t see if the techs or either of the detectives moved, but the dire wolf whuffed softly and I felt it slowly approach. Front paws the size of an elephant’s foot stopped in front of me, and a huge, wet nose sniffed at my hair and then down my body. There was another whuff, and hot breath laced with all the magic in the world blew over me. Then it was Joel’s turn, and I grasped his ruff more tightly still, sending as much support as I could through the pack bond — but he actually seemed more interested than afraid, and was smelling the dire wolf in return. Its third whuff was definitely surprised, and it raised its head for a moment. I could feel its gaze resting on me like a dead weight, and then it turned to smell Adam up and down, as it had me, and whuffed again. I could feel the iron control Adam was exerting to hold still, and maybe the dire wolf could too because after a few seconds it backed off a few steps, to an area beyond the blood spill, and settled into a crouch. Its gaze never left us. After a moment Adam muttered a question without moving.

“So what’s politeness step two?”

“Who knows?”

I cautiously let my head come straight again, seeing Adam do the same, and even more slowly let my gaze rise until I was looking at its mouth. The jaw dropped open in a gesture any wolf would recognise as an invitation to play, and in my surprise I met its gaze for a split second before looking down again — but there hadn’t been any threat, only that intense curiosity, and what had sounded for all the world like an encouraging croon. So I let myself look again, and found myself mesmerised by silver-on-gold. It wasn’t like a vampire’s gaze, and I was still wholly aware, but it held me and something stirred in my head painfully enough that I tensed and the pain vanished. The dire wolf whuffed again, softly, and this time it wasn’t a pain in my head but something that might be words, though I could make no sense of them. I felt it release me with what I thought was a sense of frustration, and looked down again, breathing deeply.

“Mercy?”

Adam’s voice was hoarse.

“Think it’s trying to communicate but I don’t understand the words.”

“Can you repeat them aloud?”

“No. Sorry. It’s just a sense of it trying to say something.”

A dire-wolf form meant something very, very old, and I knew only one sort of being that just might be able to help. There had been coyotes for a long time, but I had no way of getting hold of the one who’d sort-of-been my father. I did know where another of his kind might be, though. The wolf was still watching us intently, and I kept my movements very slow and careful as I took my phone from my pocket and called Jim Alvin, praying that he’d answer quickly. The sense of curiosity strengthened again.
Like all good medicine men, Jim had caller ID on his phone. I remembered that Riebold and Willis were listening too.

“Yes. Others can hear me. You wouldn’t happen to know how I could get hold of Gordon right now?”

“I’m afraid not. I haven’t seen him for several … except he just walked in. Gordon, it’s Mercy Hauptman for you.> Some coincidences were too good to be true, and I heard Gordon tell Jim he’d felt he was needed but hadn’t known it was about me. His voice was soft.

“So how’s my favourite coyote?”

“In need of advice. Do you know the mound covered with alder trees at the confluence of the Columbia and Snake?”

“Yes.”

He sounded wary.

“Two men died there this morning and the police asked me to look at the scene. I’m there with Adam and Joel.” I was betting Coyote would have told him about Joel. “And we’re looking at what I’m pretty sure is a dire wolf, except it’s bigger than an elephant. I think it’s trying to talk to me but I don’t understand what it wants. I hoped you might have some idea of what I could do next.”

There was what felt like a long silence before Gordon huffed laughter.

<Coyote girl, you do manage to get yourself into interesting situations. What has the wolf done so far?>

“Besides biting two men into thirds this morning, it’s sniffed carefully at me, Joel, and Adam, in that order, backed off, crouched, let me meet its eyes, hurt my head, stopped at once, and tried to tell me something I couldn’t understand. It feels intensely curious and it was frustrated at not getting through. Right now it’s watching intently.”

“I bet it is.” He laughed again, then his voice became brisk. <Congratulations. You’re the first person in a very long time to meet the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin. The dire wolf is a guard avatar. Does your phone have a speaker function?>

“Yes.”

<Turn it on, go closer to the wolf, and hold the phone up.>

“Alone?”

I sounded plaintive, even to myself.

<It would be best.>

I turned to look at Adam, who surprised me by shrugging minutely.

“It’s not being threatening, and I trust Gordon. Go ahead.”
That was easier said than done, but I forced my feet to move. The wolf lowered its head almost to the ground, which put its eyes pretty much on a level with mine, and I shook my head slightly, pointing to my ear. It tipped its head, presenting me with its own huge ear, and I put the phone to my mouth before holding it up.

<Go ahead, Gordon.>

I’d once heard Coyote speak to Gordon in an old language, but what came out of the speaker didn’t sound like anything I’d ever heard. It was Thunderbird’s voice, not Gordon’s, and if it was a language at all it was the language of creation — a sound more like a rockslip or torrential rain than words. The wolf gave a pleased whuff and when Thunderbird stopped it turned its head to look at me, snapped its jaw softly once, and presented me its ear again.

“It said ‘yes’”

Thunderbird made some more earth noises, got a second ‘yes’, and then a soft growl that was just as clear a ‘no.’ There was a bit more rumbling before Gordon spoke in his own voice.

<Mercy, turn off the speaker and listen. Adam should listen too, and Joel if he can understand me.>

“Allright. Just a second.” It seemed wise not to turn my back on the wolf, so I backed slowly away a few steps, resetting the phone, and Adam and Joel came slowly forward until we were side by side again. “Go ahead.”

<The Great Manitou is still in the process of waking up, and the guardian avatar is seeking information. The world has changed a lot since it went to sleep. It recognises what Mercy is, and senses Joel’s relation to another manitou, but werewolves are new to it, and having a coyote, a werewolf, and a tibicena in one pack is enough to surprise anything.> Adam growled agreement and Gordon laughed again. <I didn’t say it was bad, Adam. In any case, it wants to read your minds. It might hurt a bit, and it’ll surely stir up memories including bad ones, but it promises nothing it will do will harm you or your pack.>

Adam took the phone. “Mercy has memories that will harm her if they’re too stirred up, Gordon. So do Joel and I.”

<Maybe so, Adam, but it is not wise to say no to such a being. And with the Great Manitou waking, the world will change whatever any of us do, but it wants you three as its first source of information.> His voice became very dry. <If it doesn’t kill us all, it might be a very good thing.>

I put a hand on Adam’s arm. “I can stand it, Tim and all, if you can stand the war memories.”

He gave me a searching glance, but eventually nodded. “Alright. Gordon, can you please warn it to be very careful. What do we do?”

<I’ll tell it. Then just stand in front of it, nod, and meet its eyes.>

We went back, and I turned the speaker on again. The rumbling sounds lasted for maybe a minute, and the wolf whuffed once or twice before jaw clapping another ‘yes’. Gordon’s voice came from the speaker.

<It will be careful. I’ll be in touch.>

He rang off, and I put the phone away before taking a deep breath, nodding, and meeting the wolf’s eyes. That elemental magic enveloped me, and as the cliché has it my life passed before my eyes,
from Aspen Creek to Portland and onto the TriCities and Adam. It was like being a book that someone else was riffling through, or maybe a page with links, because the magic wasn’t only interested in me but in what I knew of the world it found itself awake in. Bran and werewolves interested it a lot, and so did fae and vampires, which worried me — neither looked kindly on people who revealed their secrets, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it now. And when it came to the bad bits of my life — being raped, Blackwood, the Fairy Queen, fighting the River Devil and Guayota — it was as if there was a sheet of glass between my memories and my self, insulating me from their terror. I also began to get some feedback — a sense of approval about killing Tim and Blackwood, interest in the walking stick, recognition of the River Devil, and a moment of surprise and satisfaction when it understood what I’d done to bring Joel into the pack and vanquish Guayota. The magic released me, leaving a deep sense of calm so ridiculously easing I knew it had to be a gift. I gave the dire wolf a nod of thanks and realised I had no idea how long it had all taken.

“Twenty seconds or so,” Adam told me.

I blinked. “Feels like for ever, but it kept its word. Go ahead.”

Watching the process from the outside was just as weird. Adam’s face went a little slack, as if he were asleep, but golden flashes of wolf came and went in his eyes, while the dire wolf’s became more silvery. And strangest of all was the flickering change of Adam’s scent, which seemed to shift with his memories. Burning flesh, jungle, and gunpowder must be Vietnam, a breath of desert and rock his time in Los Alamos. There were also members of the pack, Bran, and Christy, Jesse, and me, spiked with moments of fear that must go with times we’d been in danger, but he didn’t tense, and when the wolf let him go I could tell it had given him the same calm — which was interesting, because calming me is one thing and calming Adam’s wolf in this situation very much another.

It took only about fifteen seconds to read Adam, though he was older than me and knew a lot I didn’t, and less than ten to read Joel, who had until recently lived a mundane life. Or maybe it was skipping things it had already got from me or Adam. For a moment Joel’s scent also shifted, smelling of Guayota, but then he morphed into his presa canario form and shook himself. I could feel his calm in the pack bonds too, and I thanked the dire wolf again. It whuffed, and I felt a sense of approval before it stood and vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Gifted calm or no, I sagged against Adam, who hugged me back very tightly and buried his face in my hair.

“Is it safe to move?”

Willis’s voice was anything but calm and Adam loosened his grip enough that I could breathe.

“I think so. It’s gone off to think about what it learned.”

Riebold’s voice was also tight. “And what did it learn, Ms Hauptman?”

I turned to him, rotating in Adam’s arms because my legs were feeling very wobbly.

“Pretty much everything the three of us know, Detective Riebold. Which was not a lot of fun.” I took a breath. “What you are dealing with is apparently the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin. That’s why it smells of all the elements together. It’s been asleep for a long, long time, but it isn’t any more.”

“Apparently?”
“So Gordon said.”

“Gordon who?”

“Gordon strictly Native American business.”

He and Willis looked at one another.

“That’s not good enough any more, Ms Hauptman. If he knows what this thing is he can help us deal with it.”

I couldn’t stop the laugh. “Deal with it, Detective Willis? You figure you have handcuffs that’ll fit? And you can’t destroy it either, or banish it, because this is its home. It’s the same kind of being as Guayota — and I imagine Guayota coming here is one of the things that have woken it up — but from what I could sense as much more powerful as the Columbia Basin is bigger than Tenerife.”

“Shit. Is it going to kill anyone else?”

“Who knows? But I don’t think so. Or not right now.” My eyes wandered round the blood and bodies again. “I think these men were just very unlucky. For some reason, and I really don’t know what, drilling the tree was the final thing to wake it up, and the dire-wolf form reacted as any wolf would if it woke to find someone drilling into it. By the time Adam, Joel, and I got here it was a bit more awake and feeling less threatened. Plus Joel and our pack bonds … intrigued it, so it wanted to find out about us. Now it has, and it’s thinking about it.”

“So what do we do?”

“Clear this up, give those poor men a decent burial, and don’t drill into these trees.”

They stared at me, then Riebold turned to the techs, who were slumped leaning on one another, faces white, but also staring.

“Jurgenson, tell me you got all that on video?”

One of them fiddled with his camera for a moment before nodding weakly.

“Yeah. It’s on here.”

“And the wolf shows up all right?”

“Oh yeah.”

Riebold turned back to Adam and me. “Then you’re going to need to explain all that to the brass, Ms Hauptman.”

I nodded wearily, and felt Adam’s arm tense.

“She will, Detective Riebold. With our lawyers present. And I do note that neither you nor Detective Willis has yet bothered to thank Mercy for both identifying your killer and very probably saving all our lives.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Three

It went downhill from there, and it took hours. We wound up with brass from all three city PDs, and the mayors, as well as assorted Feds including an FBI observer and Agents Kent and Orton of Cantrip. I had poor opinions of both, unsurprisingly given that the last time I’d seen them they’d tried to detain me as an unknown supernatural requiring incarceration as a terrorist in the name of public safety.

I explained what little I knew about manitous, including — repeatedly — that they were coextensive with whatever they were the manitou of, and as far as I knew could not be destroyed while that existed. I was as honest as I could be about everything I’d felt and thought I’d felt, and so was Adam. Joel wasn’t, and when they demanded he become human and speak to them he went tibicena instead and growled, so that was that. And though I told them over and over again why I thought the avatar had killed the scientists but been friendly to us I flatly refused to tell them anything about Gordon, while Adam’s wonderful lawyer Jenny stopped them from arresting me or seizing my phone. I had deleted Jim’s name and number as well as wiping the call memory before we left the mound, but there were other things on there they had no business knowing, and anyway, getting used to a new phone is a pain. And as Jenny pointed out, I wasn’t breaking any law.

That stopped the police, but she went another round with Orton and Kent, who once again wanted to use some combination of the Humanity and Patriot Acts to set aside due process and lock me up on general principles. They still didn’t seem to realise that Adam would kill them before he let them take me, and that all werewolves would back him up, not just his own pack. They also had zip in the way of evidence — they just didn’t like the way I associated with the preternatural — and both that and the way they were trying to bend the law to cover them really annoyed the police. As the manitou was clearly very magical indeed Cantrip technically had jurisdiction, but they didn’t have the resources themselves, nor any powers of ordinary arrest, and needed Pasco PD at least to co-operate, which wasn’t going to happen. Eventually Orton said he’d suspend judgement for now, while warning me this wasn’t over, and we got back to my refusing to tell them about Gordon.

No-one was happy about that, and my flat statement that it was sacred Native American knowledge I could not reveal only led to more glowering and raised voices. Adam had been suppressing rage since Orton and Kent made their threats, and I could feel his control stretching as the circus went on and on. Somewhere about nine I saw his eyes begin to flicker yellow and came abruptly to my feet, cutting across the Deputy Chief who was currently venting his frustration.

“Do you idiots want a seriously angry werewolf in here?” The idiots looked at Adam, who managed to look away, and I drew his rage into my own voice. “Don’t stare at him. Stop shouting. Stop threatening me. And for the love of God get some food in here.”

There was silence, and I turned to the Pasco Chief.

“What’s the number of the McDonald’s across the street?”

He gave it to me — there was no chance any cop in this station wouldn’t know it — and I used my still unconfiscated phone to order ten double cheeseburgers with everything, and asked for someone to get them over here at a run. While we waited, I felt amusement tempering Adam’s
rage, so I briskly told the idiots some more home truths.

“You’ve had more than three years to learn about werewolves, and you still haven’t done werewolf 101. Adam’s control is outstanding, but deliberately riling and challenging him — which is what you do when you shout at me in front of him — is right up there with pointing a gun at a policeman. And given that a very magical, unkillable creature that is coextensive with the entire Columbia Basin has just woken up, and its first chosen form was a dire wolf bigger than this room, you seriously need to fix that right now.”

I took a breath and tried to speak more reasonably.

“Think about it. That dire wolf could reappear anywhere in the Basin, anytime, and there is nothing anyone can do about that. I’d also remind you that like all wolves, dire wolves were pack animals, and I very much doubt there’s only one of it. But you can tell everyone that if one does appear and hasn’t killed you yet, hold your ground, bow your head, and let it pass in peace. I know the wolf avatar we saw is fully sapient but I have no idea what instincts it has, nor what any other avatars might be like. What I do know is that the form we’ve seen is that of a predator, and predators chase what runs and fight what challenges. I also know that acting submissive has worked at least once to keep me — and your detectives and techs — from being bitten into thirds. And I know that every last one of you has found it more important to shout at me for not revealing sacred Native American lore than to do the one thing you could to protect your own people and the public.”

The cheeseburgers arrived, and I ate one while Joel (back in canario form) ate three and Adam ate six. Not having changed or been injured he didn’t really need that much, but demolishing them all in less time than it would take most people to eat one was no problem, and a way of reminding these people what they were shouting at. It also genuinely helped to feed the wolf, and his eyes were back to human brown by the time he was done. He washed them down with some of the awful station coffee they’d all been swilling, and looked at them.

“Mercy’s right. And though in most ways it’s the last thing either of us wants, we give you permission to release some of the video. Edit the blood and guts out, but show the dire wolf not hurting us because we stood still and looked down. Whether you include the rest is up to you, but I’d strongly suggest you consider that if you include Mercy’s call you’ll be giving the public a second new thing to worry about, you’ll upset every Native American in the country, and you’ll distract from the bit that matters politically and practically.”

Most of them looked thoughtful but Orton bridled.

“CNTRP is the senior authority here, Hauptman, and we will make our own decisions about managing this.”

Adam looked at him without heat, though I could feel his contempt. No-one else was very happy with him either.

“Worked real well with the Fae, Orton.” The FBI guy was older than him, and I’d bet more senior — there’s a lot of secret governmental stuff dotted around here. “And there’s no way this can be kept secret. Every policeman in the Tri-Cities already knows about it, I’d bet the Fae do, given how much magic Ms Hauptman says was released, and you can’t stop Mr Hauptman warning his pack and every other wolf in the Basin.” He looked at the assembled mayors. “And three politicians also know.”

Adam grinned. “Two can keep a secret, if one of them is dead.”
“In any case, there is a clear duty on all police and elected officials present to warn and duly advise the public, Agent Orton, which as Ms Hauptman pointed out has already been ignored for some hours.” Jenny’s voice was as precise as her aim. “The various police departments also have a duty to inform their patrol officers. And there is certainly an obligation to inform the Governor. Moreover, as the whole of the Columbia Basin is involved, the Governors of Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming must also be warned.”

“And British Columbia and Alberta,” I added helpfully. “Cantrip’s got no authority at all there, and if a dire wolf eats some unsuspecting Canadian I don’t think their government will be too happy.”

“Indeed.” Jenny gave me a look. “So there are obligations to inform the President and Secretary of State as well, so they can speak to the relevant Canadian authorities.” She stood. “And all of those obligations are on you, variously, not on my clients, who were present because they were asked by Pasco PD to assist, and have been treated disgracefully. Is anyone going to be so stupid as to try to arrest them? No? Then we’re leaving.”

I could have cheered, but the look on Orton’s face as Adam and I stood made me take a deep breath instead. One more try.

“Agent Orton, and everyone, you’re all thinking about this wrongly. ‘Decisions about managing this’, you said. But you’ve seen the video, and the one of Guayota. You don’t manage a Great Manitou. If you’re lucky, you survive it. And if you’re polite, maybe you can negotiate with it. Now it’s awake, there will be more manifestations. You can’t arrest any of its avatars, you can’t shoot them, you can’t stop them, and if you try you’ll only make it angry, and more people will die. Probably a lot more people.”

I blew out a breath and Adam rested a hand on my shoulder.

“And it already has reason to be angry. If it thinks a dire wolf is a current form it must have been asleep for at least ten thousand years.” I paused, thinking. “Since the last ice age, maybe — that seems like it might be enough to bore a manitou to sleep. And now it’s woken up to find way too many people screwing with its ecosystems, the Columbia dammed six ways to Christmas, and tons of radioactive garbage from Hanford dumped into it.”

There was a collective wince from the locals. The atomic research at Hanford might have helped win the last world war but it had also produced what was still the nation’s largest and costliest environmental clean-up project — not that that’s saying very much.

“How it feels about all of that is what we’re all going to have to deal with, and nothing in any of anyone’s standard procedures is going to be the least bit of use. On the upside, it’s a Great Manitou. Who knows what it can do if it wants? Could it help us clean up Hanford? Get the radioactives out of the groundwater? Or warn us of imminent landslides or earthquakes? Get any survivors out of one faster than human SAR?” I glared at the three mayors. “Think about the politics of that. People are afraid of the preternatural because of the Fae and wolves, but for now at least this is a single being even if it can have multiple avatars. And a very interesting being to all sorts of people — it’s already shown us an animal we know only from fossils, and just about every kind of scientist there is will be avid to ask questions. And one more thing — the Fae and the wolves are both migrants here from Europe, but the manitou isn’t just native, it’s our land itself. We need to love it, not hate it, and we need it to tolerate us. If I sense anything from it again I’ll tell you.”

Adam nodded and looked at the Kennewick police chief. “Whenever that video does get out we’re going to have reporters in droves. I’ll get extra security on my gates, but a heads-up would be welcome and a police presence helpful.”
I hadn’t thought about that, and shuddered, but that was something that would have to be managed too. My own experiences with media fame had not been good, but Adam handled the media very slickly, so perhaps it wouldn’t be that bad. Orton and Kent still didn’t want to let us leave but the mayors and the FBI guy were already jabbering on their phones and the chances of Cantrip controlling anything were zero, so we ignored them. Before getting into Adam’s car I gave Jenny a hug.

“Thank you for everything.”

She gave me another look I couldn’t read.

“Mercy, I’d have done it for free to see you tell them off. And thank you for everything.” Her voice became brisker. “Adam, it’ll take them a while to make a decision about that video but I agree they’ll have to release it, and I’ll check urgently on the legalities. It’s Pasco PD property, and evidence, but Mercy was present by direct invitation of the PPD in a capacity as a paid consultant, and you and Joel were present pro bono with PPD consent, so you ought to have some rights in the matter, and at least a preview of what they decide to release. I’ll be in touch early tomorrow.”

She marched off to her own car, and after letting Joel jump into the back seat I belted myself wearily into my own, inhaling Adam’s scent with Joel’s and without angry strangers and too much testosterone. His rage had gone entirely, and I looked at him with eyebrows up.

“How come you’re so calm?”

He gave me a thoughtful glance. “Good question. I think whatever that mojo it gave us was is still working. And weirdly, my wolf is really happy about meeting its very big brother. It still feels all of those people would benefit from being eaten, except maybe the FBI guy, but once the avatar appeared it didn’t see it as a threat. More as a very impressive Alpha who could protect us from anything.”

“That’s … really odd.”

“Yes it is. My wolf has not been this calm since … ever. Stranger still, I feel less bothered by my war memories than I ever have as well.”

“Did you get that sheet-of-glass thing for the bad bits too?”

He grinned. “Yes. Perfect description.”

“How, Joel, did you?”

He morphed to human. “Yes. It is easier. The manitou was angry at what Guayota made me do. I felt it did not approve of sacrifice. And I feel better in many ways. I only stayed canario in there because I didn’t want to talk to them. I will stay human when I have some clothes.”

“Good for you. There’s a set of sweats in the back, Joel.”

“Ah. Thank you, Adam. Can you drop me at home?”

“Sure.”

I kept my eyes forward to give him as much privacy as possible. He hadn’t yet acquired the indifference to nudity that came with changing form. That reminded me of Charles’s ability with clothes and a thought popped.
“Hey, maybe the wolf that killed was an Alpha, and the one that showed up later was an Omega. Or …” I groped for the thought. “Maybe it made itself an Omega to help us. I think it was pack bonds between coyote, werewolf, and whatever it perceived Joel to be that made it so curious. So maybe it felt our tension when we drew on them, or felt Adam’s drives as an Alpha, and reacted … helpfully.”

Adam gave me a look not unlike the one Jenny had given me.

“What?”

“Mercy, you are scarily good at this. That feels exactly right, and it had not occurred to me in six hours of wondering about it. You also read that scene in five seconds flat while I was still controlling my reaction to the blood. You were exactly right about offering submission, or none of us would be here. And calling Gordon was inspired, however much it hung us up afterwards. You get my thanks for everything too.”

His praise was a warm glow amid my tiredness.

“Back atcha.” I rested a hand on his thigh. “It’s interesting Gordon walked in just as needed.”

“Isn’t it? But that wave of magic must have jangled a lot of things.”

“Mmm. It jangled Zee alright. Maybe we’d better give him and Uncle Mike a heads-up. And Bran, of course.” I hesitated. “And Marsilia, but I’m betting she won’t be happy that it knows whatever you and I do about vampires.”

“No. But for once she’s as out of her league as we all are with this thing. And I had a sense it didn’t much care for vampires. Did you?”

“A bit, yes, but I was worrying about Marsilia. Maybe it’s a native thing, in the same way walkers and vamps don’t usually mix. It didn’t seem to mind fae, though. And it was interested by the walking stick.”

“Was it? All in all, it seems like a fairly sensible manitou.”

“Better than the last one, for sure. Maybe things are looking up.”

He laughed. “Maybe they are, but we’re all going to be even more bored with telling this tale before we get any sleep.”

I thought about it. While we stopped at Joel’s and said hello to Lucia.

“Marsilia and Uncle Mike only need a bare warning — the manitou’s waking up and wants to know what’s moved in while it was asleep. For the rest, can we make it a conference call? Bran, Charles and Anna, Samuel and Arianna, and Jim, with Gordon if he’s still about. Get it over with. The pack and Jesse can all listen, and then we only have to do it once.”

He gave me another look. “Marsilia and Uncle Mike will want more than bare facts.”

“Tough. They get a genuine warning, offered freely. Werewolves, fae, and vamps are all new to the manitou, and it’s understandably curious. We’ve lucked out, because it happened to use a wolf-form and understood what I am. But the jury’s still out on the others, and they need to come to terms with an awake manitou. Should be entertaining.”

Adam nodded, giving a sigh I understood perfectly. “All of that. And the politics will be extreme,
especially once that video is released and the general public kicks in. We have to talk to Bran before we do anything. All else aside, it will bear on his negotiations with the Fae. Why don’t you call him now, if you can bear it.”

I really didn’t want to, but Bran was Bran, and it made sense, so I hauled out the phone. He sounded interested when he answered.

<Mercy. Darryl called to say you, Adam, and Joel were talking to a lot of policemen and Feds about something. I take it you haven’t been arrested.>

“No, though Cantrip tried again, and there’ll be more trouble from them before this is done. Bran, did you feel anything late this morning?”

Aspen Creek was within the Columbia Basin.

<I did. A strange magic, far and yet near. Do you know what it was?>

I told him, as tersely as possible, knowing he’d hear the truth in my voice even when it sounded absurd, and ended as we reached home with the suggestion for a conference call. Adam turned off the engine and the humming silence deepened. When Bran spoke I could tell he was smiling as well as concerned.

<Smart coyote. And lucky wolves. Do please warn the Fae and the vampires. And Adam, I’ll set the call up for an hour. I can manage to wait that long for the details.>
Chapter 4

At least half the pack were waiting at home, worried because they’d felt Adam’s shock at the dire wolf and anger with the idiots, and puzzled because they’d also felt his calm return. Smells from the kitchen told me Darryl had been keeping them quiet with Spanish omelettes, and that extra bulk had as usual been provided by Benny’s, our local pizza joint. I didn’t like to think about what Adam’s monthly account there ran to, but we had some high earners besides Adam himself, and pack fees covered it.

Wolves being wolves they’d heard us pull up, and were drifting into the hall as we came in. Warren gave us a once over and an enquiring look.

“Long day, Boss.”

“Longer than expected,” Adam agreed, “and a long story.” He didn’t need to raise his voice for them all to hear. “Which we’ve been telling the police for hours. There’s a conference call with the Marrok and others in an hour, and you can all wait for that. Until then I want some quiet time, and a shower.”

“Sure, Boss. You need food?”

Adam gave him a grin. “No. Mercy made the police feed me and Joel. But she could do with some.”

“Coming right up,” Darryl called from the kitchen.

It was more Alpha protectiveness and management, but after all that had happened today one burger wasn’t enough so I wasn’t complaining, and in any case Darryl’s an excellent cook. Jesse clattered down the stairs, and found herself scooped into her father’s fierce hug.

“Oof. Not so hard, Dad.” He loosened his grip but didn’t let her go, and she gave me a look. “What’s up? Darryl said you’d been called to a crime scene?”

“Yeah. At Sacajawea State Park. Not nice. Followed by hours with the Pasco PD and a bunch of Feds and politicians.” I ruffled her hair, which was currently pink. “Enough to annoy anyone, never mind an Alpha. We’ll be telling the long version to various people in an hour and you can listen in then.”

“OK.”

“Adam, I’ll call Uncle Mike and Marsilia.” He nodded without speaking. “Take him upstairs, Jesse. Back to the kitchen, people, and give them some space.”

I headed for the kitchen myself, leaving Adam holding Jesse. In most werewolf packs females have no independent standing, and take their positions from the relative dominance of their mates. We were already a little different, because Mary Jo’s and Honey’s relative dominance was recognised, but while as a coyote I had no standing at all, as Adam’s mate only he outranked me, and I’d put just enough in my voice to have them all following.
“Hey, Mercy.” Darryl gave me a glance from where he stood at the range, and then a longer look. “Rough day, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“How come Adam and Joel got food and you didn’t?”

I grinned at him. “I ordered ten burgers. I got one, Joel was canario and ate three, and Adam ate the other six in about three minutes by way of reminding the idiot police that cooping us up for hours without food and shouting at me wasn’t such a bright idea.”

He shook his head. “Idiot is right. You’d think they’d have learned better by now. Here.”

An omelette a good two inches thick with bacon and greens as well as potato appeared in front of me, and I set to happily. It was wonderful as well as very filling, and as I reached the last third I slowed down enough to offer him thanks and answer the questions in everyone’s eyes.

“You really do have to wait for the long version” — another tasty bite went down — “but the short version is that the crime scene was bad. Slaughterhouse bad. Two guys bitten into thirds and scattered about.”

The silence let me finish the omelette.

“Bitten into thirds?”

Auriele had heard the truth in my voice, but it was an unlikely statement.

“Yeah. With one bite. Then we met the perpetrator, which was a dire wolf that stood maybe fifteen feet at the shoulder.” The silence deepened, broken only by the tapping as some of them looked up dire wolves on Wiki. “Equally accurately, I could say it was an avatar of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin, which has apparently just woken up after a very long nap. Fortunately, it’s a lot more sensible than our last manitou, and it’s on home ground, not wandering about anchored by tibicenas, so with some Native American help I called in we managed to talk to it a bit. Then it read our minds and vanished. The delay with the police was because I wouldn’t tell them about the Native American help — not my secret to reveal.”

Mention of another manitou had heads snapping up with alarm — Guayota hadn’t been fun for anyone — but they eased as they heard the rest of it.

“Bloody hell, Mercy.” Ben’s voice was admiring. “And I used to think the Tri-Cities were boring. Fifteen feet? And you talked to it?”

“The person I called did. It just whuffed and jaw-clapped or growled for yes and no. But I’m hoping it learned English when it read our minds, so things should be easier for whoever meets it next.” I pulled some of Adam’s Alpha into my voice again. “If you do meet it, what you do is submit, just as for a super-dominant Alpha. Eyes down and head tilted. And be polite — it seems to appreciate it. There are no guarantees, but it worked for us, and it’ll give you your best chance of not being trisected. You could call it ‘please don’t murder me’.”

That got a laugh from those who knew the Grateful Dead’s ‘Dire Wolf’, and most of them were thinking about it when someone muttered More fucking coyote shit dumped on us loud enough for everyone to hear. It was Paul, of course, and it was calculated. If Adam had been present he wouldn’t have dared, and if I hadn’t been present Darryl or Warren would have slapped him down. But I was, so it was up to me, and I’d had enough for one day.
I’d also been thinking for a while about the problems Paul was for ever stirring up, and practising what the changes in my magic and the pack bonds let me do with them. The practising had mostly involved just me and Adam, and had led to some entertaining fun while I was still wary of walking on my burned foot, but I’d made some interesting discoveries. Bran once told me that everyone senses pack bonds differently. For me they were ribbons like Christmas garlands, and without getting up I imagined a nice, thick ribbon, two inches wide and so densely woven you couldn’t breathe through it, and mentally wrapped it around Paul’s nose and mouth, pulling it tight. Then I got up, walked across to where he was already clawing futilely at his mouth, and pulled on Adam some more while sending him reassurance.

“Be still, Paul. A couple of minutes without air won’t hurt you.” I deliberately took a deep breath, staring at him, and his eyes dropped with his hands. “You know, Paul, you seem to run on hate the way cars run on oil. You hate Warren because he’s gay, Darryl because he’s mixed-race, Auriele because she’s Hispanic and married him, me because I have a coyote form, and Joel because he has a dog form. You don’t want a pack, you want a chapter of the Klan.” Ben laughed agreement, and I knew others would share it. “But we could put up with your bigotry, as we put up with everyone’s weaknesses for the benefits and joy of their strengths. What we cannot put up with, and I will no longer allow, is your constant disloyalty to Adam, and your sheer stupidity.”

I could see the furious denial in his eyes, and my temper kicked up a notch or two. Everyone else was utterly silent.

“Oh yes, Paul, disloyalty and stupidity. Today Adam, Joel, and I were confronted, out of the blue, with a wolf bigger than an elephant. We all had to be submissive to live, and that’s as easy for Adam as being polite and fair is for you. Then he had to put up with a lot of very worried police and Feds, including Cantrip, for hours in a crowded room that reeked of fear, testosterone, and interagency dominance fights. Most wolves would have lost it. Quite a few Alphas would have lost it. And you heard him say he wanted some quiet time before he has to go through it all again for the Marrok. But what’s more important to you is grabbing a chance to snipe at me, inaccurately.”

Paul was going an interesting shade of purple and the denial in his eyes was shifting to panic, which I didn’t want flooding the pack bonds. “First, last, and only warning, Paul. Get a brain and learn when to keep your mouth shut. If you screw with Adam when he really doesn’t need it one more time, you’re out of the pack for good.”

I pulled the pack bond loose and ignored the whooping noises he made as I went back to my seat. A wide-eyed Darryl drew in a deep breath himself.

“Glad we got that cleared up. What the … what did you just do, Mercy?”

“Besides disciplining a mean-minded fool? How do you perceive pack bonds, Darryl?”

He frowned. “Music and harmony.”

“Right. For me they’re ribbons, so I tied one round his mouth.” I felt the general surprise. “Magic follows intent, people. It’s probably why I could do what I did with Joel, and not being a stupid coyote I’ve been working on what I learned from that. More importantly, Paul was as wrong as he usually is. The manitou isn’t a coyote thing, or a fae thing, or an anything thing. It’s its own thing. And everyone is going to have to deal with the fact that it’s now awake — wolves, fae, vampires, whatever else, and humans. Just as importantly, what we do not want is to annoy it, and what we — meaning all wolves — do want is friendly relations with it. That’s why we’re going to be talking to Bran in a bit, and why I’m going to give the Fae and the vampires a heads-up right now.”

Having got his breath back Paul was looking daggers at me, though he dropped his gaze as soon as I looked at him. It wasn’t enough, though.
“Paul, any other night I’d send you home to cool off, but you have a right and a need to hear the
full story. Even so, if Adam sees you looking at me like that just now he will seriously want to kill
you, so you need to go outside and calm down however’s best for you.”

I caught Honey’s eye and she nodded and gave me a thumbs-up before following Paul out. When
we heard the front door close behind them Darryl blew out a long breath.

“Good one, Mercy. Scary, but good. Damn, but you keep us on our toes.”

There was some rueful laughter and to my relief most of them seemed good with it. Enough of
them shared at least one of Paul’s bigotries — especially concern about Joel’s addition to the pack
— that disciplining him for that alone would have grated. But they knew I was right about both his
defiance of Adam and it being the wrong time to do it, and almost as importantly my two fights
with Guayota had won me some respect even from those who thought no coyote should be in a
pack. The second fight mattered more, because even though I’d only ended it by making Joel pack,
doing so hadn’t only saved me but Darryl, Auriele, and probably Adam, Samuel, Warren, and
Honey as well. They started talking softly among themselves, with sidelong glances at me, but I
could live with that. I hauled out my phone again and called Uncle Mike. It took a while for him to
come to the phone and there was a lot of noise in the background.

<Mercy? The place is heaving tonight. Can it wait?>

“I’m afraid not, Uncle Mike. Would it be that surge of magic this morning that has them agitated?”

<You know something about that?>

“I do, and this is a free warning about it, offered by the Columbia Basin pack in goodwill.”

<Is it, now?> The Irishness in his voice had thickened. <Give me a moment then.>

I don’t know what he did but the noise suddenly dropped to nothing.

<You’re on speaker, Mercy. So what’s this warning, freely given?>

Speaking to fae it’s important to be precise.

“The strange surge of magic felt late this morning would seem to have been caused by the
awakening of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin. It is certainly awake, and the surge
happened at the same time as two humans working on the aspens on the mound in Sacajawea State
Park were killed by an avatar of the manitou. That avatar had the form of a mammoth-sized dire
wolf. I have been told by one who has communicated with it that it has been asleep for a very long
time indeed, and is currently updating itself on events, including the novel presence in its territory
of werewolves, fae, and vampires. It is my best understanding that you will each need to come to
terms with it for yourselves. The only guidance I can offer is that setting a drill to those aspens
appears to be what got the humans killed, and that adopting a wolf’s submissive posture helped to
prevent it from killing three members of the pack. And as humans at large are going to find out
sooner rather than later that there are manitous too, right here, the Pack offers this warning freely in
the hope that mutual goodwill between Fae and wolves will prove better for both of us in dealing
with the consequences.”

There was a long pause before Uncle Mike spoke. <Well, lass, there’s food for thought. Your
words are heard. Might I ask who communicated with it?>

“A friend of Coyote’s.”
<Ah. Can’t say I know such myself, but that explains the how. Still, we don’t have trouble with manitous in the usual way of things.>

“Maybe not, Uncle Mike, but while I’m sure a lot of things have contributed to waking this one up, I believe the Fae have some share in the responsibility.”

<How so?>

This was tricky, and non-fae might be listening at his end as well as wolves at mine.

“The manitou is the Columbia Basin and all that is naturally in it. Its magic smells of all the elements. You know the story of the princess and the pea?”

It was only a guess, but good minds including Bran’s thought the reason the Fae had allowed themselves to be ghettoed in reservations had been to concentrate their power and re-open their way to Underhill. And a certain nosy coyote girl knew that they had succeeded. Underhill occupied a different dimension, but it was still anchored in Walla Walla somehow, and I was betting the manitou was aware of Underhill and at the least interested in the strange world accessed through earth that belonged to it.

<I do. And that’s a fair thought, Mercy. There’s a drink waiting for you when you’ve the time.>

“That will be nice. Should we learn more about it we’ll let you know. And perhaps you could make sure Zee knows? I’d call him myself but I need to pass the same warning to Marsilia.”

<Of course.>

He rang off. The fae didn’t say thank you, ever, but the offer of a free drink was the nearest I’d get, and meant Uncle Mike had understood and appreciated what I wasn’t saying as well as what I was. Racking up points when one could mattered, and I held to that thought as I called Marsilia’s private number. She had caller ID too.

<What do you want?>

Who knew what vampires felt while they were dead during daylight? But one at least of Marsilia’s seethe was capable of being awake, and Wulfe was a wizard as well.

“Are you aware of the surge of magic felt by many this morning?”

<Yes.>

That made things easier, and I repeated my little speech pretty much word for word, varying it only at the end.

“The Pack offers you and yours this warning freely because the waking of this manitou and the likely reaction of humans will affect the negotiations between wolves and Fae, and because any trouble between the manitou and vampires would cause problems for all.”

I was getting used to silent reactions, but Marsilia’s didn’t last long.

<And how can this thing you have woken cause us trouble?>

“We didn’t wake it, Marsilia, and we don’t know what did except humans messing with its trees. But now it is awake it is aware of the undead within its territory, as well as of fae and wolves, and of human pollution of its earth and waters. As to how it could cause you trouble, well, gee, it’s the
Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin, and it smells of all the elements, including magma. I’d think a volcanic eruption through your seethe during the day might qualify as trouble, even by your standards.”

This silence was longer, then she gave that awful laugh that wasn’t human and sounded all wrong. I doubted she was amused — she knew it was like nails down a blackboard for me — but her voice became brisk.

<Point taken, Mercedes. And Wulfe offers you thanks for telling him what the surge was — he was really quite puzzled by it.>

The phone went dead and I put it away with relief, rolling my head as Adam and Jesse came in. He came to stand behind me and strong fingers dug into the knotted muscles.

“Ahh, that’s good. That laugh of hers creeps me out.”

“Why she did it, of course. Thank you for that chore, Mercy. What was the trouble earlier?”

I sighed. “Paul, of course. The pack-bond thing worked nicely on him, and I’ve warned him if he’s ever so stupid again he’s out. Honey’s walking him round outside while he gets his breath back and cools off.”

“What did he say?”

“More of the usual. But he did it when he knew you wanted calm and I’d have no choice but to call him on it.”

“So he did.”

The softness of Adam’s voice didn’t bode well, and I turned to look at him.

“I dealt with it, Adam. It’s over until he’s stupid enough to ignore the warning.”

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded and kissed me.

“Allright. I will make sure he knows that warning stands, though.” His gaze swept all the wolves in the room. “Don’t ever think otherwise. I don’t like losing anyone, but of late I’ve been seriously wondering if the pack wouldn’t be stronger without Paul. So the line has now been drawn, and will abide.”

Everyone nodded, and Warren gave me a warm smile.

“It was a good show, Boss. Quick, clean, fair, and out of left field.”

“And coyote smart.” Darryl’s voice was thoughtful. “No snapping and snarling and breaking things, no-one injured, no clean-up needed. Just Paul dead to rights. Some of us should think hard about that.”

“Of course it was.” Jesse gave me a grin. “Mercy is awesome, and her vengeance legend.”

“Hey!” I gave my step-daughter an indignant glare, but she’d made Adam laugh so it didn’t have much oomph. “You sound like a bad film trailer.”

“She’s right, though.” Adam was still smiling. “Peanut butter and hair dye.”

“Old news,” I told him, only a little smugly. “Don’t we need to go talk to Bran?”
While I’d been convalescing Adam hadn’t much liked having to be away, and one of the things he’d done to minimise the need was to upgrade his communications system. Not only was it now state of the art, it had serious encryption, of the sort that made the government, security, and big-league industrial types he did business with willing to deal at a distance. It also had a werewolf configuration that allowed conferencing with Aspen Creek and other Alphas around the country, and I’d seen the big screen split into a score of panels when we’d done some explaining about Joel — but talking to so many people at once gave me a headache, and I was glad we wouldn’t need that many panels tonight.

I was expecting three — Bran and Charles, Samuel and Arianna, and Jim and Gordon — but there were five. Anna was with Bran and Charles, and Zee was with Samuel and Arianna. In the fourth panel I recognised Angus Magnusson, Alpha of the Emerald City pack. Seattle wasn’t in the Columbia Basin, but that pack hunted in the Cascades and some might live within the Basin, so that made sense. I didn’t know the man in the fifth panel, but Adam murmured that he was Mark Hurley, the new Alpha of the small Boise pack, the old one having skidded his car into the Payette during a thunderstorm a couple of months back, while I’d been Guayota’d out of it.

Adam’s home office was big, but the pack took up a lot of space, and the room felt crowded. Paul was calmer if still radiating resentment, and there was a lot of interested expectation, making for a certain hum, so I sat Jesse between Adam and me. When Bran saw her he raised an eyebrow at me, and I raised two right back at him.

“She has a right to hear the story, Bran, and she keeps our secrets even if she does have a smart mouth. Besides, who says she won’t meet the manitou sometime? And when this all blows up in public …”

He thought about it for a moment, nodded slightly, and called the meeting to order, asking principals to identify themselves. I could see Angus and Mark knew about Arianna because the story about her and Samuel had made the rounds, but they hadn’t seen her before, and were interested to do so. Zee also got looks, blandly returned, but there was a larger stir when Jim introduced himself as a medicine man, and more when Gordon gave the same uninformative shtick he’d given Adam and me when we first met. Bran gave me another of his looks, and I sighed.

“Gordon, first up, we owe you big thanks. Today could have been very bad, and it wasn’t. I didn’t tell the police or the Feds anything about you or Jim, which took some doing, but the story’s not going to make any sense to anyone here if they don’t know who you are. Please?”

He was still for a moment, then shrugged in a very Indian way. “Ayah, Mercy, it goes against the grain, but the world is changing. I also hate taking my larger form indoors, so watch carefully because I’m only doing this once.”

And for a second Thunderbird was there, wings folded, head turned and stooped under Jim’s eight-foot ceiling, and only one great yellow eye visible above the savage raptor’s bill. Then he was just an old Indian in a faded work shirt that must have been pretty gaudy in its prime.

“Gordon Seeker, for now. Thunderbird always.”
The pack knew of him because Adam and I had told them after our adventure with the River Devil, but seeing Thunderbird was something else. Bran, Samuel, and Charles all had bland looks, though there was a glint in Charles’s eye, but Anna looked delighted, Arianna and Zee interested, and the other wolves and Jesse were wide-eyed. The coyote in me thought it was funny, and it never hurt to expand a wolf’s worldview a little.

“Thank you again, Gordon.” He gave me a sour smile. “And I suppose I get to go first.”

I started with the surge of magic and went through our interesting afternoon as far as the dire wolf’s disappearance. Explaining why calling Gordon had seemed like a good idea was easy, though he declined to say anything about the language he’d used save that it wasn’t human. Explaining the mind reading and sheet-of-glass thing was neither fun nor easy, though, and Adam joined in with his own version, including his wolf’s reactions and the way the manitou had been able to calm it.

“Joel said his experience was similar, and that he felt the manitou disapproved of sacrifice.” That meant a detour into what Guayota had done, which had Adam’s voice becoming a little growly, because it still made him angry too. “I thought about calling Joel in for this, but with him feeling calm enough to stay human for a while I decided Lucia needed him more.”

Bran nodded. “I have no problem with that, Adam, though I’d like to talk to him tomorrow sometime. But I confess I’m surprised about the Omega effect.” He gave Anna a grin. “I wonder what it would think of you, Gordon, can you shed any light on this?”

Gordon spread his hands. “I came here with the first people, longer ago than I can remember, and the manitou was here then. Even when the ice was at its greatest there were plenty of wolf packs, dire and timber, and they had what you now call Alphas and Omegas. I think it started as the naturalists’ omega wolves, the ones lowest in the order, but I remember dire-wolf packs, and some of their omegas were more like yours, bringing calm. It doesn’t surprise me that the manitou can be Omega if it chooses, but I’m interested it did choose.”

The archaeologists had recently pushed the dates for the earliest human habitation of Washington back to about 13,000 years ago, and that was just what they’d happened to find. Even though it was why I’d tried calling him I was trying to wrap my head around the idea that Gordon — and presumably my not-exactly father — really were that old when Bran exchanged a long look with Samuel and gave Gordon a singularly sweet smile.

“It’s a nice change to meet someone who’s fifteen times my age rather than the other way around. Do you know when the manitou went to sleep?”

“During what you call the Ice Age Floods, I think. Everything kept getting swept away, and the rest of the time the river was way down as a new flood built up. It was really dull and irritating for a long time.” He brightened a little. “The actual floods were spectacular, though.”

“I imagine they were.”

Bran’s voice was very dry, and beside him Charles spoke in his precise way.

“The geologists remain uncertain about many things, but agree the Columbia has existed for many millions of years. It is certainly older than the Cascades. Is the manitou that old?”

Gordon spread his hands again. “No idea, He Who Runs Into Trees. I don’t think about time that way. But if the river was here, probably. The manitou is certainly ancient.”
“Charles’s face was even stiller than usual but Anna grinned.

“Did you know Charles’s grandfather?”

Gordon grinned back. Anna had that effect.

“Yes. Interesting man.”

“So he was.” Bran’s voice was still very dry. “But that’s for another day. If anyone has the chance to ask the manitou about its omega effect, please do. It could be very valuable to us. And it is my order to all wolves in the Columbia Basin that you treat the manitou as Mercy has done. Be polite. Submit. Do not interfere with it in any way. I doubt we can make it an ally in any significant sense, but we cannot afford it as an enemy.” Even by link the roll of the Marrok’s power was tangible, and the wolves all bowed their heads in acknowledgement. “Good. So now we need to get on to the humans’ reactions. Mercy?”

So I went on through the fear, consternation, and kneejerk stupidities that had filled the afternoon and evening. Bran didn’t interrupt until I got to Kent and Orton making their powerplay.

“These are the same two Cantrip people who tried to arrest you before?”

I nodded and he frowned.

“I hoped that after the Heuter case and Bennet’s rogue operation Cantrip might have learned something, but this is not the first indication they still believe they can control an Alpha and his pack by what amounts to kidnapping. I will make some enquiries, and if there is any further problem I want to know at once. Mercy, Orton said this wasn’t over?”

“He did. Last time it was a Supervisory Agent called Kerrigan who was trying it on, but I don’t think it started with him. The word was that someone higher up wanted control of a pack, and that a scandal might break about it, but it hasn’t yet so that might still be in play.”

“Yes, I know about that. It has been stopped. But there are currents here I don’t like, and this line combining egregious interpretations of the Humanity and Patriot Acts is beginning to feel like the next version of that Endangered Species poison.”

The last big idea of the John Lauren Society to get open season on werewolves had been to declare them an Endangered Species, implying they weren’t human and thus removing their constitutional rights at a stroke. The amendment had been heavily defeated, a testimony to the influence Bran had in Congress, but the bigots hadn’t given up. And one of the big problems with Cantrip was that it had useless screening procedures and had let itself become dominated by people whose agenda wasn’t the official remit of finding out about werewolves and other preternatural things but making it legal to exterminate them on sight.

“There’s one thing that might help,” I said slowly. “The only sensible Cantrip agent I’ve ever met, and the highest-ranking, was the guy who came with Asil to take care of Bennet’s mess. Lin Armstrong. He’s a big gun, but if something’s really looking like it might head south he’d be a quick way to find out if any agent causing trouble really has authority or if it’s just one of their wolf- and fae-haters trying something on.”

“Good thought, Mercy. Angus, Mark, I’ll give you that number.” Bran looked around. “Annoying and dangerous as they are, Cantrip’s power plays are the least of it. The greater question is what the human public will do when they realise they have something else preternatural to be afraid of. There is bound to be overspill against both wolves and fae, so care is needed. Adam, have you
formally warned the Fae and Marsilia?"

It was Zee who answered him. “Mercy warned us, Bran Cornick, very properly and delicately, and it has been passed on. Liebchen, when you asked Uncle Mike about the princess and the pea, you were thinking that … events at Walla Walla have contributed to waking this manitou?”

“I was, yes.”

“Do you think that likely, Gordon Seeker?”

“It is the land of the river and all that is in it, Dark Smith. If someone … changed a part of your mattress while you slept on it, would you wake?”

“Yes.” Zee sounded troubled. “In the Old Country we had dealings with some of the spirits of place, but everything here is larger, and we do not have experience of one such as this, nor of one newly awoken after such sleep. I cannot speak for the Gray Lords but they will be concerned. They may come to you, Bran Cornick, but Gwyn ap Lugh and Nemane know Mercy and Adam through the walking stick, and they or others may decide they would rather deal with her directly.” His eyes rested on me, bright with worry. “Be very careful if that is so, liebchen.”

I shrugged. “I will, Zee, but I’m happy to tell any Gray Lord what little I know. What I didn’t say to Uncle Mike, not knowing who else might be listening, was that I think we’ve lucked out. By pure chance some of the first new data the manitou has is of interspecies cooperation that surprised it yet was in a form familiar to its dire-wolf avatar. And it knows from Adam and me that anyone sensible is very wary of the Fae, but also that there are fae we love and trust, and others we trust within limits as well as things like The Fideal and otterkin.” I’d been thinking hard about this.

“Gordon, if the manitou is the land of the river and all that is in it, it’s all ecosystems together, yes? So despite its current wolf form it must understand prey as well as predation, deposition as well as erosion. But would it understand war? Enmity?”

“Good question, Mercy. Perhaps not. It was aware of the first people, and even then there was conflict between tribes for the best resources, the easiest living. That is no different from conflict between wolf packs for the best territory. But the white man’s idea of war, or the kinds of tensions there are between humans, fae, wolves, and vampires? Such things would be new to it, I think. And I agree it is Coyote’s wild luck that has presented it first with coyote, wolf, and tibicena linked by pack bonds, gratitude, and love. Had the policemen met it alone and used their guns … well, we might all be running already. And I too will offer a warning to the Fae, Dark Smith. Do not think you can bind or force it with your magic. Not all the Gray Lords together could do that.” Gordon’s old eyes glinted Thunderbird. “I said maybe the manitou went to sleep because the glacial floods were boring. Or maybe it was bored of being the floods.”

On Adam’s far side Darryl shifted and I felt Adam give him permission to speak. He nodded to Zee and Gordon, but turned to me.

“Mercy, when you warned Marsilia, she asked what trouble the manitou could cause her, and you said a volcanic eruption through her seethe during daytime ought to qualify, even by vamp standards.” Bran grinned and I heard Gordon and Angus laugh. “You were serious, right?”

“Yes. The smell of magma was the weakest in its magic, but it was there. I don’t know that it could cause an eruption anywhere it wanted, but I wouldn’t bet against it being able to manifest as magma, and it doesn’t take much of that to set anything on fire.”

Darryl nodded. “And it’s also the river, and likely to be … irritated by all the dams?”
“If I was a river, I would be.”

“Me too. And I’m less worried about volcanoes than I am about that. If it controls the earth, it could destroy any dam. And given the way the Columbia system is set up, I really don’t like to think what would happen if it destroyed the dams nearest the sources of the major tributaries — the Hungry Horse and Kerr dams on the Columbia, with the Duncan and Libby dams on the Flathead and the Jackson Lake and Palisades dams on the Snake. I’ve had no time to model it, but there’s a chance they’d all go like dominos. It’s probably less water than Glacial Lake Missoula held, but it’s more than enough to wash everything in its path over the Columbia Bar.”

I didn’t know enough about hydroengineering to have any sense of the chances, but Darryl wasn’t done, and he was a very smart man.

“The death toll would be massive. And what I was thinking, Arianna, Mr Adelbertsmiter, was that if the Fae were in any way responsible for provoking it to do such a thing, the government would not be forgiving. I thought that might be a lever if any fae were to need … persuading that polite respect is the only course.”

“It is a good though.” Zee smiled faintly. “Though the reverse is also true, of course. If the manitou’s irritation with dams humans have built leads to the inundation of Walla Walla, any surviving fae here and those elsewhere would be unforgiving too.”

“Of course. But I don’t think it will want to do that.” I had an arm round Jesse. “It’s only an impression, but given how fast it went from an instinctive kill to controlled curiosity, even though it’s not fully awake yet, it’s got excellent discipline. And it’s way smart — if you see its eyes, you know. So even if it hates dams, Darryl, I don’t think it’ll just smash everything up not caring about the consequences. But it might push for some negotiated re-engineering.” I gave Gordon a look. “I’ve never met them, but maybe Salmon and Otter would be interested in that.”

He nodded, eyes twinkling, and I pushed on, ignoring the looks the pack were giving me and one another.

“Which is why we all need to co-operate, and we need to get the humans co-operating too. I told the mayors, police, and Feds.” I repeated what I’d said earlier about the radioactive pollution from Hanford, landslide and earthquake warnings, SAR, and intense scientific interest “I know it’s all speculation and longshots, but my gut tells me the manitou might be interested. The problem is getting the humans to realise their SOPs are not going to cut it.”

“Good luck with that, Mercy.” Angus’s smile was sardonic. “The humans are not going to think about negotiating until they have seen for themselves that guns, bombs, shells, missiles, and God knows what don’t work worth a damn, and by then it’ll be too late.”

“I know, Angus. But we have to try. And I think the three mayors could see there might be some serious political mileage for them in it, if the manitou can do something like cleaning up Hanford.”

“Might you try to warn the manitou, Mercy?” As often, Arianna spoke softly, and I thought she might be having problems with a room full of werewolves, even by remote conferencing. “When we hid the reservations they immediately tried a military approach, but when we sent the bomber to the middle of Australia and did nothing more they settled for the present standoff. If you explained to the manitou what is likely to happen …?”

“I can try, Arianna, if I get the chance. And it should have got some understanding of humans and military stupidity from Adam and me.”
Adam snorted. “It was certainly interested in my Vietnam memories, but I don’t know how much it got of my thinking about the politics. It was my Change and that werewolf warlord that seemed to catch its attention.” He paused, thinking, and laid a hand over mine where it rested on Jesse’s shoulder. “But it also got at least some of the political stuff I’ve been doing more recently. It had already read Mercy, so it knew what happened to her, and ... followed up, I suppose, on that video of me.”

He was trying to protect me, but the whole sheet-of-glass thing was still working where Tim was concerned. The pack and Zee would understand what he wasn’t saying, but Jim and Gordon probably wouldn’t, and I didn’t know what Angus or Mark might know. So I shifted my hand to hold Adam’s and told them about the video one of the police had damningly edited and sent to a Congressman, letting Adam and Jesse — and Bran — know from the calm in my voice that I didn’t mind. Mostly. Anna, who’d had her own experiences, gave me a tight smile.

“And going back a bit, when the manitou read me, I felt it was … I don’t know, surprised and approving of what I’d done, and what Adam did. Maybe what Joel felt about its reaction to sacrifice was what I felt about its reaction to the magic Tim used. And what Adam felt about its dislike of vampires. Predation doesn’t bother it, but I think it doesn’t like things that invade the mind.” Something clicked. “That’s why it was so scrupulous about getting our consent to be mindread. It won’t or maybe can’t do it without consent.”

“Predation is natural. Making the prey want to be eaten isn’t.” Jim spoke for the first time. “To kill to eat, survive, or defend, yes. To subvert the will, no. It is abomination.”

“Yes it is.” Bran’s voice was very soft. “I begin to like this manitou.”

I thought of the stories Samuel had told me about the witch who tried using binding magic to keep her son and grandson as werewolf pets, and shuddered inside. But …

“Bran, if I get the chance, should I ask the manitou to manifest in Aspen Creek and read you? That would be an education in human politics to chew on for a while.”

Bran went still, thinking, but I saw the glint of amusement in Charles’s eyes as Samuel spoke up.

“A fifteen-foot dire wolf in Aspen Creek? I’d pay good money.”

The glint in Charles’s eye deepened as he looked at his brother, but Bran was still thinking. At last he nodded.

“Yes, do that if you can, Mercy. There are risks, but I confess I am curious. More, there is a chance that it will — or could — have the same effect on my wolf, and Asil’s, as on Adam’s, and that I cannot ignore.”

“Alright. Zee, Arianna, I can’t guarantee anything, but if it turns up again and it’s willing, is there a Gray Lord who would like to meet it? I count it a duty and self-interest, not as a favour.”

They both shrugged, and Zee answered, approval in his voice.

“That may help, or it may not, liebchen. To accept aid without incurring debt is not so easy, but I will pass the question along.” He shook his head. “So often you seem to stand between worlds and kinds.”

“As Coyote does.” Gordon sounded more resigned than approving. “But yes, Dark Smith, she does it strongly. That is why she was the one to kill the River Devil, standing between Anglos, fae, and my kind.”
“Tell me.” Adam’s voice was wry. “It started with Gerry Wallace, who was bringing together wolves, witches, and humans. Then vampires and wolves, several times, humans and fae, the River Devil, humans and vampires, Guayota and everything. I should get her business cards — Coyote Services: Conflict Resolution with a Twist.”

Most of them laughed, and I thumped Adam’s shoulder.

“You better hadn’t, mister. I just try to deal with what lands on me.”

“It is more than that, Mercy.” Gordon still sounded resigned. “You are the only half-Anglo avatar, and were raised by wolves. You have befriended fae, a tibicena, even a vampire, Coyote says, which is absurd.”

“Stefan’s different.”

Even to my own ears I sounded defensive.

“And now you seek to befriend a Great Manitou when anyone else would have tried to run and died. So rash — and yet so very wise.” He glanced at Jim. “You know, things often go sideways in our families. I think maybe you got more of your not-exactly aunts than your not-exactly father allows.”

That was a thought I liked a lot, and I smiled at him. “Give them my best? Tell them my name should be She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars.”

He laughed, but Bran and Charles were both giving me looks.

“Later,” I told them. “Anyway, we have a strategy, if not a plan, and even if it goes against some instincts. The humans are going to have to come to terms with the manitou, somehow, and if wolves and fae aren’t wasting time and energy with one another, both stand a better chance of benefiting from whatever happens. There’s one thing, though. Jim, when they were all wanting to know about Gordon my line was sacred Native American stuff I can’t reveal. I suspect I’m going to need that line again, and once knowledge of the manitou breaks we’re going to have reporters up the wazoo. Some Yakama Nation cover would be nice.”

Jim nodded. “I think we can do that, but while local police will hear, I’m not sure who else will.”

“I can get it pushed, Jim. And it will help in many ways to distract media resources and widen their focus.” Adam looked around, then at Bran. “Other wolves who are out could help, too. Christiansen, say, might do an interview about when force is helpful and when it’s disastrous.”

Bran nodded slowly. “He might, yes. I take the point. Zee, Arianna, when this breaks, do you think Gwyn ap Lugh would be willing to release a statement about generally respecting the manitou? I can and will ask him directly, but I’d be glad of your thoughts.”

Zee waggled a hand. “I think it possible. If it has no quarrel with us, we have none with it. I will pass on the question.”

“He will see the advantages,” Arianna added. “But it is a delicate game to play, and some of the oldest ones are blindly angry with all that is not fae. Co-operation is not something they will approve.”

Bran’s voice had a slight growl. “The more fool them. None can stand alone any more. But I hear you.” He straightened. “It will depend on what the manitou and the humans do, of course, and Angus is right that there’ll be stupidities. But unless the manitou is driven to do something
catastrophic, both wolves and fae can benefit, if only because the Feds will have something else to fret about. It does mean, though, that we cannot have any bad press just now, so all Alphas and seconds need to keep a very tight rein. Does anyone have questions?"

There were a few — it was a lot to absorb out of the blue — but things wound down. Samuel was on the graveyard shift, and Angus had something early tomorrow, but once Gordon and Jim signed off Mark Hurley sat forward looking as apologetic as I’ve ever seen an Alpha. His voice was very rural Idaho.

“I’m sorry to be stupid, Ms Hauptman, but until tonight the only Thunderbird I knew of was that old puppet series. What kind of a being is this Thunderbird?”

“Mercy’s fine,” I told him, “and Thunderbird’s a bit of a puzzle. The others of his kind I’ve met are Coyote, Hawk, Wolf, Snake, Bear, Bobcat, and Raven, and they’re the essence of those creatures. In human form they’re all Native Americans, as Gordon is, and the animal forms I’ve seen are oversize versions. Coyote’s coyote is the size of a St Bernard. But Thunderbird isn’t quite like any living bird, even eagles, so the best I can do is that he’s essence of big raptor. There are plenty of stories about him, though — I can send you a list of better sources.”

“I’d be grateful. And about manitous, maybe.”

“Call me tomorrow, Mark.” Charles had that glint back in his eye. “I can explain a bit. Meantime, Mercy, when did you get on joking terms with Coyote’s sisters?”

“They came to see me during the River Devil business.” I grinned at him. “They didn’t think Mercedes was a proper Indian name, so one suggested She Fixes Cars. Another suggested Rash Coyote Who Runs With Wolves, shortened to Dinner Woman.” Charles didn’t often lose his poker face where anyone beyond immediate family could see him, but Anna has been very good for him and he couldn’t stop his smile. “I liked them. And the way of killing the River Devil was originally their plan, not Coyote’s.”

“So the stories say. But She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars is a good one.”

Beside him Bran smiled too, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Yes, it is. But fix is the word in more than one sense. Take care, Mercy. And everyone.”

When the screen blanked I found most of the pack staring at me.

“What?”

Warren shrugged. “I don’t think I knew Charles could smile, Mercy, and I’ve known him maybe a hundred years.”

“It’s the love of a good woman,” I told him with a straight face.

“Good idea,” said Adam. “Go home, everyone. Get your heads down and keep them there. Breakfast on Sunday unless anything happens sooner.”
Following Jesse upstairs I knew what had been nagging at my attention. Her body language told me she was bothered about something, and had been before all the excitement, but it had gotten worse, so after a quiet word with Adam, and setting my phone to a well-deserved recharge, I backtracked to my step-daughter’s room. She was propped up in bed listening to her iPod and scratching Medea’s head. The cat was purring fit to burst, and I eased onto the bed beside them, giving Medea a scratch myself. I could see the tension in Jesse’s shoulders as she pulled out her earbuds.

“I was wondering where Medea had got to.”

“She doesn’t like it when the pack’s tense.”

Medea lacked the sense to be afraid of werewolves, as almost all cats instinctively were, but she didn’t like raised voices much.

“Who got too loud?”

“Two or three of them, before Darryl and Auriele got here. They were jumpy because of what they’d felt from Dad.”

“Yeah, before the dire wolf appeared the sense of being watched had him jumping himself a bit.” And that wasn’t the problem. “What’s on your mind, kiddo?”

“Nothing. It’s just school stuff.”

“And school stuff sucks. What’s the problem?”

“You’ve got enough to be worrying about, with the manitou and Cantrip and all. I’m trying to imagine a fifteen-foot dire wolf and not doing so well.”

“Un huh. No changing the subject.” I put two and two together. “Someone did or said something that’s bothering you, and you want advice, but you think it’ll upset Adam? Or…” I looked at her more carefully. “You think it’ll upset me? Someone said something about Tim?”

Adam and I hadn’t yet been married when Tim raped me and I killed him, but we’d been dating and the media coverage had splashed onto Jesse as well. So had being the daughter of one of the best-known werewolves in the country, and she was wary — rightly — of Adam’s reactions to anything that hurt her, but silence wasn’t going to help.

“Not really. Sort of.”

Jesse was usually clearer than that and I gave her a quizzical look, asking rather than pushing. She took a breath.

“In the Social Issues class Mrs Bradley announced the guest speakers for next semester.”

She looked at me unhappily and I ran what I knew about her teachers through my mind. I tried to
keep up, but there had been quite a lot of changes this year.

“Mrs Bradley’s the older one? The replacement for the one you like who’s pregnant?”

“Yeah, Ms Linner.”

“And the problem is?”

Jesse took another deep breath and words tumbled out. “She’s asked Bright Future to speak. So I asked her why she was bringing in someone from a hate group, and she got all uptight and said they were no such thing, just good Christian citizens scared with good reason. She believes it, too. But Mercy, the Bright Future person she’s invited is that cousin of Tim’s who vandalised your garage. I didn’t know if Mrs Bradley knew about that, or if I should say anything, so I let it drop.”

I had some sympathy for cousin Courtney — accepting that a relative you thought you knew and liked was a multiple murderer as well as a rapist and thief had to be hell — but she also irritated me. All else aside, bigots are boring, the more so when they’re none too bright. And this was about Jesse, not me, so I stuffed my irritation down and focused on my step-daughter some more. Letting something like that drop wasn’t her style at all.

“And you’ve been feeling bad about that as well as about having a hate-the-monsters talk to look forward to.”

Jesse nodded, looking down. “I knew you’d get it. I just didn’t want to bother you.”

There was more to it than that, but one step at a time.

“Jesse, parents exist to be bothered, and to bother. It’s what they’re for.” Not that that was anything her mother had shown her. I could forgive Christy a certain amount, as she didn’t have Adam any more and I did, but the way she messed with Jesse wasn’t among it. “Let me think a minute.”

There were complications here, and not over-reacting was important. But so was having bigotry preached at school, and I was damned if Jesse would have to sit and listen to Courtney spewing Bright Future’s brand of fear and loathing.

“Being careful was the right call, Jesse, but that doesn’t mean rolling over for this sort of thing. Charges were filed against Courtney, and that’s on record, as well as my dropping them in return for her paying to have the garage cleaned and repainted. I’ve got pictures of what she did, and so have the police.” I held up a hand. “I agree she’s not a good choice to speak in any class with you in it, but there are some options. We could try to head her off at the pass, by talking to Mrs Bradley, though it doesn’t sound like she’d listen. We might stand a better chance talking to the principal and pointing out that not only is Courtney a wildly inappropriate choice for any class with you in it, she’s antisocial and a vandal.”

I won a small smile.

“Or we could raise the stakes, and ask them why they’re allowing a supply teacher to show obvious bias in choosing guest speakers. That’s probably the right thing to do, but we might wind up having to come up with speakers to put the opposing case rather than blocking the bigots. What do you think?”

She looked down again, which also wasn’t Jesse’s usual mode, and her voice was hesitant.

“Would that even be allowed, Mercy?”
“Why ever wouldn’t it be?”

“How said he didn’t want anyone rocking the boat.”

A lightbulb went on in my head.

“Point, but I don’t think this is what he had in mind. Let’s find out.”

I snagged Jesse’s phone, dialling from memory, and she gave me a look that told me I was right, and Bran scared her more than Adam or I had realised.

“He’s not going to bite me for asking, Jesse. Or you.”

Bran answered at once, cautious at an unknown number. <Yes?>

“Hi Bran. I’m on Jesse’s phone.”

<Mercy? Has something else happened already?>

“Nope, different problem.” I laid it out as concisely as I could, including Jesse’s worries, seeing the tightness in her face. “Does fighting this constitute rocking the boat?”

<No.> Bran’s answer was immediate. <It exposes you further, Mercy, because from what you’ve told me this Courtney still believes her cousin was an innocent, and her bitterness is likely to spew. And unless the principal agrees with you straight off, it’s the sort of thing that could generate intense local argument. But this is not the first time such a problem has come up, and a case centred on bigotry in school teaching and provision is one I’d welcome. So would others.> There was a brief pause. <And you and Jesse would be perfect for it, in many ways, but Adam will not be happy.>

“My problem,” I told him. “Mostly, anyway. It might go away if I speak to the principal, but if we do wind up needing to provide speakers of our own to balance the school’s list, who do we ask? I wouldn’t mind, but I’m no orator, and me against Courtney in public would not be wise.”

<No it wouldn’t, though you speak well enough when you want to, Mercy.> If we’d been on the conferencing equipment I’d have stuck my tongue out at him. <Let me think about that one. Ask Adam too.>

“Sure. Can you send me anything helpful about other cases and what anyone did that worked?”

<Of course. Colin’s handled some of that for me, so look for his e. Can I have a word with Jesse, please.>

Whatever the phrasing it wasn’t a question. Bran could always read between the lines and hear what I wasn’t saying, so I handed the phone over, and heard him gravely thank her for her sensible concern before explaining his thinking a little. This was not Jesse causing a problem, but Mrs Bradley and Bright Future dumping one on her, and his order didn’t mean not reacting when there was good cause, just being very careful about creating incidents. In any case, he pointed out mildly, she didn’t answer to him, however Adam might, but from all he knew of her, her credit was very good. When he rang off I looked her in the eye and took her hands in mine.

“Bran often has to be hard, Jesse. Adam deals with forty-odd wolves and you know how that can be. Bran deals with nearly a hundred Alphas. And you know a bit about what Charles has to do sometimes. No way round it, with wolves, and the way things are.”
She gave a small nod.

“But they’ve both got your back too, you realise? They would have as Adam’s daughter anyway, and as mine too you can double that.”

“I know. But he still scares me. So does Charles. I’m sorry, I know they’re family to you, but they do.”

“Jesse, anyone in their right mind finds those two scary, because they are. Very old and very scary. But they’re our old and scary, hey?”

“Alright.” Jesse shoulders were more relaxed and she snuggled down. “How old is very old?”

“Good question. I’ve never known exactly. Charles just turned 200, and until a while back I thought Samuel was his younger brother, but he’s not. And this is not for blabbing, but when we were in Aspen Creek Anna told me Asil is in his 1300s, and Charles thinks his da and brother are older.” Jesse’s eyes went wide. “I know. But you heard what Bran said to Gordon tonight, about it being a nice change to meet someone older. And you heard what Gordon said — he remembers glacial floods from fifteen thousand years ago. Besides, the manitou’s little nap was about that long. Bran and Samuel are just cubs by those standards.”

And by Coyote’s, apparently, but I wasn’t bringing that up just now. Or ever, until I knew how I felt about it myself. I was rewarded with another small smile.

“Alright now? Don’t listen too long.”

She promised and I went to snuggle down myself. One of the advantages of being married to a werewolf is having a heat source to make the best electric blanket look like a piker, and I used it shamelessly. Adam slipped an arm round me and I lay listening to his heartbeat and breathing him in.

“What was Jesse worried about?”

I told him, and he growled a bit about Bright Future and supply teachers with agendas. Then I added that she’d been worried about causing trouble with Bran, and was finding him and Charles tough to come to terms with, but that between us he and I had at least started to fix that. His arm tightened.

“Thanks again.”

Adam was too much of a gentleman to speak ill of his ex, and he knew I loved Jesse to bits, but after Christy’s neglect of her daughter my practical care for her was a source of real ease for him. I lifted myself up enough to give him a kiss, which went on for a while, but we were both too tired for games and I settled down again.

“I thought maybe we could invite Charles and Anna sometime, too. Anna’s a sweety, and Jesse will be easier about Charles if she gets to know him rather than hearing the pack tell big bad Charles stories.”

“Fine by me. I like Charles, and you’re right about Anna. And you don’t have to ask me to invite family.”

“I know, but he is very Alpha.”

Adam snorted. “Just a bit.”
“So I’ll ask. Anyway, what surprised me was that Bran said he’d actually welcome a case about school bigotry. I don’t know I want to go that far, for your and my sakes as well as Jesse’s, but I won’t settle for less than balance. So if it winds up that way, who’d be a good choice to debate Bright Future?”

“I’m not sure. Human or wolf?”

I thought about it. “Human for choice. Bright Future couldn’t just claim it was self-interest.”

“True. Kyle?”

“Maybe, if he could promise his courtroom style and no camp. But it would add a possible complication.”

Most werewolves weren’t too happy with a gay wolf, and I didn’t want to find out what the public thought about one’s human partner.

“Also true. Someone who understands constitutional law would be good, though. I can ask Jenny tomorrow.”

“That’s a thought. And maybe you could check with her about Courtney’s status? I know the fact that charges were filed is public domain, but how does that go with speaking in a school?”

“Badly. But yes, I’ll ask.” His arm tightened again. “Still, I’d rather keep this simple if we can, Mercy. I hate it that Jesse has a hard time because of what I am, and I don’t want her having to step up to the plate any more than she does already.”

“No. But she can’t not step up to the plate when she needs to, Adam, any more than you can.” I checked my grammar. “Any more than you can’t. And Bradley picked the fight.”

He gave a little rumble, pride and rue mixed with annoyance. “I doubt she sees it like that, though. And I’ll run her tomorrow. Is she just an all-purpose bigot or has she got a more specific agenda?”

I pushed myself up on one elbow again. “You think she’s targeting Jesse? Or you?” He gave me a look and I reconsidered. “Me?”

“I don’t know. Probably not, but I don’t like coincidences. And random supply teacher not only invites a Bright Future speaker for Jesse’s class, but picks someone who already hates you, specifically, needs checking out.”

“Huh.” I thought about it some more. “I wonder how Bradley knows Courtney in the first place. Did she just ask Bright Future and they supplied Courtney? Or …”

“Yes, or. Bradley sounds like the Christian variety of bigot, but is she Bright Future herself?”

That was a good question, and I’d wondered myself. “I’ve never met her, but no-one fitting Jesse’s description was present or mentioned at the meeting I went to.”

“Maybe not. But she could be from another chapter. And if she’s a friend of Courtney’s, who believes her version of reality, and then found herself teaching Jesse’s class …”

“I suppose. It would be very petty.”

“And your point is?”

“Cynic.”
But Adam was right. Who knew what Bradley really thought or believed, but the way she’d answered Jesse’s question didn’t bode well, and I already knew Courtney thought vandalism was a good way to soothe her feelings. More, given her fear and hatred of fae and wolves she wouldn’t care about hurting Jesse, and might easily see it as a means of hurting me. It still seemed unlikely, but I hadn’t anticipated the vandalism either, and neither hate nor religious fear and loathing made for rational or decent behaviour.

“Alright. Check her out, and we’ll see. And if I meet Bradley and the principal together, I can ask some straight questions and hear any lies.”

That was a plan we could both go with, and it wasn’t long before I slid into very welcome sleep.
ADAM is by long habit a very early riser, dealing with email and catching news before breakfast. I’m not quite that bright-eyed and bushy-tailed before eating, but garages don’t run themselves, nor teenagers, so neither am I a slug-a-bed. Jesse’s very good about getting herself sorted, but not a morning person at all — surprise — and less than communicative until sufficient caffeine sparks ignition. We’d fed Medea, eaten and cleared, and were waiting for Honey, Jesse’s escort to and from school, when Adam and I heard a very different engine turn in and pull up outside. He went over to the nearest monitor for the outside security cams, which ran and recorded here and remotely 24/7, and I saw his muscles tighten.

“Cantrip. Kent, Orton, Kerrigan, and someone I don’t know who’s much more senior. And ex-forces of some kind.”

Adam reads body language better than me, but when I went to look the difference in the four men who’d climbed out of a new model black GMC Yukon was obvious. Cantrip didn’t have the same firearms training requirements as the FBI, CIA, or ATF, and most of their people were desks, not field agents. Kent and Orton were fit enough, but walked like civilians, and though I’d never met their supervisory agent, Kerrigan’s slumped shoulders made it clear he too was strictly a paper warrior. But the fourth man wasn’t only the best dressed and in charge — he had a glide in his step and a set to his shoulders that screamed training, muscle, and speed. Before I’d risen from the table Adam had his phone out, and by the time I’d seen the monitor and sucked in my breath he was talking to Jenny, telling her Cantrip was at his door in force and asking her to get here fast. Orton, taking point, rang the doorbell, and Adam flipped a switch, his voice a growl.

“What?”

“Mr Hauptman?” Orton’s voice was taut. “You know me and Kent. I don’t know if you know Supervisory Agent Simon Kerrigan.” Kerrigan, who was visibly sweating, gave a jerky nod. “The fourth is Senior Supervisory Agent Richard Preskylovitch. He has a subpoena for your wife.”

“What kind of subpoena? And signed by which judge?”

“To attend the Special Security Court and provide the information she withheld yesterday. Judge Cray.”

It was the truth, but not all of it, and my heart sank. At least there was a judge involved, but the Special Security Court had all sorts of provisions that from what had been variously leaked seemed to involve playing fast and loose with law and constitution alike.

“And why does Cantrip need four of you to deliver one document?”

It was Preskylovitch who answered, voice deep and smooth with a lot of anger underneath the surface civility.

“Because there are certain things you and she need to understand, Mr Hauptman, and I have been tasked to ensure that you do.”
“Then you can wait until our lawyer gets here.”

“No, Mr Hauptman, I cannot.” The anger was more audible. “This is a matter of national security and your lawyer has no clearance. If you do not co-operate now I will speak to the Kennewick police and you will both be liable to immediate arrest. And after your wife has satisfied the Judge and our agents that she has told us all we need to know you will both be served subpoenas requiring you to attend me in DC. Alternatively, we can be done in only a few minutes.”

Adam didn’t deal much better with blackmail than with direct threats, but Preskylovitch knew something about Alpha wolves. He’d avoided giving an order, he was offering a deal of sorts, and however angry he was he had it under control. Adam looked at me.

“What do you want to do?”

“If they’re using a subpoena we can’t fight it until we know what it says. Then again, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Me too.”

Adam slid open a drawer, took out his Sig, and put it in his jacket pocket. He also turned on internal cams that covered the hall and doorway.

“I will not wait very much longer, Mr Hauptman.”

“One minute, Agent Preskylovitch.” I could see Adam thinking. “Jesse, keep out of sight, please. Mercy, stay back until I’ve had a chance to assess him a bit.” As he was speaking he’d taken out his phone and speed dialled. “Bran, Cantrip at the door saying they have a Special Security Court subpoena for Mercy. Orton, Kent, Kerrigan, and one Senior Supervisory Agent Richard Preskylovitch. You know him?”

<Only by rumour. Charles hasn’t been able to get data on him.>

That was not good. Charles could get data on most anything he wanted to, and for a Cantrip agent to have eluded him meant someone very deep in the shadows.

“He also says there are things Mercy and I need to understand. I’ll pocket the phone.”

I was glad Bran would be listening, however little he could do from Aspen Creek, and I gave Jesse a quick hug before I shut the kitchen door behind me. Adam stood in front of the door for a few seconds, and I knew he was bottling his anger and his wolf. Then he released the locks, letting the door swing open, and Preskylovitch shot him in the knee. Pain ripped at my own leg, the force knocked Adam back as well as down, and before he landed Preskylovitch stepped forward, a customised gun that must have been in a sleeve holster in his right hand. It had an absurdly large bore for such a small weapon, and was trained unwaveringly on Adam’s head. He didn’t even look at me.

“If you move, Mr Hauptman, I will kill you. If you run or resist, Mrs Hauptman, I will put a bullet through his other knee. Orton. Kent. Kerrigan.”

There was satisfaction in Preskylovitch’s voice, and on Kent’s and Orton’s faces. Kerrigan was sweating cobs but had his own gun out, unsteadily aimed at me while Kent warily approached and Orton went straight for the kitchen. I found my voice.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”
“What should have been done a long time ago, Mrs Hauptman. Get on with it, Kent.”

Kent took two sets of handcuffs from his pocket, one steel and one heavy silver. If the threat had just been Kerrigan’s gun I’d have backed myself to take Kent and risk his aim, but with Preskylovitch’s hand still rock steady I couldn’t see any choice but to hold out my hands. Both the steel and the silver were cold, and Kent ratcheted them tighter than necessary, stepping back hastily.

“Done. Her eyes have gone yellow but the silver isn’t hurting her.”

“Interesting.”

Preskylovitch meant it, but my attention was on Orton, who had a shocked Jesse cuffed — ordinary police issue — and was pushing her towards us. He also had my phone in his hand. Adam’s head snapped round, eyes bright with his wolf, and swung back to Preskylovitch. His voice was hoarse with pain.

“You’re a dead man.”

“I told you not to move, Hauptman, and I don’t tolerate disobedience or threats.”

Even while he was speaking his aim shifted and he shot Adam again. Pain exploded in my other knee, and I stumbled against Kent.

“How Adam did it I have no idea, but the pain cut off as he constricted the pack bonds and our mate bond, and after a few seconds his jaw shortened again, though his eyes remained all wolf. Preskylovitch didn’t seem bothered.

“Better. This is how it is. You and your pack are now owned by Cantrip. You will speak of this to no-one, and you will do as you are told by any of these agents. Your wife, whatever she is, will remain in our custody, and she will pay for any disobedience. Clear?”

“Yes.”

There was raw murder in Adam’s voice, but it was also weaker, and I could see the blood spreading from his legs. I took a deep breath and forced my own voice to stay level. Inside I was screaming.

“Preskylovitch, Adam is bleeding out.”

He glanced at the blood, lighting fast, gun never wavering.

“It’s not arterial. Bullets were lead and low velocity, and we’ve tested werewolf healing quite closely. He’ll live. And frankly, Mrs Hauptman, I don’t care if he doesn’t. The chigro is less connected and would be easier to deal with, and you’re the one who matters. Your husband’s just another monster we’d be well rid of. Get her and the girl into the car, Orton.”

My mind was reeling with the implications, but Jesse’s gasp as Orton shoved her cut through everything.

“Why are you taking Jesse? You have no grounds to detain her.”

“Actually, I do.” His gun and awareness remained on Adam, but for the first time he looked at me.
“Whatever kind of preternatural you are, you have shown constant defiance and repeated
association with other unknowns who kill people. My authority covers whatever is necessary to
learn what you are and what you know, and your step-daughter is much the easiest means. As you
will pay for your husband’s disobedience, she will pay for yours.” His voice was as calm as his gun
was unwavering, but even through my rage I could hear the excitement melding with his anger.
“Simple pain or minor mutilation are usually enough. Given your history with the unfortunate Mr
Milanovitch, though, rape might be the better lever. Now, Hauptman, where is the recording from
your cams?”

Adam wanted to kill him the way he’d wanted to kill Tim, but was staying in control, just.
“Remote.”

Preskylovitch nodded as if he’d expected it. “You’re competent, however arrogant. Orton will
return tomorrow to collect those discs. Failure to provide them, or any indication you have retained
a copy, will be punished. Kent, Orton, go.”

Changing shape would have got me out of the cuffs, but not my clothing, and though Adam’s
weakened, wordless growl as Jesse and I were steered around his blood and out the door made my
heart howl I could do nothing. Kerrigan, still sweating and looking slightly ill, opened the rear door
of the Yukon, and we were pushed in. It smelt new, with a trace of breath mints, and had been
customised to fit two bare metal drop-seats facing backward, opposite the upholstered bench.
Neither Jesse nor I had to be told to take them, and Orton and Kent strapped aircraft-style seat belts
round us before Orton gave Kerrigan my phone and took the driving seat. Kent rode shotgun. When
Kerrigan climbed in the far side and sat, the smell of his fear, sweat, and adrenaline joined the mix.
My phone was a welcome distraction for him, though, and he was tapping his way through one of
the menus when Preskylovitch came out, pulling the front door to, and climbed in to sit opposite
me.

“Drive.”

Orton pulled away, and Preskylovitch looked at Kerrigan.

“Who did she call yesterday?”

Kerrigan grunted. “Call list’s been deleted.”

Preskylovitch looked at me. “Who?” I said nothing, and he shook his head. “Stupid. You know
what will happen. But it can wait until we have you secured.” Both the excitement and the anger
were back in his voice, with the satisfaction. “The arrogance of you preternaturals is beyond belief.
But that ends—”

“Shit!”

Orton stamped on the brakes and the Yukon slewed on the gravel drive before crashing into
something that stopped it dead. Jesse and I were squeezed back, then thrown hard against our seat
belts, and the air was driven from my lungs. Kerrigan slammed against the door, and my phone
flew from his hand onto the seat, bouncing to the floor. Preskylovitch’s left hand had snapped out
to the door handle in time, and he stayed upright, his gun reappearing in his right — but for the first
time his eyes were wide with shock, and crackling magic told me why.

The Yukon dipped and bucked violently with a screech of abused metal. As it came back down the
windscreen imploded and there were brief, inhuman noises from Orton and Kent as it dipped and
bucked again, more metal tore, and the reek of blood and oil joined the elemental smell of the
magic. Kerrigan’s face was slack with terror, and the smell of urine was joining the mix when wolf
claws pierced the roof above him and ripped it away with another scream of metal. I had only a flickering impression of the dire wolf’s head in the opening but abruptly Kerrigan’s torso ended at the neck, blood gouting as it slumped against the door, and Preskylovitch had his gun against my forehead.

“Stop or I’ll kill her.”

The manitou must have understood because there was a pause in which I heard Preskylovitch draw a breath and the pulsing splatter of Kerrigan’s blood. It was enough for my brain to start working again, and I went coyote, not to attack but just to drop my head below the muzzle and pull my paws free of the cuffs. There was a blast of air and magic, and I changed back before my clothes had time to crumple, feeling the cuffs land in my lap, and looked up to see Preskylovitch’s legs dangling from the dire wolf’s mouth. He must still have had his gun because I could hear it being fired inside the wolf, with no effect at all. Then the wolf threw back its head, swinging his legs up, and swallowed him whole.

I would have been happy to cheer. Or gibber. But there was Jesse, and Adam. I released my seat belt, beginning to feel bruises where it had cut into me, and knelt to undo Jesse’s. Her clothing was spattered with Kerrigan’s blood, she was in shock, and though my heart was screaming for her I put a hard edge into my voice.

“Jesse! Snap out of it now.” She focused on me, her body beginning to shake. “We have to get back to Adam. The manitou won’t hurt you.”

She nodded jerkily, and I tried the door nearest me, but the Yukon’s frame was so buckled it wouldn’t budge. What was left of Kerrigan was still dripping on the other one, but I could see it too was torqued.

“Hell. We’ll have to climb out the roof.”

I straightened, realising the jagged edges of torn metal were a real danger, and the cuffs were going to make this very tricky for Jesse. The manitou’s breath washed over me, offering calm, and a voice older than the hills sounded in my mind.

Hold on to my teeth and I will lift you out.

It was absurd, practical, and fast, and I didn’t hesitate for a second.

“Right.” I knelt, turning my back to Jesse. “Put your cuffed hands over my head, Jesse, and when I stand, go piggyback.”

She obeyed automatically, and as her hands grasped the front of my shirt I saw my phone on the floor and shoved it into my pocket before slowly standing so Jesse could wrap her legs around my waist without having to loosen her hands. As soon as I was upright the manitou lowered its head, jaw open and breath sweet with water and earth. Its canines were too large for me to hold with one hand, so I locked my fingers behind the nearest, and with sure smooth power it lifted us both straight up, well clear of the jagged metal, swung us carefully around, and set us down. I knelt again to let Jesse lift her cuffed hands back over my head, noticing Kerrigan’s half-embedded in the gravel a few feet away, where the manitou must have spat it out, and straightened, meeting the manitou’s silver-on-gold eyes.

“Thank you. I have to get to Adam.”

And I was running back towards the house, Jesse trailing as the cuffs hindered her movement. The
voice returned to my mind.

_I feel your pack and another wolf approaching. I will let them in and no other unless you ask._

The other wolf had to be Samuel. I had no breath to reply and wasn’t stopping, but threw out a hand with a thumbs-up and a flick of magic told me the manitou understood. Even flat out it seemed to take for ever to reach the house, and I could smell Adam’s blood from yards out. The pool around his legs had grown a lot and he was unconscious, but as I skidded to a halt on my knees beside him I could hear him breathing and hope flared. I wrenched open the mate bond he’d shut off to spare me his pain, let it wash through me with a grunt, and pushed energy into him. He couldn’t have been out very long, because he’d torn away his trouser and used his belt as a tourniquet on his right leg, but when he’d faded out his hands had slipped, and there was a lot of blood coming from it. I tightened the makeshift tourniquet with the strength of desperation, and the flow lessened to a trickle, but when I ripped the trouser from his other leg it wasn’t much better, and he hadn’t been wearing a tie. I was reaching to tear a strip off my shirt when I had a quicker idea and wrapped a pack bond round the leg, but found I couldn’t pull it tight enough. I put out a hand, grabbed the walking stick, and used it to twist the bond tight. The second bloodflow lessened, and I gasped a sigh of relief. Jesse sank to her knees beside me, panting.

“Is he alive?”

“Yeah.”

<Jesse? Mercy?>

The faint voice was Bran’s, from the phone still in Adam’s pocket.

“Jesse, hold the walking stick tight.” She grabbed it and I reached across Adam to snag the phone. “Here.”

<Samuel’s on his way, with blood. How much has Adam lost?>

It was hard to estimate, but the pool was thick and I could feel it soaking into my jeans.

“Pints. I’ve got tourniquets on but Samuel needs to be here fast.”

I heard Bran speak briefly on another phone.

<He’s three minutes out, Mercy, with Darryl right behind him.>

I grunted acknowledgement, and saw Jesse’s arms were shaking. She was still cuffed, and could only hold one end of it, so I jammed the phone against my shoulder as I grabbed the walking stick again, twisting the bond tighter.

“I’ve got it, kiddo. Hang on in. Samuel’s only a few minutes away.”

She nodded and swallowed, eyes huge. Somewhere outside I heard a screech of brakes. My head was starting to spin and Bran’s voice anchored me.

<Mercy, how did you escape?>

“Manitou. Totalled the Yukon. Crushed Kent and Orton, beheaded Kerrigan, and ate Preskylovitch whole. Now standing guard to allow only the Pack and Samuel through.”

<You had the cams running?>
“Oh yeah. It’ll be on disk.” My brain caught up with my mouth. “The inside cam was running too, so we should have all that unbelievable crap Preskylovitch said as well. If he’s been experimenting they’ve got captive wolves.”

<Yes. I caught that.> Bran’s voice was very soft. Killing soft. <Mercy, Charles, Anna, and Asil are already in the air. They will be with you before noon. As soon as you can, confirm you have everything on disk and send it to me.>

“Right. Unh!”

It is alright, wolf of Adam’s pack. Run past me to the house. He needs you.

<What is it?>

“Manitou just spoke to one of the pack. Honey, I think.” I could hear her running footsteps on the gravel. “Made my head chime.” It hadn’t before but I’d poured a lot of energy into Adam. And if he woke now ... “Hang on. Jesse, grab the phone and stand back. If Adam wakes like this he’ll be pure wolf, and if he hurt you he’d never forgive himself.” She needed a job to keep her focused. “Please keep B—him informed of whatever’s happening.”

Jesse slipped in Adam’s blood as she stood, and her shock was deepening, but she caught herself before carefully stepping round me to take the phone. I rotated my head with relief, hearing her step backwards, and renewed the pressure on the walking stick. Honey skidded to a halt in the doorway.

“God almighty!”

“Yeah. Link with me, Honey. I can’t give Adam any more strength without passing out.”

As soon as her hand rested on my shoulder I threw open the pack bonds, dragging strength through us and into Adam. Honey gasped, and sank to her knees. I slammed a command to run at the rest of the pack, hearing more brakes screech somewhere and the drone of a helicopter.

Hammering paws on gravel announced Joel in tibicena form. He’d obviously run, not driven, and as soon as he saw us he morphed human, and ignoring his nudity joined Honey, adding magic as well as strength into the pack bonds. The bells of the manitou’s voice rang in my head, and from Honey’s and Joel’s expressions in everyone’s, and more running footsteps brought Samuel, Darryl, Auriele, and Ben to the door and into the circle pouring strength into Adam. Samuel had two bags of blood with dangling needle-tipped tubes in one hand, and the other grew claws to rip Adam’s jacket and shirt sleeves aside before stabbing one needle accurately home and squeezing the bag to send blood pulsing down the tube. His eyes searched the wounds and he swore under his breath.

“The bullets have fragmented. I’ve got to get them out before I can align the bone shards.”

Without even thinking about it I found myself giving orders. “Samuel, hold Adam’s shoulders. Joel, your tibicena is immune to bullets. Reach into it, and send Adam that magic to get those fragments out. I’ll hold the pack bond open.”

Samuel was already moving, bless him, but Joel gave me a frantic look.

“Magic follows intent. Do it!”

And after a second he did. His eyes closed, something alien flexed, and a bubble of magic passed through me to Adam. He juddered without waking, and torn flesh and bone shards quivered as lead moved, retracing itself until two complete bullets emerged and fell apart again, fragments half-
spashing into the pool of clotting blood.

Samuel swore again, but he was already back at Adam’s knees, fingers deftly moving bone that I willed to assemble, pulling the pack to their knees. After an interminable time Samuel sat back.

“Enough, Mercy. He will live.”

I heard the truth, and with a wrenching effort released my grip on the walking stick, letting the bond vanish and the pack’s inflow of energy drop. Everyone drew shuddering breaths. Samuel reached to undo the other tourniquet, switched the empty blood bag for the second full one, and squeezed it more gently. Adam didn’t start bleeding again, though his open wounds glistened, and my head blared with relief like static for a second before the rage I’d been holding down swamped me. I heard someone inhale sharply, and Darryl’s voice was carefully gentle.

“Mercy, your eyes are blazing gold. Are you injured?”

I had to swallow before I could answer and my tongue felt thick. “No. Bruises from the belt when the Yukon crashed. Thank you.” I wanted to stand but wasn’t sure I could. “Adam’s going to need food. I do too.”

“On it, Mercy.”

Auriele pulled a Hershey Bar from her pocket and offered it to me. They are not my favourite — give me European chocolate any day — but as sugar hit my system my head cleared. The rage didn’t, but I had it mostly under control. Then I sensed Adam starting to come round.

“Keep back, people. He’s waking.”

Adam had once warned me not to trust his wolf when it was in charge, and the yellow eyes he opened were all wolf, a growl sounding in his chest. I heard Samuel suck in a breath but I bent down so the wolf could smell me all the same, stroking Adam’s hair.

“I’m here. Jesse’s safe. I’m safe.” The wolf stared at me. “The manitou’s here. We are safe. The agents are dead. Please let Adam through.”

I wasn’t sure it could understand, but after a moment Adam drew in a juddering breath and one hand grabbed my arm hard enough to bruise.

“Mercy?”

“Right here. Jesse too. Safe.”

He shuddered again, blinking. “How...”

“Manitou. Killed the agents, saved us. But there’s going to be police all over. I have to deal with them. We have to get you upstairs, and it’s going to hurt like crazy.”

It took him a moment to process what I’d said.

“Alright. Food.”

“Darryl’s on it. Samuel, how do we move him?”

“Spinal board. I dumped it outside.”

I hadn’t seen Warren arrive, but he went out and came back with the board. No matter how careful
you are, moving legs with smashed knees hurts, and though Samuel had given him a shot of morphine Adam gave a vicious growl as they moved him and tightened the immobilisation straps. Then he and Auriele lifted it, and I managed to stand after all.

“Adam, Jesse’ll be up in a minute. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

He growled again, more softly, and they carried him upstairs. I looked around, seeing blood on everyone’s clothing and the unholy mess on the floor. Priorities tumbled in my mind.

“Honey, break those cuffs off Jesse, and find Joel a tracksuit. Ben, assemble the recordings from the security cams outside and inside into a single sequence, from Cantrip’s arrival to where Jesse and I are running back to the house. Cut nothing, but blur Jesse’s face. Send it to Bran the moment it’s done, and have it ready to put up on the big office screen.”

Ben took off at a run, and I caught Warren’s wide eyes.

“What’s going on out there?”

“What isn’t? The manitou’s growling at everyone and telling them to back off. It let pack through, but not Kyle or Jenny Trevellyan. Or the police. The helicopter is KEPR’s traffic eye, and I’m guessing we’re live, manitou, body parts, and all. What the hell happened. Mercy?”

“Cantrip happened, Warren. And they are dead meat.” I pushed rage down again. “Right. Clean yourselves up as best you can, but leave this shambles for the police to see. I’ll try to keep the numbers down until we’re calmer. Mary Jo, Kelly, go help Darryl with food. We all need it.”

They went and Jesse’s quavering voice brought my head snapping round.

“M-Mercy, Bran wants t-t-to t-talk.”

I had never heard Jesse stutter, and more rage flooded me but I walked carefully over and hugged her tight.

“This is pure crap, kiddo, but you have to hang on.” I freed one hand to take the phone from her grip. “What is it, Bran?”

His voice was sharp with concern. <Are you as in control as you almost sound, Mercy?>

Subtle, subtle Bran, who hears between every line.

“No. But I’ll cope.”

<Warren was right that you are on air. There are cameras on the ground as well as the ’copter. The coverage is going national, fast. Be very careful, Mercy.>

“Yes. But you know what Coyote says about changing the rules? Cantrip wanted secrecy, and they’re not going to get it.” I gave the phone to Warren. “Jesse, take some food up to Adam, then go wash and change. You’ll have to talk to the police later, and they’ll need your clothes as well as mine, but I’ll stall them for a bit. OK? Honey’ll give you a hand.”

She took Jesse gently from me, and I went to the study where Ben was working on Adam’s computer, Medea crouched beside him. He looked up, his eyes flickering wolf.

“Fucking Cantrip fuckers.”

Ben had a way with words.
“Yes, they are. Were. It’s all on there?”

“Yeah. I’m just blurring Jesse’s face on the inside cams. You’re really gonna release this, Mercy?”

“Oh yes. This week it’s Cantrip who are the monsters.”

“ Fucking right.”

I headed for the front door, saw the walking stick lying by the stairs, and detoured to pick it up. By rights it should have been covered in blood but it was clean, and warm in my hand.

“Thank you,” I told it, and it warmed some more. I didn’t really need to lean on it, but my knees were still twinging with Adam’s pain, and the bruises from the seat belt were beginning to catch up with me. I’d told Zee my stamina wasn’t back, and I knew I’d be paying for today for a while, but needs must, so I squared my shoulders and went to find the police and the cameras.
On another day, for another reason, it might have been funny. The manitou was standing in front of the shattered Yukon, just inside the gate, head low, and the roadway outside was chaos. Cars were jammed haphazardly on verges where the pack had abandoned them, framing a line of police units, a KEPR van, an ambulance, and a mob of people shouting over the clatter of the news helicopter. Kyle, Jenny, and the ambulance crew were arguing with the police, the police were arguing back and among themselves, and the KEPR reporter and cameraman filming everything were looking like cats that ate the cream when they weren’t looking scared. I could see Clay Willis, and as I passed the Yukon, not looking at what was inside it or at Kerrigan’s head, he saw me, and so did the reporter. The camera swung and the babble of voices died away as I walked past the manitou and turned to face it. It leant down some more to look at me closely.

“Thank you again for saving Jesse and me.”

You are welcome.

The chiming wasn’t too bad.

“Can you please tell the pilot of that helicopter to fly higher? The noise is impossible.”

It didn’t answer but lifted its head to point at the hovering copter, which suddenly jinked in the air and began to rise. I imagined the pilot’s head was ringing, but at least the din receded a bit. The manitou looked at me and I’d swear it was amused.

“Did stopping the Yukon injure you? It was still going quite fast.”

Not at all. This form does not bruise, Mercy, but it is good that you ask.

I nodded. “Basic welfare always comes first. How did you know Adam and I were in trouble?”

I felt your pain and rage. You and your pack interest me, so I defended you.

“Alright. As you see, it’s caused quite a stir. I don’t know what you want to do, but if you’ll back me up some more I think we can get some good out of this.”

I was winging it, and the manitou dropped its jaw in a lupine grin.

As you will. Coyote was always interesting.

“I bet. Then wait here, please.”

I turned and went forward again. Save the still rising helicopter the silence was deep, but Willis pushed forward, Kyle and Jenny behind. I held up a hand, noticing the dried blood on it, and when they stopped pointed to the reporter and signalled her to come closer.

“Detective Willis, one moment. Jenny, the manitou will let you pass. Use the back door. Go watch the video from the security cams, please. Ben’s in Adam’s office stitching it into a single sequence.”
Willis tried to object but Jenny was by him, giving the manitou a nervous bow before easing past it and jogging towards the house. Kyle got by Willis too, concern on his face.

“Mercy, are you injured? There’s blood all over you and your eyes are golden.”

“I know, Kyle. The eyes are rage. Some of the blood is from being in the back of that Yukon when the Cantrip agents in it died, and some is Adam’s. He’s alive and stable but badly hurt.”

Kyle knew how fast wolves healed, and nodded. Willis was less sure.

“Does Mr Hauptman need hospitalising?”

I shook my head. “No, and it would be dangerous. Energy from the pack has stabilised him, and he’ll heal, but it’ll be a few hours at least before it’s safe for you to see him.” Willis didn’t understand and neither would many watching. “Injury makes wolves very cranky, Detective Willis. They get to heal faster, but they also get to do without effective anaesthetics.”

He winced and nodded. “Because of the metabolism thing? Alright, that makes sense. Rough.”

“Tell me. And don’t ever try to question an injured wolf without a more dominant wolf to help. Now, as to what happened, you will get that video from our security cams, Detectives, and so will KEPR. I know it’s irregular, but SOP is not going to work for this. File under manitou. I know you need access, and you will get that too, but there are things you need to understand before you and your tech people come in. There are also things the people watching need to understand.”

He didn’t like it, but with the manitou at my back I was in charge, for once. I looked at the reporter, recognising her, and with an effort remembered her name.

“Ms Taylor, we’re live?”

“Oh yes.”

“Then please get your station boss and lawyer on the line. You’ve got an exclusive that’ll blow wide, but there are conditions.”

She had her phone to her ear before I’d finished speaking, and I turned back to Willis, rage making my voice flat and hard.

“What happened, Detective Willis, is that Cantrip Agents Orton and Kent, Supervisory Agent Kerrigan, and Senior Supervisory Agent Preskylovitch rang the doorbell, about seven-fifteen. Orton said they had a Special Security Court subpoena for me, and he wasn’t lying, but when Adam opened the door Preskylovitch shot him in one knee. He said he was detaining me to be interrogated and to control Adam and the pack, and detaining our daughter Jesse because threats to torture, mutilate, or rape her would ensure my co-operation. He also shot Adam in the other knee, and left him bleeding out while they kidnapped Jesse and me. But as you see, the manitou stopped them.”

They were all staring at me in shock, even the guy with the boom mike, but Kyle’s brain was still working.

“You have all this on video, Mercy? Cantrip committing mayhem?”

“Oh yes. All of it. And there’s two other things. I told Preskylovitch Adam was bleeding out, and he said no, they’d experimented on werewolf healing. So Cantrip is torturing captive wolves somewhere. And second, he also said his authority covered detaining me and Jesse without due
process and carrying out the threats he made. And he believed it. Which is why, Detectives, the KEPR camera is coming in with us. Cantrip is running rogue, and the only thing that will stop them before they kill more people or get themselves killed is publicity.”

I took a slow breath, banking rage as best I could, and spoke to the camera.

“There are other things that everyone needs to know. The very large dire wolf behind me is an avatar — a manifestation — of what I as a Blackfeet Indian call the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin. It is a guardian animal of the spirit of the river system and everything within it. Neither this avatar nor the manitou can be killed while the Columbia Basin exists, and the full extent of its powers is unknown. And it is both curious and angry about what humans have done to its land and water.”

I had meant to give it a few seconds, but the manitou saved me the wait by growling. I ploughed on.

“As you can hear. So we need to come to terms with it. It only came fully awake yesterday, at Sacajawea State Park. Two men managed to disturb it as it woke, and were killed. I was there at the request of the Pasco PD, examining the scene, and it chose to speak to me because I am Native American and mated to a werewolf, and to my husband Adam because he is a werewolf and it hadn’t met one before. Adam and I spent more than six hours afterwards telling all three cities’ police brass and mayors, the FBI, Homeland, and Cantrip, everything we understood about it, which is not very much. I withheld exactly one thing, the identity of a being I’d called for advice, because it involves sacred Native American lore, and is not mine to reveal. That is recognised in law, and will be confirmed by the Yakama Nation. But overnight Cantrip unilaterally decided the proper response was to kidnap me and a fifteen-year-old girl, and threaten rape and torture if we didn’t tell them more. Shooting Adam to cripple was necessary to prevent him defending us. You all need to think about that decision very carefully.”

Rage had flattened my voice again, and I stopped to take two deep breaths.

“The manitou has just told me it felt Adam’s and my pain and distress, and decided to defend us. That shattered Yukon behind me and four dead Cantrip agents are the results. So what you all need to ask yourselves, every one of you, especially if you live in the Basin, is whether you really want Cantrip left in charge of talking to the manitou, or if you’d prefer someone sane and competent. Then call or email your elected state and federal representatives and let them know. Today. Because that’s what all this is about.”

I turned to the reporter, Taylor. “You have them on line?”

She blinked. “Yes. Station boss is Carl Radzinsky, lawyer’s Sam Morris.”

“Put them on speaker, please, so everyone can hear both ends.”

She did, and I took her phone.

“Mr Radzinsky, Mr Morris, I want everyone to see this, now, while it’s all fresh, but there are three conditions. Would I be right to think you’re imposing a transmission delay so you can blur out blood and body parts?”

<Sam Morris, Ms Hauptman. Yes, we are — we have to.>

“Then inside the house you also blank any shot that shows my daughter. She’s fifteen and she’s dealt with enough already this morning.”
I could hear the surprise in his voice.

“Second one’s trickier. I will show you and give you, free of charge, the video from our security cameras that shows exactly what the Cantrip agents did, what Adam, Jesse, and I did, and what the manitou did. The only thing blurred will be my daughter’s face, and you will not blur anything else — not my husband being shot, and not the manitou killing the agents. And whenever you show it, you show it all. No clips, no stills, the whole five- or six-minute sequence every single time. You also impose the same requirement on anyone and everyone you sell it on to.”

Carl Radzinsky, Ms Hauptman. I’m sorry, but that’s impossible.

“Make it possible, Mr Radzinsky, or say goodbye to the scoop of a lifetime while I contact KNDU.”

I don’t have the authority.

“Then get it. This is non-negotiable. If you show what the manitou did to those Cantrip agents, you also show what they did to deserve it.” I might often be rash but I try to learn from experience, and editing could make that video a weapon for the bigots. “And the third condition is that KEPR gives half of its profits from those sales to the Hanford clean-up. If you’re making money out of the manitou, you tithe to clean up its lands.”

I hear you, Ms Hauptman. I’ll try to talk to someone higher.

Morris came back on. Even if we agree, drawing up the contracts will take time.

“Then I suggest you hurry. Meantime, I’ll accept your sworn words, on air. And if the suits above you repudiate you, we’ll see them in court together.”

Morris’s voice was tight. If we show what you’re asking, the FCC will have our license.

“This is not Janet Jackson’s nipple slip, Mr Morris. This is whether a domestic agency of the Federal Government is allowed to shoot, kidnap, rape, and torture citizens as policy and at will. It’s the biggest thing since Prince Gwyn ap Lugh beheaded Les Heuter, and it is once again Cantrip agents who are responsible. The sworn word I offer you is that everything I’ve said is plain truth, and the video will prove it.”

“Mercy’s word is as golden as her eyes, Tom.” Kyle was in courtroom mode. “And if the FCC prosecutes KEPR over this you’ll have my services pro bono to help shoot them down. Give a one-minute warning of each transmission, edge the screen in red, and declare the self-evident public interest every time. And put all that in the sell-on contracts.”

Morris grunted. Maybe.

“What you need to do is put the facts out there and let everyone see. If they can’t handle reality, tough.”

Easy to say.

Necessary to do.

Radzinsky came back. The highest person I can reach says yes, so you have my word, Ms Hauptman. Give us the video and KEPR and its affiliates will show it whole or not at all. And
we’ll make the demand of buyers, but we can’t guarantee them. We’ll also make the donation.

“Your word is good, Mr Radzinsky, and if someone else breaks theirs I’ll sue them, not you.”

I gave Taylor back her phone, with a smile that had her stepping back. That hadn’t been my intention, and I took another breath before shifting from invitation to challenge.

“So, first up, Ms Taylor, come and meet the manitou. I don’t know how much it understands about live TV, so it might be an idea to let it read you first. It needs your consent to do so, and the process is short, painless, and safe, but weird — like being a book someone else is reading, if that makes any sense. And Detective Willis, if you want to contribute a police awareness to its understanding, that would be good too. Meet its eyes, nod, and say you’re willing. Or don’t, as you will.”

I turned, using the walking stick because my knees were hurting, and went towards the manitou so they had no choice but to follow. It crouched and brought its head to ground level.

“Manitou, sir, meet Kyle Brooks, lawyer, partnered with a member of the pack. Caroline Taylor, a reporter for our local TV station. The men with the camera and boom mike are with her. Detective Willis of the Kennewick Police Department, whom you saw yesterday.”

_I see you all, and would welcome your consents to be read. As Mercy has told you, I am new awake and seek to understand what has passed while I slept._

I gave points to Taylor as she shook her head slightly and said aloud for the mike what she had just heard. Kyle was just as smooth, though I could smell and feel his tension.

“For the record, I too heard exactly those words. I thank you, Manitou, for protecting Mercy and Jesse against human monsters. And you are welcome to read me.”

The manitou didn’t hesitate, and in Kyle’s shifting scent I knew the misery of his family and adolescence, a time of promiscuity and self-loathing, a time of celibacy and self-loathing, the many frightened women and children he’d helped, and Warren. When Taylor consented, I read a happy and secure childhood, a teenage rape that had almost broken her, and a grim determination to succeed in a hostile, male-dominated world. I liked her the better for it all, but as Willis consented and was read, I turned my head away, breathing through my mouth because I didn’t want to know his secrets. When it was all over, I could see the mild shock on all their faces and became as brisk as I could manage, shifting attention to the remains of the Yukon.

“The video will confirm all this, but for the record now — Orton was driving, Kent riding shotgun, Kerrigan and Preskylovitch in the back. Jesse and I were in fold-downs, facing backwards, so I didn’t see all of what happened. And I haven’t yet seen the video. But putting together what I experienced and what I see, the manitou appeared in front of the Yukon, Orton hit the brakes and skidded, and it hit the manitou slightly sideways on. You can see the impact marks in the front side panel. Then the manitou smashed the engine out — looks like both forepaws through the hood — and went through the windshield on the rebound, killing Kent and Orton. I did see it rip off the roof, and bite off Kerrigan’s head, which is buried in the gravel there.” The walking stick made an excellent pointer. “I also saw it eat Preskylovitch whole.”

As I watched Willis running it in his mind and matching what I said to what he could see, several thoughts hit me, and I swung round yet again, seeking the manitou’s eyes.

“Manitou, sir, is it possible we could recover Preskylovitch’s jacket and trousers? I would like to know what ID and authorisation he carried.”
I didn’t know silver-on-gold could look quizzical.

You can have him all, Mercy, now he is dead. This form is not equipped to digest.

And like a cat hawking up a meal of grass, the dire wolf coughed Preskylovitch up again in an ungainly heap. His torso was rent by canines but from the expression of utter terror stamped on his dead face I thought he’d probably suffocated before he bled to death. His gun was still in his hand.

“Detective Willis, could you please secure the contents of his pockets, and his gun, which is customised. Large bore, low velocity, and I would assume designed for exactly the use he made of it. That will need investigating. Oh, and I heard him fire it when he was half-inside the manitou, to no effect at all.”

Do you want the bullets?

“Please.” I held up a hand, and the manitou extended its tongue and let three slugs drop into my palm. “Detective?”

Willis had a shaken look I could sympathise with but fished in a pocket for an evidence bag and I tipped the slugs in.

Kyle cleared his throat. “I’m not Adam’s or Mercy’s lawyer, but in Ms Trevellyan’s absence I’ll stipulate that before they are removed from these premises, full inventory and copies of any ID and documents on him will be required. You also itemise them aloud on air. No mysterious going missing from evidence rooms.”

Willis knew what Kyle meant — interestingly, as it had been a Richland PD case — and nodded, shocked and grim as he knelt beside the corpse.

“Yes, agreed.” He went for inner pockets first, pulling out a wallet and a folded document. “Cantrip ID card has him as SSA Richard Preskylovitch. But there are also FBI, CIA, HSA, and NSA cards, which is impossible and illegal. Plastic and some cash. The document’s a Special Security Court subpoena. I’ve never seen one so I can’t tell if it’s genuine.”

“Preskylovitch said it was signed by Judge Cray.”

Willis peered. “Could be. It’s a scrawl.”

“Did he serve it to you, Mercy?”

I shook my head at Kyle. “No. Didn’t even try. He had to have it or we’d have heard he was lying, but it was a ruse to get us to open the door.”

“Then it is not in effect. And now it’s in evidence. Detective Willis, can we take it KPD will be asking His Honour Judge Cray to explain why an SSC subpoena was issued for a patently illegal purpose?”

“Oh yeah, Mr Brooks. We’ll be doing that.” Willis managed to prise the gun loose. “Definitely customised.”

“I think he had it in a sleeve holster.”

Willis felt the arm and then pulled up the jacket sleeve. “He did.”

“Will you show that, please, Ms Taylor — just the holster, they can blur the rest. It has to have
been designed for use on an unsuspecting wolf, and it wasn’t made between yesterday and this morning.”

The cameraman went to focus in, and recorded Willis removing the holster and bagging everything else he’d taken — a pen, mints, a matchbook, but no keys or phone. When he’d finished Willis looked at me.

“Ms Hauptman, we need to get crime scene and recovery people here now.”

“Go ahead, Detective. There’s the scene in the house too, where Adam was shot. Do you want me to ask someone to move the pack’s cars?”

“Yes.”

He gave some crisp orders on his two-way radio. There was no way the pack wasn’t watching the TV, so I just set off again towards the house with Kyle, and they all followed, including the manitou. Taylor must have felt she ought to be doing some reporting, and came alongside me.

“Ms Hauptman, I’m seeing it with my own eyes and not really believing it.”

“Manitou’s right there, Ms Taylor, and we’re all going to have to deal with it.”

“Well, yes. Actually I meant Cantrip, though. They’re supposed to be the good guys.”

“Well, yes. Actually I meant Cantrip, though. They’re supposed to be the good guys.”

“Depends who you ask, Ms Taylor. Les Heuter was extreme, and I’ve met at least one sane person from Cantrip, but it’s jammed full of anti-fae and anti-wolf bigots. Imagine the government set up an agency to deal with African Americans and staffed it with members of the Klan.”

She almost stumbled and Kyle caught her arm.

“You’re serious?”

“Deadly serious. Cantrip’s founding remit was to find out about the Fae and anything else preternatural to assist in integration. With co-operation there’s a lot of good that could be done, but all Cantrip wants is a license to kill everything they fear on sight.”

She took the bait. “What kind of good?”

“Think about the Heuter case — three serial rape-torture-murderers caught and Elizabeth Beauclaire rescued because the FBI had the guts and sense to ask for wolf help. I was asked to look at the scene in Sacajawea State Park yesterday because I have a keen sense of smell anyway, and being mated to Adam has boosted it. Wolves have a very keen sense of smell. Talking bloodhounds. A wolf Search and Rescue team, using both forms, would also be seriously efficient. There’s a lot the Fae could have done as well if Cantrip and a very perverse Boston jury hadn’t driven them to secede. And one of my hopes in negotiating with the manitou is that it might be willing to help with things like the Hanford clean-up.”

Mary Jo and Kelly, who were both out as wolves, came around the house from the back door, assorted keys in their hands, and jogged over.

“Put the cars on your land, Mercy?”

“Yeah, just get them moved so the KPD can get their stuff in, Mary Jo. They’ll need heavy lifting gear for that Yukon.”
They went and I looked over my shoulder at Willis.

“Mary Jo’s FD, Detective. And I know you need the forensics done first, but we’re going to need access restored as soon as possible. You might consider moving the Yukon somewhere else before you try extracting the bodies. Doors are jammed anyway.”

He nodded. “Point taken, Ms Hauptman. I’ll need clearance, and to see this video, but that sounds like good sense to me.”

“Thank you.”

We reached the door and I pushed it open. Even after the Yukon and Preskylovitch the scuffed and congealed pool of blood was very ugly. Taylor swallowed and Willis’s eyes narrowed.

“All this blood is Adam’s, Detective. You can see where Jesse and I were kneeling beside him. That’s when my jeans got soaked. As soon as I can change I’ll give you these clothes, and Jesse’s, for analysis. You can also see where other pack members stood round giving him energy to live and heal. And the bullet fragments are there.”

I pointed with the stick.

“How did you get them out?”

“Magic, from Joel Arocha. His tibicena form is immune to bullets and he managed to squirt enough of it into Adam to pop the fragments out. When he was stable we stretchered him upstairs, and we’ve tried not to disturb this any more. And again, I know you need forensics, but please get it done as fast as you can so we can clear it up? All else aside, the smell of their Alpha’s blood is going to keep every wolf here very edgy. Your interviews will be a lot easier if this is gone.”

“We’re going to need to do those interviews at the station, Ms Hauptman.”

I shook my head. “Not gonna happen, Detective, until we have rock-solid assurance that Cantrip has been muzzled and cannot take anyone from your custody. They’ve shown themselves stupid enough to try it, and we now know they have already kidnapped wolves to experiment on. We’ll co-operate fully, but we do it here. Oh, and we have the pack members arriving on the internal cams as well. We won’t be giving KEPR anything after the agents were killed, but Kennewick PD can see it.”

He took a breath and thought about it for a moment. “Alright, Ms Hauptman. From what I know your wolves were all first responders, not witnesses, and I believe the video is going to show what you say it will, so unless I’m ordered otherwise I can go with that. Let me get a photographer up here to do the necessary stills, and a tech to get the bullet fragments, and then we can go see it.”
While we were waiting for the techs Taylor did some more reporting.

“You said you weren’t injured, Ms Hauptman, but you’re moving very stiffly.”

“Car crash’ll do that, Ms Taylor. Seat belt bruised me.” I pulled up my shirt, and from her expression knew the bruises already looked as spectacular as they felt. “And as Adam’s mate I got a share of his pain when he was shot. A bullet through the knee really hurts.”

“I bet.” She hesitated. “You’ve said ‘mate’ or ‘mated’ several times, Ms Hauptman. Is that more than married?”

“Yeah. Marriage is human to human. Mated means Adam’s wolf has also accepted me. Doesn’t always happen, but it did with us, and it’s why I got the pain and my eyes go gold with rage.” This wasn’t something I wanted to talk about. “I was also hurt quite seriously a month and some back by the thing that killed all those women in Finley.”

“So I read. The police said it was a volcano god.”

They had, looking weirded out even as they did so.

“Yeah. From El Teide, on Tenerife. Name of Guayota. Also a manitou, but much less powerful, mostly insane, and way off its home turf.”

She couldn’t help glancing at the manitou, which was sitting about twenty feet away, and it fielded her implicit question.

Volcanic manitous are often unstable and violent. It is their nature. Had I been awake I would have forced it to leave before it killed anyone.

Taylor repeated what it had said for the camera, drawing a sharp look from Willis, and then showed she had a brain as well as guts.

“Forgive me, but you have killed six people in less than a day.”

Yes. I am sorry about the men yesterday. They did no real harm but the tree they drilled into is a part of me, and the guardian spirit woke sensing an attack. The kills were instinctive defence. Now I am fully awake I am in control of my actions.

It waited for her to repeat its words.

I am not sorry about the men here. They were attacking two I have found friendly and interesting, as well as the young one. To kill young as easy food I understand, but to threaten a cub to force its parents to act against their nature and will is unacceptable to me.

“The manitou is a whole bunch of interlocking ecosystems,” I added, when Taylor had repeated the words, “and ecosystems contain a lot. Plenty of animals kill one another, but very few kill except for food or in self-defence, and none go in for torture, rape, kidnapping, or blackmail.”
She nodded. “No, they don’t. I don’t know as much about werewolves or manitous as I’d like, Ms Hauptman, but I know about human monsters. Why did you insist on the KEPR donation to the Hanford clean-up?”

“No, they don’t. I don’t know as much about werewolves or manitous as I’d like, Ms Hauptman, but I know about human monsters. Why did you insist on the KEPR donation to the Hanford clean-up?”

“Because it’s fair, and I’m betting the manitou doesn’t like having millions of gallons of human radioactive waste dumped into it.”

I do not. It was that contamination that began to wake me. It itches, and it is harming many creatures.

My head snapped round. “Can you get it out?”

Yes, but concentrated and brought to the surface it will harm more. I am thinking about the problem.

I turned to the camera. “If whoever’s in charge of the Hanford clean-up is listening, please get someone senior here. And make a public statement of just how much radioactive pollution still needs to be cleaned up and the projected cost to state and federal governments. Last I heard was a hundred and some billion dollars.”

I could see the techs approaching.

“And everyone, this is the sort of thing I meant when I told Cantrip yesterday they were not thinking straight about what was happening. Their gut reaction was ‘how do we kill the manitou?’ and they didn’t have the brains to think past their fear. Mine was ‘how do I survive this?,’ and then ‘how can we help it and how can it help us?’ I know the preternatural is frightening, and sometimes it should be, but not always. And the kneejerk reactions have to stop. It didn’t work with the Fae, it isn’t working with wolves, and it won’t work with the manitou. How many more people have to be killed or injured before we realise that? How long before common sense steps up to the plate?”

I let everyone think about it while they watched the techs do their stuff. Taylor remembered to give an on-air warning before the flash bulbs started popping. When they had several score photos and samples, and had bagged the bullets, Willis called the senior tech over. I recognised him from the scene in Finley.

“Ms Hauptman, could you please tell Mr Sandys what happened here.”

I did, including the interval between Adam’s wounds, and between my arrival back at the house, Jesse’s, and the pack’s, as well as the magical extraction of the bullets.

“Jim, would you say that everything you see is consistent with what you’ve just been told?”

Sandys nodded. “Fits like a glove, Clay. I’ll need to do analysis to check the blood’s all Mr Hauptman’s, but allowing for the first aid it’s consistent with a man shot in the knee standing, then again lying down. Got the big veins but not the artery. I’m surprised he’s alive. Can I see that gun you took off the Cantrip guy?”

Willis produced it and Sandys peered at it in its baggie.

“Again, I’ll need ballistics, but it looks right.” He flicked his eyes at me. “You said low velocity?”

“Sound was off, and a round that size at high velocity and that range would have gone right through or torn Adam’s leg off. Depending.”
“Yeah, it would. Checks out, Clay, down the line so far as I can tell from eyeballing.”

“Right. Thanks, Jim.” Willis took a breath and looked at me. “I’ll probably take some heat for this, Ms Hauptman, but go ahead and get it cleared up.” He looked at the camera. “Everything I know about Mr and Ms Hauptman indicates they’re good people, and unless the video shows something unexpected, as senior officer on scene I’m declaring them victims here, not suspects.” He looked back at me. “Take us in and show us the video, Ms Hauptman, and prove I’m not a fool.”

So I did. The manitou said it would wait, and the rest of us stepped inside over the blood. I could hear members of the pack filling buckets in the basement, and a quick check told me Adam was still in human form but in a healing coma, and that he’d eaten. Crossing the hall I stopped.

“Detective, those are the cuffs that were on Jesse. We didn’t have keys so one of the pack broke them off her wrists.”

“Right.”

He bagged them and we went on to Adam’s office. Ben and Jenny were waiting, and Ben had KEPR on a side screen. Seeing myself there threatened to make my head spin, so I looked at Jenny instead, who went into brisk mode, though her face was tight with anger.

“Mercy, after I’d seen that video and heard your conversation with Morris I spoke to him and he’s faxed a contract for your signature.”

“Does it have everything I asked for?”

“Yes, hand-added, but he’s right that they can’t guarantee what any secondary purchasers will do.”

“If they default we can sue?”

“Oh yes. And we’ve made damages severe enough to give anyone pause.”

“Good.”

I read things before I sign them, but there was a lot of print, and I didn’t want to lose any more momentum. I also trusted Jenny, so I read the additions and signed it. Ben cut the KEPR feed, and after a brief, uber-geeky conversation with the cameraman about avoiding the flicker you get when TV shows a screen image, he half-dimmed the lights and adjusted the brightness of the big screen. Then he let it roll.

Hearing again what Preskylovitch had said and seeing the terror in Jesse’s body language renewed my rage, even though her face was blurred out, but I was also interested. Ben had put external and internal feeds in parallel, time stamps showing they were synchronised. When all the Cantrip agents had been inside, the external shot diminished to a small corner square, and once they’d left Adam bleeding out and hustled Jesse and me into the Yukon, the internal one did the same. And I’d been right about the sequence in which the manitou had done things. The Yukon had skidded and hit its leg the way a car hits a tree and loses, and it had used both forepaws to smash the engine from its mountings and kill Orton and Kent. What I hadn’t quite understood was how blindingly quick it was, and though the cams had high resolution all its strikes blurred with speed. To my relief the split second when I’d gone coyote didn’t show, and when I gripped the manitou’s tooth with Jesse on my back and it lifted us out of the carnage in the Yukon I heard Taylor and Willis inhale sharply. When the video ended with me and Jesse running flat out for the house, Willis blew the breath out heavily, and Ben brought the lights back up. I could see renewed shock and anger in Willis’s eyes, but he was professional through and through.
“What happened in the Yukon between the manitou taking Kerrigan and taking Preskylovitch?”

“Preskylovitch put a gun to my forehead and shouted to the manitou to stop or he’d kill me, I ducked, and the manitou took him.”

“You’re that fast?”

“Natural reactions, a lot of martial arts training, and a boost from Adam.” He looked at me, and I could see his doubts. “Put your fingers to my head like a gun, and try to track me down, Detective Willis.”

He did, I overrode my bruises to duck as fast as I could and took a step aside before he’s even started to drop his hand.

“Damn, but you are fast.”

“And the manitou is faster.”

“Yeah, it is. How did you get out of the cuffs, though?”

I really didn’t want to start explaining I could turn coyote, so I answered Gordon-style. “Magic. I’m not wolf or fae, but I have a little Native American magic from the father I never knew. Desperation brings it out and it was enough. Cuffs are in the back of the Yukon somewhere. I did grab my phone back, though.” It was time to move on, and I looked at the cameraman. “Don’t show the screen. Ben, once the camera’s turned, put up the internal cam shot of me, Jesse, and the pack helping Adam, up to the point we moved him. No sound.”

Ben gave me a look but obeyed, He even kept silent, for which I gave him serious points. The camera pointed at me instead, and Willis, Taylor, and the sound-man watched. No sound took care of my conversation with Bran, but I’d forgotten using an invisible pack bond as a tourniquet and the appearance from thin air of the walking stick. When the sequence ended Willis gave me and it a long look, but then nodded.

“Alright, Ms Hauptman, both videos show everything you said they would, so if this was a straight human-on-human home invasion I wouldn’t be charging anyone except those Cantrip goons and they’re dead. God knows what the manitou’s legal status is, but I’ll call its killings today righteous. Yesterday’s, I don’t know, but what it said is an arguable defence. Not that we can charge it anyway.” He took a deep breath. “And I realise a billion tons of political … concern’s gonna drop on everyone’s head, real soon, but the brass and politicians aren’t standing here right now. Unless and until I’m over-ruled, I’m saying Kennewick PD has no beef with you or your husband over this. If those agents came to my door and did that to me and my wife and daughter, and I could do what the manitou did, I surely would.”

I blew out a breath myself, acutely conscious of how much Willis’s judgement mattered, and the effect it would have.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, Detective Willis, and the common sense. After Cantrip it’s a welcome change. What else do you need?”

“Witness interviews. Your clothes and the ones your daughter was wearing. To talk to your husband, when that’s possible.”

“Then start with Ben here, and I’ll go check on Adam and Jesse, change, and send the rest of the pack along, one at a time. Oh, and use another room, please. I only brought you in here for the big screen.” I turned to Taylor. “Means you’re done with the live show inside for now. You can wait in
the kitchen for whatever else might happen, if you want, or do a piece to camera outside. Or talk to the manitou, if it’s willing. But no more filming inside without my permission.”

“Alright. Can I talk about that healing?”

I shrugged. “If you want. It’s no secret that wolves can heal fast and packs can help their Alpha. I just wasn’t going to broadcast my husband half-naked and bleeding all over. Or my daughter having to see it. Now turn the camera and mike off, please. Let the studio talking heads earn their keep for a bit.”

When I was sure they had, I dealt with the other thing.

“Ms Taylor, I’d also advise you against mentioning the walking stick. I wouldn’t mind — it’s an old fae artefact that decided it liked me when I helped Zee Adelbertsmiter a while back, and it turns up when it’s needed.” I gave it a stroke and it warmed again in my hand. “I’m very grateful to it. It’s saved my life several times, and it saved Adam’s today. I don’t think it would mind, either. But I have good reason to believe the Gray Lords would not be happy having it discussed on air, and believe me, we do not need that complication in our lives.”

She looked more intrigued than alarmed. “You know Gray Lords too?”

“They have come to collect the stick once or twice, they are very scary indeed, and that’s all I’m saying about them.”

I couldn’t think of anything else that had to be done right now, the adrenaline rush was finally wearing off, leaving me nauseous as well as hungry, and I was suddenly conscious in a different way of the dried blood splattered on my clothes and soaking my jeans. My legs swayed and I grabbed Kyle’s arm.

“Sorry, Kyle. Out of energy.”

Willis nodded. “Been wondering when that would happen. You were flying. You need help, Mr Brooks?”

“I’ve got her, Kyle.”

Honey came in with Warren behind her, and picked me up as if I were a child. Werewolf strength is useful. Warren ruffled my hair and I felt like a child too, cranky, exhausted, and close to tears.

“We’re on it, superwoman. Go get clean and see Adam and Jesse.”

The floor by the door had already been mopped to within an inch of its life, and the blood was gone. The smell of bleach caught my throat, but at least it wasn’t blood. Sandys was standing in the doorway and gave me a concerned look.

“She alright?”

“She’s zonked,” Honey told him.

“Not surprised. Hell of a show, lady. Where can I find Willis?”

“Study.” She jerked her head in the right direction. “Hey, Willis, one of your techs wants you.”

Then Honey carried me upstairs, and I gratefully let my head rest on her shoulder.

“Shower or Adam first?”
“Adam.”

“You got it. I think he’s out of it though.”

He was, with Jesse in clean clothing holding his hand, Medea on her lap. Darryl and Samuel were there too, watching Taylor cautiously approach the manitou on the little TV from Jesse’s room, but muted it as Honey carried me in and set me down carefully by the bed. I sat, feeling my bruises protest and wrapped one hand round his and Jesse’s.

“Alright, Jesse?” She nodded, but didn’t speak, and I squeezed her hand, thinking she needed a chance to cry herself out. “How is he, Samuel?”

“He’s OK, Mercy. Deep healing coma for a few hours because he didn’t want to change and with the bone damage it would have been hell. Jesse’s got some bruises like yours, but that’s all. Are you OK?”

I gave a wobbly nod. “Adrenaline crash, big time.”

“I bet.” He gave me a wide, warm smile, and a still warm meat pasty from a tray Adam had depleted. “Eat. Da agrees with Jesse that you are awesome. So do I. Nation’s at a standstill, near enough, with its eyes bugging out. Phone lines to Congress and state legislatures are burning up. The FBI obviously liked your compliments, because they’re already making noises about investigating Cantrip. The feeding frenzy is going to be spectacular. And Charles, Anna, and Asil will be landing in about ten minutes, though you’ve pretty much sorted everything out yourself.”

The pasty was good, and even a few bites had me feeling less wobbly. So did Bran’s approval.

“Are they caught up on what’s happened?”

“Yes. Charles used the Lear Jet, and it has phone and TV.”

“Good.” My brain kicked back in as food reached my stomach and I realised what I’d forgotten “Darryl, call Jim Gutstein and get security for the pack members who aren’t here and their families. Until we know Cantrip’s under control—”

“Already done, Mercy. All the PDs are helping. Adam’s work diary’s being taken care of too. And everyone here who’s supposed to be working has called in for today.”

“OK. Thanks. I don’t want anyone going anywhere alone for a while.”

“I’m on that too.”

“Da’s warned all the Alphas, Mercy, not that he needed to once they’d seen that video. Go get clean. You’ll feel better.”
Chapter Ten

Samuel was right. A long, scaldingly hot shower, some of Gordon’s supercharged Bag Balm on the abrasions from the seat belt, and a short but violent crying jag later I did feel better. I shared the Bag Balm and tears with Jesse, letting both of us get some bottled-up rage and terror out of our systems. When we’d recovered enough to stop looking blotchy, snagged some more pasties, and bagged my blood-soaked clothes to join hers, I took her to see Willis. He was interviewing Joel in the kitchen, under Jenny’s and Kyle’s eagle eyes with Warren standing guard for the pack, but Joel couldn’t explain what he’d done to get the bullets out of Adam, only that he’d obeyed my order and demanded his magic do it. Willis shook his head.

“Allright, Mr Arocha. Bullets removed by magic is the least of today. Out of interest, do you think you could do it for anyone?”

“No, only pack. Maybe only Adam or Mercy. My bonds with them are the strongest, and I feel them more clearly.”

“Allright. Makes sense, I suppose.”

Willis let him go, and it was Jesse’s turn. I sat with her, holding her hand, but he was as careful as he could be, offering some of the praise she deserved for holding herself together when it counted. Like the crying jag, getting some of the words out helped too. Besides the blood and shock, she’d heard the underlying desire to hurt her and worse in Preskylovitch’s voice too, and Willis nodded.

“Yeah, I caught that. Makes me kinda glad the manitou ate him.”

“And barfed him up again. The puke got puked.”

Kyle and I grinned, Jenny put a hand to her mouth, Warren laughed, and Willis snorted.

“Good one.”

He did press her a little about events in the Yukon, but I’d spoken to her upstairs about that, and she hadn’t actually seen my very brief shift because she’d been understandably preoccupied with headless Kerrigan. When he was done Willis thanked her and sat back.

“You’ve got spine, Miss Hauptman, and I’ve a feeling you’ve already seen a lot more than someone your age should have. But this today is enough to rock anyone, right down to the ground. You’re going to have flashbacks and nightmares. Don’t bottle it up — it eats at you if you do. Talk to someone. I’ve been Homicide for twenty years, and I do when it gets bad. No shame in it. And it does help.” His gaze switched to me. “I can give you some names, if you want.”

“We’ll see how Jesse goes, Detective. It’s her call. But thanks for the thought.”

“Nada. I’ve got a daughter about the same age, and right now gutting Cantrip gets my vote.” He looked at me thoughtfully. “You were right yesterday evening, though the brass wouldn’t listen. They’re listening now, though, and so are the mayors and the governor. Plus a top dog from Hanford is on his way as requested, wanting advice.”
I shrugged. “Tell them to talk to the manitou.”

“I think they’re hoping you will.”

“I’ll introduce them, if it’s still here. But it does what it wants.”

“Right, but when Taylor tried to talk to it some more, it said it was thinking about what you’d said and suggested she did too. Then it went to watch the techs at work on the Yukon. Asked questions, which shook them up. Seems interested in forensics.” He shook his head and his voice became brisker. “Preskylovitch and Kerrigan’s head have been moved already. Brass have agreed to move the Yukon, which is tarped, and Kennewick FD’s on its way with a heavy lifter. Word I’m getting is that the FBI will also be here sooner rather than later, seeing as this is way over my pay grade. In the meantime, is anything else going to be happening I need to know about?”

I thought about it. “Some senior wolves will be here soon. One’s my adoptive brother, and his wife. They testified in the Heuter case. And do you know about the case in Richland, when Kyle’s home was invaded?”

Willis waggled a hand. “Mostly what was on the news, but Tony’s told me a few things.”

“Well, another was the wolves’ liaison with the sane Cantrip guy, Armstrong, when that was cleared up. I’d also bet that Jesse’s mother and my own are on their way.”

Jesse shook her head. “I headed them both off, Mercy, but you need to call Margi so she can hear you’re OK for herself. Christy was babbling but I calmed her down.”

Her voice was small, and I sighed, slinging an arm round her.

“Let me guess. You’re not safe here, this is her fault because of Guayota, and she didn’t ask about Adam until you told her he was alright. How am I doing?”

“Three for three.”

“But she cared enough to ring, kiddo, and having Darryl and Auriele take off at a dead run from the breakfast table would have freaked her out. Still, when things calm down a bit I’m sending her back to Eugene whether she likes it or not. You do not need her dumping on you.”

Willis had met Christy during the Guayota mess and gave Jesse a sympathetic look but kept to his own agenda.

“So no worried mothers. Can I ask what these senior wolves want and if there’s anything I should do about it?”

“Beyond giving us general support I don’t really know, Detective.” I spoke carefully. “When Cantrip turned up, Adam … informed higher authority, and his phone was in his pocket, still connected, when he was shot. You saw me use it after I’d got the tourniquets on, and the people who are arriving were already scrambling. The initial order was because with Adam seriously injured they could keep the pack under control. Wolves more dominant than Adam are in short supply.”

“Alright, I understand that.”

“Now things have evolved, I’m not sure what they’ll want. Depends what happens about Cantrip, I suppose.”
“Yeah. You have any guesses about that?”

“Not really, except I’ll bet they claim Preskylovitch was rogue and the others innocents obeying orders. One bad apple in the nice, shiny barrel. Exceeding authority blah blah. Just like Heuter, and Bennet.”

“Bennet?”

“The one who got left out of the story about the Richland case. He hired the mercenaries involved.”

“Cantrip hired that done?”

“A rogue agent did.” With vamp money playing vamp politics, but that was another story. “But a Cantrip rogue is just one who actually does what most of them fantasise about. I meant what I said to Taylor, Detective Willis — Cantrip doesn’t screen for anti-fae or anti-wolf bigots, it welcomes them and they fit right in.”

Jenny nodded, giving me an oddly apologetic look. “I spoke about this with Adam, Detective Willis, after the late Agents Orton and Kent tried to detain Mercy without due process during the Guayota case. There is apparently hard evidence that quite a few senior Cantrip people have links with the John Lauren Society or Bright Future. I would imagine those stories will shortly leak. But the big unknown is Preskylovitch’s implication of captive wolves, and maybe fae too. If that story breaks, and it’s as bad as it sounds, I doubt they’ll survive as an agency. If not, maybe they’ll wriggle out of it with some scapegoats and a new broom.”

Willis was pondering that when his two-way crackled.

“Would Charles, Anna, and Asil No Last Names be your senior wolves?”

“They would.”

“Do you need to escort them? The manitou’s still down by the Yukon.”

The idea of me escorting Charles and Asil was so absurd I couldn’t help a grin. “No. Is KEPR still live out there?”

“Yeah.”

Willis gave orders to let them in, and I flipped on the TV on the kitchen side — Jesse likes to watch stuff everywhere. Taylor and her cameraman were as ever on the ball, and as the image came up both Willis and Jenny breathed in sharply. Charles couldn’t be mistaken for anything but Native American, even in the power suits he sometimes wore, and today he was in a magnificent beaded and fringed jacket over dark jeans. His long hair was in a single braid, and as he walked past the tarped Yukon towards the manitou there was reverence in his look. Combined with his power it made him look wise as well as dangerous, like pictures of the great nineteenth-century warriors, and as he approached, Anna and Asil behind him, it raised its head, silver-on-gold eyes brightening. Charles stopped maybe ten feet away, made a gesture I didn’t recognise, and then he, Anna, and Asil all looked down, tilting their heads and not moving an inch as the manitou leaned forward and smelled them as it had Adam and me. As it began to pull back Charles straightened and said something, and there was a short conversation before they headed on to the house. Taylor tried to intercept, the cameraman on her heels, but Charles’s stoniest look sent her back a step, and Anna patted her arm with a sunny smile.

“He’s Mercy’s brother, and having her and Jesse kidnapped and terrorised by Cantrip has left him
grumpy. I expect he’ll have a statement for you later, though. And good job earlier, Ms Taylor.”

Taylor was left with a bemused expression that made me grin, and when Asil bowed to kiss her hand without breaking stride I couldn’t help laughing. Willis gave me another of his repertoire of looks.

“Asil’s old-fashioned that way.” And plain old. “Hey, Jesse, make some fresh coffee and two chocolates? And shove another load of pasties in the oven?”

“Sure, Mercy.”

I went to meet them at the door, and to my complete surprise Charles swept me into a long, tight hug even before Asil shut the door in the enterprising Taylor’s face.

“Oof, Charles, I’m OK. Just bruises.”

He put me down at last, looking me over carefully, eyes bright. “So I have seen and heard, Mercy. But you could easily not have been. We owe the manitou much.”

“I know. And Jesse’s badly shaken. Hey, Anna. Asil.”

Anna gave me a hug too, less exorbitantly but with a little Omega wash, and though coyotes don’t have omegas my furry self sighed contentedly. Asil kissed my hand as well.

“Mi princesa, I like your style.” He meant it too, and grinned at my slight flush. “And your new friend. Life is going to be very interesting for a while.”

“Isn’t it just? What was it saying?”

“I asked it to wait before reading us,” Charles said. “Given my age and Asil’s it would take too long when things are pressing.”

And now was not the time to be provoking questions about werewolf ages.

“Right. Samuel says you’re up to date with the broadcast and all?”

“Yes. You made some very good decisions in an impossible situation.” Praise from Charles and Asil at the same time was disconcerting and he gave me a true smile. “Coyote luck, little sister, but you ran with it superbly and we’re running with it too, as hard as we can. How are things here?”

I marshalled scattered thoughts. “Adam’s still in healing coma upstairs, pack’s been interviewed as witnesses and are mostly in the basement, and Willis is here until he can speak to Adam. Yukon’s going to be moved soon, bodies and all. Willis says the FBI are coming in?”

“So Da tells me.”

“Is he pulling strings?”

“Undoubtedly. But so are they. You have, among other things, given the Bureau a weapon against Cantrip it has no intention of wasting. The Heuter case left many people very angry indeed, and you have spilled a great deal of Cantrip’s blood into the water.”

“Good. Are they looking for the captives?”

“That is one thing driving their haste, yes.”
I’d been trying not to think about the fact that if Cantrip did have illegal captives they’d be scrambling to vanish them, and nodded.

“Right. Oh, and there’s also a Hanford bigwig on the way. It’s the Manitou he needs to speak to but I imagine I’ll have to introduce him.”

“Yes.” He smiled again. “I thought you were … over-imagining with that, but it’s proving another very good idea. So be nice to the bigwig, please. If visible results are possible rapidly, it will be very helpful.”

“I’m hoping. Anyway, Jesse’s making fresh coffee, so come say hello to her and Willis. Jenny Trevelyan’s there too, with Warren and Kyle.”

Kyle had met Asil before, during the Bennet mess, but neither he nor Jenny knew Charles and Anna, and Willis didn’t know any of them. Watching them try to process Charles being intimidatingly impassive as he sized them up, sunny Anna as his wife, and Asil to boot was interesting. Warren was calm, Kyle and Jenny had wide eyes but knew enough to look down, and though Willis met Charles’s and Asil’s gazes for a second he too looked away quickly, face tight. But I was more interested that there wasn’t anything like as much Alpha tension between Charles and Asil as I’d expected. It wasn’t only Anna, I thought, though she was certainly helping, but that they were hunting together and the prey was more important. And most of all I was interested that as soon as basic introductions were done Charles and Anna went straight to Jesse, Anna giving her a hug that was all Omega, and Charles gravely praising her courage in as warm a voice as I’d ever heard from him. Some stiffness ebbed from Jesse’s shoulders, and I saw Willis’s wariness joined by approval. I’d never doubted Charles’s kindness, however scary he usually was, but he always had several reasons for doing anything and for all her lesser experience Anna had made him a better people person.

Like me, Anna preferred chocolate, and when others had coffee and we were all seated at the table, Charles let her take point. I knew they’d done it that way consulting on the Heuter case, and the surprise Jenny and Willis couldn’t help showing suggested how effective it was.

“Detective Willis.” Anna gave a smile that had him smiling back despite himself. “Thank you sincerely for all you’ve done today. I expect you recognise Charles and me from the Heuter case, so you know I’ve seen law enforcement at its best and worst, and you rank high in the scale.”

He didn’t actually say ‘Aw, shucks’, but looked as if he was thinking about it. I swallowed a laugh and saw Jenny and Jesse do the same.

“I also expect you’ve been pretty frustrated by Mercy not telling you things, and I’m afraid there are things we won’t be telling you either. But” — Anna’s smile became dazzling — “seeing as Mercy has set openness against Cantrip’s secrecy, we may speak more freely than usual. What you pass on to your superiors — and when — is entirely up to you, but you might want to frame those decisions … carefully.”

Willis’s eyes narrowed as he reassessed Anna in all sorts of ways. “I hear you.”

“Good. Mercy tells me you’ve heard the FBI is taking over?”

He nodded. “So I’m told, but if it was our local Feebs they’d be here already, so I’m guessing someone’s flying in.”

Anna nodded back. “You guess rightly. The KEPR broadcast went national very quickly, and when that video hit the Beltway, well, sparks started flying. All wolves have pretty much had it
with Cantrip anyway, and after the Heuter case so have quite a lot of other people. Including the FBI, who reached the very top quickest and have jurisdiction in this case with a remit to find out what Cantrip has been up to. The Executive Assistant Director of the National Security Branch is dealing with the DC end, where there will be emergency Congressional hearings, and one of his Associate Executive Directors is flying in here to soothe Mercy and Adam and speak to the manitou, if it’s willing.”

Willis did a lot more reassessing, and so did I. Bran had been busy.

“You’re empowered to speak for all wolves?”

Anna gave him another dazzling smile. “I’m a bit young for that, Detective Willis. I can say that the news cycle will soon have statements from many Alphas supporting the line Mercy has taken, and withdrawing all co-operation with Cantrip as out of control and unfit for purpose. The Yakama Nation and the Fae will also be issuing strongly worded statements.” Anna’s tone didn’t change from cheerfully informative, but Willis’s face tightened at the implications. “May I ask what Kennewick PD will be saying?”

He was still for a moment, then shrugged slightly. “They haven’t pulled me, which ought to mean they’re backing me, but it may just be they’re too afraid of the manitou to try bulling in here. And most of the time the answer would be ‘as little as possible’, but nothing about this is usual, and if they feel the kind of political heat you’re suggesting …”

“Mmm. That’s one reason we thought you might like to be ahead of them with such news.” He nodded appreciation, eyebrows rising, and Anna gave him another smile. “Here’s the other. Are you aware that besides the FBI in Boston, you and Detectives Montenegro and Riebold are the only law enforcement officials in the country to have asked for werewolf help?”

Willis blinked. “We are?”

“Yes, you are. Witches have been consulted, and some fae before their secession. But not wolves. Yet Detective Montenegro persuaded you in the Guayota case, and you persuaded Detective Riebold yesterday. Another thing you won’t know is that since Charles and I helped the FBI on the Heuter case, they have become seriously interested in getting scent evidence made legally admissible. So have others, and we’ve been talking to a few people about possibilities. And now Mercy has put the idea out there, spectacularly, there will be a push from several agencies, including the FBI, CIA, and DEA to get a bill passed.”

She let him digest that.

“You think it’ll pass?”

“I think it should, and there will be a lot of pressure on its side. It isn’t straightforward — scent isn’t easy, there’s no manual, and there’ll have to be some kind of credential. Additionally, not all wolves who are capable are suitable. And if it happens much of it will be major federal cases, at least while it’s working out and resources are short. Meantime a public face is needed, and though we had been thinking of one of the FBI’s larger open cases, after this morning you and the Tri-Cities PDs are everyone’s first choice. So, would you be willing to put your weight behind it?”

This time Willis stared at her, before remembering his manners and dropping his eyes. “My weight? There’s not much of that at the level you’re talking about.”

“That was yesterday, amigo.” Asil’s accented voice was soft and amused. “Today Mercy has shown you to the world, and the world likes what it saw. Nor will it be looking away for a while.”
"Asil is right, Detective. We don’t yet have hard data, but you came over very well on TV and showed great courage, scruple, and sense in very difficult conditions. You coped with the manitou, Mercy in full flight" — Anna gave me a smile — “and the camera she imposed on you. You were also willing to call Cantrip on what they did on your own authority, despite the political risk. So you have credit with humans and wolves, and you’re already interested in how we can help law enforcement."

He thought about it some more. “What do you have in mind?”

“A wolf, or Mercy, on call for serious crime scenes and paid as a consultant. Until accreditation is passed it’ll be information received rather than admissible evidence, but it’ll be extra data you can work with. Documentation of that data and any assistance it gives you for state and federal lawmakers to consider. And when it does help catch the bad guys, public statements saying so.”

“If the brass agrees, I can go with that.”

“Good. I believe they will. And thank you again, Detective Willis. We’ll be pushing for integrated SAR as well — wolves can do a lot in—”

Anna broke off, looking round as Mary Jo knocked lightly on the door frame, eyes glued to the floor.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. Mercy, cars are all moved and the FD’s here with a heavy lifter. It’s the shift I should be on.”

“Work with them, by all means, Mary Jo. FD’s good. But I don’t want any of the pack on their own until we know Cantrip doesn’t have any more kidnapping teams out there.”

“OK.” She looked at me and Willis, avoiding Charles’s and Asil’s looks. “Moving that Yukon’s gonna be tough. Engine block’s completely separated, and so are the front seats with what’s left of Orton and Kent. Chief says you’re gonna want a screen, Detective Willis, or when we lift the chassis it’ll be splatter-movie time again.”

“Hell. Right. I’ll come.”

“Hang on a minute, Detective.” I chased my thought down. “Mary Jo, ask the manitou if it can fuse the gravel under the Yukon into a slab. I bet it can, and then you could just drill in eyebolts and lift the whole thing intact. Heat might pop the tyres, but I can’t see that matters.”

Mary Jo stared at me. “Ask the manitou. Right.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll try. It would certainly be easier.”

“Oh, and take Taylor with you so everyone understands what’s happening.”

Asil’s rich laugh made her eyes drop, and his voice was almost apologetic. “No harm to you and yours, Mary Jo. I am just becoming an aficionado of Mercy’s style. Do not mind this old lobo.”

She risked a glance and gave Asil a quick smile. “Join the club, sir.”

I hadn’t always been popular with Mary Jo, and I appreciated the compliment. Asil laughed again and Willis stood, shaking his head.

“No offence, Ms Hauptman, but you make my brain hurt. I agree it’s worth a try, though. When will it be possible to talk to your husband?”
“Another hour or two at least, Detective, I’m afraid. Bone takes time, even for wolves, and when Adam wakes he’ll need to eat and settle a bit. I’ll let you know.”

“Alright. I’ll see to this and talk to the brass about the other thing.”

He left with Mary Jo, and we watched KEPR as they approached the manitou, Mary Jo calling her Chief across. While she explained, arms gesturing, Charles was on the phone to Bran, and the rest of us were listening to Jenny telling Anna and Asil about the contract she’d agreed with Morris. I’d shifted to sit beside Jesse and let her lean against me, but she straightened and Charles and Jenny both fell silent as the manitou padded over to the Yukon, lowered its head, and let loose a wave of magic the echo of which rolled right through the house, making me tingle. Charles obviously felt it, but others didn’t. The gravel under the Yukon glowed and blurred, tyres popped with muffled reports, the chassis settled, and the bottom of the tarp melted, but a second wash of magic cooled things down again and the manitou gave Mary Jo a glance and went back to where it had been. There was a thoughtful silence as Mary Jo and the FD chief scuffed loose gravel away from the irregular slab the Yukon now sat on — or was fused to. It looked as if the wheel rims had sunk in. Asil sighed.

“Such marvellous simplicity, querida. How did you think to do such a thing?”

He seemed serious, and I shrugged. “Guayota melted his way out of my garage, and Mounts St Helens and Hood are within the Basin. Didn’t you smell the magma in the manitou’s magic, underneath earth and water? Fusing gravel didn’t seem a leap, and I want that Yukon gone.”

“But of course.”

“That was magma?” Anna sounded interested. “I just got that there was something hot. I don’t think I’ve ever smelled magma.”

“Me either before Guayota, but it’s distinctive.”

“Huh. Still, Mercy, Asil’s right that you are on a roll today.”

“Yes. The spirits are with you.”

Charles was serious too, but I’d never sensed what he called spirits, and shrugged again. “Thank them for me, then?”

“I will.” He stood. “Others will soon be here — the Hanford person for one. I would like to see Adam myself, and he will soon wake. Anna will make that easier. Asil, help Warren to let the pack know what is happening?”

“Surely.”

“And Ms Trevellyan, perhaps you and Kyle could begin listing the grounds on which Adam, Mercy, and Jesse can sue Cantrip for a sum greater than their annual budget. We would like to put them under as much pressure as we can, in every way we can.” Charles gave her a card. “These people in D.C. will deliver writs, and I would like it done tomorrow at the latest and today if at all possible.”

Lawyers really did have shark smiles. “My pleasure, ah —”

“Charles is fine. When I have to, Anna and I go by Smith, as we did in the Heuter case.”

“Just don’t shorten it,” I told them, and gave Jesse a hand up. “He’s no charlie. Come on, kiddo,
let’s grab those pasties and go check on your dad.”
Darryl was standing guard in the bedroom with Auriele, watching the Kennewick FD team on KEPR drilling the slab the Manitou had created and screwing in steel eyebolts. They both dropped their eyes as Charles and Anna came in behind me, but they’d met Charles before and even as I put down the tray of pasties Anna’s presence washed calm through the room. Her friendly handshakes as Charles introduced her gave them an extra dose of Omega zen and I could see their surprise at the effect, but they were too sensible to make any comment.

“How is he, Samuel?”

“Still under, but he’ll be waking before too long.”

I lifted the blanket. To the eye Adam’s knees looked healed, if raw, but skin regrows a lot faster than bone knits, and he wouldn’t be up and about for a while yet. I let Charles and Jesse see, and covered Adam again, letting Jesse sit on the bed to hold his hand and leaning against the wall by Darryl.

“Grab a pasty each if you want, while they’re hot, but only one. And no feeding Medea, Jesse. Food’s getting low.”

They did want, and so did Samuel. Darryl gave me a smile, though his eyes were on the TV.

“Thanks, Mercy. As soon as the drive’s clear I’ll order in from Benny’s. Good thinking about moving that Yukon, too. The Fire Chief’s face as Mary Jo explained it was priceless.”

“Gets it shifted and shows the Manitou being helpful. But listen up, there’s stuff you need to know.”

I ran through what Anna had told Willis, and Darryl whistled silently.

“We’re going after Cantrip full bore? With the Feebs in support?”

“Yes.” Charles’s voice was back to his usual precision. “Da was not happy about Heuter, or Bennet, and the renewed threats to Mercy by Orton and Kent yesterday had him pacing. He would have done something anyway, and this morning was beyond bearing even before Mercy handed him Cantrip’s head on a platter.”

“No argument here. And the Feebs?”

“I think they’re mostly fed up with Cantrip’s lack of professionalism.” Anna shrugged. “The Heuter case also really offended them. And they genuinely want our forensic help.”

“To which Cantrip is opposed without much reason?”

“So we are told.” Charles was watching Adam, but gave Darryl a glance. “You’ve known the pack longer than Mercy, saving Joel. Could you make a list of those you think capable of scent work at a crime scene?”
Darryl frowned. “Interesting question. Mercy’s got the best nose of anyone, no question. I’ve seen it when we’re hunting, and so have others though they don’t all like admitting it.”

“Coyotes smell better than wolves.”

It was an old joke between us, and he gave me a grin.

“Yeah, they really do. Still smell like wet dog in the rain.” It was the standard reply and I stuck my tongue out at him. “It’s not just scenting, you’re after, though — it’s picking the smells apart to interpret them. And being able to describe them usefully.”

“Tell me.” Charles let some rueful amusement show. “Experience helps, and I can give some instruction if Adam is willing. Anna’s already far better at it than most wolves.”

She grinned. “Took me a while. He’s been measuring it with some fancy lab gear he doesn’t let me touch. I hate to think how many strips of paper soaked in this and that he’s had me sniffing at.”

Darryl raised his eyebrows and Charles shrugged. “Medical biologists are only just getting around to quantifying smell. Published animal work’s more useful. Wild wolves’ sense of smell is about fifty times better than a human’s. Based on Aspen Creek, werewolves as wolves come in a bit lower, about forty to forty-five, and as human a lot lower, maybe fifteen to twenty, but it can be improved. Using dilution of a scent solution as the measure I come in about fifty-two as wolf and I’ve got Anna as wolf up to forty-nine or fifty. We know it applies to distance as well, but I haven’t worked out how to quantify that with any precision.”

“Huh. I’d really like to see your data. What do coyotes score?”

“Higher, according to some papers I read. Sixty, maybe. But for some reason Mercy also smells magic very keenly, where most wolves don’t unless it’s right on them. I can’t quantify that at all, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she was higher still.”

“How far away is the dead pigeon? Ask Supercoyote!”

I got a grin from Jesse, which was what I’d intended, but Charles stayed serious.

“Maybe. If you have the chance to ask your not-exactly father I’d be interested. I’m pretty sure I get some boost from my mother’s magic.”

That was an intriguing thought. “Alright, but there’s the magic of Guayota’s I claimed as well. And we don’t need Coyote turning up just now.” A certain resignation came into my voice. “Though I’m doubtless being interesting enough, and they’ll all want to meet the manitou.”

Auriele gave me a look. “All who?”

“Thunderbird and his kind. Besides Gordon and Coyote, I’ve met Bear, Wolf, Bobcat, Snake, Raven, and Hawk. Otter, Salmon, and Owl I know exist, and there’s probably a Beaver and Cougar. I don’t know about Lynx — Bobcat might cover it. And I’ve no idea about prey species, but there could be a Deer, Elk, and Moose, I suppose. Even a Rabbit, maybe. They all figure in Indian stories.”

Auriele digested what I’d said and frowned. “Salmon are predators?”

“You bet, however they may be prey to bears. Insects, crustaceans, and small fish when they’re young, bigger fish in the ocean. Anyway, point is the manitou matters to those beings too. You heard Gordon last night.”
She nodded. “I did, but I’ve been trying not to think about that too much. I know you’d told us about him, Mercy, but seeing Thunderbird was a shock.”

“Gordon’s good people. Good raptors, anyway. Raven’s OK too. The others aren’t so keen on humans, especially Anglos.”

“With reason.” There was a slight edge to Charles’s voice. “Anglos have not been good for those species, nor people generally. But you are right they are interested. All the spirits are.”

Medea got up and hopped off the bed. She did have some sense.

“I bet. But let’s cross that bridge when we have to. Adam’s waking.”

There was a bustle towards the bed. When Adam’s eyes opened they were all wolf, but as the growl started Anna laid a hand lightly on his shoulder and the yellow eyes froze, blinked surprised contentment, and faded to his warm, human brown.

“Anna.” His voice was rough with pain. “My thanks. My wolf is not happy. Mercy?”

“Right here. Jesse too.”

We let him see and smell us, and his muscles relaxed. Samuel took over for a moment, getting him to try lifting his legs, and he hissed.

“Hurts.”

“Surprise. Eat, stay still for a few hours. I’ll give you as strong a shot as I can so you can talk to Detective Willis, then change. It’ll be bad, but when you change back I think you’ll be mobile with a stick.”

He grunted agreement. “Police are still here?”

Samuel slid some pillows behind him so he could half-sit.

“Most of the world’s still here. Mercy can explain.”

Adam’s eyes had focused on the TV, where the Yukon on its slab was in mid-air, and he blinked.

“What the … ?”

“Mercy can explain that too.”

“Actually, Charles, Anna, and Darryl can. I’m going to smell Adam for a bit.”

I climbed carefully onto the bed and lay beside him with an arm resting lightly over his warm chest, breathing him in and listening to their accounts of what he’d missed, while he ate five pasties in as many minutes. It sounded just as lunatic as I’d expected, but there was no mistaking the approval in their voices, which pleased and soothed me. Still, I hadn’t altogether realised quite what a spectacle I’d been when I’d gone to meet the police and cameras, gold-eyed and covered in blood, and one comment of Auriele’s opened another perspective for me.

“It was Mercy’s rage that nailed Willis, Adam, not just her eyes. You could see it crackling round her, and you didn’t have to be wolf to know she was on a knife-edge, nor that she was speaking truth. Soft-voiced, like you get when you’re real close to losing it, with spikes all her own. The security cam footage was shocking, but no-one who’d seen and heard her was surprised. Once Willis believed Jesse had been threatened the way she was, he was on her side. And from what
Anna and Charles have been saying, I’m guessing the same happened as far away as DC.”

“Da agrees.” Charles was carefully not meeting Adam’s eyes. “I’ve seen Mercy mad often enough, and calculating how to get even, but this was something else. It could have been disastrous. But she wasn’t just mad about herself and you, she was mad about Jesse, and it showed. They hurt my cub, and I will see those responsible dead for it. And humans understood that perfectly. We don’t have hard data yet, but preliminary polling shows real shock and fascinated approval, extending from Mercy and Jesse to the Manitou and Willis, with shared rage against Cantrip.”

“The Heuter case made a big impact.” Anna’s voice was filled with the calm she brought everyone. “This hits exactly the same fault lines and seems to have set off the earthquake. Preliminary breakdowns showed women, African and Asian Americans, Hispanics, and everyone under forty approving Mercy seven-to-one or better. And Bran made sure DC understood those numbers when he pulled the trigger. We didn’t want war, but appeasement hasn’t been working so well, and now Cantrip have declared war, whatever we want. But they’re finding they don’t have the allies or the public support they thought they had, not by a long mile. Speaking of which, Darryl, could you unmute the TV, please?”

He did, and I heard the flat, official voices of press spokesmen without opening my eyes. The White House declared itself deeply shocked, condemned the apparent actions of Cantrip agents, and announced that the Secretary of the Interior would be flying out to speak to the Manitou. I groaned softly and Adam patted my shoulder. Then the FBI announced that in light of the exceptionally shocking events in Kennewick, Cantrip was subject to Congressional and criminal enquiry, and that all Cantrip agents were hereby suspended until those enquiries were complete. No questions would be answered until they had something to say, which didn’t stop the reporters asking dozens of them, but an excited voiceover cut in. Alphas had also started making statements, stressing Cantrip’s targeting of human spouses and children and pointing out that it meant they could not in conscience forbid lethal reactions to any Cantrip agent who approached a pack member’s house. That voiceover was overridden in turn by an even more excited one, because the Gray Lords had issued their statement too, formally greeting the waking of the Manitou, before becoming a stinging snarl about what any preternatural could expect from the blood-soaked agency that had sheltered Les Heuter, followed by a declaration that any fae was free to assist the werewolves as they wished. And, this being the Pacific North-West, KEPR added to that an equally stiffly worded statement by the Yakama Nation about the sacredness of the Manitou, and condemning Cantrip for refusing to honour my denial of the identity of a tribal elder who had saved lives. But then the soundtrack changed completely because, middle of the working day or no, a crowd had surrounded Cantrip’s DC headquarters, their chanting ugly enough to make me sit up and look, my hand finding Adam’s. They were all ages, predominantly African-American, with quite a few Hispanics and some Anglos, and though they weren’t jostling the line of sweating police in front of the building they had already found their slogan and were using it like a sledgehammer.


Some of me was dumbfounded, and most of me got it immediately. Not many people pegged me as Native American, because they thought I was Hispanic, but no-one thought I was Anglo. There was an attitude that came with that, rarer than it had been when I was younger but still there, and what I’d said to Taylor had obviously rung bells with a lot of people. Protesting against discrimination these days is often seen as flogging a dead horse, or just whining, but All-American prejudice remains very real and I’d given those who most suffered it a new outlet for their resentment. The crowd might have had a wolf or two, and some half-fae, but it wasn’t fear of the preternatural they were protesting — it was all fear of otherness and ready violence at the urgings of bigotry.

Anglos had no monopoly on that, of course, but Cantrip’s ethos didn’t encourage anyone from a minority, and its long use of Les Heuter as a poster boy had given it a feel of his father’s white, right, and might politics long before what he really was had been exposed. Now that was coming home to roost, but this wasn’t something I’d foreseen for a second, and my pulse spiked. Jesse brought me back from growing panic by climbing carefully over Adam and hugging me, her face buried in my shoulder and her voice making calm sense.

“Hey, Mom, didn’t you say last night that it was having you, Dad, and Joel pack-bonded that interested the Manitou? Those people just understand that too.”

Jesse always called me Mercy, never Mom, and I was registering that when Coyote’s voice slid sideways into my mind.

She’s right, not-exactly daughter. You should listen to her. And you’re being wonderfully interesting. Even my pesky sisters agree.

“Are you going to show up?”

Soon. Look forward to it. And be nice to Wolf.

I didn’t realise I’d spoken aloud until Jesse shifted and I looked up.

“I saw who going to show up?”

I took some breaths, holding Adam and Jesse tight. “Coyote. And he is, soon, but not yet. Others too.” More breaths helped. “Charles, I didn’t expect this. Is it bad?”

“Only for Cantrip, unless the DC police are stupid. It means we can put their hiring record out there straight away, with the JLS and Bright Future associations. They’re way under quota for every minority, and they’ve been skating on it because they’re new.”

Charles had his phone out well before he’d finished, and I found the courage to look down at Adam.

“I’m sorry, Adam, I didn’t mean to drop you in all this. I was just so angry with Cantrip and all their sh— rubbish.”

His hand tightened on mine. “Don’t you dare apologise. Those people’s rage is their own, love, it helps us, and if it didn’t I couldn’t care less.” The endearment hit me like a brick, and I lent into Adam and Jesse both. “Shh. Shh. I would have been uncontrolled anger, but you directed yours. Sow the wind, and harness the whirlwind.”

There was something wrong with that, but my panic receded, helped on its way by Anna’s calm voice and another Omega wash.

“Cantrip made the play, Mercy. You just keep on keeping on. Did Coyote say when he might be along? Or which others?”

“Soon. And he only mentioned Wolf, but implied more.” I looked at Adam. “He said to be nice to Wolf, if he came. I think he meant Wolf won’t hold a grudge if we don’t.”

“A grudge about what?”
I told Anna about the slight friction there had been, and Adam growled softly, but his eyes stayed brown.

“He knows you are mine. But we should warn wolves to be submissive. He is very Alpha.”

“Wonderful.” Anna sighed. “I am so glad I’m outside all the testosterone games. And I don’t suppose my Omega zen will affect him at all.”

The idea amused Adam as well as me, but I shrugged. “No idea, especially if he’s in human form. But if all these humans and whatever are going to be turning up I ought to warn the manitou, and we’re going to need support and a bunch of stuff. Security for the whole perimeter, someone to do routine press, lawyers to back up Jenny and Kyle. And food — I was due to shop today.”

“Food’s done, Mercy.” Darryl had been using his phone and something had amused him. “Benny’s for now and a complete restock from Yoke’s as soon as their van’s free. Clerk there asked after you all, and if the manitou wanted anything better-tasting, on the house.”

Anna grinned at me but Jesse shivered against my shoulder and Adam reached up to stroke her hair.

“Un huh. It said that form wasn’t equipped to digest. Good thing too, though the field could use the manure.” Jesse snorted. “Pushing it to where it’s funny helps, kiddo, even if it’s sick. You were right on track earlier.”

I shook my head slightly at the enquiring glances, and Anna took the conversation back to other things we would need before she and Charles went to talk to Jenny and let Willis know Adam was awake. He must have been back in the house because it was only a few minutes before he showed, Charles behind him with Jenny. He listened carefully to Samuel explain the local anaesthetic he’d just given Adam would be effective for only fifteen minutes, and after that Adam would need to change to help the healing.

“Won’t that, ah, break everything again?”

“No, but it will hurt worse than getting shot in the first place. Clock’s ticking, Detective.”

Willis asked Adam for permission to record and got it, promising Jenny a copy. He didn’t waste time on events that were on the video, but did want to know why Adam had pocketed a gun before answering the door, and had taken the precaution of having his phone connected to what I’d called higher authorities. Adam’s voice was less rough while the anaesthetic had a grip, and he ran flatly through the pack’s kidnapping by Bennet and his mercenaries, including Bennet’s murder of Peter.

“They were using an experimental tranq. Didn’t work too well, but enough to let them get heavy silver cuffs on. Told Armstrong I’d be shooting next time. But they didn’t have guns out this morning, and the tranq guns are too bulky to conceal, so mine was just back-up. Habit. Didn’t spot the sleeve holster, and most guns that’d fit one are too small calibre to be much threat to a wolf outside a clean head shot, even using silver. The phone was politics.”

Willis was taken aback by Adam’s threat assessment but stuck to the point that interested him. “So you’ve been kidnapped by Cantrip before and seen them do murder.”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “Not a thing people usually have form for.”

Jesse had been kidnapped before too, but that was purely wolf business, though human mercenaries
had again provided muscle in numbers. I gave her a wink Willis didn’t see.

“Armstrong was the Cantrip agent who organised the cover-up?”

“Yes. Lin Armstrong.”

“Why did you agree to it?”

“Politics. A separate justice, but adequate.”

“I’m wondering if there was payback motivating today, as well as whatever else.”

“Maybe, but not from any of Bennet’s immediate people.”

“Because?”

“All dead.”

Willis thought about it and decided not to go there. “But there could be others who weren’t on that … operation?”

“Could be. But Preskylovitch didn’t want me, except under his thumb. He wanted Mercy.”

“Yeah, he did. I’m not sure I understand why, except to get to whoever she called yesterday. Do you?”

“Not clearly.” Adam reached for my hand. “But Mercy gets mixed up in things. Cleared Zee. Killed the River Devil. Saw off Guayota. Orton and Kent had a line of bull about using the Humanity and Patriot Acts to detain her for public safety, but that was a screen.”

“For?”

“First time, it was a plan to control the pack and use us for domestic black ops. Talk to Torbett. Watchdog Times knows about it. Yesterday and today I’m not sure, but I’d bet panic about the manitou. They’re the people who ought to be set to deal with a new preternatural, and aren’t. Mercy’s doing the job they should have been and couldn’t begin to. So a desk somewhere thought grabbing her would put them back in control.”

“Preskylovitch?”

“No. He wasn’t a desk. Ex-forces. And if they’re really holding wolves for experiment, it’s not in their declared budget. Preskylovitch might have been in charge of the facility, but he didn’t appoint himself or find the money. Someone in DC. Charles says the Feebs are looking.”

“So I hear. Alright, Mr Hauptman, that makes sense of a sort. But that customised gun and ammo say planning, not panic. Ballistics are still taking it apart, but your wife was right. The rounds were way big but underpowered, designed to smash and fragment, not kill.”

“I felt it. Been shot often enough to know what regular bullets feel like. But you’re right. Cantrip have chucked a lot of money at Blackwood Corp for specialty ammo to use on wolves — silver Black Talon and an exploding round. Might have come from there.”

“We can follow that up. Thank you, Mr Hauptman, you’ve been very helpful. Anything else I should know?”

“Kent had fae blood — maybe a grandparent — but didn’t know it until we told him, when they
tried to detain Mercy during the Guayota thing. Jenny was there. It’ll be incidental, but that might have festered.”

“OK, noted.”

“And two other things. If the manitou stays here for all these people who are coming, we’re going to need some serious perimeter security. Jim Gutstein’s on it, but KPD help would be good.”

“We’re on it too. Pasco and Richland will be helping out. And we’re keeping the media well back, except the KEPR team.”

“Right. Thanks. And two, none of the Feebs or any protection details brings guns into the house. Outside, alright. Inside, no.”

“I’ll try.”

“Not negotiable. If they don’t like it they can stay outside.”

Adam’s voice was hoarsening again with renewed pain, and I could feel his rising desire to change.

“Time’s up, Detective.”

He could hear the pain too, and we left Charles and Samuel to see Adam through his change. Darryl and Auriele went with Jesse and Medea to her room, Jenny headed swiftly back to the kitchen, and Willis and I followed more slowly. At the bottom of the stairs I paused.

“Do you need anything else?”

“Need? No. Plenty to report.” He gave me yet another of those looks. “Off any record, Ms Hauptman, is there anything you can tell me about getting mixed up in things?”

I sat on the second-from-bottom step, and thought about it. After a moment he sat beside me. In the kitchen Anna stopped talking to Jenny and Kyle as she listened.

“Not really, but it’s true stuff happens to me. I can be rash, but it’s more than that. The bit of magic I have seems to be a magnet for trouble. Gordon thinks it’s because I stand between things somehow — half-Anglo and half-Blackfeet, non-wolf mated to a wolf, friends with several fae.” And a vampire. “Charles might tell you spirits follow me. But it’s all like Guayota, or yesterday. Christy snags a man she fancies in Reno, and God knows there have been enough of those, but this one’s a psycho volcano god and she gets scared and runs back to Adam, dragging it after. The manitou wakes up, you reasonably tell Detective Riebold to ask me to have a look, Cantrip freaks out, and here we all are.”

“Huh. And the River Devil?”

“A fae had a premonition it might be a good idea if Adam and I were there, and pulled some strings.”

“And you killed it. Guayota I think I’ve half-wrapped my head around, with a big dose of file under magic. Tell me to mind my own, but how in creation did you kill a thing that big?”

I shrugged. “Details are privileged, but roughly, drugged it senseless and cut out its heart.”

He looked at me. “Damned if I don’t believe you. God knows you’ve got the guts. And I’m remiss — Jerry and I never did say thank you yesterday, which I do now.” He looked down. “Truth to tell,
besides being scared witless, we were both shaken by the way you stopped us drawing. It’s an inbuilt reaction but your voice was like a clamp. I haven’t been pulled up like that since my first LT thought I was being dangerously stupid one time.”

I stared at him. “I was pulling on Adam’s Alpha mojo a bit, so you’d hear me, but it shouldn’t affect a human like that.”

“I’m not complaining, nor Jerry. You understood something we didn’t, and rightly took command.” He looked back at me. “When I had a chance to think about that I was interested. Protecting you should have been our responsibility, but you took protecting us as yours. And the techs. No hesitation.”

I tapped my chest. “Mrs Alpha here. After Adam I’m responsible for the pack.”

“But we’re not pack. Nor was Mr Arocha until you made him so.”

“It was all I could think of. And Joel was a friend.”

“Yeah, I get that. And you don’t leave anyone behind, no matter what. You were thinking about other people last night, too. Still are.” He stood. “Your husband was right — you’re doing what Cantrip should be and can’t. Luckily for us. I gotta go report, but … I don’t know how to put this. It’s all weird stuff, but are you expecting … unfolding weird stuff, or new weirder stuff, if that makes any sense?”

I was still absorbing what he’d said, and what he hadn’t needed to, but I couldn’t stop a rueful laugh.

“Perfect sense, and both, I’m afraid. There’ll be plenty of unfolding, but if I’m a magnet, the manitou’s a whole mountain of them. The Gray Lords will be as fixated as everyone else until they’ve come to terms of some kind with it. So will Native Americans in the Basin, and probably beyond. The first people knew the manitou here before it went to sleep, and tales have come down. Don’t misunderstand — it’s not Indian any more than it’s human, but you might want to ask the Yakama Nation for some relevant stories.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks.” He pulled a police two-way out of a pocket. “That goes to me on one channel and the uniform sergeant on the gate on the other. We’ll let you know when the Feebs or the Hanford guy turn up. And Ms Trevellyan’s assistant.”

“Right.” I liked Andrea, who’d probably be in preternatural heaven. “Oh, and some deliveries are due — Benny’s and Yoke’s. You might have noticed wolves get through a lot of food.”

“Yeah. You get through a lot of everything, far as I can tell.”
Fortunately the Benny’s delivery arrived before any of the converging top dogs, bigwigs, and who knew what. It saved me from a call to my mom that was making me want to cry again, and I only let the drooling pack up from the basement after I’d diverted five boxes upstairs, and snagged their choices for Jenny and Kyle, as well my own. Being Supercoyote worked up an appetite. There was some ritual grumbling but they were more bothered by the security restrictions on their movement and worried about the effects on their families.

“I know it’s a pain, and I’ve heard about Cantrip agents being suspended, but there could still be people running wild. And not just Cantrip. This sticks a large pin in every wolf-hater. Suck it up while Adam’s down, and as soon as he’s up, we’ll review.”

Paul might have argued with me, but not with Asil there. A certain wariness in everyone’s body language told me he’d backed someone down over something, but it didn’t matter. They could all see the sense of my orders, and they were more interested in the rippling — tsunami-ing — effects of what had happened. The speed of the Fae’s statement had surprised everyone, but with Jenny and Kyle present they couldn’t discuss Bran’s known but never detailed negotiations with the Gray Lords, so conversation slid to the demonstration in DC. Some of the Anglos among them didn’t get it, but non-Anglos had seen exactly what I had, and Kyle brought us all up short by telling us that Pink anti-Cantrip rallies were being scheduled for the weekend in San Francisco and DC. Then he brought me up shorter by telling me the organisers wanted to print tees and placards with a KEPR image of me talking to the manitou, and were seeking contractual permission. Morris had already agreed for KEPR. I rested my head gently in my hands and Asil patted my arm.

“Is there a slogan, amigo?”

Kyle laughed. “They’re still arguing about it, but I’m betting not. Picture’s worth a thousand words. There’ll be some ‘K-K-Kantrip!’ shirts and placards, though — it’s too good not to use.”

“Indeed. Then I would suggest you agree, mi princesa. The more who join our cause the merrier.”

He had a point and I raised my head wearily.

“Yeah. But. Anna, can you find out what Bran thinks, please?” She pulled out her phone. “And Kyle, any money has to be split like the KEPR payments. I won’t say no to money I can put into the garage, but I tithe to cleaning up the Basin too.”

“Smart. And there’s a slogan that works.” Jenny spoke round a mouthful of pizza without losing a fraction of clarity. “Not anti-Cantrip. That image, with Clean Up the Basin. One of the big manufacturers with green smarts and serious distribution, Kyle. Lapel pins too. Half their take to Hanford, as well as half of Mercy’s. I can do the contracts.”


“And plasters me across the nation’s chests.”

But I didn’t mind the idea as much as I expected. With the way the video of Tim attacking me had circulated I sometimes felt half the world had seen me being raped. The other half seeing me with
the manitou, having survived Cantrip, was a step up. Still.

“Even if Bran has no objections you’ll have to sell it to Adam. I can see the advantages, but I want to think about it a bit. Can it wait until tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, but no longer for the Pink rallies.”

“Right. And Jenny, if this happens, and the manitou can slash the clean-up costs for Hanford, we need a different fund to cover all the other crap humans have dumped in the Basin. Fertiliser runoff, oil and chemical spills, illegal dumping. Whatever.”

“Set one up or use existing charities?”

“I don’t know. Talk to someone who does.”

Anna ended her call. “Bran likes it, Mercy, and offers Kyle thanks. The exposure for you worries him, but that horse has already bolted and he thinks the politics could be very helpful. Your call, and Adam’s.”

“Wonderful. I can think of several wolves who’ll be foaming.”

She grinned. “I know, but it is a good idea just the same. I’ll run it by Charles, too, but he’s all in favour of cleaning up the land even if it means rolling back civilisation a little.”

“I know.” Jenny was giving me a look that meant she wanted to talk more privately, and I could guess why. “Alright, Kyle, go ahead. And people, back downstairs with your prizes, please. More arrivals are due. Oh, that reminds me.” I showed them the two-way Willis had given me. “This’ll be by the landline in here, and it links to Willis and whoever’s on the gate. And while you’re lounging about watching KEPR, think about other ways to, what, broaden the politics? There’s Cantrip, but there’s also the manitou, and now there’s all this reaction. How can everyone co-operate? and all wolves best benefit? Answers on a postcard. Go.”

It took a while, but Asil chivvied them a little and by the time Charles came down only he, Jenny, Kyle, and Warren were left.

“Adam is sleeping again, Mercy. Samuel will stay with him.”

Adam had kept our mate bond very limited, and I frowned. “How bad was his change?”

“Not good, but it has already helped. Kyle, can you tell me about these rallies?”

He must have been speaking to Bran. Kyle recapped, and Charles nodded cautiously, but before things went any further I held up a hand.

“Jenny, you had questions?”

She took a breath. “Yes. I respect necessary secrets, Mercy, but with all this going on being ignorant could be dangerous.”

That was too true. “Fair enough. Ask. I’ll answer unless it’s not my secret to tell anyone.”

“Who is Bran?”

“The Marrok?”

“Just a title. Sir Marrok was King Arthur’s only werewolf knight.”

“Huh. You obey his orders?”

“Adam has to, and Charles and Asil. I’m not obliged to, and I usually ignore the personal ones, but I wouldn’t in anything to do with serious wolf politics.”

“How many humans know about him?”

I looked at Charles again, and he answered her.

“A few, at the highest levels. More know enough to realise there is a highest authority but no detail. It may change, but Da would rather keep it that way for now.”

“Alright, I can understand that. Second, Mercy, what happened in the Yukon that you were dodging round with Willis? He knew you were leaving something out.”

“Yeah, I know.” I shrugged. “I’m not a wolf, or fae, but I am something else. I can change to a coyote-form, which is how I got out of the cuffs. I can also see and give orders to ghosts. And magic often doesn’t work on me, or works strangely around me.”

Jenny was good — she didn’t even blink. “You’re a were-coyote?”

“Nope. They don’t exist, so far as I know. I can change between one breath and the next, and I’m not moonbound. No superstrength or rapid healing either. And I was born this way. I used to call myself a walker, from skinwalker, but that’s not accurate. Skinwalkers are a kind of witch. I’m an avatar of Coyote. The Coyote.”

“Because your father was? He was called Old Coyote, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, but … this is complicated, Jenny, and I have some issues with it. He wasn’t the same kind of avatar I am. Joe Old Coyote was an incarnation of Coyote, not one of his children. I get round it by calling him my not-exactly father. Coyote was Joe, but Joe wasn’t Coyote.”

This time she did blink, for which I couldn’t blame her. It didn’t make a lot of sense to me unless I thought sideways quite hard.

“Thing is, Jenny, though I didn’t know it until last year, there are other avatars around. Shapeshifters. Not many, but some. All Native Americans. I used to keep what I was secret from humans out of, well, call it prudence. Now I do because I have no right to reveal others too.”

Jenny frowned. “I can understand that also. But you’re in a lot of spotlight, Mercy, and this kind of media attention is dangerous. If it came out now, it would be one more strange thing, and would have a context. But if you stay in the spotlight as apparently human for a few months and someone finds out and leaks it, a lot of people will feel you’ve deceived them.”

I didn’t like it, but I couldn’t disagree. “I know, but it’s still not my call. And the problem might go away, because my not-exactly father says he’ll probably be showing up soon, and if he chooses to reveal himself …”

“Yeah. Another being of Coyote’s class. He could talk to the manitou because he was around before it went to sleep.”

“And when did it go to sleep?”

“Best guess is during the Ice Age floods. Ten and some thousand years ago.” I let her take it in.
“Think about how many people would want to ask Gordon how many things.”

“Lord, yes.” Jenny hesitated, which wasn’t like her. “Is that why you’re so cagey about werewolf ages? I don’t mean to pry needlessly, but as Adam’s service record is public, the fact that he looks less than half the age he has to be attracts attention. It’s becoming steadily more awkward.”

That one I also left to Charles, but it was Anna who spoke, her voice very brisk and factual, and I wondered if she’d fielded the question before, with the Feebs.

“The average lifespan for a werewolf after being Changed is nine years. But it is true we don’t age, and are immune to most diseases. Less than 4% make it to fifty years as a wolf, and less than 1% to a century. But those who manage that can live on for a very long time. And yes, protecting ourselves from curiosity is important. Old wolves don’t much like remembering the far past, because they’ve lost too much.”

Anna’s hand rested casually on the table, just touching Asil’s. In thirteen centuries and change he’d lost more than I could begin to imagine. Samuel and Bran were the same way.

“But more importantly, even a high chance of failing the Change and dying at once, and a 95% chance of dying inside five decades anyway, would not deter many people from wanting what they would think of as a chance at very long life. Most would be unsuitable even to attempt the Change. Letting them try would mean many, many messy and painful deaths by werewolf. Yet refusing them would mean mass resentment and worse.”

“Yes.” Jenny nodded. “I didn’t know the numbers, but I’d wondered about that. Is your Bran aware that people are starting to look at Adam and wonder?”

“Da knows. It was discussed before the wolves came out, but it is part of the same problem. Technology was making it impossible to remain concealed, and it will expose this too. We will deal with it when we must, but not before.”

Jenny nodded again. “Alright, so long as you realise that Adam is going to come under increasing pressure over his apparent age and recorded DOB.” She frowned. “Are age and seniority the same thing?”

“No. Dominance is also involved. But old and dominant means senior, yes.” Unexpectedly Charles gave a slight smile. “Are you trying to work out Anna?”

Jenny smiled back, though she was still taking care not to meet Charles’s gaze. “Yes. Forgive me, but I can believe you and Asil are old, as you are both clearly very dominant. I’ve seen Adam being very Alpha. But Anna doesn’t feel the same at all.”

“I’m not.” Anna grinned. “Thank heavens. I’m twenty-eight, and eight years a wolf. Still in diapers, pretty much. But I’m an Omega. Asil would tell you an Omega complements an Alpha. Charles would tell you I bring peace to Brother Wolf and his fellows, and he doesn’t care what anyone calls it. And I’d tell you Omegas are Alphas who are extremely zen.”

Jenny processed fast. “So you came to calm Adam and others?”
“Un huh. And do PR as needed. Omegas affect humans as well as wolves.”

That reminded me of what Willis had told me about my use of Adam’s mojo working on him, and I relayed it. Charles frowned as I had, but Asil laughed.

“Mi querida, Bran told you your pack bonds were being affected by Joel and the magic you took from Guayota. So is your status. My wolf reads you as little less dominant than Adam, which confuses him as he also knows you are coyote. Warren?”

“It comes and goes, Mercy,” he told me laconically, “depending. When you don’t need it, it’s not there. But when you do, yeah, it’s right there. It was last night with Paul. So if you pulled from Adam under real stress and told Willis and whoever to freeze, I’m not surprised they did exactly that.”

Charles was still frowning. “What did Paul do?”

“Stupid backchat — he’s always stirring. I slapped him down.”

“How?”

“Tied a pack bond round his mouth and nose he couldn’t breathe through and gave him a first and last warning to wise up.”

Asil laughed again, but there was something in his eyes. “You suffocated him with a pack bond?”

“Yeah. I see them as ribbons, and you know magic follows intent. He was being annoying when we really didn’t need it.”

“He has already annoyed me, querida. But I have never heard of anyone who could do that with a pack bond, however they imagine them.”

“Nor have I, and it should not be possible.” Charles smiled as Anna gave him an arch look. “I know. And I am glad you have this trick in your arsenal, Mercy. The pack saw this?”

Warren answered for me. “They were as surprised as you, Charles, but also impressed. Most of the negative comments I’ve heard were about how stupid Paul can be, and how he doesn’t learn. If Adam or Mercy do throw him out of the pack he won’t be missed.”

“We won’t unless we have to, Charles, but we’ve both nearly had it with Paul, and he hates anyone who’s not straight and Anglo anyway.”

Charles was going to ask me something else but the two-way I’d put by the phone gave a crackle, and as he was nearest he grabbed it, eyes going to the muted TV as we all listened to the fuzzy voice of the uniform sergeant on the gate.

“Ms Hauptman will be there very shortly.” He set the two-way down again and spoke for Jenny’s and Kyle’s benefits. “The Hanford man, and someone called Andrea Lafferty?”

“My assistant,” Jenny told him. “She’s … very good.”

“And slightly ditsy about the preternatural,” I added, “but in a rather sweet way. I like her a lot, so play nice, please.”

He gave me a look but on this one I met his eyes.

“Slightly ditsy in a sweet way.”
He said it as if it were a crossword clue he was puzzling over.

“Yeah. Moved here because she hoped to see a real live fae and wound up seeing the video of me fighting Guayota.” I gave Charles a grin. “She thought it was cool in a *Twilight Zone* way. And complimented me on some of my moves.”

“She thought a mad volcano god was cool.”

We were still solving crossword clues.

“No, sticking a mop in his head. And Adam chucking an engine at him.”

Warren was looking down but didn’t try to hide his amusement. “The pack thought those things were pretty cool too, Charles. Andrea’s good people.”

“More than that,” I added. “She’s a … preterophile, not a preterophobe. Which is a nice change, and exactly what we need right now. I’ll introduce her to the manitou before I send her on up, and she’ll be in pretero-heaven.”

“Oh glory.”

Jenny barely breathed the words but we all heard, and Anna laughed.

“She sounds splendid. But we shouldn’t keep Hanford Man waiting.”

“No.” I stood, and so did Charles and Anna. “You’re coming with me?”

Anna smiled. “Watch and ward. Charles for security, me to help keep Hanford Man calm if the manitou freaks him out.”

“On TV? Won’t that cramp you too much, Charles?”

He couldn’t do what he had to for Bran with media trailing him, but he shrugged. “It’s necessary, Mercy, and they forgot me soon enough after Boston. Anna and I don’t use public flights any more anyway.”

“Your call.” I took a step and turned back. “Oh, Jenny, before we got sidetracked I was going to say that my being an avatar of Coyote was what first grabbed the manitou’s attention yesterday. It wasn’t just pack bonds between a human, a werewolf, and a tibicena, but a coyote–wolf mating.”

“Preternatural multiculture.”

“That’s the one. Or the three. Either way, we intrigued it, and that’s one reason it didn’t like Cantrip taking me away.”

I got another look.

“Noted. Go intrigue it some more.”
Kennewick PD had set up their blocks a good fifty yards up and down the road from the gate, which was a good thing given how large the crowd seemed to have become. Some were obviously media, not happy to be kept out when KEPR were inside, and when they saw us coming there was noise and a sparkle of camera flashes. I supposed the rest were looky-loos come to see the manitou for themselves. That was better than having them running away screaming, and they seemed to be cheering. People are very odd.

With the pack’s cars and some PD vehicles moved to my land, there had been room for Andrea to park her little Subaru on the verge, behind a Jeep Cherokee I assumed must be Hanford Man’s. Taylor and the camera crew were down by the gate asking them questions, and the manitou was lying down about halfway between the gate and the house. Its head was on its forepaws and its eyes were closed, but it opened them as I stopped to tell it who had arrived.

“Andrea would be a good person to read — she’s unusual — but the Hanford man might be wary. He’ll know secret stuff and be worried about breaking trust. The FBI people who are coming too, I expect.”

_I do not force anyone._

“I know, but he’d be good to help you understand what humans can and can’t do at Hanford. And the FBI people would give you more on how the Federal Government really works.”

_Your lives have become very complicated, but I have time to learn._

“There’s that. I’ll go get them.”

I gave the manitou a little bow, which from its look I thought had amused it, Anna followed suit, and I saw Charles makes the same gesture he had before. I looked a question.

“A spirit thing,” he told me, and I knew better than to ask further. Charles is a very private man anyway, and especially so about the spirits — even Anna stayed out of that part of his life except on the very rare occasions he chose to share it. He had also put on one of his stonier faces as we approached the camera.

“Right. Hanford Man’s looking very nervy. Anna, can you zap him while I introduce Andrea?”

“Sure.”

Andrea, though her eyes were as wide and excited as I’d expected, wasn’t Jenny’s chosen assistant for nothing, and whatever she’d been saying to Taylor had both the reporter and the uniformed sergeant looking thoughtful. She came forward to meet me, offering a hand.

“Ms Hauptman. Way to go!”

“Me or the manitou?”

“Both. I’m so glad you and your daughter are safe. How is Mr Hauptman?”
“Recovering, thank you.” I appreciated her priorities. “My brother Charles and his wife Anna.”

Charles didn’t do anything to narrow her eyes either. “Ms Lafferty.”

“My pleasure, Mr, ah …”

“Properly my name is Qcqécélšmlqnups.” His voice was grave but I saw Anna swallow a laugh. “It doesn’t translate well from Salish, so I go by Smith in the Anglo world.”

“He goes by Charles,” Anna told her.

“Andrea, then. Ms Lafferty makes me feel like I’m in court.”

“When actually you’re on nationwide TV. Come meet the Manitou.” She blinked but fell in beside me. “It’s much nicer than the last one, and I hope you’re willing to let it read you. Did you see it reading Kyle, Taylor, and Willis earlier?”

“God, yes. It wants to read me?” She sounded breathless at the idea. “It didn’t read Jenny.”

“She was in a hurry, and I want it to read you, Andrea, so it knows about a human who is more interested in the preternatural than scared by it. The better it understands people, the more it can help us, and you’re a really good advertisement for people.”

“Oh.” She went a little pink. “That’s … I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. It’s true. You remember what to do?”

“Look down, be respectful, then meet its eyes and nod. Um, you said it’s like being a book someone else is reading?”


She really was more excited than scared, looked deeply peaceful while the Manitou smelt and read her, and seemed charmed when it thanked her.

“No, no, thank you, Manitou, sir. For saving the Hauptmans this morning, and stopping Cantrip, and making everyone think.”

She gave it a deep bow, took a breath, and turned to me. “Where should I go?”

“Jenny’s in the kitchen with Warren and Asil. Shout once you’re inside and they’ll guide you. Pack’s downstairs, and Adam’s up, so stick to the first floor. Oh, and be careful around Asil. He can be prickly.”

“Right.”

She marched off towards the door, and I met the Manitou’s gaze, this time certain of its amusement.

You have interesting friends, Mercy.

“I try.”

I turned to go back to the gate but Charles and Anna were escorting Hanford Man towards us, Willis had reappeared from somewhere, and Taylor and her crew were trailing them. I went a few yards and waited.
Hanford Man turned out to be Dr Joseph Tinton, and though Anna had calmed him some he was both very nervous of the manitou and more than a bit flustered at being summarily despatched to talk to it.

“It should be Dr Jarvis but he’s on holiday and I was the most senior scientist onsite today. But I’m a nuclear physicist.” His voice was almost plaintive. “I know very little about the geology and hydrology involved.”

“That’s alright. The manitou knows all of that. Let it smell you and we can get talking.”

“It doesn’t resent me because I work at Hanford?”

“How should it? It’s not happy about the pollution, but you’re cleaning it up, so you’re a good guy.”

He was visibly trembling but he managed to hold it together while I introduced him and the manitou smelt him, before drawing back its head and looking at him with interest. I didn’t know how I knew, but I was sure only he and I heard its voice.

Mercy says you will not want me to read you, Dr Tinton. Would you like me to insulate you from your fear of me? It is understandable, but not useful if we are to talk.

He blinked, and I all but felt his curiosity engage. “No it isn’t, sir. If you can really do that, go ahead, please.”

The manitou breathed out some magic. Tinton’s body language told me the effect was almost immediate, and I had to stifle a grin at the contrast with his obvious startlement.

“That’s … amazing.”

I shifted slightly, and his automatic turn meant the camera could see his face.

“Isn’t it? Like a sheet of glass between you and your fear?”

“Yes. Exactly like that. I’m still scared spitless and I don’t know why you aren’t, but it doesn’t matter any more. I can think straight again.” He turned back to the manitou and spoke rapidly but clearly. “I wanted to apologise for the contamination we’ve inflicted. I know it started with a wartime rush, and they didn’t understand the damage they were doing, but there’s no excuse for being so careless with radioactives, never mind all the storage leaks. We’re trying to clean it up, but we just don’t have the resources. Should I explain what we have managed to do?”

I had visions of a very long briefing no-one else would understand. “Why don’t we go the other way round, and find out what the manitou can do?”

“Oh. Yes, that makes sense.”

The manitou was half-amused again, and so were Anna and Charles. Willis had a poker face but I thought he might be enjoying someone else’s discomfiture.

The lumps of metal and other radioactive elements I can push to the surface. Can you then collect them?

In the background I could hear Taylor repeating the words for the camera.

“Lumps? Damn, I thought we’d got all the solid High Level and Trans Uranic Waste.” He took a
breath and focused again. “Sir, we can certainly pick up anything on the surface. It’s a big site, though, and we wouldn’t want any sources exposed to the air for longer than we could help. Is there any way you could mark where they are?”

*Many ways, but most would disperse what must not be dispersed.*

I had visions of radioactive geysers. “If Dr Tinton marks a spot, could you bring the lumps there?”

*Certainly.*

“Right, right. Good thinking.” A cautious note entered Tinton’s voice. “Do you have any idea what mass … weight of … lumps we’re talking about?”

I didn’t think silver-on-gold eyes could go distant, but the manitou was obviously thinking about it, and for my money doing sums in its head.

*Between fifty and sixty pounds, if I push them all together.*

“Fifty and …” Tinton swallowed. “Damn. Yes, we can pack that, but it’ll take every container we have on hand, and that’s if we push the limits. And we seriously do not want a single block that big. Can you leave it in its component … lumps?”

*Yes. How soon can you get more of the containers you need? What is in lumps is nothing to what is in the groundwater, and removing that is more urgent. It is harming more things.*

“You can clean the groundwater?”

*I can and will. It poisons all the river, and the sea beyond.*

“How?”

*I will open a shaft that will fill with water, and draw all the radioactive contaminants into that water. You will need to filter them out and return the water to where it should be. Reduced to a block, all the contaminants together weigh about two tons.*

“Two… We don’t begin to have storage for that much available. And we don’t want that stuff too concentrated. How long will it take you to draw the contaminants out?”

*A few days.*

“Damn. I’m sorry, there’s no way we can do anything that fast. Or even this financial year.”

I winced. “Budget?”

“Oh yeah. Properly certified long-term storage containers cost a fortune. Regs demands double shells, double the necessary shielding, Graded-Z, and all sorts, even before we figure out where to put them all. High Level and TU waste scares people stupid, and suiting people up to handle it …”

I listened to the impassioned lecture — or rant — for maybe a minute, thinking hard, and held up my hand.

“Dr Tinton, you haven’t recalibrated enough. We want that stuff out of the ground and the groundwater, yes?”

*Of course we do.*
“And in any kind of secure storage is better than not, right?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And inside six inches of lead would be safe enough?”

“Six inches of lead? Hell, yes. But we don’t have anything like that available that would take the
mass we’re talking about.”

“Can you filter the stuff from the groundwater if the manitou pulls it into water in one shaft?”

It was Tinton’s turn to look distant. “Ye-es. Physical and magnetic filters could get most of it out.
But the exposure levels for anyone manning such a filtration system would be lethal. Look, Ms
Hauptman, have you been following the Fukushima clear-up at all?”

“A bit.”

“Well, there are good reasons it’s been so slow, and despite all the precautions they’ve already got
people dying from the doses they’ve received. I want to clean up Hanford as much as anyone, but
this stuff can kill you real fast and nastily, or slower and worse.”

“That I get.” I thought about it a bit more, and turned, pointing at the soundman on the camera
crew. “Sound off, now.”

He stared at me, and Charles turned to give him a serious look, Brother Wolf peering from his
eyes. The mike was lowered and a cable disconnected.

“No sound.”

“Thank you.” I walked away far enough to be out of easy human earshot, Charles following me,
and turned my back to the camera. “Charles, how well do wolves cope with radiation?”

He shrugged slightly. “Better than humans, but in high enough doses it can do damage. Even kill,
though there have only been one or two cases I know of, and those were Russian wolves drafted
into Chernobyl.”

I didn’t want to think about that. “And fae?”

I couldn’t remember ever having made Charles blink before — I certainly hadn’t in the long, long
summer after I’d peanut-buttered the seat of Bran’s car, during which Charles had taught me to fix
engines.

“I don’t know. It might depend on the kind of fae.”

“Then let’s find out.” Yet again I hauled out my phone and speed dialled. Zee answered at once.
“Have you been watching, Zee?”

<*Liebchen*, the world is watching. Tad says hello.>

“Back at him. A couple three questions.”

<Go ahead.>

“Are fae immune to radiation?”

<Not all, but the Iron Kissed are and Tad has it from me. It tickles, but it does not hurt.>
That was what I had hoped. “And if you were given enough ingots of lead, how long would it take you to make a box with every side six inches thick?”

<Lead is easy to work. A few hours, depending on size.>

“OK. And the tricky ones. Does that statement by the Gray Lords allow you to help clean up Hanford? And if so, will you?”

<It was a very permissive statement. Your Bran must drive a hard bargain. And I do not like the contamination at Hanford either, so yes, liebchen, I will help you and the manitou in any way I can.>

“Zee, you’re a prince.”

He sounded amused. <Not for a long time.>

“Always to me. And I get the feeling the manitou is serious about a fast timetable for this, which we want too, and I can’t see why enough lead to make a start couldn’t be at Hanford by tomorrow. The filtration system will likely take longer, but I’ll push Tinton on rough and ready.”

<I look forward to watching it. Call, and we will come.>

“Bless you, Zee. And Tad.”

I put the phone away and found Charles giving me the fish eye. “What?”

“I doubt this is quite what the Gray Lords had in mind. It is more helping humans than wolves. And your position remains ambiguous, Mercy.”

“You wanted visible results, fast. Can Bran get a new clean-up budget through in less than several months?”

He sounded reluctant, but werewolves found it hard to lie, even Charles. “No. But I do not like it, Mercy, even so. There are Gray Lords and Gray Lords, and not all will have agreed with that statement, which I suspect was Gwyn ap Lugh’s alone. Despite your friend Zee’s consent, those opposed to the statement will not be happy. And they have power that cannot easily be answered.”

“I know, but it would be good publicity for the Fae, which has been in short supply. Zee and Tad are already out and registered. And losing momentum won’t help anyone.”

Charles had a point, and the Gray Lords scared me a lot more than the manitou, but I had a point too, and he knew it. We headed back to Anna and Tinton, and I told the sound man he could plug himself back in.

“Dr Tinton, I know this is irregular and busts all your protocols, but it’ll get the radioactives out of the groundwater and into storage that’s adequate until you can sort it out properly. Good enough?”

He blinked. “How?”

“My old boss, Siebold Adelbertsmiter, is a metalzauber, a fae who can work with iron and other metals. He’s also immune to radiation, as is his son, Tad. So what you need to do is, first, get hold of as much lead as you can. Zee can make a box with six-inch-thick sides in a few hours, and there’s your safe storage. Second, get that pump and filtration system set up. The manitou opens a borehole and concentrates the radioactives, pump and filters do their stuff, and Zee and Tad can shift the recovered radioactives into the boxes and do any maintenance that’s needed on the
“They sent you here, you have the authority. And besides getting the lead, and setting up the filtration system, all you have to do is give Zee and Tad permission to come on site. They’ll do the rest.” I put an edge into my voice. “They’ll even sign medical disclaimers, I expect, to keep the suits happy. And the tithe I got you from KEPR ought to cover the costs”

He had the grace to blush. “I’m sorry. I meant to thank you for that. But I’m a scientist. Magic throws me. Nothing you’re saying ought to be possible.”

“That was yesterday, Dr Tinton. Fifteen-foot dire wolves that can shield you from your own fear aren’t possible either. But if you’d rather explain to everyone here and downstream why all the lethal rubbish Hanford has dumped into the ecosystem is still there rather than in nice lead boxes that can be taken away, go ahead and plead science.”

Willis’s eyes were bright, his voice flat. “Do it, Dr Tinton. Regs and SOP are out the window today, and the worst that can happen is it doesn’t work. But if it does, a lot of people will be very happy indeed.”

Tinton stared, then shrugged. “Damn, but this is weird. Alright, Ms Hauptman, I’ll try.”

“Succeed.” I heard engine noise and saw two more black SUVs edging through the crowd on the road. Another idea spun into place. “And third, there are monitors all the way downstream, aren’t there, tracking what gets into the Columbia?”

“Oh yes.”

“Then as well as seeing what happens at Hanford, people will want to see the evidence — those monitored levels dropping. All the media people out there blocking the road are wasting their time, because no-one here is talking to anyone but KEPR for a while, but they can do something useful and go cover Hanford and the monitors. The faces can have fun dressing in the anti-radiation suits you were describing, and the talking heads can explain becquerels and curies. And how the pollution happened — people in the Basin know all about the Hanford site, but lots of viewers won’t. Get your Press Office on it?”

Willis was hiding a smile, Taylor wasn’t bothering, and somewhere along the way Tinton had decided to go with the flow.

“They can do that. It’ll be a nice change from trying to get the media interested. How do I talk to Mr … Adelbertsmiter, did you say?”

“Yeah. You have a card, and pen and paper?”

He did, and after stashing the card I wrote down my number and the house landline, making sure the camera couldn’t see them.

“I’ll give Zee your number. Call me when you’ve got the lead, and I’ll tell the manitou.”

“Alright.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe any of this. Strange, strange day.”
“Tell me. At least you didn’t start it being kidnapped or shot.” The SUVs had parked on the verge outside the gates and were disgorging suits. “And you’re not going to spend the next few hours talking to the FBI. Count your blessings, Dr Tinton, and go buy a few hundred tons of lead.”
Chapter Fourteen

Getting the FBI inside took a while. Besides greeting the manitou, which they managed quite creditably for seven scared people with guns, the AED in charge had a prepared statement for KEPR promising that no stone would be left unturned, no official wrongdoing ignored, and no-one responsible would escape justice. He even sounded as if he meant it. And then there was detaching them all from their guns before they entered the house. They were not happy, and the Associate Executive Director cited duty regulations.

“And if an agent on duty visits a prison?” I asked him. “In any case, sir, it’s not optional. It’s Adam’s order, he’s healing in wolf form so he can’t rescind it, and he wouldn’t if he could. Besides, I can smell from here that all of you are packing silver, which is very understandable. But so is my not letting nervous people with silver ammo into a house full of upset werewolves, and I won’t. I don’t doubt your goodwill or your discipline, and the pack is well under control, but it’s a bad combination. We can sit outside, round the back, or you can give the guns to Detective Willis, but they are not coming inside.”

They still didn’t like it one bit but the AED — Grant Westfield — was well aware of Taylor and the camera, and gave the right order. Willis bagged each gun individually, marking bags, a uniform took them away, and we finally made it through the door and off air. Westfield let out a breath, rotated his neck, and became quite brisk.

I’d been wondering why he needed six agents with him, but they weren’t as superfluous an entourage as I’d thought. Three were established in the dining room with their laptops, and set about linking with the FBI team at Cantrip’s headquarters in DC and with their own. One was a deputy for the local SAC. The only woman among them turned out to be Leslie Fisher, who had worked with Charles and Anna on the Heuter case and as far as I could tell had been brought in mainly because they both trusted her, and she them, though she remained sensibly wary of Charles. And the sixth was another lawyer who supposedly understood the gray areas where law and national security ran foul of one another, and seemed to be doubling as Westfield’s PA. I took those three and Westfield to the kitchen, to bring Jenny, Andrea, and Kyle in, and because I felt most comfortable there.

Once introductions had been made, with a gentle reminder not to get into staring matches with Charles or Asil, and we were all seated Westfield gave me a long, considering look.

“You’re playing hardball with a lot of people today, Ms Hauptman.”

“Cantrip set the tone. Then I had four bodies and a fifteen-foot dire wolf inside my gates, a husband who was bleeding out, and a KEPR ’copter putting it all on national TV.”

“Yes, they did, and yes, you did.” He gave a slight smile. “I didn’t say I disapproved, Ms Hauptman, but you have set off a political firestorm.”

“No, that’s also down to Cantrip, and the waking of the manitou. I’m just trying to make sure it’s a useful firestorm.”

“A useful firestorm.” Like Charles, his repetition made it sound like a crossword clue that was
eluding him. “Useful for whom?”

It was a fair question and I gave him a genuine answer. “As many people as possible, and not any one group or agency in particular. Useful for wolves by taking out Cantrip and getting someone competent instead. Useful for the government because it doesn’t end up having to fight wolves or the manitou, and there aren’t a whole lot of dead citizens. Useful for humans living anywhere in the Basin because we’re the ones who’ll have to live with the manitou on a daily basis, and useful for the manitou because it gets enough of what it wants not to decide mass destruction is a better choice. And if possible, useful for the Fae by making sure they don’t end up fighting the manitou, and easing the tense standoff that’s existed since they seceded. There’s more if you want.”

His smile was a bit warmer. “I think that’s enough to be going on with. And I can go with most of that. Now, forgive me, I know there’s a lot of leeway needed here, but that makes it the more important to follow the rules and protocol we can.”

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you.” He turned to Willis. “Detective Willis, I’ve been briefed by your superiors on the reports you’ve made, and we would like you to remain on the case as a special liaison, if you’re willing.” Willis’s eyebrows rose a bit, but he nodded. “Good. You’ve been here all day, and while we’ve been watching all we could, we’re new on the ground. Would you tell me what determinations you’ve made?”

“Of course, sir.” He took a moment to marshal his thoughts. “The manitou is clearly responsible for the four killings, and setting aside its legal status and the obvious impossibility of arresting it, I provisionally determined its actions today to be lawful. Justifiable homicide. It … bit to kill, as it were, but what it did was determined by its form, the agents were all armed, shots had been fired, and there was clear cause, with innocent people in danger. What happened yesterday is a complication, but one, that’s not my jurisdiction, and two, crediting what I’ve been told about its actions, if an armed human being woke up to find two guys setting a drill to his or her flesh and shot them, I’d very probably again determine justifiable homicide. The only other crimes committed here were by the dead agents — either attempted murder or two counts of felony assault with a deadly, and two of kidnapping, with a bunch of lesser stuff — but they must have been acting under orders. Their crimes were committed here, so I have cause to follow up, but not the authority. There’s also the multiple IDs Preskylovitch had, which I’d call illegal while recognising there may be overriding issues.”

“That is being investigated. The FBI and CIA cards were certainly not properly issued.”

“Glad to hear it, sir. The video of Preskylovitch also implies what may well be other serious crimes committed by Cantrip, so I have an obligation to report that, and arguable cause to follow up but again not the authority. The thing I’m not at all sure about is the SSC subpoena, which seems to be genuine and valid, but was never served. We hadn’t heard from Judge Cray last time I asked.”

“I’ve spoken with him. The subpoena was obtained by Preskylovitch with false representations. It’s a dead letter, and Judge Cray is a very angry man.”

“May I ask what false representations, AED Westfield? I ask because Mr, Ms, and Miss Hauptman will be suing Cantrip.”

Westfield nodded. “I imagine they will, Ms Trevellyan. Judge Cray told me Preskylovitch asserted that Cantrip had solid grounds to believe Ms Hauptman was a preternatural serial killer, presumably a werewolf, who was responsible for the murders of Mr Milanovitch and, through unknown means of control or coercion, all those committed by the Columbia River Devil,
Guayota, and the present manitou yesterday. They had done what sounded like some very creative editing of files and videos, and as Judge Cray was unaware of the details of any of the four ... sets of events, it did not seem unreasonable to him that Ms Hauptman should be subject to interrogation to determine whether she was in fact what they believed her to be."

My jaw had dropped but Jenny held up a hand.

“"I will require copies of those edited files and videos." Westfield narrowed his eyes, but after a second nodded. "Does anyone else believe such vicious and preposterous slanders and libels?"

“No. Ms Hauptman is surely something, including something preternatural we don’t know about and would like to, but her medical records alone make it crystal clear both that she is not a werewolf and that she sustained life-threatening injuries from both the River Devil and Guayota. There is also redacted testimony on file from elders of the Yakama Nation and Cantrip’s Lin Armstrong that strongly supports her integrity.” He grimaced. “We are only just beginning to take Cantrip’s records and databases apart, and there are non-standard encryptions that will have to be broken, but from Ms Hauptman’s file alone it is clear they have erroneous data, with wild beliefs passing as facts, and that they think like conspiracy theorists. Any two possibilities add up to a certainty, and the present manitou’s terrifying wolf-form seems to have been taken as proof of everything they had previously imagined. Professional meltdown.”

“Try bigots egging one another on until they formed a lynch mob.”

Westfield looked at me and blew out a breath. “Yes, that too. One reason I’m here, Ms Hauptman, is that I hadn’t had much to do with Cantrip before today, and when I heard the analysis you gave Ms Taylor on air I was sceptical. But I’m changing my mind fast. Do you have data to support what you said?”

Charles slid a flash drive across the table. “You’ll have to call a lot of it information anonymously received, but that’s what we’ve put together since Cantrip’s creation. Two Deputy Directors are de facto John Lauren, and it went from there. They’ve skewed to killing, imprisoning, or controlling Trans- and Nonhumans rather than understanding or relating to them from the first, and recruited accordingly. They also spend a lot more than their declared budget, and some at least is Heuter money.”

A lot of jaws were clenched around the table, including Westfield’s. A government agency taking private money to finance illegal activity had seen very senior people do jail time before.

“There’s more, including multiple instances of harassing and threatening wolves. Some limited data on similar treatment of fae. You already have Anna’s and my statement about Les Heuter’s inaccurate claim, citing Cantrip’s database, that Ian Mott is fae, and his son Jacob, one of Heuter’s victims, was half-fae. We have evidence that Cantrip has given names of wolves and supposed wolves to bounty hunters and others, and if I had access to Cantrip’s official and extended databases, I’d be running it against all unsolved murders of humans. And we’ve included the most complete list of Heuter properties we’ve been able to compile, because they all need to be checked for the captive wolves Preskylovitch implied.”

“Yes, they do.” Westfield’s voice was tight, and without being asked his lawyer/PA fired up his laptop and loaded the drive while his boss’s fingers drummed briefly on the table. It wasn’t a sensible thing to do with wolves in the room, but he was looking down. “Ms Hauptman wants Cantrip gone entirely, and a new agency created to do what they were supposed to do. I am told the most senior wolves do too. Is that correct, Mr Smith?”

“Yes. You can’t save meat that’s gone rotten. We will co-operate with a satisfactory successor
agency, but one criterion for satisfactory is no transfer of any existing Cantrip agent or employee without our approval, and right now the only one we would approve is Armstrong.”

Fisher stirred. “Not Patrick Morris, Charles?”

“No. He went to Cantrip because he wants a Bright Future. After his behaviour towards Anna at that first meeting I looked hard at him. He makes secret donations.”

“Huh. I knew he was a jerk, but that surprises me. Point is, sir, that Morris had passed our vetting at least once.”

Charles slid another flash drive towards Westfield. “Lists of everyone we know to be John Lauren or Bright Future, with those on the government’s dollar marked. I’ve included some cues so your own hackers can check it. There are names you will know, including two Associate Justices of the Supreme Court.”

Who knew clenched jaws could drop? And who knew Charles had been able to hack that kind of data? Some of my worry about having rashly forced Bran to pull a trigger prematurely slid away. And Charles wasn’t done.

“We are not foolish enough to believe organised bigotry can be uprooted as Cantrip must be, but maximal damage to John Lauren and Bright Future is a major secondary target. Which is why those lists have also gone to the Watchdog Times, with the same cues to let Torbett get the data checked. And why, despite the racism of some and homophobia of many wolves, we will be endorsing the scheduled DC and SF Pink protests against K-K-Kantrip, and seeking to broaden them to John Lauren and Bright Future bigotry.”

Westfield took a breath and muttered something so obscene that I stored it away while giving thanks Adam hadn’t heard it. Wolves’ eyebrows twitched, and Westfield flushed slightly.

“Forgive me. This just goes on getting worse. Joe, get all that to DC now, start organising the property searches, and brief the Director. Option C.” The lawyer/PA went. “Option C is to disestablish Cantrip and prosecute maximally. I have a voice but not the decision. Mr Smith, coming at the possibilities the other way, is there a list of missing wolves?”

“Not in any simple sense. We are checking, but without knowing numbers all I can say is that no pack has reported anyone missing without explanation. There are some deaths where bodies were never found — drownings, mostly — or it could be lone wolves who were taken. But if Cantrip had a wolf who was co-operating, they could have been taking humans and Changing them to obtain wolves as subjects. You should check for a concentration of human disappearances — probably predominantly male, fit, strong-willed, and younger rather than older.”

“Because?”

“They would have needed people who would survive the Change. You might also check the database to see what they knew or supposed they knew about it for any other criteria.”

Fisher was making notes and emailing someone, and Westfield grimaced.

“Not a good thought. If we locate anything in that search, are wolves available to … control any prisoners we may liberate?”

“Yes.”

“And fae?”
“Mercy?”

I shrugged, feeling bemused by the speed of things and by Charles’s apparent belief that my lines to the Fae mattered more than Bran’s. “I’d think. But someone should ask a Gray Lord direct.”

Anna had her phone out as I spoke, and I heard Bran using another phone and, very faintly, Gwyn ap Lugh’s answer before Anna repeated it.

“Yes, but the call goes through us. Gwyn ap Lugh will not deal with humans directly unless and until the injustice to his daughter is officially acknowledged, but he will not willingly leave any with fae blood in Cantrip’s hands.”

“Wolves and Fae have reached alliance?”

“No.” Anna’s voice was indescribable, but I’ll call it zen noir. “But we both recognise natural justice and mutual advantage. And prisoners of Cantrip are an absolute obligation. *Ruat coelum.*” Her voice mellowed a fraction. “You should understand that Mercy is among other things the most senior wolf’s adoptive daughter, as Charles is his son, and that Gwyn ap Lugh thinks well of Charles and me for assisting in the rescue of his daughter. The threats to Mercy and Jesse echo Heuter in more than one way, and the Gray Lords appreciated Mercy’s actions to clear Mr Adelbertsmiter. Cantrip could not have been stupider in their choices of target and threat.”

Westfield was reeling where he sat and Andrea rose to the occasion, staring at me with wide eyes.

“You’re the hidden princess as well as the kick-ass heroine and the mystery bride? No wonder you’re so cool.”

I saw Jenny’s mortified look and stifled my laugh. Spring it all on Jesse and she might have said something similar. And like Jesse, Andrea had … not broken the growing tension round the table, but shifted it sideways somewhere. Even Asil’s eyes were bright with amusement.

“Too much tvtropes, Andrea, but thanks anyway.” She blushed and I winked at her. “In any case, AED Westfield, what matters is to find those captives and let us know.”

“Wolves are available to scent search as well, if a local SAC thinks something warrants it. Call me, and I’ll call the nearest Alpha.”

“Noted, Mr Smith. Allan, update Joe.” He blew out a breath as the local FBI guy rose and went.

“Most of this has to be co-ordinated in DC. What I need to do now is confirm Detective Willis’s take, which means seeing the video and the statements and forensics for myself. The TV images were good but regs are regs. Before that, though, there is one other issue, Ms Hauptman, which is the person you called yesterday who spoke to the manitou. ‘Gordon’. I respect your position, but is there any way in which I could speak to him? I do not disbelieve anything you’ve said, but you are at present our only source of information on the manitou and there are those who are protesting that fact.”

“There is the manitou itself.” I enjoyed his expression, but took pity on him. “I can ask, but he won’t like it and you’re exaggerating the need. The manitou has been asleep for a long, long time, and there is no-one who really knows it. To learn about it you have to talk to it. But Native Americans have been aware of manitous as a kind of being for millennia, and for what they know you only have to ask any decent medicine man politely. Or if you want European tales, the usual term is *genius loci*, spirit of place. So far as I know they’re pretty much the same thing.”

“Also noted. But I was not exaggerating, Ms Hauptman. Forgive me, but the people who make the
sort of decisions you want making need more than one person’s unsupported testimony.”

I narrowed my eyes. He wasn’t lying, but for the first time he was skirting truth.

“And that may be true, but it isn’t really what you’re after. My unsupported testimony about what? That it can’t be killed?”

He flickered a glance at Fisher and went back to honesty. “There are people asking about that, Ms Hauptman, yes. It’s inevitable, but your use of publicity has already blocked that option, as you well know.”

“It’s not an option, AED Westfield, any more than shooting an earthquake. And you don’t need an old Native American to know that.” Thoughts clicked. “No, someone pushed you about this, and whoever it was should be fired.”

He blinked. “Why do you say that?”

“Because the idea behind it is that Gordon could speak to the Manitou, so maybe he could control it, and if so getting to him would be a smart move. Compare that with Cantrip’s thinking. And I’m betting SA Fisher called you on that when the order came down.”

His face was blank but his scent wasn’t, nor Fisher’s. And he wasn’t what he was for nothing.

“Yeah, she did. And orders from that high are orders all the same. I’ll pass your response right back up. But I’ll also say I personally would be glad to have more sources. All else aside, I’ll have to give evidence to the Congressional Enquiry, sooner rather than later, and as they’ll have that Pasco PD scene video there will be questions about Gordon. The fewer I can’t answer, the better.”

“I’ll relay that. And I’ll throw in some free advice, AED Westfield. You need to start thinking about Native Americans a lot more directly. Even with Charles in buckskin you’re thinking of him as a wolf, period, just as you’re thinking of me as unknown preternatural mixed up with wolves. But he’s half-Salish and I’m half-Blackfeet. And Gordon’s all something else.”

“I imagine he is.”

“Go right on imagining. We should get to that video, but I have one thing first, too. Preskylovitch genuinely believed he had authority not only to take Jesse, but to threaten, torture, or rape her if necessary to control me. I heard it in his voice, as I heard you skirt truth just now. But how is that possible?”

“A question others are asking also, Ms Hauptman. Leslie?”

“The best guesses we have so far boil down to two data points. Preskylovitch’s file before he was Cantrip is so classified we haven’t seen it yet, but that in itself makes it obvious he was very black ops indeed. He started as a Marine, but went off radar almost immediately. Prime inference, law meant very little to him except as an obstacle or tool. And then there is the legal line Cantrip were developing using the Patriot and Humanities Acts to regard anything preternatural as a terrorist and therefore without civil or constitutional rights. There is a military attitude that anyone associated with a person so designated is acceptable collateral damage. And to use your own analogy, a lynch mob believes in its own absolute rights.”

“Point, SA Fisher. But Preskylovitch believed he had no limits at all. He said, My authority covers whatever is necessary to learn what you are and what you know, and your step-daughter is much the easiest means. And as Detective Willis will confirm, he was getting off on it. He also explicitly linked the threat to my own rape.” Certainty clicked. “He was a torturer. Rape and kin rape were
known tools.”

Fisher winced. “That is possible, yes. We are investigating.”

Asil’s voice was very soft and precise, and my hackles rose. “Torturers have employers. And it is not meet that such an employer should live.”

He echoed Gwyn ap Lugh’s words before beheading Les Heuter on the steps of the courthouse where he’d been acquitted of sixty-two torture murders not because he didn’t commit them but because his victims were mostly Fae or wolves. And everyone knew it.

“No argument here, sir. We will do all we can.”

“Just remember AED Westfield’s statement to KEPR,” I told them. “No official wrong doing ignored, no cover up. I take it as a promise to wolves as well as the public.”
TV makes investigations seem quick and exciting, but watching the FBI at work in real time was anything but. Most of it seemed to be computer wrangling, and with Fisher in tow Westfield rechecked for himself everything Willis had done, didn’t like my limited explanation of how I’d got out of the cuffs any more than Willis had, and was very curious about the walking stick. I gave him a little more than I’d given Willis, but with the same warnings, and he frowned.

“I ask, Ms Hauptman, because although it’s less than clear, that stick’s behaviour when you needed it to … strike Mr Milanovitch seems to be one of the things that got Cantrip fixated on you. The stick was out of your reach but it rolled towards you of its own accord.”

I’d last seen the stick in the kitchen, and we were in Adam’s study for the big screen, but I held out a hand and rested it on the stick’s silver handle. Westfield stared.

“Yes, it can do that. It was made by Lugh, you know, Gwyn ap Lugh’s father, for humans who help the Fae, which I have. And old things develop a mind of their own.”

He blinked and backed off, but there was some more friction when they re-interviewed Jesse. I wasn’t keen to begin with, figuring she’d had more than enough for one day, but she was awake and willing, Jenny said it would be wiser, and Westfield agreed Fisher should take the lead. She was kind, gentle, and thorough, but we could all hear the stress and horror in Jesse’s voice when she insisted the only thing she had seen in the Yukon was the death of Kerrigan.

I helped distract them from that little mystery by throwing Bradley and her invitation to Courtney into the mix. The FBI didn’t like coincidences any more than Adam or me, and while Westfield thought it was probably extraneous he agreed it could be wilful harassment, set in motion before the manitou appeared and Cantrip decided to try more direct action. Questions would be asked, and Fisher won points from Jesse by promising cheerfully that Bradley would be given the third degree before the day was out.

I got a few other things done, too. Kyle had to get back to his office, and I made sure with Jim Gutstein and Richland PD that he had an escort and security cover. I also put in a call to Jim Alvin, or rather his answering machine, relaying Westfield’s request to speak to Gordon, and another to Christy to let her know that Jesse was bearing up well and to tell her that if she ran into media problems we could provide security. She was still furious with me about her hair, and the conversation left me irritated, but the arrival of the Yoke’s delivery provided some welcome light relief. Ben, Warren, and Kelly came up to help the driver and his assistant bring in a food mountain, heavy on meat for our freezers, and I recognised the assistant, who was a year ahead of Jesse at school and worked on bagging and checkout as needed, so I gave him a hi. When he’d put down his load he turned and gave me the triple bow of awesomeness, making Andrea grin.

“Hey, Ms Hauptman. Rockin’ and then some. I gotta ask, is Mr Hauptman alright? Never seen someone shot before. Pain city.”

Liking him more than I ever had, I shifted registers. “Yeah, it is. Knees really hurt. But he’s healing, thanks, Tom. And you should give the awesome to the manitou, not me.”
“I did, when it let us by. It said I was welcome. Unbelievable. But you get the awesome too. And Jesse, when I see her. Better than any game I ever played.” His gaze switched to Fisher and sharpened with recognition. “You’re FBI and you testified against Heuter, right?”

“Right.”

“Cool. That jury was nuts. I was that Gwyn dude, I’d’a beheaded Heuter too.” Ben came in with another armload of bags. “Gotta get on, but it’s a privilege delivering to you, Ms Hauptman. Unbelievable.”

Despite the inane reasoning the cheerful approval and the idea of Gwyn ap Lugh as a dude left me feeling better, and the improvement extended when Anna and I accompanied Westfield and his lawyer PA to take a statement from the manitou. They were nervous, determined, and very conscious of the absurdity, but got some more detail about yesterday and the difference between the reflex behaviour of the dire wolf on first waking, when it had been only a fragment of the manitou, and its present state. It confirmed its interest in me, Adam, and Joel as packmates of differing kinds, and added that it had been tracking us because it had intended to visit us again. No, it hadn’t been aware of our thoughts or speech, but it had sensed pain, distress, and killing rage, and seen Jesse and me being bundled into the Yukon. There was also some other information — Gordon had been right that the glacial floods had bored it, but they also seemed to have hurt or even diminished it because they destroyed so much of the Basin’s ecosystems.

_The great animals were dying out anyway, as the climate changed with the ice, but the floods hastened their end here. The humans who came from the north were interesting, but I missed all that had been lost and withdrew my awareness to the life and heat of the rocks below me. Time seems slower there. The changes that have happened are greater than I had expected._

Its mental voice was very dry for that last line, and I gave it a rueful smile, acknowledged with a whuff that made Westfield jump.

_Many of them unwelcome, yes, but not all. You have become very complex creatures, but you have no harmony with the world and destroy too much too carelessly. That must change. But much that you have discovered and made is interesting, as are the magical creatures new to me who now live here._

“The werewolves and Fae?”

_Among others. And no, I will not speak to you of them. If they wish to speak to you they can do so for themselves._

Westfield was visibly disappointed but had to accept it. I was mostly relieved that I could relay some news to Marsilia that she’d like, and I put all the weirdness aside in favour of some serious late afternoon cooking. Biscuits, brownies, and two cakes were done before Darryl joined me to start in on food for all the wolves and people who were present. I didn’t think we were obligated to feed the FBI, gate police, or Taylor and her crew, but as we were doing pack quantities anyway adding them in made no odds and we figured there was no harm gaining goodwill points where we could. Darryl was a much fancier cook than I’ve ever been, but given the bulk involved we both wanted something simple and settled on stew. We did it together, taking pleasure in the co-operative dance over the range, before recruiting pack from the basement to peel a mountain of potatoes for mash, chop a dozen cabbages, and sneak most of the biscuits and brownies when they thought I wasn’t looking.

It was the first normal thing I’d done in what seemed like an eternity, though it was less than twelve hours since Cantrip had turned up and my day had exploded. Darryl was keeping an eye on
the small TV, mostly talking heads with an inset of the manitou, but he had the sound at a murmur and I could tune it out, losing myself in the rhythm of the work and the good smells that began coming from the stew. It was another simple pleasure to radio the uniformed sergeant on the gate to ask if his people needed feeding, and to hear the surprised gratitude in his voice as he explained that Adam’s security people had taken care of it, bringing in both a site canteen and WCs for those on the perimeter. KEPR hadn’t done so well, though, and he passed word to Taylor, who came up to the house, leaving her crew at the gate, to offer thanks. I introduced the pack who were there, still at work, and she tried to hide a smile, then apologised.

“I’m sorry. It’s just werewolves peeling potatoes and chopping greens together isn’t quite what I’d imagined.”

“We don’t eat everything raw. And pack is like family.”

“Mmm. I get that. I suppose I think of werewolves hunting together as wolves, not sitting round a dining table as people.”

“That’s just full moons. Or special occasions. But most wolves are gregarious — even if the person isn’t so much, the wolf wants company.”

“And touch,” Darryl added. “I wasn’t much for that before my Change, but now it’s soothing.”

“Huh. Wolves are touchy-feely?”

“Pretty much.”

Taylor digested that. “Do you go with them when they hunt?”

“Sometimes. Wolves are also beautiful. Look at the manitou.”

She gave me a look. “I’m still on awesome, literally. I haven’t got to beautiful, but there’s some palaeobiologists from Wazzu the police let through as far as the gate who agree with you. Every time they see it move they go into geek heaven.”

“I bet. Dire wolves have been extinct for ten thousand years and the reconstructions had a lot of guesswork involved.” A thought tumbled. “The manitou was saying that it missed the megafauna. You should ask it if it’ll speak to these Wazzu guys — it could settle a truckload of disputes about how dire wolves and smilodons and whatall behaved. Not as compelling as the political stuff, I know, but I’d think any manitou time was good TV. And a lot of folk here like their prehistory.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Yeah, they do. I should have thought of that. It’s political too — like Hanford. Damn, I can’t even count the levels you’re thinking on.”

“It’s all the same level. Cantrip did what they did and hate what they hate because they’re scared. You thought of wolves at their scariest, not doing normal things. And the manitou is scary, no way round it. But scary isn’t necessarily bad, nor all it is, and the more people who understand that the better for everyone. So go add its witness of prehistory to the mix.”

When she’d gone Darryl gave me a sideways look. “She’s right, though, Mercy. You don’t just cope with pressure, you rise to it. I was having kittens when you marched out there and brought that camera in this morning, but it was the right call, and you haven’t missed a trick all day.”

“Except my poor customers who haven’t been able to get their cars.”

He shook his head. “I expect they’ll forgive you that.”
“Tell them the manitou ate your homework,” Ben added.

The laughter was welcome, but as I didn’t know when I’d be able to get back to work and I’d arranged for Zee, who might have filled in for me, to be busy elsewhere, I was arranging for a couple of the pack to collect my customer sheet from the garage so at least I could call them to apologise when Willis came in and promptly offered to have Tony Montenegro get what I needed.

“He’s due anyway, with Westfield’s agreement. I’d been at a domestic scene in Finley for half the night before I got sent over here at a run, and I’m getting fuzzy. And the media are going to be all over anyone leaving here like fleas on a dog.”

He did look pretty bushed, and I nodded. “Alright. But you’ll need to get the keys as well as the alarm code to Tony.”

I gave them to him and he summoned a uniform to run the errand, then accepted a seat.

“Ms Hauptman, I understand entirely why you let only KEPR in, and why giving the rest any time is not high on your agenda, but there are some very frustrated people out there.”

“Yeah. People who behave like hyenas at the best of times, and almost all of whose questions would be inane.”

“Can’t argue, but it would make our life a lot easier if we could give them a statement of some kind, and a schedule for updates.”

“We are on that, Detective Willis.” Anna came in. “Charles had intended to give a statement before now, but he’s been caught up with Torbett over the John Lauren Society membership list and the plan to use Adam for domestic black ops. Torbett found the list illuminating, and he sends you his regards and congratulations, Mercy.”

“Mine to him. What does Charles want to say?”

“Family outrage on your behalf, political outrage on wolves’ behalf, and Native American reverence for the manitou, mostly.” Anna grinned and snagged a brownie. “And he doesn’t want to say anything, but he does look good in that jacket and we need to keep feeding the media machine as well as the pack.”

I thought about Charles and a mob of frustrated reporters. “You’re going to be holding his hand, I hope.”

“Oh yes. Brother Wolf thinks eating a reporter or two would be salutary, but he’ll behave. Food beforehand would be good, though, and we’ll be too late for the East Coast news, so there’s no tearing hurry. They all played the video in full, by the way, preceded by screamer warnings, and Kyle tells me you’ve bumped George Clooney off the cover of this week’s Time.” I couldn’t keep the look of horror off my face and Anna grinned again. “It made Jesse smile, so suck it up.”

Indignation joined the horror. “That’s just sneaky.”

“I do sneaky as well as zen. Ask Charles.” She took my hands for a moment, with that wash of calm. “And they’re not the only ones, Mercy. Kyle and Jenny have made you and Clean Up the Basin a lot of money today. You need to add your accountant to the to-do list.”

“Agh.”

Willis looked curious. “You don’t like being richer?”
“One anomalous year and the IRS will be auditing me for the next twenty.”

“Probably, yeah. But it’s not like you won’t have an explanation.”

“IRS, explanation. Hell, snowball.”

He laughed. “There’s that.”

“They don’t even understand the word.” I shook my head to clear it. “At least I can pay off Zee a bit faster, I suppose.”

“Mercy, you could pay him off completely and retire, if you wanted.” Anna was still smiling, and I tried to catch my jaw and take it in. “It won’t be one anomalous year either. But accountants can wait. There’s a call you need to take in private.”

I followed her upstairs to Adam’s room, expecting Bran, but it was Stefan, awake long enough to have been told by his sheep what was going on and shown an edited package one of them had put together during the day. He’d called Adam’s private line, and mostly wanted to know if Adam, Jesse, and I were alright. Adam was awake, and I sat beside him, running my fingers through his ruff while I gave Stefan the highlights, and told him what the manitou had said to Westfield.

“Pass that on to Marsilia for me?”

<Of course. And she will be relieved. She was not happy last night.>

“I bet. But I had one other though I was going to pass on when I called her, Stefan. We’re assuming Cantrip has captive wolves, and maybe fae. Is there any chance they could have a vampire?”

There was a silence. <Slim, but not impossible.>

I shot a glance at Charles, who was listening. “Charles will send you a list of Heuter properties that are being searched. There’s no guarantee Cantrip were using any of them, but you might want to keep tabs on the search.”

<Yes. And search on our own account. I’ll be in touch. Take care, Mercy.>

And he was gone, Adam’s phone humming gently in my ear, and I looked at Charles. “You have his email?”

“Yes. And more swift thinking, little sister. Exposure of vampires now would not help anyone.”

“No. But being dead during the day constrains what they can do.”

“They have agents. And any vampire found in daytime would seem merely a dead human.”

“Until.”

“Yes. But it gives leeway.” Charles turned the topic, which told me he was thinking hard about it. “Adam is healing fast.”

Samuel nodded. “He could walk now if he had to. I don’t know if it was the energy you fed him, Mercy, or Joel’s magic but something boosted him very efficiently. More meat would be good, though.”

“I kept back a couple of beef roasts from what went into the freezers. And the stew’s nearly ready.”
It was as good as it smelled, too, but the meal was odd. Westfield seemed as embarrassed as relieved that I was willing to feed his people, and said they wouldn’t intrude, so they ate in the dining room with Willis while the rest of us used the kitchen. I caught up on what Kyle and Jenny had been doing — Anna hadn’t been exaggerating — and on the continuing release of statements by all and sundry. The NAACP and Black Caucus had criticised Cantrip’s hiring record and attitudes, the NRA wanted an air strike against the manitou, and faith leaders were divided between insisting it must be of God’s or Yahweh’s or Allah’s creation, denouncing it as an agent of Satan, and just gibbering. More importantly, Westfield’s boss in DC, though cautious and insistent that there was a long way yet to go, had confirmed that Preskylovitch had been acting under orders, and that a Deputy Director of Cantrip had been arrested, in the first place on suspicion of having made willfully false representations to a judge of the Special Security Court. There was also mention of serious financial irregularities, and confirmation of an extensive search for wolves held captive for experimental purposes.

We were also listening to KEPR’s coverage of the manitou telling the Wazzu people about megafauna and the Quaternary Extinctions. It was awkward, Taylor doing her best to repeat what it said for the camera while palaeobiologists panted to ask the next question, faces alight with wonder, triumph, and occasional dismay as pet theories died. Eventually the manitou said it was willing to answer more questions on another occasion but had other things to think about just now, and withdrew, padding round to the field behind the house and lying down, and after talking briefly to the scientists — including a nice question about what sort of evidence they considered magical telepathic eyewitness — Taylor announced a break in live coverage.

When she and her crew came to join us a few minutes later they looked bushed. The cameraman turned out to be Al Hersch and the sound guy Vince Dilman, and around a mouthful of stew Taylor asked me if I wanted them to stay.

“Radzinsky doesn’t want to give up a camera inside, of course — KEPR’s making a fortune — and God knows I recognise a big break when I get one, but we’ve already done nearly twelve hours straight.”

I thought about it for a minute. When I’d brought her in I’d only been thinking about nailing Cantrip down for what they’d done, but her presence was also controlling the media pack outside and disseminating the various conversations people had been having with the manitou.

“If you go, and events warrant it, you can come back in. And you can use the canteen Adam’s security people have set up — I’ll talk to Jim Gutstein — but I’d rather go on dealing with you, if you’re willing. You’ve coped with the manitou, and with wolves. And you’re all a lot less scared of both than you were this morning.”

“Too tired to be scared any more, but yeah, the fear’s faded. How do you know?”

“Body language. Smell, too — fear stands out.”

“Huh. If I don’t get a shower pretty soon that’ll be the least of it.”

I grinned. “Point. And you can’t do 24/7. Out of your colleagues, who’d cope best and is a decent human being?”

Taylor had some waspish opinions, as did Hersch and Dilman, and I was enjoying them when a hard-faced Westfield came to say he needed to talk to me.
We wound up in Adam’s study. Fisher was with Westfield, Charles, Anna, Jenny, and Andrea with me. Westfield’s body language said he was angry, though not with me or anyone present, and his voice was tight.

“Of the two Deputy Directors of Cantrip who were on Mr Smith’s list of John Lauren Society members, one — James Hobson — is under arrest in DC but refusing to talk. The whereabouts of the other — Xavier MacLandis — remains unknown, but unfortunately he is talking. I’m very sorry to have to tell you this, Ms Hauptman, but he has uploaded material from your Cantrip file to YouTube and other sites, and sent the same thing to all the major networks and papers.” His gaze went to Jenny. “It’s similar to the material shown Judge Cray, which you have, but compressed, with some extra tweaks and an accompanying statement. And while YouTube have already agreed to pull it and we can get it taken down from anything hosted here, it’s on several overseas sites and has already been multiply downloaded.”

I felt very cold. “The rape video.”

“Some of it, yes. I’m sorry.”

“Killing Tim.”

“Yes. Your husband … assailing his corpse. You shooting Guayota’s dog. Guayota’s kill scene, claimed to be a wolf kill. Shots of the dead River Devil. Stitched together with all the accusations they made to Judge Cray and some more.”

“Show me.”

“Are you sure, Ms Hauptman?”

“I can’t fight it if I don’t know what it is.”

“Alright.” He blew out a breath. “It’ll be quickest online.”

Fisher hooked her laptop to Adam’s projector, and found a site. The video ran for eight minutes and it was even worse than I’d imagined. It showed me inert beneath Tim as he raped me before I suddenly thrust the walking stick at him, and smashed his head with the crowbar. They’d added sound to imply I was enjoying the sex, but his crushing my arm had been edited out. Adam, half-changed, tore through the door and into Tim’s body, and this time they’d added screams to suggest Tim had still been alive and slightly blurred his mouth. I shot Guayota’s dog, but shooting him with no effect at all and barely surviving his attack were cut off. Every victim of the River Devil and Guayota was listed, with images of the River Devil’s mouth and the grotesque Finley kill scene. And over those warped truths an impassioned voice wove accusations about my control of the monsters I’d fooled the police and FBI into supposing I’d fought, and how Cantrip alone had seen the larger picture connecting my presence at what it called the two worst preternatural slaughters of citizens in American history. My mysterious absence for a month not long before my wedding — I’d actually been enthralled by a Faerie Queen and held prisoner in her elphame — was supposedly when I had started the River Devil’s killing spree. My injuries had been a blind.
And the manitou and Guayota were one and the same, a demon not magically banished as the police had stupidly believed and now returned in still larger form to serve my purpose of destroying Cantrip, and those who rightly saw me for the servant of Satan and murderous abomination I was. I should be put down for the good and safety of all, and so should every demonic thing. The voice was thick with hatred, and the whole thing left me feeling soiled and grimy. But whatever the manitou had done when it first read me — only yesterday, though it felt like forever — still had enough juice to wall away the sick memories of the way Tim and Orfino’s Bane had made me feel. And the video also left me coldly enraged, both with Cantrip and with what they were forcing me to do. Fisher started to say something sympathetic but I cut across her. “It has to be answered and it will be. Detective Willis, I’m going to need some things from KPD — the recording of the tests you did on the cup and bracers, with at least some of the officers who were present, and Sandys as the chief tech at Finley. Also the video from Sacajawea Park yesterday, if you can get it. The rape and Guayota videos we already have. Jenny, get hold of Morris, please. KEPR will have to show that Cantrip crap, and then my answer, which will mean showing some of what’s been edited out. Same rules as before — all or nothing. Tie indemnity for broadcasting the slander to showing the full answer. Charles, I need Gwyn ap Lugh’s permission to talk openly about the cup and bracers, and the walking stick. Anna, please tell Taylor her shift just extended again and brief Ben. We’ll need his IT skills. We also need Lucia Arocha. Andrea, go tell the manitou what’s happening, please. It will be aware of my anger. AED Westfield, you’ll want to have an official statement to make. I have to talk to my mother and Adam. I want to go on air as soon as possible.”

I knew my eyes had gone golden again, and only Charles got in my way as I headed for the door. “You’re sure of this, Mercy?” “They’re using fragments of truth, Charles. We need more of it.” “Maybe. What do you mean to do about those shots of Adam?” “The truth, and Adam in true wolf form, if he can hold it together with Anna’s help.”

He narrowed his eyes for a second, but then nodded and stepped aside. “Alright. I’ll talk to Da. Go talk to Adam.”

My anger had already woken Adam, who was growling at Samuel. They both turned as I walked in and sat beside Adam on the bed, fisting my fingers in his ruff. “Adam, listen. And don’t change, please — we’re going to need you as wolf.”

Then I called my mom, and told her what Cantrip had done. Her comment was unrepeatable, but I asked her to listen while I told Adam what I wanted to do. Samuel had his phone out, so I knew Bran would be hearing me. Adam was just as enraged as I’d unexpected, but I had our mate bond wide open, despite the ache in my knees, and because he could feel my own rage and the control I had it under he was listening. “I know it’s hard on you, but if we can do this now we can boomerang it. People won’t have a chance to believe the crap because they’ll get it with the real versions. That thing MacLandis put together is as sloppy as all their work, but people won’t know that unless we show them. We’ll carry you downstairs. Anna will be there, and Charles if you can stand it. Please, Adam.”

He growled, in rebuke rather than denial, and I let him know through our bond how sorry I was to have to ask it of him, and how much I resented being forced to it, with a stark question about what
else could work for us. His wolf was bright in his eyes as he hauled himself to four feet, threw back
his head, and gave an Alpha’s roar, more lion than wolf. Even with my hands clapped hastily over
my ears they were left ringing, and I barely heard my mother’s question.

<What the hell was that?>

“Adam venting some rage, so he can function. His version of what you said.”

<That was Adam?>

But I wasn’t really listening to her, because I’d been right. The eyes that met mine when his head
came down were all Adam, and after a long moment when I could feel his frustration, love, and
reluctant agreement, he dropped his jaw and settled down again with a whine. I could still feel his
pain in my knees, and ignored it as Samuel handed me his phone. Bran’s voice was back to deadly
soft.

<Mercy. I have seen that unspeakable thing and I am every bit as angry as Adam but I agree with
your strategy.> There was a pause, while Bran drew breath and banked rage I could feel even over
a phone. <You’ve been ahead of the curve all day, and you still are. Ap Lugh agrees, but asks that
you stay as close as possible to the original agreement about the fae artefacts Milanovitch used.
The stick he declares yours at present, so you are free to speak of it as you will, but I would suggest
you keep it to a minimum.> Another deep breath. <I do not know how you are controlling yourself,
Mercy, but you have my admiration as well as my gratitude. And I am surprised Adam is coherent
enough to behave as he is.>

There were questions there, and I’d been thinking about them too. “For me, rage gone to ice, and
for both of us some lingering manitou.”

<Ah. Beware that wearing off, then.>

“One more reason for speed.”

<Yes. Margi didn’t tell you, but she and Curt already have media doorstepping them. I’ve
contracted security, who are on their way. Tell her I’ll call her in five minutes.>

Tell her about me, too. Coyote’s voice slid into my head again. The way things are going you’ll
need me to appear soon. I’ll look as unlike Joe as possible, but he was me and I’m still me, so there
are limits.

I didn’t waste time cursing, just switched phones.

“Mom, listen. Two things. Bran has security coming to deal with the media outside your door.
He’ll ring you in five with details. I’m so sorry this crap is spilling on you and Curt and my sisters.
Please tell them. Second, sit down. This is rough, but I have no choice.” She must have heard
something in my voice because she did. “You know the reason I am what I am is because Joe was
Joe. What you don’t know is that he was also Coyote. The Coyote. Who in the stories usually gets
killed and is always reborn. Joe is as dead as you’ve always known, Mom. Don’t ever think
otherwise. I saw his ghost last year. He danced for me.”

<Oh, sweeting. You saw his ghost?> Her voice was teary, then her brain caught up. <He’s dead
but Coyote isn’t?>

“Hole in one. He looks something like Joe, but he isn’t. He’s all Coyote. And between the manitou
awakening and this Cantrip crap he thinks he’ll have to reveal himself, and he doesn’t want to hurt
you, or Curt. I met him during the River Devil thing, and I didn’t tell you because I thought it
might screw things up for you and Curt until you realised he was Joe but Joe wasn’t him. I wouldn’t do that for the world and I know how powerful a memory can be.” I didn’t look at Adam or Samuel. “I’m sorry if this hurts worse. Things are moving too fast, and the best I can do is give you a heads-up. I get round it by thinking sideways a lot and calling him my not-exactly father. You might think of him as Joe’s father. Your sometime would-have-been father-in-law.”

<But …>

“Yeah, mom, lots of them.”

<And you have to go. Knock ’em dead, sweetheart.> I’d never admired her more, and for all I found her impossible I loved her dearly. <Ask him to come see me and Curt when he can? I’d like them to know whatever part of Joe he is. Is there anything we can do right now to help?>

I drew a shaky breath. “Ask Bran. And tell my sisters I’ve knocked George Clooney off the cover of this week’s *Time*.”

<Of course you have.>

The phone went dead as Samuel laughed to himself and Adam gave me a long look. He wanted me to close our bond, so I didn’t feel his pain. I couldn’t have cared less, but beneath wanting to spare me he was worried about his own control when I had to speak about Tim.

“Manitou’s glass is still working some.” I let him feel the truth of it. “I don’t want to be cut off from you. Live with that for now, and restrict the bond if you have to?”

He agreed, and though he hated to show weakness Samuel and Darryl carried him downstairs on the spine board straight away. With Warren and Asil standing guard, and making sure everyone who had to pass through the hall gave him a wide, wide berth, he could see and hear what was happening, and with Anna beside him, oozing Omega zen, he could stay calm — or still, at any rate — while I called people together. Most of the pack were conspicuously absent — they’d have heard that roar — but Ben was working feverishly on Adam’s computer in the study.

Lucia had arrived, and I explained to her and Joel what we needed. So had Tony, with my customer paperwork and the KPD recordings. He took my hands, looking at me carefully, expressed another unrepeatable opinion of Cantrip and told me the witnesses I’d asked for, including Chief Rodgers and Chief Tech Sandys, were expected shortly. Westfield said his superiors were having conniptions but his authority covered him to make statements, and he would. Taylor, with Hersch and Dilman, had watched the Cantrip video, and she was angry for me about the rape scene — she’d been here when that story broke — but also pale and wide-eyed at the other images, shooting glances at Adam. She had Radzinsky on the line, and Jenny had Morris, and they held their phones up to me as I laid out what I wanted and what would and wouldn’t be shown.

Maybe it was because KEPR had already broadcast the Manitou’s killings, but Morris seemed less worried about showing me crushing Tim’s head and Adam tearing into his corpse than he was about my nudity. But he was also concerned about broadcasting what he openly called gross and malicious libel, the wording of my indemnity, and the fact that in wolf form Adam couldn’t give one himself, and I appreciated the implications. Jenny beefed up the wording, and more screamer warnings, a transmission delay, and those black bars they use in case anyone should see a breast or worse were agreed. When he rang off Jenny gave me a small smile.

“He still thinks they’ll be charged by the FCC and he’s probably right, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”
She was going to say something else, but broke off, looking round as Andrea came out of the kitchen and straight over to me.

“The manitou thinks Cantrip sucks even wider, and is sorry they’ve attacked you again in a way it can’t defend against. It asks if there’s any way it can see your broadcast.”

I blinked, but why not? “Kitchen TV. There’s a fifty-foot power and cable reel in the toolroom that’ll get you outside the back door.”

“Right.” She frowned. “It said that roaring noise was your husband?”

“Yeah. He thinks Cantrip sucks even wider too. He says hi.”

How you miss a werewolf in the room I have no idea, but she had, and as she followed my gesture her eyes went wide.

“That’s Mr Hauptman?” Adam dropped his jaw in confirmation. “Oh. My … oh. He’s magnificent.”

She was perfect, and though my flash of amusement didn’t touch my rage it centred me again.

“I think so too.” I turned. “And you need to get over your fear again, Ms Taylor, as Adam needs to get your scent clearly. Come meet his wolf form. And Mr Hersch and Mr Dilman. You can meet his eyes, but then drop your gaze. Staring is a challenge and he’s controlling a fair bit of pain still.”

They followed me nervously, and Adam stood. The ache in my knees sharpened, and I could feel him pulling energy from Darryl and Warren. I crouched and put my arms round his neck, being careful to put no weight on them.

“How’re you doing?”

I could have used our mate bond to ask, and I knew the answer anyway, but I wanted Taylor to hear. He growled softly and put a wet nose against mine before dropping his head on my shoulder for a moment. I moved aside a little, keeping one arm round Adam, and looked at the KEPR people. Anna had moved to stand behind them, and that was helping.

“You need to understand that what you saw on the Cantrip video was not a normal state. This is the true wolf. That was a half-change, forcing itself through even while Adam was driving flat out to get there — almost uncontrollable rage. The garage cameras transmit to here as well as remote storage, and he knew what was happening to me so he was wild with love and fear and fury. But he still kept enough control to arrive without hurting anyone else.” I met Taylor’s eyes. “When he saw Tim he didn’t know he was dead, and he couldn’t see me because I’d curled up in a corner, and he lost it. If he’d been human he’d have emptied a gun into Tim’s corpse. If I hadn’t been obsessed with trying to smash the cup after I’d killed him — and you’ll see that — I’d have gone right on pounding his head with the crowbar myself, until it was paste. But Adam was wolf, so he made sure a wolf’s way.”

Taylor swallowed and nodded, still pale. “The police knew?”

“Yes, they saw the body and the video. So did a Congressman it was leaked to by a member of the KPD. You can ask Tony or the KPD brass about their decisions. All that matters to me right now is that you don’t look at Adam as if you think he’ll attack you for no reason, and that you aren’t radiating fear of him because that will show, and make it harder for him, and we don’t need that.” I gave her a few seconds. “You saw the pack earlier. Adam’s been known to peel potatoes and chop cabbage too, though he grumbles about it.”
Adam sent me a query through our mate bond and I sent back an image of Taylor’s earlier surprise in the kitchen. Amusement touched him and he responded with a tangle of emotions I had to unpick.

“He can’t say he’s sorry he did it, because he isn’t. In a different way he’s glad he did, because he knows it’s been a help to me, sometimes, to know absolutely that Tim is never, ever coming back. I dream about the guilt the fae drug left me with sometimes, but not about him. But Adam is sorry seeing it has shocked and scared you, because he appreciates what you’ve done today.”

“You can talk to him when he’s wolf?”

“Emotions and images more than words. Our mate bond is very strong.”

She swallowed again and came to some decision. “Can I touch him?”

Surprised, I checked. “Yeah, but don’t put any weight on him. His knees still hurt. And if you get your head down to his level, you can meet his eyes.”

In its own way it was the bravest thing I’d seen all day. She was still scared silly, though Anna was giving her some insulation, but she dropped to her knees and met Adam’s eyes. She didn’t have a dog now, or I’d have smelled it, but she’d been around a big one sometime, and the same protocols worked. She offered a hand Adam could smell, understood the reassurance when he let a cold nose brush her palm, and when he turned and angled his head she knew he was offering his jaw to be scratched, just in the angle of bone and muscle. Her hand reached out and she was lost in wonder for a moment, before looking at me.

“I don’t know why I’m sure of it, or how you can know, but you do know what happened to me, don’t you?”

I didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “Yes. I smelt it when the manitou read your memories. Someone else might not have recognised it, but I did.”

“And you haven’t used it. Appealed to me because. Not once.” She took a breath. “I still have nightmares about him, and I wish to God I’d had your guts. I’m as jealous as I am scared.”

I could hear and smell the truth but there was no time for everything I wanted to say.

“Call me when this crap is over. We can talk. I know someone else who can help, too.” Ben knew all about rape. “Can you hold it together for this?”

“Oh yes.” Her voice was breathy. “I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t.”

“Then let’s go do it.”
Chapter Seventeen

The seating wasn’t right in Adam’s study, so we used the den room with the biggest flatscreen and sofas large enough for sprawling wolves. Adam lay stiffly on one side of me, head on my lap, Anna and Charles sat on the other, and there were seats opposite Tony and other KPD people could use when they were needed.

Taylor, who had spruced herself up somehow, started with a clear warning about what would follow, and explained the uploading to multiple sites of a video making very serious allegations against me. Westfield, also freshly groomed, confirmed that the voice had been positively identified as that of suspended Cantrip Deputy Director Xavier MacLandis, now wanted for unauthorised release of restricted material as well as on suspicion of complicity in assault and kidnap. Then with further warnings they played the video. KEPR had received their own copy and streamed it direct, but Ben put it up on the screen and I made myself watch it again, fixing points I needed in my mind. When it ended the camera was on us. Taylor introduced Charles and Anna, identified Adam, and gave me a cue.

“Ms Hauptman, these are dreadful images and appalling allegations. Why did you want them shown to everyone like this?”

“Because they’re desperate lies Cantrip has made sure will circulate, hoping to save themselves and stir up violence, and because people who’ve been watching all day, seeing me and the manitou, need to know the truth. And I want everyone to see exactly what Cantrip have done, because it’s as clumsy and botched as it is stupid and cruel.” I was keeping my voice as measured as I could.

“That first scene is two and some years old, from the security cameras at my garage — my workplace. It was given to the KPD as evidence, and it shows me being raped by Timothy Milanovitch, before I killed him. They’ve altered the soundtrack — it sounded like something from a porn movie — and though the pictures are real enough, they’re cherry-picked to mislead, so you need to see some more of it.”

Lights dimmed, the camera focused on the screen, and Ben put the beginning of the video up. Tim marched me into my work office and I stood shivering with a vacuous face as he searched it with increasing violence and then punched me in the ribs, knocking me back several steps. My calm advice that he needed to get his thumb out of his fist or he’d break it sent him storming out to get the cup. I drank, answered his questions about the walking stick, and took him through to the garage, the screen splitting briefly between cams to show the continuity. He found the walking stick, I stopped mumbling to ask him if it had been worth killing O’Donnell, and we had the short, ugly conversation that ended in his knocking me down and ordering me to drink again. The video ran until Tim told me that when he was done I’d go down to the river and swim until I couldn’t any more, and Ben had cut it off before his last sentence, about killing Austin Summers. I’d made a promise to Austin’s ghost and I wouldn’t break it even now.

Lettering came up — “3:27 of rape redacted” — and the video resumed about five seconds before the section Cantrip had used, but this time the soundtrack was right, and Tim crushing my arm was still there. So were my repeated, futile, and clumsy attempts to smash the cup after I’d killed him, ignoring his corpse and scoring the concrete floor with one-handed blows of the crowbar that glanced off the cup no matter how hard I tried. The black bars over my breasts and hips and Tim’s
The name was because when it came to the cup they’d mentioned Austin’s murder. It made for some awkward gaps, but the cup’s ability repeatedly to refill itself was clear, and so were its effects. Tony had volunteered to drink from it, saying that doing so hadn’t killed me, and after he’d found himself unable to resist commands to sit, take off his shoes, and touch his toes, he’d stared hard at the cup with loathing on his face. Two others had also taken small sips, with the same results, and while that played Tony, Willis, Sandys, and Chief Rodgers himself, in full uniform, quietly took seats opposite me.

I’d never thought much of Rodgers, and yesterday hadn’t improved my opinion, but to be fair to the man he’d made it clear when he’d arrived that he was angry about MacLandis’s incitements to violence and slurs against his own people as well as at what had been done to me, and that nailing Cantrip’s lies was at the top of his agenda. He’d been forthright in apologising for not taking my advice about the manitou as well, and he was again when the video ended and Taylor introduced him, Tony, and Sandys.

“Open knowledge of magic and preternatural beings poses a challenge for all police departments, but as we’ve just seen Kennewick PD takes its responsibilities very seriously. We also take the rights of the people we’re paid to serve and protect very seriously. Ms Hauptman was the victim of a most heinous assault, magical, chemical, physical, and sexual, and her killing of Mr Milanovitch was deemed lawful homicide not only by the detectives in charge and by me, but by every state and federal official who saw those videos. Moreover, as AED Westfield can confirm, that record of cup and bracers being tested was given both to the FBI and to Cantrip, so MacLandis knows — knows absolutely, as fact — that Ms Hauptman was heavily drugged and badly injured when she
killed Mr Milanovitch, and that he had boosted strength.”

Taylor asked me about those injuries and why I hadn’t been hospitalised, and I did what I could to honour Gwyn ap Lugh’s request by saying that Tim’s death had allowed the Gray Lords to sense the whereabouts of the things he’d stolen, and that because my physical injuries had been magically inflicted the one who’d come to collect them had been able to heal them magically as well. I also said both objects, with everything else Milanovitch had stolen, were now back with their proper custodians, where they could not be abused by criminals.

“You still have the walking stick, though.”

I had it beside me and stroked it. “Yes, I do. It was made to help humans who help the Fae, and it has a mind of its own. I’ve returned it several times, but it chooses to stay with me. I’m happy it does — it’s beautiful and useful, and it can’t be misused as the other things were.” Except I’d managed to do that when I used it to kill the River Devil, but it hadn’t minded. “And it saved me. I can’t prove it, but I know that when it touched my hand it broke the cup’s spell and let me defend myself.”

Tony had been staring at me, and blinked. “Was that it? I wondered how you’d broken its hold.” He turned to Taylor and the camera. “I’ve had training regarding Rohypnol, Ms Taylor, which included being given a small dose, and that cup was worse. Rohypnol screws awareness and memory, as well as robbing you of volition, but with the cup I was fully aware. There just wasn’t anything I could do. If someone had told me to take out my gun and kill myself, or murder someone else, I’d have done it, no question. The memory still bothers me, though it was nothing next to Ms Hauptman’s experience. And what we’ve just seen wasn’t only multiple assault and rape, it was torture and attempted murder. You heard Milanovitch’s command — when I’m done raping you, blame yourself, drown yourself. I’ve seen some evil on the job, believe me, and Timothy Milanovitch was right up there.”

“No argument here, Detective Montenegro. I’m as glad he’s dead as you are. But I can’t say I’m not disturbed by what happened to his body.”

So we went on to Adam and Tim’s corpse. That wasn’t for reshowing, and I repeated pretty much what I’d said to Taylor earlier, my hand in Adam’s ruff.

“I can’t tell you werewolves aren’t dangerous, and it’s right to be horrified by what happened. But I can insist on context and that you look at Adam now. He’s had a pretty grim day today, starting with being shot, twice, and having bones reset without anaesthetic. If he wasn’t a wolf he’d be in intensive care, and even as a wolf he’s still in pain. And he’s about as happy about me having to relive all this as any husband would be.” Adam growled, long and low, and I sank my hand deeper into his fur. “As you can hear. But what’s making him unhappy isn’t a present physical threat, so even in wolf form he’s under control, however enraged with Cantrip he may be.”

Taylor nodded. “I can see that, and I do understand, but I’m still shocked by what happened. Was charging Mr Hauptman discussed, Chief Rodgers?”

“Oh yes. But charged with what? Desecrating a dead body? Cantrip added the screams to that obscene slander they cooked up, but you can see Mr Milanovitch was already dead from the blow to the head. The pathology lab confirmed it. And God knows Mr Hauptman had cause. The legal opinion was that while there were grounds and evidence for such a charge, there were also such strong extenuating circumstances that a conviction was very unlikely. Mr Hauptman’s a pretty popular citizen round here. The political opinion was that charging him was not in anyone’s interest, and any trial would be a very expensive circus that would be exploited by hate groups, just as Cantrip now wants it to be. Whatever happened elsewhere it would have put citizens here in
danger — citizens to whom I and all KPD personnel have an obligation. And there was also our obligation to Ms Hauptman as the victim of a truly vile assault, who needed her partner. I made the decision, and I stand by it.”

I hadn’t known about that, and Rodgers got some more points, but it was time for the next thing, which I was taking out of order.

“There’s another relevant point, Ms Taylor, because you and everyone have seen exactly what an enraged wolf can do, and Cantrip claim the mass murder at Finley two months back was the same thing. But while it’s far more sickening, it’s not remotely the same.”

After more strong warnings from Taylor, Willis gave an account of why I’d been there and the help I’d given, stressing the fact that there had been two kill sites, and making it clear both had been staged to be found. Then the KPD video of the main Finley scene came up while Sandys, in a dry, clinical voice that couldn’t conceal repugnance, pointed out how carefully arranged the bodies and body parts were.

“This wasn’t hot blood, but cold madness. There wasn’t a wolf hair or wolf print anywhere, and the paw prints we did find” — the video showed them, including several I hadn’t known about that had been discovered when the bodies were moved — “were much larger than any wolf’s and clearly show non-retractable claws. I made casts, and Mr Hauptman arranged for me to make others of werewolf prints, from several packs. They were all much smaller, and showed no claw marks. The crime-scene prints did however exactly match prints Guayota left elsewhere in his canid form. I also have records on file of the damage Mr Milanovitch suffered post-mortem, and I checked those against the forensic evidence of the claws and dentition that did this to the Finley victims. And there is no way any of them were wolf kills, which Cantrip knows full well because the late Agents Orton and Kent were all over that case, wanting the deaths ruled wolf kills, and they went away wholly aware that a lot of hard evidence proves otherwise.”

I nodded. “They also know Guayota confessed to it, though obliquely, and that he tried to kill me.”

And on we went to the more recent video of my brief conversation and rather longer fight with Guayota. While it played Joel and Lucia came in and took seats. Taylor hadn’t seen this before, and was riveted. When the engine Adam had thrown knocked Guayota back and the video abruptly ended she gasped.

“What happened?”

“Heat fritzed the power to the cameras. You can still see the burn scar on my cheek, and I have others. Then more backup arrived, the pack following Adam, and Guayota decided he’d try to get what he wanted another way.”

She shook her head. “That’s … as astonishing as anything I’ve seen today. Five shots and he didn’t even fall over. That dead dog changing … and the fire …” She took a deep breath. “I don’t know how you survived, Ms Hauptman.”

I nodded. “Me either, most days. But I had speed, martial arts training — I’ve always done some and after Milanovitch I did a lot — and blind luck. And Adam and the pack. I wouldn’t have lasted much longer alone.”

“But you did defeat him, later.”

“Not alone, but yeah, with a lot more luck and a last-gasp magical gamble. Guayota could only function here, so far from his own domain, if he had anchors. That’s what his tibicenas were. But
that’s Joel’s to tell.”

I was listening very carefully as Joel spoke, not for words but tone, and I thought the manitou really had helped him. He didn’t leave out killing his own dogs on Guayota’s orders, and he was holding tightly onto Lucia’s hands, but his emotion was closer to rage than the self-loathing evident when he’d spoken to Willis and Riebold yesterday. He’d also been a helpless witness to Guayota’s later murders, and equally helpless against the command to attack me until I’d admitted him to the pack and Guayota’s magic unravelled. Taylor looked at me, and I shrugged.

“No, I don’t know how it was possible. Wolves aren’t magic users, they just have the magic of what they are, and part of that is the bonds that make up a pack. And though I am a magic user of sorts, I’m very minor league. But with the walking stick’s help, and my mate bond with Adam, I can sense the pack’s bonding magic, so I know what it feels like, and when Joel’s tibicena was standing over me I was lying on the stick and I could feel the way Guayota’s magic was binding him. And it was like pack but all wrong, forced servitude not willing companionship, and the only thing I could think of to try was that right pack magic might beat this wrong sort. So I said formal words, willing it, and it worked. Joel was freed to kill the other tibicena, and when he did Guayota had no anchors left. He just vanished, Mount Teide’s been intermittently spewing smoke ever since, and I spent several days in hospital and more than a month recovering from the burns.”

My foot throbbed at the memory and my rage rose.

“And you know what, Ms Taylor? Cantrip had all that too, just as the KPD did, and the FBI. They had Guayota’s confession, they had the video, they know he killed all those poor women, and they couldn’t care less. I have no idea what the legal position is, but I hope the families Guayota bereaved sue Cantrip for the distress they’re causing. And MacLandis personally. He isn’t just an unstable bigot obsessed with a crackpot theory about me, he’s cruelly indifferent to the suffering of anyone he thinks he can use to further his agenda of hate crimes. The same goes for the families of those the River Devil killed.”

“I hear you, Ms Hauptman, and I can’t say I disagree. It’s been clear since this morning that Cantrip has no regard at all for decency or law. But I confess I’m confused about the River Devil. I saw and read the news reports about it, but I don’t understand why MacLandis thinks it had anything to do with you.”

“You don’t understand because nothing he said about that is even remotely plausible. He believes I’m a monster so apparently I must control all monsters. I was on holiday for a few weeks six months before the River Devil appeared, so I must have been, what? Creating it? But it’s been in Native American legends for centuries. Ask the Yakama Nation, or any competent anthropologist. There’s even a petroglyph of it at Horsethief Lake. Adam and I had just got married, and had limited time off work, so we were on honeymoon in the Columbia Gorge for two or three days before the River Devil was killed, so again MacLandis thinks I must have been responsible for every one of the murders it had been committing for the last month, while I was more than a hundred miles away and completely preoccupied with wedding nerves. And AED Westfield tells me all of that is in the FBI file, which is where Cantrip got the pictures of the River Devil’s body. But God forbid they should take any notice of the facts.”

This was the trickiest ground, because I couldn’t tell the truth, and if I had it wouldn’t have tallied very well with that FBI file. Taylor frowned, genuine puzzlement in her voice.

“So why are you in that file at all?”

“Because I’m half-Blackfeet, and Adam and I found a Native American survivor of one of its attacks and helped get him to hospital. That led us to meet a Yakama medicine man who knew the
legends and had realised what had to be doing the killings. He thought I could add my little bit to the Native American magic that sent the River Devil to sleep so deeply it could be killed while it slept. I can’t and won’t talk about that — it’s sacred, and not to be spoken of — but Adam and I did tell the local police and the FBI everything we could, and they also spoke to some of the Yakama elders involved.”

“But MacLandis said you’d used injuries as a blind. What injuries?”

“Several broken bones and cuts that needed more than a hundred stitches. The River Devil thrashed around a bit right before it died and that time I wasn’t fast enough to get out of the way. My bad.” Adam growled, for more complicated reasons than Taylor realised. “Sorry, he didn’t like my getting hurt on honeymoon, and the River Devil was a scary, scary thing. In the legends it’s always hungry, and it wasn’t only killing people. The fish counts between John Day Dam and The Dalles still haven’t completely recovered.”

Taylor ignored that diversion. “You were so closely involved in killing it you got hurt by its … death throes?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Is there another?”

I shrugged. “It’s accurate. It’s just I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone actually say ‘death throes’.”

“And you were involved in getting rid of Guayota.” Taylor took a deep breath. “So what MacLandis thinks is that because you were a common factor, you must be connected?”

“Right. Cantrip are trying to project me as like Les Heuter, featuring in investigations because he was the killer. But he was one of their own.”

“Yes, he was. But forgive me, it does seem that things happen to you, Ms Hauptman, and I was wondering if that’s why the manitou — this manitou — finds you so interesting?”

“Could be. And you’re right I seem to attract trouble. I wish I didn’t. As to the manitou, it confirmed to AED Westfield that it could sense Joel’s magic as from another manitou, and that Adam and I are mated even though I’m not a wolf. It found that interesting. If you want anything more, you should ask it.”

“I did, earlier. It said you stood between things, and found ways for different kinds to co-operate, and people should think about that, as it was doing.”

“I try. I’m Anglo and Blackfeet, I grew up with wolves and I’m married to one, and I worked for a fae for years. I’ve met lots of others, and some I’d count as good friends. I want my friends to get on with one another, as well as with me, and I don’t like bigotry in any form — not racism, not sexism, not gay bashing, and not the poison the John Lauren Society and Bright Future peddle. And for my money, that’s really why Cantrip’s agents hate me, and why they’ve done everything they’ve done today. You heard MacLandis — he wants legal open season on everything preternatural, and meantime pogroms and lynchings will do nicely. K-K-Kantrip is spot on. And then yesterday they saw the crime-scene video from Sacajawea State Park and had a complete meltdown.”

The camera refocused one more time, and Ben ran the last video. Besides Adam, me, and some KPD and FBI people, no-one had seen this, and Charles and Anna were as interested as Taylor and her crew. The tech who’d had the camera — Jurgenson, I remembered — had heard the tone of my
warning that we were being watched and focused on us, then gone to the widest shot he could. He had the whole thing, and his hand had remained remarkably steady, but sound was limited and Ben had added subtitles. The remains of the Park Service scientists had been blurred out. Gordon’s voice on speaker was just a rumble, and Ben’s caption read “unintelligible sound”. It ended with Riebold looking at the camera and shakily asking Jurgenson if he had the film, and Taylor let out her breath in a huff. She also took a few seconds to marshal her thoughts, even though we were on air.

“Ms Hauptman, I’ve been wondering all day how you were coping with the manitou so well. If you hadn’t been with me when you had me approach it, I’d have been … well, I was scared stupid. And unless I’ve lost my judgement completely, on that video you were too, but you were sucking it up, and you thought about trying to talk rather than shoot or run faster than anyone. How did you do that?”

“What good would running have done? It just says you’re prey, and whatever else the manitou may be, its guardian form is a predator. And you know, Ms Taylor, you don’t live among werewolves for long without learning when submissiveness is the safest option. A predator has the instinct to kill, but isn’t governed by it. Challenge one head-on, get in its face, and you’re in danger. Eyes down, and maybe you’re not. Much like a boss who’ll take polite disagreement in private but not public defiance.” I hesitated but pushed on. “And you heard what I said to Adam — the manitou’s invisible attention felt curious, not like a hunt. You’ll know the difference between a man who checks you out when he sees you because he fancies you, and one who thinks you’ve said something interesting and studies you to reassess you as a result.”

She almost grinned. “Oh yes. One’s stripping you with his eyes and the other is noticing you’re a person.”

“Right. It was sort of like that. It wasn’t stalking us, it was intrigued.”

“Mmm. I felt its curiosity when it read me.” She paused, brow wrinkling. “You said earlier that the one thing you’d withheld when you were questioned yesterday was the identity of the person you called.”

“Yes.”

“I have to say I can see why the KPD and Cantrip were curious.”

I took a breath but Charles forestalled me.

“Anglos find it hard to respect, Ms Taylor, but there are strong Native American beliefs that Mercy and I share about speaking some things aloud. Her call was necessary. So is her silence.”

She took a sensible line. “I can understand that, Mr Smith, but is there anything more you can say?”

There was a brief pause as Charles thought about it.

“Christians believe blasphemy is wrong, and some Jews that you mustn’t write a divine name without asterisks or dashes. We are silent in respect. But you also need to remember your history. Anglos signed and swore to many treaties, and did not keep their word once. Before the Fae and werewolves came out, not one Anglo in a million gave our legends any credit. Are you surprised that when they prove true, we do not hasten to offer the authorities and media contact with a sacred elder?”
Taylor blew out a breath. “No, Mr Smith, I’m not. And I don’t know much about being treated the way your people have been.” Her voice flattened. “But I’m also grappling with my own fears. There were Fae. Then there were werewolves. Now there are River Devils and manitous and who knows what.”

“Careful, Ms Taylor.” Her eyes came back to me. “There was and is only one River Devil, and for now at least it’s dead. And all those kinds of beings have existed for a long, long time. Some people have always believed in them. Now everyone knows they’re real. That doesn’t make them any more dangerous to anyone — it makes humans more dangerous to them. What we all have to do is learn how to live with what we all now know, and that’s what Cantrip was supposed to do. Combined Nonhuman and Transhuman Relations Provisors, remember? And that’s why Cantrip has to go — it’s not just that a few bad agents, and a rogue Deputy Director or two, have abandoned the rule of law, it’s that the whole agency isn’t doing and can’t do the job it was set up to do. And it’s a job we all need someone to do properly. The preternatural isn’t going away, and as I said before, co-operation can have real benefits for everyone. Those Wazzu scientists were happy, and I hope we’ll all see tangible benefits at Hanford.”

“Yes, that’s … What is it?”

Charles and I had both stiffened as we felt the rising tingle of magic — not the manitou’s but something like it — and Taylor’s gaze switched between us. I wasn’t sure if Adam had felt the magic, but we all heard Andrea’s distant exclamation and running feet, and Taylor’s head turned as she skidded to an excited halt in the doorway.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but the manitou says you’ll all want to head outside because the Elder Spirits are coming.”
Chapter Eighteen

By leading the way I was able to keep the pace down enough to let Adam walk under his own steam without showing weakness. Warren and Ben had fallen in around us like an honour guard, and he was pulling on both to keep any hitch out of his walk, but still hurting. Asil was with them, wary of the leash Adam had on his temper, but intrigued. Charles and Anna were behind me, and others behind them, including Samuel. I wasn’t sure how far back Taylor and the camera were, but as soon as we were outside I heard feet crunch on the gravel as they broke sideways, though where Hersch was pointing his camera was anyone’s guess.

The manitou was standing just off the drive, halfway to the gate, illuminated by the outside lights but with darkness around it where they failed. Between us Adam and I owned about ten acres sloping down to the banks of the Columbia, mostly grassland and scrub, and the ground was throbbing with magic that grew every second. It could have been the heartbeat of the earth, and the manitou was feeling it, paws flexing where it stood and claws scoring the turf. The KPD and Adam’s security people at the gate were staring, and there were raised voices coming from the more distant police line holding back the media. I didn’t have the two-way Willis had given me, but he was right there.

“Can you find out what the fuss at the line is?”

He gave me another of his looks, but complied, and the crackling answer told me what I’d half-suspected.

“If they’re Native Americans with Jim Alvin, let them through, please. Anyone Jim vouches for is good.”

“Who is Jim Alvin?”

“Senior Yakama Nation medicine man. Retired professor at Wazzu. Good guy.”

I wasn’t sure which credential persuaded him, but he nodded and spoke into the two-way, and I saw three crowded pickups let through the police line. But my attention wasn’t on them because the darkness outside the security lights was thickening, especially between the house and the river. The Columbia is big, and even on moonless nights you’re aware of it from anywhere on our property, if only as a different sheen in the darkness, but right now I couldn’t see it at all. The magic was picking up too, throbbing harder and a little faster, as if the world’s pulse were slightly fevered, but the manitou had become still, looking out into the darkness with eyes that I was sure saw what I could not. Adam and I were in line with Charles and Anna, the rest spread out behind us, and Taylor and Westfield arrived behind me all but simultaneously, though Taylor beat him to the draw.

“What’s happening?”

“Magic, Ms Taylor. But I can’t improve on ‘the Elder Spirits are coming’.”

“Is it dangerous?”

And out of the dense darkness beyond the lights my not-exactly father’s kin came, using their animal forms. He was there, his coyote as big as a St Bernard. Wolf’s wolf was the size of a bear, and Bear’s bear nearly the size of a horse. I heard sharp breaths around me but I was too fascinated — ever since I’d first met them and seen my not-exactly father’s coyote, I’d wondered what their other forms were like. Bobcat was the size of a cougar, and Cougar bigger than the biggest tiger I’d ever seen. Snake was a diamondback rattler the size of a python, and Otter and Beaver as big as seals. Owl, Hawk, and Raven flew down in silence, followed with a ringing cry by Thunderbird, his wingspan as impossible as ever and his claws scoring the grass as he landed. And there were prey species too — Deer was something older as well as larger than either mule or blacktail, flanked by Moose and Elk, with Rabbit beside them. Last, a Salmon-headed figure joined them, walking on two legs out of the darkness, and all morphed to the equivalent animal-headed forms I’d seen only when they went to fight the River Devil. Then, slowly, with native dignity and a renewed tremble of magic that resonated in the earth, they began to sing and dance, forming a shuffling, leaping circle around the manitou.

I’ve tried to describe Native American singing before, without much success, and they weren’t using human sinuses or language. The sounds of earth and water moving echoed in the thick air, with the voices of the animals they were and represented, and when circling movement took them over the gravel drive the drumming of their shuffles and stamps changed from a hollow booming to a sliding rustle. Without any conscious decision I was moving forward to join them, and so was Charles, leaving Anna and Adam standing together. I could hear a distant commotion among the crowds, and running feet, but it didn’t matter. Dance and song alike welcomed the manitou’s awakening and asked its favour for the animals who had survived the coming of the Anglos, and though Charles and I could barely understand it our movements joined the invocation. Ignorant of the words, he was humming a low descant and I was singing a higher one. Taylor’s film says it lasted eight minutes, but for all I can swear to it could have been one or a thousand before the manitou threw back its head, howled acceptance into sudden stillness, and vanished.

Only then did I become aware of the half-circles that had formed behind us, though a glance gave me Jim Alvin, Calvin Seeker, Fred and Hank Owens, Gary Laughingdog, and more Native American faces I knew as well as a dozen I didn’t. After the morning’s terror, and amid all that had followed, today had been a day for making new friends, and I knew that some of the unknown faces would be my closest peers, avatars I was eager to meet — but I was also unhappily aware that anything private had to wait, because the camera was still rolling, and wonderful as Elder Spirits were they had interrupted things that mattered. I also knew Adam ought to be helped back upstairs, and that I needed to be horizontal sooner than later, not that I could see much hope of it — if the wicked were getting less rest than me they had to be seriously exhausted. I could hope, anyway. Meantime the Elder Spirits looked as if they’d be leaving as swiftly as they’d arrived, so with real regret I shook off both the elated peace the dance had brought and the desire to go coyote and just curl up by Adam’s side. Instead I stepped forward and gave my not-exactly father and his peers as good a bow as my bruised stomach allowed, straightening with a wince.

“Elder Spirits, thank you, and be welcome here.”

They’re not staying, not-exactly daughter, though I am, for a while.

“They’ve put you up as a spokesman?”

Spokescoyote, please. And of course they have. They need someone charming and handsome.

I gave him a look, blandly returned in so far as a coyote-headed man can do bland.

“Wonderful. But can you all please wait a moment. I have a request of you.” Coyote cocked his
muzzle enquiringly. “I also have other guests on camera, so I beg a moment first.”

I didn’t wait but turned to Jim Alvin. “Jim, they’re not staying, saving Coyote, so take everyone round the back? There’s a fire pit, and ask Darryl — big beautiful Blasian — to get more food cooking for you all?”

He gave me a fish eye, as did Charles, but when I flicked a look at the camera Jim nodded, and once the mob was moving, many faces looking exalted, I turned to catch Taylor’s eye.

“Ms Taylor, back of the house is now off limits to the camera. Maybe someone’ll have something to say tomorrow, but these folks have just had a strong magical experience and need some space.” She was nodding reluctantly, eyes wide, but also looking as if she’d like to move in on me and the elders, and I flicked a hand to keep her back before turning and taking a few steps towards the waiting circle, Charles right behind me. I kept an eye on my not-exactly father, but spoke to them all.

“Elders, do you know about the captive wolves and fae we think Cantrip must be holding somewhere?”

Thunderbird snapped his beak, which I took for a yes.

“There are a lot of places to try looking, and any who are being held are at terrible risk. If it is possible, I ask if your kinds could help? Most have at least one superior sense — sight or smell. Can they be asked if any know of an isolated place where wolf, fae, and human coincide? A place that will smell of fear and pain?” I looked at Otter and Salmon. “A place where the water carries taints it shouldn’t?”

I didn’t think it was what they’d expected, and Charles and I waited while long looks were exchanged. Then Coyote acquired his fully human form, wearing an expression I couldn’t read and a buckskin outfit even more magnificent than Charles’s.

“It’s all very well being She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars, not-exactly daughter, but you can’t fix everything, you know.” He waved a hand. “There are limits — you try explaining to a salmon what a werewolf is, never mind that almost everywhere’s tainted in ways it shouldn’t be — but you’re in rather good odour, just now, so we’ll do what we can. And my own four-legged children are a better bet than most, of course. Was there anything else before they go?”

They not we again, I noted, wondering what he was up to, not that there was any chance of stopping him.

“Only my respects to all, and to those I met before that I’m pleased to meet again under happier circumstances.” If more complicated ones. “Oh, unless Gordon is willing to talk to AED Westfield.”

The look Thunderbird gave me suggested not, but to my surprise he stayed with my not-exactly father while the others offered nods, even Wolf, and vanished into the surrounding darkness. A part of me noticed that as they left the density of shadow eased, and I could again see lights reflecting on the Columbia, but the thought was scattered by my not-exactly father, sounding so cheerful that both Charles and I gave him very suspicious looks.

“I’m so pleased I saved you from Guayota, not-exactly daughter. You’ve really done quite well today. Now, do introduce me to all these nice people you’ve collected, especially that reporter.”

There wasn’t much point but I gave him a glare anyway. “You be nice to her, now. And to
everyone else.”

“Cross my heart. I can’t say ‘and hope to die’, because I don’t — once is enough for one year, as I’m sure you agree.”

I did, and so did Charles, but as we turned towards the throng of Feebs, police, and wolves surrounding Adam, Asil beside him with Westfield and Fisher to one side, everyone’s attention was on Gordon, who was striding directly towards them. Adam and, I thought, Asil got very slight nods, no more than a tilt of the great head, but after looking at Westfield for a second Gordon became Thunderbird in full, before snapping his beak and taking off with a scream that had wolves and law officers alike stepping back smartly. Hersch tried to track him into the darkness but gave up, returning the camera to Westfield and Fisher, who were gingerly shaking their heads to clear them when I came up.

“What was that about?”

Westfield sounded quite plaintive amid his shock, and I gave him a smile with some sympathy in it.

“You remember you asked to talk to the being I called from Sacajawea State Park, and I said I’d pass the request along? Well, he just said ‘no’.”

Westfield blinked, and I saw Asil grin, but it was Andrea who spoke first, eyes wide and delighted.

“It was Thunderbird you called? Oh my. Ms Hauptman, you just keep getting cooler.”

There was laughter, and I couldn’t stop a grin but also wagged a finger. “I called a friend of his, Andrea, and he happened to be there. I’m not sure Thunderbird does cell phones.”

The banter was a welcome relief amid all the tension, but there were too many agendas still in play to allow much distraction, and several of them were mine, so I took a deep breath, caught my not-exactly father’s eye, and turned towards Taylor and the camera.

“Ms Taylor, I think our business about the malicious and criminal slanders Cantrip’s Xavier MacLandis has been spreading was pretty much done. But there are some things I can now clear up, both for folks here and for anyone who’s been watching today unfold.” I looked straight into the lens. “Frankly, it’s a relief, because I have been keeping silent about some secrets that were not mine to tell, but that’s now moot. As you just heard, it was Thunderbird — in his Native American form — whom I called from Sacajawea State Park. Given that the manitou’s avatar was a dire wolf, I figured it had to be very old, and the Elder Spirits are the next oldest kind I know, so the one I could maybe get to talk to seemed like the best bet. I’d met him and some of the others when we killed the River Devil, so I didn’t think he’d mind me asking for advice. But you’ll understand that on top of the sacred considerations, talking out of turn about Thunderbird is not such a good idea.”

My stomach felt very tight but delaying wouldn’t help, and if you’re going to confess you might as well do it properly. I certainly had the largest audience I could hope for, so I looked at Adam for reassurance, feeling his love as well as pain and tiredness, and faced the camera again.

“And there’s one other thing I should say, because although I am not a wolf, nor any kind of fae, I’ve already admitted on air that I am a minor-league magic user, and I’ll add now that I can shapeshift to a coyote form.”

It was actually a relief to say it, and though I had my worries about what going public would mean I’d agreed with Jenny earlier that after today sooner was better. Taking a breath, I looked at a blinking Westfield, letting Hersch shift to widen his shot.
“So that answers your other outstanding question, AED Westfield. The kind of preternatural I am is an avatar of an Elder Spirit, for want of a better term. Oh, and yours, Detective Willis, because it’s how I got out of the cuffs in the Yukon, changing just enough to pull my paws free. I’d show you, but a full change means stripping and I’ve had enough of being naked on TV for today.” So had the FCC, I’d bet, and there was no point making trouble KEPR didn’t need. I gestured and Coyote came to stand beside me. “Being a coyote in a werewolf pack was one thing that caught the manitou’s attention. It’s not exactly common. And the reason I am what I am is that I am this being’s not-exactly daughter. I know it sounds odd, and it’s complicated, but it’s honest and avatar theology can wait. Ms Taylor, everyone, meet Coyote, my not-exactly father. And yes, that’s the Coyote, as in all those stories.”

There was a silence in which Coyote looked at me with a grin, his voice sounding amused in my head. I think your name should really be She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars, She Drops People Right In It.

In Charles’s and Adam’s heads too, from their looks, and I wondered who else’s, but Coyote wasn’t one to miss a stage that had been set for him, or even one that hadn’t, and stepped forward.

“Charmed to meet you, Ms Taylor, and you have the thanks of the Elder Spirits for a fine job today, introducing the manitou.”

The expression on Taylor’s face as she took the hand he offered was priceless, and despite my many reservations about what Coyote wanted I couldn’t deny after that dance that a lot of it was probably not only sensible but righteous. Still.

“You know, Ms Taylor, when it comes to Elder Spirits I’m just guessing most of the time, but as Coyote is one he knows better, so you can try asking him. Just remember he is a trickster. Oh, and if he tells you he thought up the plan to kill the River Devil, don’t believe a word of it. It was my not-exactly aunts.”

“Such a stickler for truth you are, not-exactly daughter. Your not-exactly aunts send greetings, by the way, and are just as proud of you today as I am.”

The unexpected compliment stole my breath for a moment, and left me feeling a bit weepy, which wouldn’t do at all. Fortunately Coyote became brisker, as well as more formal, helpful, and talkative than I’d ever heard him, and I began to think he might not be so foolish a choice as a speaker for his peers.

“And you can indeed try asking me, Ms Taylor, but a proper interview will have to wait on tomorrow, I fear. Something to anticipate with relish.” He gave her a grin, half-friendly and half-warning, though I wasn’t sure what she took from it. “What I can say now, to all who watch, on behalf of the Elder Spirits you have seen here tonight, is that we came to ask for the manitou’s aid to all our kinds, which it has granted. It is a pure spirit of the land, while we are not only of our animal kinds but born of their relations with the First People, those you call Native Americans. We knew the manitou before it slept, and while it has slept all our kinds have suffered at human hands, not from honest predation but from the loss and poisoning of the land they need to live. And as many humans already realise, that has to change.”

“I hear you, sir, and I’m sure others will too, especially if the manitou says the same thing.”

“So we thought, Ms Taylor.”

“I bet. Do you know where it went?”

That was a question I’d been meaning to ask him more privately.
“It is digesting what we gave it magically, which was our collective knowledge of how the Columbia Basin has fared while it slept, before and after the coming of Anglos.” That Coyote grin was pure predator. “So it is now quite well informed about the last few centuries, from a Native American point of view, anyway, human and animal. And it will be back soon enough, if only to see how my not-exactly daughter fares — it’s really quite taken with her, you know, as well it might be.”

He drifted along to Westfield, the camera tracking him.

“We rather thought it ought to know about Anglo ways with treaties they sign, you see.” Westfield winced. “And the habits of so many Anglos, especially those enforcing their laws, when it comes to treating Native Americans, or then again, wealthy corporations that pollute. You will find the manitou as unimpressed with bad faith as we are. Or the Fae, with whose actions in Boston we have every sympathy.”

That was news, though what the Fae would make of it was anyone’s guess, and Coyote seemed to be done for now. His grin came back.

“But do cheer up. You wouldn’t have got very sensible answers from Thunderbird anyway — he’s never liked being indoors — and you have me instead. Much more useful, and far better fun.”

Westfield didn’t look particularly reassured, but my knees were telling me that keeping Adam standing much longer was not a good idea. One last effort.

“Don’t say you weren’t warned, AED Westfield. But forgive me, people — I don’t wish to be inhospitable, but it’s been a **very** long day, and I need some down time.” I turned to Chief Rodgers and the KPD men with him. “Chief, my heartfelt thanks for coming out, and helping me to refute MacLandis’s slanders, and show his selfish and deranged bigotry. And all of you folks. Tony. Mr Sandys. Detective Willis.”

They didn’t much want to leave but had no particular reason to stay, and with Willis chivvying a little, keen for some down time of his own, I got them on their way, and considered who was left besides Tony, spelling Willis as KPD liaison.

“AED Westfield, I don’t mind feeding you and your people but this isn’t a hotel. Or are you working all night?”

“Probably, Ms Hauptman, and we’ll need to be here when the Secretary shows up tomorrow.”

I’d forgotten about that, and managed to stifle a sigh. “Right. Well, when in the house please restrict yourselves to the first floor. Asil, will you keep the pack downstairs or out back?”

“Certainly, **querida**.”

“And Ms Taylor, if your bosses want to bring in an overnight crew they’re welcome, but it’s front exterior only. You and your own crew can come back tomorrow morning, but for today we’re done with the live show.” I looked at the camera for the last time. “I know it’s been a wild ride, and everyone will have their own opinions, but if you think it started with Cantrip running horribly out of control, committing assault and torture and kidnap and mayhem, and the manitou having to rescue me and my daughter, and it’s ended with the Elder Spirits declaring themselves and a green dance, you have to think something went right. Despite Cantrip. Don’t let up on that, please, or give the Federal Government any wiggle room on getting rid of them and setting up an agency that can actually relate to magical beings without foaming at the mouth and shooting people. And pray to whatever god or gods you believe in that we can all go on getting it right tomorrow, and the day
after, at Hanford and everywhere else. I certainly will.”

And I was done. As everyone headed back to the house a look at Anna had her gently keeping Westfield and his Feebs back until Samuel and Darryl could carry Adam upstairs on the spine board, with me and a very quiet Jesse behind. I more than half expected Adam to change as soon as he was in our bedroom, but he let me know, grumpily, that much as he wanted to he thought a few more hours in wolf form would be wise, and that if I didn’t lie down myself very soon I’d fall down.

“I know, Adam, but there’s half the Yakama Nation doing whatever out back, and—”

“They’re good, Mercy.” Darryl was grinning. “Fire’s lit, and the grill, and they’re happily drinking beer and eating burgers. Interesting lot, and I like your Jim Alvin. Warren’s riding herd. Pack’s good, too, even Paul.” He shook his head. “For now, at least. He’s more dumbstruck than anything else, I think, but your broadcast gave him a bunch to chew on. And the rest of us.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, oh. Wasn’t that we didn’t know the outlines, Mercy, but seeing it all put together, and how well you were handling everyone despite it being pure crap for you … sorry, Adam. Well, let’s just say your rating on the Mohs Scale went up a ways. Appreciation of your smarts, too.” His voice became more thoughtful. “And your dominance. I think most of our wolves are still confused about how a coyote can be so alpha, but none still doubt it.”

I blinked. “Good to know, I suppose. How are they about all the decisions I had to make?”

“As cool as can be expected, Mercy.” He shrugged. “Lots to digest, and they were no happier than me when you brought the camera in, but Adam and the Marrok backed you and the strike on Cantrip is providing a lot of warmly fuzzy feelings. Plus, Elder Spirits are pretty interesting.”

“Don’t worry about the pack, Mercy.” Anna came in with a tired smile and her usual calm. “I gave them some more zen, and Asil’s hardly had to stare anyone down except Paul when we first arrived. What is his problem anyway?”

“Everything that isn’t white, straight, male, and outranks him.”

“One of those. He’ll go on being stupid, then.”

“Probably.”

“Mercy said it earlier, Anna. No, yesterday. Paul runs on hate the way cars run on oil, so yeah, he’ll want to get back to it.” Darryl laughed, without humour. “He’s probably confused by having so many new things to hate, though, so it might take him a while to recalibrate.”

I waved a hand, dismissing Paul. “Whatever. I drew the line last night and it holds. Is everything else OK, Anna?”

“Yes. Charles and Coyote are talking to Westfield, and DC on a link, making it clear ecology really is the point and asking for a serious commitment to clean up the Basin, including re-engineering the Columbia hydropower systems. Some Hanford stuff, too, because Tinton called to say he’s bought all the lead he can find, so I called your friend Zee for you. He’ll head out in the morning. Charles is fretting some because he still hasn’t made his statement to the press, but feels he has to wait because your whole interview really hit the mark, Mercy, even before it got so interestingly interrupted. Not many people had a chance to see the Cantrip video before you put it out yourself, and everything I’m hearing says most everyone believed you, not MacLandis. Lots of rage at K-K-
Kantrip, with strong support for Adam and the KPD, too. Willis especially.” Anna gave a real laugh. “Oh, and you’re now trending strongly under the hashtag #SheCalledThunderbird! You were exactly right about Andrea being a very good person to have around today.”

“Wonderful. My very own tvtropes entry.” Even to my own ears I sounded grumpy, but the hashtag would tickle Jesse so I sucked it up and gave her a smile. “I’ll get over it, kiddo. How are you doing?”

Jesse shrugged and tried to smile back. “OK, I guess.”

Or not. I slung an arm round her shoulders, feeling her tension.

“Worried about what your friends will think if they see those videos? Or just learn what I am?”

“Some, I guess. Not really.”

“Mmm. I don’t suppose Mrs Bradley will be too thrilled, but she’ll already have the FBI to deal with, remember? SA Fisher’s word is good, I’m told.”

“Yeah. The third degree and all.”

But Jesse wasn’t herself, and as I was pretty sure I knew why I asked everyone except Anna to give us some privacy with Adam. Darryl gave me a look but went with Samuel, and I steered Jesse to sit on the bed beside Adam, who knew as well and rested his head apologetically on my leg while I took her hands. Anna leant against the closed door.

“I know you’re tough as nails, kiddo, but you’ve seen a lot of violence today. And seeing your dad losing it with Tim’s corpse freaked you out some, hey? Freaked Ms Taylor out, too, more than anything else today, so no surprise there. But did you hear what I said to her about it? About not dreaming of Tim, because I know he’s never coming back?”

A small nod.

“That was straight up, kiddo. So I can’t say I regret what Adam did, however much I wish that footage had never been leaked, for his sake as well as my own. But I am sorry you got to see it this time round, and so’s he. There will be people who are rude enough or nasty enough to throw it at you, and there’s nothing we can do about that. But you don’t have to face it tomorrow, nor for a few days at least. Back to school next week, I hope, if things have settled down a bit, but not before.”

Some tension leached from her shoulders but not all, and I considered her as carefully as I could, pushing my tired brain. She’d seen Adam as wolf often enough, and seen him change, but it might be the weird half-changed shape in which he’d torn into Tim. Or … Willis’s words came back to me.

“Hey, Jesse, did seeing the video bring back Kerrigan?”

She folded into me, suddenly crying hard, and Adam whined his distress. I tucked one hand into his ruff, conveying what comfort I could while hugging Jesse with the other, and felt it when Anna’s hand joined mine. The Omega touch let him hold it together, and from the words Jesse managed between hiccupping sobs we gathered it wasn’t so much the visuals of Kerrigan’s savage death that seeing Adam and Tim had triggered, but the smell of his blood and the feel of drenched clothing and splattered skin. I hadn’t much cared for those either, and Jesse had been closer to the spouting neck. There was having to kneel in Adam’s blood too, and I knew how I had coped — mostly, anyway. Anna was careful not to soothe Jesse too much, so she could let the
worst out with tears, but once the sobs subsided and she’d worked through several man-size tissues I eased her upright and took her hands.

“Detective Willis warned us, remember? No-one walks away from some things unscathed, and there’s no shame in it, but we might need to see one of those people he recommended, kiddo, you and me both. We’ll see how it goes. But for tonight you get another shower, then I’m gonna ask Anna to give you as much Omega zen as she can, and we’ll make sure Medea’s in with you to cuddle. And tomorrow, or whenever the manitou comes back, I’ll ask it to give you the sheet of glass thing, like it did for us and Dr Tinton. How about letting it read you, too? It ought to know what kiddos think as well as wolves and cops and Andrea. Deal?”

It was a plan of sorts, and enough to get Jesse off to bed with Anna cheerfully promising enough zen zap to calm anything. Adam was calmer too, and though I could feel his regret and a twisting guilt for what Jesse was suffering, his wolf wasn’t bothered. Neither was much impressed with my determination to go downstairs one more time, though, mostly to meet the avatars, and my legs weren’t so keen either, but Adam at least could see the sense of it, and knew what finding out I wasn’t wholly alone as a shifter with a coyote form had meant to me. So after calling Samuel back in, to check on Adam’s knees and sit with him a while, I dragged myself back upright, changed into a dry shirt, combed out the tangles, and thought the woman in the mirror didn’t look so bad, considering.
I found Charles and my not-exactly father still in with Westfield and his merry band of Feebs, Jenny and a bright-eyed Andrea observing, though the DC bit seemed to be over for now. They were talking budgets — or Charles and Westfield were — but broke off when I came in, and Charles gave me a look.

“Anna told me about Jesse. Good thinking about the manitou, Mercy. And the spirits may be able to help. I’ll ask.”

“Thanks.” Westfield looked puzzled and I made a snap decision. “She had a flashback to Kerrigan’s death, AED Westfield. Smell and the feel of blood, more than the sight, she says.”

“God, yes. She’s a trooper, Ms Hauptman, but no child should have to deal with what she’s been through today. Nor any adult.” He looked pretty tired too, but his brain was still functioning. “You’re going to ask the manitou to do whatever it did for Dr Tinton?”

“When I can, yes, if only as a stopgap. Do you suppose it ought to register with the APA, Jenny?”

Jenny blinked, Coyote laughed, Charles and Fisher grinned, as did Andrea, and Westfield frowned before shaking his head.

“I’d think Yakama certification as a medicine man — medicine wolf? — would cover you, Ms Hauptman, if any of the state authorities were silly enough to object.”

Medicine wolf made me smile, and I’d bet it would amuse Jim Alvin too. And points to Westfield, who’d clearly heard what I’d said about taking Native American matters seriously, even before a bunch of oversize shapeshifting Elder Spirits and Coyote as a special consultant had reinforced the point.

“One thing I needn’t worry about, then. Are there any others?”

Westfield and Fisher both gave me appraising looks, before glancing at Jenny, and though I saw no sign Fisher took the lead.

“Quite a few, actually, Ms Hauptman. Ms Trevellyan’s already got most of this, but from the top, your broadcast shook some people pretty hard, and we’ve been given some leads on MacLandis. If any of them pan out he’ll be in custody by morning. And if it’s any compensation, his releasing that material, in that crudely falsified form with his creepy voiceover, has put the final nail in Cantrip’s coffin. The President has accepted they have to go, and that a completely new agency is needed.” She grinned. “You could say they’re being thrown to the wolves. The plan seems to be to make that announcement during the rallies on Saturday.”

Politics, yet, but I wasn’t complaining, even about the pun, and felt a weight ease in my heart. There might still be rogues about, and bigotry was perennial, but losing Cantrip was a big step forward.

“Alright, SA Fisher. That’s welcome news, on both fronts.”
“For us, too, Ms Hauptman.”

I nodded. “One thing, though. The successor agency has to deal with all preternaturals, which now means not only the Fae and wolves, but the manitou and Elder Spirits, with their avatars. How they approach any of us is going to be their first major test, so you might want to consider having some serious Native American representation, at least to Assistant Director level, as well as proper minority hiring.”

“That’s a good thought.” Westfield made himself a note. “I’ll pass it up the chain.”

Fisher resumed. “And second, we have zip from Preskylovitch’s effects — he had some keycards in his wallet, but nothing to identify them and all calls made by Kerrigan or the others were screened — but, third, with Armstrong’s help we’ve cracked Cantrip’s non-standard encryptions, so the search of their files for anything on their presumed captives is making progress.” She grimaced. “A lot of … grim facts have already popped — almost everything Charles warned us about, including what amounts to a green light to murder and some very dubious financing. More importantly, a dozen properties on that list you gave us have been cleared, and all others will be reached no later than tomorrow.”

I nodded, turning to my not-exactly father. “Did you tell them anything about … other searches?”

“Not yet, but I will if you like, though it’ll be a day or three at least.”

“Please.”

So he did, pointing out that many animal kinds weren’t really of much use, though bobcats, bears, wolves, and the bigger birds might be of some help. “Ravens can search well. Coyotes, too. We get everywhere. But passing on such a request takes time and they all have other things to do.”

Westfield was staring at me. “*That* was what you were doing after the dance stopped?” He shook his head. “Damn. My compliments, Ms Hauptman. Detective Willis was right about your sense of responsibility. And” — his hands moved in a vague clenching gesture — “integrating things. Joining it up. You’ve been impressive as hell all day.” It was nice to hear, but I was glad when his voice became brisker. “And in other news, Judge Cray called me and will be sending you a written apology, both personal and on behalf of the SSC, for issuing that subpoena. I understand he’s contacted your lawyers in DC to offer to testify in support of your suits against Cantrip and MacLandis, though how the agency being disestablished will play with those isn’t yet at all clear, as they won’t have a budget.”

“If Senator Heuter was funding them, as I suspect, he might become personally liable.”

Charles’s voice suggested that he relished that idea, and I didn’t mind it myself. Nor did Westfield.

“Now *that* I’d enjoy watching. And though we haven’t tracked all the funds yet, nor even half of them, there’s no doubt Cantrip was spending money it didn’t officially have, so illegal funding was coming from somewhere. Lawyers’ll have a bunfight, though.”

“Let them.” Charles moved a hand dismissively. “It’s pressure, not the money. Is there anything else that really needs dealing with now?”

“No.” Westfield sighed. “We will be here working most of the night, I’m afraid, Ms Hauptman, because this has gotten so big half the Beltway is still at work, and we have to get reports in. But the local SAC has some motel rooms on retainer and I’ll rotate people off shift as I can. I’ll have a better idea of what’s going to happen after the Secretary’s visit tomorrow, but though the criminal
aspect here seems pretty much done and dusted for now, with both the KPD and us declaring lawful homicide, I’m less sure about those poor guys at the State Park. And the politics is going to take a while, whatever happens, so unless the manitou wants to nominate somewhere else for talks I’m afraid we’re going to be in your hair for some days yet, at least. Do you mind if I bring in a Mobile Command Center? Then at least we can stop occupying your house.”

It seemed reasonable, and I nodded. “Go ahead for now, but you’ll need to talk to Adam when he’s back in human form tomorrow.”

“Fair enough, Ms Hauptman. This does seem to be where things keep happening. Leslie, we’ll need a trailer too — the MCC has limited space.”

“I’m on it.” Fisher fired up her phone. “What specs do you want?”

I left them to it, and took my not-exactly father, Charles, Jenny, and Andrea to the kitchen, finding everyone save Charles thought hot chocolate a fine idea. He opted for water, saying neither he nor Brother Wolf needed a sugar rush, though they both needed a run. I didn’t think he had jogging in mind, and raised an eyebrow.

“Fine for you, Charles, but don’t give the pack any ideas about changing, please. And I don’t know if any of the avatars might change, nor what kinds we have here.”

My not-exactly father grinned at me. “Most of them. We should go and say hello.”

“Surely. That’s why I came back down. Chocolate first, though — I do need the sugar rush.” I went on stirring the heating milk. “Charles, has Bran had anything to say since I talked to him?”

“Only approval, Mercy. He thought you did very well indeed, with the Elder Spirits as well as Taylor and the KPD. And he’s very happy that Cantrip will be gone.”

“Me too.” I looked at Coyote. “I was wondering what the Fae were making of your sympathies.”

“We won’t be interacting any more than we already do, which is very little. I was just being nice, as ordered.”

And pigs might fly, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it except stay alert. Milk came to the boil and I passed mugs around, sliding into a seat at the table with tangible pleasure in the domesticity. Opposite me, Jenny raised her chocolate in a salute before sipping.

“Thank you for taking my advice about outing yourself, Mercy, as well as for everything else. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you, never mind the broadcast, but it’s the right move.”

“Yeah, I heard you earlier, Jenny, but I could only do it because my not-exactly father and his friends showed up. And you might distribute some cards to the folks out back, so if they get any hassle they can at least call on solid representation.”

“That would be sensible, Ms Trevellyan.” Coyote looked at me and shrugged. “We did think about that, not-exactly daughter, but the chance to enlist the manitou and actually get something done for the animals was too good to pass up. And anyway, with wolves and Fae and manitou all out there, why shouldn’t you and I be so, too? It makes things interesting.”

“For your value of interesting.”

“And yours.” He grinned. “Admit it. Today wouldn’t have happened if you were one of Snake’s,
or even Raven’s. That name I gave you was a proud not-exactly father’s compliment, you realise?”

I gave him a hard look over my mug, but Charles laughed and to my surprise explained to Jenny and Andrea.

“He’s not wrong, Mercy. You have dropped all sorts of people in it today, and Cantrip most of all, so we’re not repining. Interestingly, nor is Westfield, now he’s over the worst of his shock. And even Fisher, who is very level-headed and wary, is about ready to sign up for your fan club.”

“So are a lot of people, Mercy.” Jenny’s voice was dust dry. “Sam Morris and I have had a lot of unexpected help today, from lawyers all over who’d been watching and went to bat for you as soon as they got the chance. Other people too.” She shook her head a little. “Andrea’s not wrong about you getting cooler. You’ll be on more covers than Time this week. And the list of requests for interviews is already lengthy — you’re going to need a press secretary, you know, as well as an accountant.”

I rested my head in my hands, cursing, but Andrea said the right thing, again.

“I’ve told them all nothing will be possible for a while, Ms Hauptman, but some of it could be fun. Saturday Night Live called, and National Geographic, as well as all the national papers and broadcasters.”

She sounded equally enthusiastic about all of them, and the idea of making the cover of National Geographic struck me as genuinely funny. And actually quite useful, too — a lot of kids read it, as well as people waiting on dentists and lawyers.

“Make it Mercy, please, Andrea, in private at least. And you can say yes to National Geographic, if they’ll run a special coyotes number and put furry me on the cover. Or my not-exactly father. If I can bump George Clooney, surely he can bump a baboon or whatever.”

“Ooh. More cool.” Andrea’s laugh was a joy. “And I can’t believe I’m drinking chocolate with the Coyote. My dad is going to be so jealous. He’s already bugged out that I met the manitou and it read me.”

My not-exactly father gave her a quizzical look, and Charles nobly refrained from rolling his eyes, but I was interested.

“He’s why you’re such a preterophile, then?”

“Un huh. He was always into folklore, European as well as Native American, and used to say all the stories had to come from somewhere. Mom says when the Fae came out he didn’t stop smiling for a month.”

“What’s he do?”

“He’s a teacher. High school, history, back in Philly. My mom’s the lawyer.”

The sugar rush was good enough that my brain made a connection. “Mmm. Do you know about Mrs Bradley and her Bright Future invitation?” She hadn’t been present for Jesse’s interview with Fisher, but Jenny had caught her up on it. “Well, I’ve no idea what’ll happen with that now, and it’ll depend on what if anything the Feebs find, but if we do wind up with a debate against Bright Future, would your dad be interested in taking it on? A fee wouldn’t be wise, but we could cover expenses. Adam and I were wondering about asking Kyle but, though it sucks wide, his being gay could get made into a distraction.”
“Not a problem with Dad. He and Mom are still sweet on one another.” Andrea grinned. “And he’d be delighted to be asked. He works with the school debate team, too, so it wouldn’t be a stretch for him.”

Charles had become much more interested, and gave me a look that had something in it. “It’s another useful thought, Mercy. Whatever this Mrs Bradley was about I doubt she had any Cantrip connection, and Bright Future are not going to be anything like as badly hit as the JLS, so the school debate might play well.” He gave Andrea another of his looks. “If your father can be ruthless in exposing bigotry as well as friendly to preternaturals.”

She let her own gaze flick up for a moment, and nodded. “He can be, Mr … Charles. I’ll put it to him, and maybe you or Mercy could talk to him, get a feel for his style.”

“Sounds like a plan I can go with.” I smothered a yawn. “But I need to get out back, and then get horizontal. Who’s coming?”

Charles said he needed some more talk with Jenny, so she fished out a stack of cards and sent a very happy Andrea with Coyote and me to dish them out. The fire had bedded down nicely, and most of the avatars were sitting round it, talking, though a couple were tending another round of burgers on the grill. Coyote introduced them — an Owl and a Bear — and as the others fell silent, looking at us, Jim Alvin came over.

“Sorry to drop in unannounced in such numbers, Mercy.”

I waved a hand. “De nada, Jim. It’s not a problem.”

“Except for Gary.” Jim gave me and Coyote a crooked smile. “He sends apologies to you and someone called Honey, but went coyote and legged it some while back, on the grounds that staying in the same place as you two and a bunch of Feebs and cops was just asking for trouble.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, and hoped Honey wouldn’t ask.

“He never did know what was good for him.” Coyote grinned. “But I’ve work for him tonight, and all of them, so I’ll find him later.”

“Work?”

“Work. Mercy wants animals searching for Cantrip’s prison, and all of you can help spread the word. Meanwhile, this lovely lady has presents for everyone.”

I introduced Andrea to Jim, and then we all went around the circle, being introduced ourselves and offering Jenny’s cards, with the proviso that any trouble that could be dealt with locally, should be, but if serious backup were needed it was available. I was filing away names and faces and animal affiliations, taking in different scents, and offering half-apologies for the way my problems had spiralled out to catch them, but to my surprise they were pretty much all cool with it. Calvin Seeker thanked me for not giving anyone Gordon’s identity before tonight, and Fred and Hank Owens asked after Adam, with some very vet jokes about making a habit of getting shot.

Most of the way round, Coyote stopped off with one of his own — Linda Redruff, a coyote sister, I supposed, who was Quileute — and she and I swapped contact details with a promise to sort out a longer visit when it was possible. She was also a little scornful of Gary, and I wondered how much I might have been misled by his being the first fellow coyote I’d met, but it also felt like a working woman’s scorn for a shiftless man and I reluctantly added it to the list of things that would have to wait on that longer visit.
The avatars welcomed Andrea easily, too, telling her they agreed with me that she was a good advertisement for people, and teasing her a little about her wide-eyed appreciation of the strange.

“It’s a good attitude to the world,” an older Salish Snake avatar who went by Joey Diamond told her. “You don’t wanna go trying to sink fangs in something before you know for sure you need or want it dead. But refreshing as you are, Anglo girl, don’t forget there are things out there that need avoiding, or killing.”

“Oh yeah.” Andrea nodded. “I knew about Guayota before today, and even dead the River Devil was plenty scary. But even they were only being what they are, though both seem psycho to me. But in general people scare me a lot worse, and all the bad stuff today has been people, not anything else.”

No-one disagreed with that, and we went on round. I was getting a much more solemn reception than Andrea that I couldn’t quite work out — there was kindness, which was welcome, and caution, which I knew was all too reasonable, but also elements I didn’t recognise, and when we were done, sitting with Jim for a moment to enjoy the heat and colours of the fire, I quietly asked him and got a long look.

“Try extreme respect, Mercy. Even before today the story of the River Devil had spread, and they have the legend in their bones. And thanks to Gordon we all had KEPR on pretty quickly this morning, and were glued to it until the Elder Spirits sent their summons.”

“They called their children in?”

“Oh yes. Gordon didn’t say why but their presence boosted the dance, somehow. Calvin and I were just designated drivers and tickets to get to you or Charles.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Makes sense, Jim. The dance sucked me right in. Not sure why it got Charles as well, if it was avatars, but he’s mentioned spirits several times today so maybe they were dancing too.”

“They were. And he is right they are following you closely, Mercy. That’s another part of what the avatars are feeling.” He sighed. “But you’re right there’s something more. We had the TV the manitou had been watching, so we heard you come out to Westfield and the others. They know what that took, and you are the first to declare yourself openly. We also heard you keeping Coyote honest about his sisters. And we heard his name giving, so I told them the first bit was your own, and what you’d said about it last night.” He blinked. “Was it only last night?”

“Yeah, it was. I know. But why does that matter so much?”

“Names do, Mercy. And names openly endorsed or given by Elder Spirits even more so. And this name, now, shouts truth. You are dropping us in it, and you are fixing a lot more things than cars.” He shrugged. “Mostly, if you push the world, it pushes back hard enough to flatten you. We’ve learned that the hard way, over and over. But you pushed the world, and it moved. It’s still moving, and they feel it. And you’re still pushing it and doing your best to steer. Which means, roughly, that they agree with Andrea that you are very cool indeed, and also not someone to mess with just now, if ever. So they welcome you with soft words, and look with some awe, and hang back a little.”

I didn’t really know what to say to that, but I knew I wanted as much of a bond as any of them were willing to let me have. Thinking was getting progressively harder, and I had to get to bed without much more delay; nor did I have another speech in me to offer them. But I wasn’t as happy to be that kind of cool to these people as I was to amuse Andrea’s sense of the wonderful, and I told Jim
“Can you let them know I don’t need distance so much as friends. And, I don’t know … it wouldn’t work for prey species, but maybe those of us with predator forms could get together sometime, somewhere. Linda Redruff and I have promised a visit sometime, here or there.”

“There, maybe. Here’s a bit too public right now, Mercy, and for a while. But I’ll pass the message on. And there will be a full tribal meeting coming up for sure, to which you and the manitou are certainly invited.”

It was as much as I could hope for, and reminded me to tell Jim about Jesse’s flashback, and that I wanted the manitou recognised as a medicine wolf in case Christy or anyone else had a silly idea. He looked at me rather owlishly, and then burst out laughing.

“That I can do myself, Mercy, and will. And it is another true name, if only of one aspect of the manitou.”

The laughter attracted attention, and when Jim repeated my request there was pleased agreement the manitou’s guard form should be called Medicine Wolf. Jim said they’d all be leaving at first light, and I told him to talk to Tony Montenegro and get a police escort at least to the edge of town. As he’d have sleepy, and from the way the beers were going down very probably hungover, avatars piled in the beds of a convoy of pickups he agreed that would be wise, and offered thanks that covered more than the suggestion before telling me to go rest. I’d earned it, and went, taking Andrea: she was reluctant, and I knew she was hoping some of them might change, but once we made the kitchen I reminded her it involved nudity and of Native American attitudes.

“Oh, right. Sorry. I’d forgotten about that.”

“No problem, Andrea. You’ve done a lot of good today.”

“Coming from you, that means something.” Her eyes were still bright. “I’ll see if Jenny needs me for anything, and if not I’ll go home and call my dad about the possible debate.”

“Thanks. Make sure you get a police escort, too, or the media will be all over you like fleas on a dog.”

There were voices still coming from various rooms, but all seemed calm, so I ignored them and headed upstairs. Anna and Samuel were still sitting with Adam, but rose as soon as I entered the bedroom.

“About time, Mercy.” Samuel wasn’t joking. “You both need to sleep.”

I flapped a hand at him, more interested in Anna’s reassurance that she’d seen Jesse sleeping soundly, Medea curled up at her side.

“She wanted a second shower, Mercy, but I zenned her out of it. You need to watch for any compulsive washing.”

I nodded. After Tim I knew all about that, and it didn’t make you feel any cleaner, it just made you all wrinkly and pushed up the utility bills. I told her about the manitou becoming a certified Medicine Wolf, and she and Samuel laughed before leaving me alone at last with Adam. I peeled out of my clothes, pulled on the oversize old tee of Adam’s I was using as sleepwear, climbed gratefully under the covers, draped an arm over Adam’s flank, and just held him for a while. With our mate bond wide open there was some emotional sloshing back and forth, shared fears, rage, love, and frustrations, but we were both so relieved to be together and alone that it settled into
mutual comfort, and after a while we let the sleep we both needed claim us.
THOUGH I slept like a log I woke before dawn, knowing as my eyes opened that Adam was changing. Interrupting a change is never a good idea, so after a quick visit to the bathroom — for some of Gordon’s supercharged bagbalm to put on my rainbow of a stomach, as well as the necessary — I went to the rear window, wondering what state the avatars were in. The fire was still burning, and the manitou had returned, lying on the edge of a circle of sleeping forms and talking to Jim, Charles, Anna, and Asil. There was no sign of Coyote, and I guessed he was spreading word to my furry brethren. I hoped the manitou had taken the chance to read Charles and Asil, and been able to help Asil’s wolf with its crotchets, as well as wondering what it had made of so long a human and animal life. Or early mediaeval Spain, come to that, and whether being read might prompt Asil to any greater willingness to speak historically, if not personally. I did understand why old wolves so disliked remembering, but having a living eyewitness to the building of Cordoba, and for all I knew to Columbus setting sail, who wouldn’t say anything about his past had been a frustration since I’d grasped just how old he was. I felt Adam shake off the last of the change and a moment later his arms came around me, hugging hard, while his head rested on my shoulder. I leaned back into him.

“Hey there. How’s the knees?”

“Better. Mostly. How are you?”

It was a serious question, and I thought about it for a moment. “Better for sleep, surely, but feeling like I got run over. My stomach is black and blue, and yellow and all sorts, from the seatbelt in the Yukon. And a little terrified, in retrospect, of winging it like that yesterday.”

“I’m not surprised, Mercy, but you winged it very well.”

I felt a weight ease, because I had made a lot of decisions that should by rights have been Adam’s. “I’m sorry to have pushed you so hard last night, but I couldn’t see what else to do.”

“Don’t be, love. I was down, and you stood up.”

He drew me back to the bed, and after kissing for a while we slipped back under the blankets, still holding one another. We both wanted the affirmation of making love, and it would help with yesterday’s memories, but between his knees and my stomach we settled for waiting a little longer.

“I think I have it all straight, Mercy, but tell me your side, please.”

It wasn’t what I most wanted to do, but it was necessary, so I did, from being hustled out past him, very afraid that I’d never see him alive again, and terrified as well as enraged by the threat to Jesse, to what Jim Alvin called the avatars’ extreme respect, and my mixed feelings about that. He didn’t interrupt, but when I was done had some questions about Hanford and Zee, and about Jesse. And about me, and the effects not only of the kidnap and fear, but also of knowing the rape video was now public, and of having declared myself a preternatural. I had some answers — the release of the video made me feel much more angry than sullied, and I had some lively worries about what being
known as a coyote girl might mean for my life and business — but there were also feelings and
half-thoughts I couldn’t name or pin down. The money Jenny and Kyle had secured was one source
of uncertainty, and I wasn’t at all sure I liked the idea of being rich — which made Adam smile, as
he pointed out that it beat being poor all ends up.

“There’s that, sure. But now I could rebuild the garage pretty much however I want, do I want? I
like fixing cars, and helping owners, but it’s never been much of a business.”

“Your call, love. And I don’t see that you need to decide in any haste. Take the time, and see what
you really want. Money’s an opportunity, more than anything.”

“And an unlimited Benny’s account. But yeah, I get that. Only …” I faced it. “It’s the publicity
thing that bothers me most. Bumping George Clooney and all sounds fun, but the stuff MacLandis
put out is something else. If I did rebuild the garage who might come calling? I don’t mean just
bad guys — there’d be gawpers and fruitcakes, and probably the really weird too. People who’ve
seen me with Tim. And all those could find me anywhere around. Will I be approached by
strangers in Yoke’s, or on the school run? Probably. And I don’t know what I think about that
except that I don’t much like the idea.”

“Me either, but that cat’s long gone from the bag, Mercy. And yes, you are going to need some
serious security for a while. A long while, probably. Wolves are good, but I think we’ll need to
hire. You’ll hate it, but please don’t fuss more than you have to.”

I already hated it, but knew he was right and buried my face against his chest. “I’ll try, Adam. If at
least one’s a woman it might be easier.”

“Not a problem.” Adam sighed. “I’ll upgrade the house some as well, though there isn’t much
more I can do. But I’m not at all sure what to do about Jesse. Christy’s not wrong that she’s seeing
way more than she should be at her age, and she’s gonna need public security too.”

“Not wrong, no, but let’s wait on the Manitou before we decide anything like that, Adam. Jesse
needs here and us a lot more than she needs anywhere or anyone else. And leave Christy to me,
hey? Did you catch that she didn’t exactly help Jesse much with her call yesterday?”

“Yeah. And gladly.”

“I can hear Eugene calling her, and as soon as things have quieted a bit, if they ever do, she’s going
back there. Darryl and Auriele won’t mind either — they’re getting itchy to have their space back.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Of course you have. Oh, and we may have a speaker for the school debate, if it happens.”

I told him about Andrea’s father, mentioning Charles’s interest and the vague plan to talk to the
guy when we could. Laying it out stirred some thoughts.

“I’m making this up as I go along, Adam, but Andrea was genuinely helpful more than once
yesterday. And it wasn’t just being in pretero-heaven, though that mattered. She has a knack for
defusing tension, and I think she’s a bit Omega. She’ll be a lot of use as all this pans out, I suspect.
And then her saying that her dad is also strongly preterophile … well, what I thought was, there
are people who are … prejudiced towards us, as well as the bigots. And the bigots have John
Lauren and Bright Future. But what do the ’philes have?”

“Good question.” He gave me a slow, gorgeous smile. “You think we should start a, what,
werewolf appreciation society?”
I grinned. “Maybe. Werewolf 101 for everyone would be good. But I was thinking about schools. We did the visit with Ben, which worked pretty well. But maybe it ought to be SOP wherever there’s a pack that’s out. I never got the chance to see if Colin sent the stuff I asked Bran for, and he was probably caught up with KEPR anyway, but I thought I’d float it by him and see what he thought. And Bran.”

“Sounds good to me. Tell me about Andrea being helpful?”

I laid out the episodes, from her priorities when she’d arrived at the gate to #SheCalledThunderbird! and the plan to get coyotes — and Coyote and me — a special issue of National Geographic. Adam couldn’t help laughing a few times, and like me found the idea of my furry self on that august yellow-framed cover ridiculously funny, but he also heard what I was saying about Andrea’s guileless instinct for the best in a situation, and nodded thoughtfully.

“I knew she had to be good — Jenny doesn’t hire fools — but I hadn’t seen the kind of potential you’re describing. And you’re right she is a bit Omega, or would be, but when I first met her and heard she wanted to meet a fae I asked her if she had any desire to try the Change and she said not at all. She is happy as a human, and as herself. She just likes appreciating things that aren’t human but still talk. It matters because we’ll need to be very wary of wannabes.”

That was always true, and would be truer. It was my turn to sigh.

“I know. And Jenny was warning Charles yesterday that curiosity about your age is becoming awkward. But have you heard the speech Anna gives about werewolf survival and ageing? It’s a good deterrent for anyone who’s got any thinking in them.” Which was not, unfortunately, everyone. “Andrea wasn’t there for that bit — it was just Jenny — but I was thinking she might be a good person to share this PR problem with. She got pulled much further in yesterday, one way and another, and even Charles is warming to her some, though I think he still finds her a bit bemusing. And Anna already likes her a lot.”

“Mmm. Do you know what Bran thinks of her?”

“No at all. But he’ll have seen her on camera some yesterday — when she first arrived, and when the Elder Spirits came.”

“I’ll ask him later.” He grimaced. “And the age thing is getting to be a problem, as Bran knows all too well. But it’ll be a can of worms any which way, and worse for genuinely old wolves. I’ve talked to Warren a bit — he’s our oldest now Peter’s gone — and he does not want everyone knowing he lived through the nineteenth century.”

“I bet.” Another set of thoughts coalesced. “But you know, Adam, I was just thinking about that. When I looked out at the yard I saw the manitou was back, talking to Charles, Anna, and Asil, and I wondered if it had read them, and if that would help Asil’s cranky wolf, and if he might open up enough to talk more, not so much about himself as history he lived through. I wouldn’t suggest putting him on for anything — thirteen centuries and change is a bit much to take — but if we do wind up admitting to some centenarian plus wolves historians are going to be very interested. And how much good publicity could we get from Warren giving out some stuff on the Wild West he knew way back when?”

“Huh. Also a thought. Did you ask Kyle about that?”

“No. But Kyle knows a lot more about that history than he’s ever got from books, so Warren must talk to him some at least. What I don’t know is how important it is to either of them for that to be a private thing between them.”
“Fair enough. I can see it might be. But you’re not wrong that whenever this breaks Warren might be a good face for some of it. Better than Asil, for sure. Or Bran or Samuel.”

“Samuel could do some old music, though — he already does, when he plays. He just doesn’t always say how old.”

“Also true. But this can wait, Mercy. Bran and I figured it would only become a real problem once my real age hits seventy, so we’ve a few years yet.”

“Maybe.” I thought about it, frowning a little. “But also maybe not. We’re in what Jenny called a lot of spotlight. And if keeping as much as possible from Cantrip was a no brainer, so is recognising that by starving them of real data we helped create the ignorance vacuum that imploded on us.” Adam looked quizzical, and I reviewed the metaphor. “Exploded? Whatever. Point is, assuming the successor agency is at least half-way reasonable and trying to be honest, what are we going to tell them? And do we have any idea what anyone else might decide?”

“And your thoughts keep coming. Good questions, Mercy, not only for us. But yeah, garbage in, garbage out, and if we don’t want that we need to make a decision. More things I ought to talk to Bran about, and time’s passing so I should get going.”

False dawn had started, and I nodded but held up a cautionary finger. “I know, but watch the knees, hey? Who knows when the Secretary of the Interior will turn up, or what he’ll want besides photo ops? And the pack need to see you — I kinda neglected them yesterday.”

“No you didn’t, Mercy. You fought for them all day long, on more than one level, and fed them home-made cookies. But yeah, I’ll be talking to them once I’m clean and I’ve eaten. Can I have the shower first?”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “I suppose. Yeah, go ahead, and if Jesse’s rousable I’ll get her out to see the manitou. I doubt whatever it does can be a long-term solution, but I’ll happily settle for no more flashbacks for now.”

He didn’t like the whole thing but couldn’t argue with that, and after a moment rolled out of bed and made for the shower. I appreciated the view a little, then rolled out myself and pulled on underwear and sweats before heading for Jesse’s room. She was awake, just, and said she’d slept OK, but her eyes were shadowed and I didn’t like her paleness or the longing look she gave her shower as I chivvied her into her own sweats, and steered her downstairs to the kitchen door, snagging coffee for her as we went. The avatars had woken with the light, and though quite a few looked as if they’d be going right back to sleep as soon as they could, they were packing up — which mostly seemed to mean crating a lot of empty beer bottles, and I made a mental note to check just how low our supplies now were. Jim was helping, Charles, Anna, and Asil were still talking to the manitou, and as I walked Jesse across we received quiet greetings from avatars before the manitou looked up.

_Mercy, and Jesse, greetings._

I hadn’t realised Jesse had never actually spoken to it, or been spoken to directly, and saw her slight start, but she wasn’t afraid of it.

“Oh. Hi, manitou, sir. I … thank you for yesterday. For saving me.”

_You are welcome._

I squeezed Jesse’s shoulder. “Hi. And Charles, Anna, Asil. All well?” They affirmed it, and I
looked back at the manitou. “Coyote said you went to digest what the Elder Spirits told you, or gave you?”

That is a way of putting it, yes. But my attention is ... large, Mercy, and I did not let my watch over you drop.

“Good to know. Thanks. Did Jim ask you about being named Medicine Wolf?”

He did. It is a name I welcome. The manitou sounded amused, but that faded. And he told me how it came to be suggested. Jesse, I believe I can help you, and am willing to do so, but you must understand that to be insulated from your memories is not a permanent answer. And for you it is not quite as it was for Mercy or Adam. Their bad memories are older, and they have already learned to live with them. I only ... walled them off, a little, in return for stirring them up by reading them.

Jesse nodded, but I was frowning.

“I get that, Medicine Wolf. But if Jesse’s willing I’d ask you to read her too, for several reasons. One is, as I told her last night, that I think you ought to know what people her age are thinking, as well as what older people reckon to the world.”

That would be welcome, certainly.

“Right. But another is that, sorry as I am to have to say so, Jesse is carrying a lot more than yesterday. From reading me and Adam you’ll know she’s been caught up in violent events several times now. Cantrip weren’t even the first people to kidnap her. And while we do our best by her, I hope, we know all too well how often we’ve failed her.”

“No.” Jesse’s sudden grip on my arm was strong. “No, you haven’t, Mom. Or Dad. You never make the crap worse — you do your best to get rid of it.”

“So I should hope, Jesse, and thanks, that’s good to hear. But we also attract the crap, kiddo. No way round it. And that’s not likely to change any time soon.” Quite the opposite, probably. I took a breath. “Means you have to be able to deal, which sucks. And you have dealt, brilliantly. But I’ll tell you straight, Jesse, the washing thing worries me. God knows I understand it, but I also know it’s a symptom not a cure. It’s still your call, and we’ll see how Medicine Wolf can help, but we do need to think about other help. You know I had counselling after Tim?”

“It’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it? It’s got that urge to wash in common, Jesse. You weren’t raped, thank God, but you were threatened with it, and you were violated in other ways yesterday. So was I, and Adam, but with our furry forms the blood doesn’t bother us so much. And the other side of that is that neither of us is having to deal with seeing parents doing what you’ve seen us do. So what it comes down to, I’ll bet, is that you don’t yet really know what you think about it all, because how could you? And while I hope the insulation will help in the short term, it’s not going to help you find out.”

I hadn’t convinced her but I didn’t need to today, and what she needed was some calm time and space. In any case, she was willing for the manitou to read her, so it did. She looked as peaceful during the process as everyone else had, but her scent was a different story, with way too many spikes of fear and a lot of blood, ending with so close a match for the smell inside the Yukon that I had to hold down my own reaction. Charles, Anna, and Asil were following scents closely too, and showed concern, but I didn’t know if they got the other smell that came and went, associated with the darker emotions, which was Christy. And as I was pretty sure her attitudes to counselling, and
imperviousness to any kind of self-awareness, were a factor in Jesse’s reluctance, I decided I’d be packing her off to Eugene pretty damn soon, even if things didn’t calm down. When it was done — and it took longer than I’d expected given Jesse’s age — the Manitou gave a little huff of breath sweet with magic.

*Mercy is correct, Jesse. I have given you some distance from your memories, but you will need to speak of them if you are to control them, and not allow them to control you. I am sorry that my form, and the necessities of yesterday, have added a memory that is so hard for you. The men who took you made me angry, and I had not appreciated how vulnerable human young have become to such an experience.*

Jesse shook her head. “Please don’t apologise. You *rescued* us. What else could you have done?”

*Used magic more, and teeth less, maybe.*

That brought grins, and I nodded gently. “Hindsight is so often twenty-twenty. But I’m not complaining, Medicine Wolf, and neither’s Jesse.”

“And if those Cantrip agents had lived the day would have gone very differently, and not so well.” Anna’s soft voice was unexpected. “Whatever the difficulties, for my money the severe reaction was the right one.”

Asil offered Jesse an oddly sweet smile. “For mine too, querida. As you are not wolf I do not know if it will work for you, but for me the roses I grow are a help. A good smell helps with bad memories, I find.”

Jesse wasn’t much for flowers but looked thoughtful, and the insulation was clearly already doing her some good. “Thank you, Asil. I find roses a bit sweet, but incense is good. I like the sandalwood Mercy burns sometimes.”

“Incense we can do.” I gave Asil an enquiring look. “Would I be right to think Medicine Wolf read you too?”

“Oh yes. My wolf is very calm indeed this morning, and happier than he has been in a long time. You have found us a great treasure, *mi princesa.*”

I looked at Charles. “Bran knows?”

He nodded. “Da doesn’t want to come while cameras are here, but I have asked Medicine Wolf if he will visit Aspen Creek as soon as events allow. Brother Wolf is less affected than Asil’s, but just as happy.”

“And you, big brother?”

“And me, little sister.” Charles carried a heavy burden for the sake of all wolves, and though I hadn’t seen them I knew from Anna he had had problems with the ghosts of those he’d killed. “Samuel came by when his shift finished, and it has worked for all of us, but Anna feels she has also had an Omega … boost, did you decide?”

“Or lesson.” Anna grinned. “Either way, the zen’s feeling pretty zippy this morning, if that’s not a contradiction. And there’s assorted news, Mercy, good as well as less good. Ready? Top of the pile, MacLandis is dead. The FBI did find him, in Atlanta, and he started shooting — no other deaths, but he put an agent down so fire was returned.”

“Huh.” I wasn’t sure what I felt about that, though some of me was simply glad he was gone.
“Suicide by cop?”

“Perhaps. Or just panic and denial. But it means no questions or answers, and the other Cantrip DD they have in custody, Hobson, is still refusing to talk. MacLandis’s death might change that, or not. Next up, the search for captives is still striking out. More positively, we persuaded KEPR to let the FBI put your broadcast up on every site that has the Cantrip version, and it has already been viewed scores of millions of times, worldwide. It’s also on most bigger international news sites, having been sold for many hefty sums, where it’s also humming. Both domestic and international reaction remain very positive.” She waggled a hand. “There’s continuing worry about the manitou and what it can do, of course, with whether any others might wake up or reveal themselves — Medicine Wolf says, who knows? — but also universal revulsion at Cantrip’s crimes. And that’s quite complicated — domestically, the President’s numbers are tanking, because it’s happened on his watch, and internationally there have been some hard words about US agencies that ignore the rule of law. But where you and Adam and Jesse are concerned there is very strong endorsement, from almost everyone. It’ll embarrass you, Mercy, but you are headlines everywhere. My favourite so far is a North Korean one that translates as Green Jackal Slays Capitalist Wrongdoers. Or so Google Translate tells me.”

I stared at Anna. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Yes and no, Mercy. Of course that one’s weird, but the Hanford thing is playing strongly, as well as Cantrip’s bigotry, and the spine of the story everywhere is you.” Anna had shrewdness and something else in her eyes. “I don’t think you realise how you came over last night, Mercy. Or the effects of revealing what you’ve been through in the last few years — as much of it as you made public, anyway. People had seen you all day, dealing with everything thrown at you and much angrier about Jesse and Adam than you were about yourself, but calming down as proper responses began. Your eyes were a pretty clear index of that. Then the gold was back, they found out you were a rape survivor, had killed Tim while he was about it, and taken out the River Devil as well as Guayota. You were dealing with yet another heinous assault, but showing concern for others — the kin of all victims, as well as Adam and Jesse. Add Elder Spirits, with your dance, which was as magical as anything I’ve ever seen. And then you came out as a new kind of preternatural, and introduced Coyote, while making it crystal clear why you’d kept shum about what until then, as well as turning everything back on MacLandis — whose death was leaked very quickly, by the way, with a distinct shade of good riddance. Net result is that most of the world agrees with Andrea, in spades. Mercy Hauptman is very cool indeed.”

Anna reverted to grinning, while I tried to process it all.

“And Jesse Hauptman, too. And Adam Hauptman.” She turned to look up. “And Medicine Wolf, which name is also going to catch on like crazy, I’ll bet. Whatever show you can put on at Hanford will also matter.”

Yes. The manitou’s voice was very thoughtful. This way you have invented of allowing all to see the events in some particular place, even beyond the ocean, is a great change. It was very helpful of you to suggest I read Caroline Taylor, Mercy. I learned of television from you, Adam, and Joel, but I had not thought clearly about its effects.

That made sense, but I was still grappling with the idea of world fame, and the worst of it was that I had no-one to blame but myself. Well, Cantrip, but they were already taken care of. I’d brought the camera in and directed the show, and if I hadn’t thought through what the effects would be, that was my problem. A press secretary would be the least of it, for a good long while. If I’d still been on my own I’d have thought hard about having plastic surgery and finding somewhere truly remote to live, but I wasn’t and there could be no running away from this. So I’d suck it up, however much
Green Jackal made me cross, even if the critters were fellow canids. I shook my head to clear it.

“Me either. Anna, am I supposed to do anything about all this media stuff?”

“Open question, Mercy. But if publicity is the weapon, the PR machine needs feeding.”

“Yeah, I get that. Adam and I talked about it a little, just. And we both want to talk to Bran.” I sighed. “But he’ll be out of the shower by now, and I want in. Do we know what time the Secretary is coming?”

Charles answered me. “Late morning, last I heard. And tell Adam his guards are not happy about being asked to give up their guns.”

“Surprise. Maybe. But they’ll have to be packing lead. No silver.”

“That might work. I’ll talk to Westfield.”

I hauled myself up, and gave Jesse a hand. The avatars were pretty much ready to be off, so I made farewells, and headed back inside, dropping Jesse off with Warren and Darryl in the kitchen, where good breakfast smells were already starting. I met Adam on the stairs, noting the power suit and understanding his need to do some reasserting.

“Hi, handsome.”

“Hi yourself.” He grinned and gave me a kiss, before the grin faded. “Did Anna catch you up with the news about MacLandis?”

“Yeah, and some other stuff. I made the headlines in North Korea, apparently. More importantly, Jesse’s been helped, but the manitou — now officially Medicine Wolf — agrees it’s not a long-term answer. She’s in the kitchen. Oh, and the Secretary’s due late morning, according to Charles, and you need to talk to him about his guard detail’s guns.”

“I bet I do. But Jesse comes first.”

“Yeah. Always. I’ll be down in a bit.”

The back of my head started wondering about what I should wear. I’d somehow missed the article on the correct outfit for a coyote girl meeting a Beltway bigwig, but I suspected jeans and a tee weren’t the top choice. I did have some nice evening dresses, but they were evening dresses, mostly bought with Adam in mind, and though not so immodest — I had enough scars I couldn’t hide to want to show off the rest — they did show more leg than I felt comfortable with for this. Decisions, decisions. The shower was a happy delay, and a boon, though the jets packed enough force that I had to be careful with my stomach. My back was another story, and I was enjoying the heat and the massage of tired muscles when the water went abruptly cold. And, my nose as well as my various abrasions told me as I yelped, salt.
Chapter Twenty-One

Finding yourself being pummelled by cold salt water is never good. If you’re in your own shower, which was hot and fresh a moment ago, it’s very bad indeed — especially if you already have reason to be wary of the Gray Lords. And when the volume of water increases in ways no standard shower pipe can explain, and the shower curtains seem to have metamorphosed into a retaining wall so you’re rapidly becoming immersed, it’s potentially catastrophic, but I’d barely got as far as wondering if this really was an assassination attempt, never mind what to do about it, when the water flowed somewhere else and I went with it, just managing to grab the walking stick as it appeared beside me.

Somewhere else turned out to be nowhere I recognised — a featureless patch of earth with blurry, opaque air all round — but I knew all the same that I had to be Underhill. And I knew what must be happening, because a bunch of Gray Lords were also there, and all but coming to blows. Or at least, Gwyn ap Lugh and Nemane, with Yo-Yo Edythe and Baba Yaga behind them, and figures I didn’t know all around, were squared up to one I couldn’t name but recognised with a sinking heart. I couldn’t see the green, green eyes I remembered, but the ankle-length hair was still laced with seaweed and he was no more clothed than he had been when he’d found coyote-me on the beach after I’d blundered into Underhill’s sea kingdom. Whoever he was, he would have killed me then if Zee hadn’t grabbed me out of the wave that had swept me off all four feet, and judging from what had happened to my shower he was picking up where he’d left off. On the good side, I was in human form, which gave me some options I hadn’t had as a coyote. On the bad side, I was naked, and already shivering from the shock of the cold water.

What language they were all arguing in I had no idea. Some very old form of Gaelic, maybe, but it could have been Welsh, or something inbetween. And my arrival seemed to have kicked it up a notch, with ap Lugh glowing and hurling words at the sea … god, I decided, remembering how wary of him Zee had been. Or ex-god, if I was lucky. I’d instinctively picked myself up from where the water had dumped me, feeling soaked earth squelch under my toes and finding a defensive posture, slightly crouched with the stick in one hand and the other spread open — until it closed, and I found myself holding a bone-hilted blade I recognised as Carnwennan. The stick was hot in my hand and seemed to pulse with weight, drawing my arm down until its silver-shod tip rested on the earth of Underhill. Carnwennan was cold to my grip, but quivering slightly, its blade pointing straight at the sea god. Why it should come to me I had no idea, though I was guessing the stick or Zee had somehow asked it — or maybe after killing Dana it had decided it liked the blood of Gray Lords. Either way, politeness seemed called for, and I spoke soft words of thanks to both artefacts. Who knew what Carnwennan heard or thought, but the stick warmed some more in my hand, rooting itself a little, and I realised I could now understand what was being said.

This is madness. Ap Lugh wasn’t quite shouting, but he wasn’t being conversational either. She is not a mere human, Manannán mac Lír. You have said yourself that you saw her in another form. And she is not without friends or power, even without the spirit of place she has taken as an ally. You not only risk all of us, you risk Underhill.

I wasn’t much happier to know I’d been right about the sea fae being a god, and what I’d read about Manannán wasn’t good. Then again, he didn’t have his invincible armour on, nor his unstoppable sword, and there was no sign of a self-propelling boat or a herd of immortal swine.
Count what blessings you can — and I had one in each hand, as well as a rising rage that would let me use them. He might be a sea god, but I’d done him no harm, and I had done as well as I could by the Fae yesterday. But hearing his voice, cold and hissing like angry surf, I also knew he’d flipped, and wasn’t much better than a mirror image of Cantrip.

_It was you who broke with humans, Gwyn ap Lugh, avenging your half-breed get, and you who then spoke of caution. Faugh! No spirit of place can harm Underhill, and no human life is our concern. Yet you let this human steal your father’s work, though she shows Overhill our treasures and gives menial orders to the Dark Smith. And still you prate of negotiations and alliances with beasts. But you forget the storm must blow before calm can return, as you forget your power, and I will no longer endure it. She should have been killed when she broke the sea’s glamour._

A horribly sly note came into his voice, despite its rage, as if he thought he was being very clever.

_You say any fae may help the beasts, and so I shall, by teaching them their place. That other humans stare at her now, with such attention as they have, makes it a good time to kill her, not a bad. And so you will see._

With the last words a wall of water out of nowhere knocked ap Lugh and those with him down, foaming over them as Manannán swung to face me, starting forward. His eyes were just as green as I remembered, and lit with madness. The stick was swinging up in my hand, and I saw its tip had taken the same leaf-bladed form it had when I used it on the River Devil — but I also realised I had iron in one hand and silver in the other, and when it comes to the Fae things work in threes, not pairs. And while I didn’t happen to have a third hand, nor anything to hold in it if I had, even being washed into Underhill couldn’t break my pack bonds. The ribbons were opaque to my sight, and I couldn’t feel Adam or any of the pack, but they were there, and my magic grabbed a nice thick one — Joel’s, with the most manitou fizz in it — and formed a loop I could throw. Manannán was half-way towards me, there was still no sword or armour, and my experience of fighting overconfident wolves and vamps told me that they expected submission or flight, so attack often was the best defence. But the same bit of backbrain that knew about threes also knew I was Underhill, brought there by force, and there were — or at least had once been — some strict rules about that sort of thing. Many tales said so. It offered a better chance than a knock-down fight with a god, however ex, and I _am_ coyote, geared for sneakiness and changing the rules, not macho headbutting. Either way, I’d go down fighting.

Whatever Manannán was expecting it wasn’t a ribbon lasso of pack magic settling round his mouth and nose, and I was imagining Joel pulling it tight in tibicena form, with all the weight he could muster. It not only brought the fae up short, hands rising to his face as the ribbon bit deeply into whatever kind of flesh he was presently made of, it distracted him — and he hadn’t thought about my speed, either. My stomach muscles were _not_ happy about it, but I was within the stick’s range before he registered it, the silver blade piercing his neck, and within Carnwennan’s before he could react. The stick’s handle was flaring heat into my hand, and as the iron that had killed Dana pierced his side I found myself shouting.

“I hold you, Manannán mac Lír, by iron, by silver, and by magic, and I call on the justice of Underhill to answer the three lies you have spoken of me, and the three harms you have offered me.”

I felt powerful magic grip me, but it was gripping him too, locking us together, the tip of the staff and the blade of Carnwennan both half-in and half-out, frozen in place. Manannán was struggling, to judge from the contortions of his face, but he was being held as surely as I was, and beyond us there was silence until I heard the voice of Gwyn ap Lugh, high and remote.
“Mercedes Athena Thompson Hauptman, you have called on the justice of Underhill, and Underhill has heard you. Make good your case.”

I took a deep breath, thinking furiously. Only exact truth would do, and brevity would be good.

“Three lies Manannán mac Lír has spoken now, in my hearing. He called me human, but though I am mortal I am not human. I am half-human, half-coyote. I have two forms. I use magic. I see ghosts. He also said I stole the work of Lugh, but the walking stick Lugh made comes to me of its own will, in friendship, as it has now. And he said I gave orders to the Dark Smith, when the truth is that I made a request of that one, and was answered gladly, and today a blade of his making comes unbidden to my hand. Three lies, now. How many before I cannot know.”

Somewhere there was a deep chime, and I took another deep breath, feeling the stick pulse in my hand.

“And three harms. When I first entered Underhill, brought by the Dark Smith in service of the Fae, answering their need, and found myself on the sea shore, he sought my death by water and was forestalled only by the Dark Smith’s hand. This morning he has brought me Underhill by force of magic and water, without notice and against my will. And he declared that the Gray Lords would witness my death, approaching me in rage and madness, intent on achieving it.”

A second chime. One more deep breath.

“I have no formal debt to the Fae, nor any to Manannán mac Lír. And I have revealed to no human any fae secret that was not already known to humans. Nor did I seek to enter Underhill. How then can I with justice be stolen from my home and told I must die at his hands?”

There was silence for a long moment, save my own breathing. I thought the voice that eventually spoke was Nemane’s, but it was as remote as Gwyn ap Lugh’s had been and I couldn’t turn my head to look.

“You have spoken truth, Mercedes, daughter of Coyote, and Manannán mac Lír has lied and sought your death. He has also threatened you having brought you here unwilling, against our ancient law. What justice would you have of Underhill for these wrongs?”

Nothing but death would change Manannán’s mind, but I didn’t know if he could die. Dana had, but whatever she’d been it wasn’t a god, and you couldn’t shoot an ocean any more than an earthquake or a Manitou. I didn’t think the other Gray Lords would object in principle, but there might well be consequences far beyond my understanding. Was Manannán necessary to the sea of Underhill? And what would happen to his power, which the other Gray Lords probably needed, if he were to die? I really wasn’t feeling very merciful, but caution won.

“I will not ask his death, for there is no death between us. Yet I cannot allow his threat to stand unanswered. So the justice I ask of Underhill is that Manannán mac Lír be stripped of his power sufficiently that he can no longer threaten any outside Underhill. To whom or what that power goes is not my concern, so long as it and its recipients offer no further harm to me or mine.”

This time the silence felt surprised, and it was again Nemane’s voice that broke it.

“You ask for neither reward nor compensation?”

Alarm bells rang in my head. “I ask for justice, not reward. And in compensation I ask only my prompt and safe return to my home, whence I was stolen by Manannán’s waters. Nor, if the justice I ask is granted, will I hold the Fae, or any fae, in my debt for anything that has happened yesterday
or today, as I reckon time, and I acknowledge no debt to any fae, though I am made glad by some actions of Gwyn ap Lugh and the Dark Smith. I would live and let live, in such friendship as is possible between kinds.”

There was more silence, with a growing sense of strain, before Gwyn ap Lugh spoke.

“Even now the spirit of place you call the manitou grips Underhill as it is in this place, seeking entrance. Justice granted, will you speak to it on our behalf, that all Fae not suffer for the madness of one?”

“Gladly. If you can, let it know that I will soon be returned to my home safely, and ask that Medicine Wolf speaks with me and with the Gray Lords before taking any further action against them or Underhill.”

What tipped the balance I don’t know, nor how real a threat even the manitou could pose to the power of Underhill, but Manannán’s face contorted more wildly than ever and water began to pour from him, a salt flood that disappeared as it touched the earth under my feet. I had no idea what the split was, but I could see more than one Gray Lord, including ap Lugh and those who’d stood closest to him, sucking in power, while the earth of Underhill was shuddering, and all around me rose stems were bursting from it and into flower, heavy with scent. Manannán’s green eyes were dulling as his body shrank, but the madness in them increased and I was very careful to keep both the blade of the stick and Carnwennan lodged in him, and the pack bond looped around his mouth pulled as tight as I imagined a tibicena could manage. I don’t know how long it took, but eventually the flood slowed and stopped, and the definitely ex-god in front of me was now my own height and … shrivelled. Muddy green hatred stared at me, and all my alarm bells were still ringing despite a heady relief and exaltation that some rules still held true. I became aware of the silence and that the Gray Lords were waiting on me — and though Underhill’s grip had eased, Manannán was still held by iron, silver, and my own magic.

“I acknowledge the justice of Underhill. You who are or were Manannán mac Lír, at this moment there is nothing further between us. The lies you told of me and the harms you offered me have been answered. Swear by your life that you accept that justice, and that you will never again either seek my harm yourself, nor aid nor encourage any other to harm me or mine, and I will let you go. But if in word or deed you offer me or mine any further threat I will hold your life forfeit. Do the Gray Lords and Underhill witness my truth?”

“We do.”

It was a remote chorus of voices, and behind it a chime, so after a moment I imagined Joel letting the pack bond drop, and saw the tension leave it. What Manannán’s remaining strength might be I didn’t know, so I nevertheless kept the bond round him as I let it slack sufficiently to free his mouth — and he was still as far from anything I’d call sanity as I’d thought. The sea surf had left his voice, but the hissing hatred and loathing hadn’t.

“I will drown you and every wolf, every human, every—”

“Wrong answer” I told him, and let the walking stick and Carnwennan do what they wanted. The dagger slid home to the hilt, angling upwards, the dull green eyes flared and blanked, and the spiked tip of the stick reached the far side of his neck before expanding and cutting off his head. But what hit the ground was just another splash of water, and when I withdrew Carnwennan, stepping back to let the body fall, it didn’t last much longer. A few wracks of seaweed from his hair were all that were left, and I took a juddering breath as I looked up to meet Gwyn ap Lugh’s gaze. He was glowing with new power but made no move as he spoke, and though it wasn’t back to normal his voice was less remote.
“Mercedes Athena Thompson Hauptman, daughter of Coyote, you have received justice and dealt
justice. The Gray Lords have no claim on you.”

The Fae always said things so damn carefully, and though he was no more human than I was he
was very male, and making me conscious that I was once again naked in front of people I didn’t
know.

“I hear you, Gwyn ap Lugh, Prince of the Gray Lords, and acknowledge the justices I have
received and dealt. Nor do I have any claim on the Gray Lords. All that remains is my return to my
home.”

“Is it? Many here have gained greatly from what has just happened, and might think you were yet
owed a debt.”

His voice had a note that set my teeth on edge, but I knew he must be struggling with whatever
he’d absorbed from Manannán, and he’d been honourable about the walking stick. Besides,
holding markers on any fae was about the only thing worse than having one of them hold your
marker — which didn’t mean there might not be advantage to be had. And if I was going to stand
between kinds I might as well try to do it well.

“If the Gray Lords, or any fae, have benefited from Underhill’s justice, or the fate of Manannán
mac Lír, that is no concern or doing of mine. I claim nothing but my return home, Gwyn ap Lugh,
though if that is not to my bathroom some clothes would also be welcome. But tell me, has the grip
of the manitou on Underhill eased?”

He looked at me steadily, his new power swirling in his eyes. “It has, though we are urged to return
you as swiftly as safely.”

“That would be good, Gwyn ap Lugh. My husband and daughter will be no happier than the
manitou.”

“Yet there might be mutual benefit in our longer speech. What will you say to Bran Cornick of the
justice you received and dealt? Or to the humans?”

“To Bran, all I know. To humans, as little as possible, but whatever I must. And I also see that
mutual benefits might be possible, so I will be happy to speak further with you, Gwyn ap Lugh, or
to any Gray Lord who comes in peace, but not here and now. Overhill, at our mutual convenience
and by our mutual agreement.” And with clothes on. “Bran can give you my number, if you need
it.”

A smile glimmered onto his face. “Tell him I will call him soon to ask. I hear your words, daughter
of Coyote, and there is no claim between us, nor between you and any fae. Yet I will say also, as
the Prince of the Gray Lords, that by my word and command no fae shall offer you or yours harm,
Underhill or Overhill, and that all should heed you.”

That one I’d have to think about, and report to Bran the moment I could. I thought that, like Uncle
Mike’s casual promise of a drink waiting for me, it might be the closest thing to thanks for killing
Manannán I’d get. But I was still naked, and the adrenaline rush was running out. I was also
steadily more aware that my poor bruised stomach muscles had not liked all the tension, any more
than my abrasions had liked the salt.

“I am happy to hear your words, Prince of the Gray Lords. I would be happier still if I had some
clothes on.”
I expect he or Yo-Yo Edythe would have got around to it eventually, but Underhill answered me first. While ap Lugh and I had been speaking the roses had continued to sprout and bloom, a great thicket of them, in all the colours roses Overhill have ever managed and then some more. The air had been still, riotous with scent and very humid — maybe some of Manannán had evaporated — but as I finished speaking a breeze picked up and I found myself amid a swirl of rose petals that tickled, and flowed, and wove themselves into a cloak that not only covered me from head to foot but was immediately warming. Velvet softness was a lot better than bruised nudity, and I couldn’t stop a relieved smile as I looked down at myself. For a moment the impulse to twirl was strong. Then I wondered how to thank Underhill without saying anything unwise, but the renewed look in Gwyn ap Lugh’s eyes made for new alarm bells before, to my utter astonishment, he gave me a short bow.

“Underhill honours you. Such a cloak has not been given since we left the old world. And the last of all colours was Manannán’s féth fiada, that granted invisibility.” He paused for a moment, meeting other Gray Lords’ eyes, then met mine again. “Whatever its powers, this one is yours for your lifetime, and, at the least, when you wear it Underhill will at your asking open for you to enter or leave this place where it grew. What other powers it may have are yours to determine.”

My head was spinning, but looking at the cloak and wondering how it fastened had reminded me of what I held, and I decided I’d been wrong and there was something I still ought to do before asking the cloak to take me home.

“I am happy to receive the freely given gift of Underhill, and will be happy to help Underhill and the manitou to speak peacefully of their coexistence. And” — I held out my hands, not offering either artefact to anyone, but letting them be clearly seen — “while Carnwennan already bears a famous name, I ask you, Gwyn ap Lugh, if you will consent to the naming of your father’s work for the deeds it has done this day.”

He tilted his head, raising one eyebrow in an almost human gesture. “A naming is deserved, surely.”

“Manannán’s Bane?”

The walking stick warmed in my hand, preening, and ap Lugh saw it.

“Yes.” Something glinted in his eyes. “Its maker would laugh, loud and long.”

I wasn’t surprised that Manannán had made enemies everywhere, way back when as well as today, but filed the offered datum away, with another note to tell Bran, and ask Zee. Or rather Arianna, seeing as Zee had killed Lugh, and it wasn’t a good subject to raise with him unless he invited a question.

“I am happy to hear so. And I am going home.”

I gave ap Lugh a nod, briefly returned, with one more for the rest of them, returned only by Nemane and Baba Yaga, though Yo-Yo Edythe gave me a wink. I wondered if the cloak needed some formula or incantation, but decided ap Lugh would have said so, and simply asked Underhill if it would of its grace take me home, to the dwelling from which I had been brought to where I stood. An arched opening appeared, filled with a swirl of earth-scented magic, and I heard ap Lugh’s voice.

“Three steps will take you there. Or anywhere you will.”

So with a breath, and a firm grasp of both Carnwennan and Manannán’s Bane, I took them, and
stepped from an idiot Gray Lord’s mess into an idiot wolf’s.
The idiot was Paul, of course, and only two steps into the swirl of Underhill’s magic I could hear his voice, scared but angrily threaded with a whining insistence his hate sustained, saying I had obviously offended the Gray Lords and must be dead. But as the pack bonds reopened fully and they felt me coming, I was also aware that Adam was enraged to the edge of sanity, hanging on by a thread, and as soon as the front hallway materialised in front of me, and I could see them both, I understood what was stopping him killing Paul where he stood. The resident pack members were all there, crowding around the space where Paul faced Adam, and so were a very angry Charles, Anna, Samuel, and Asil — but Jenny, Andrea, AED Westfield with Fisher, and two other Feebs were also present, if marginalised, and all scared by the violence thickening the air. So were Caroline Taylor and her crew, camera and sound running, but not — my temper rose sharply — Christy, who was standing with mouth open and eyes alight with testosterone thrill next to a terrified Jesse. How much time had passed while I was Underhill, and how had this shambles happened? For a second I also wondered why Anna hadn’t used her boosted zen to stop this madness, but realised Paul must have made a formal challenge, and to zen Adam into declining would be very dangerous for him. All the rage I’d held down with fae boiled up, because however irritating and stupid he might be Paul was no Gray Lord to fear, and I exited another arch-with-swirls in what I think Brits call high dudgeon. Heads snapped towards me but Adam reacted quickest.

“Mercy!”

He was moving towards me before he took in the rose cloak and what I carried, but slowed as he did, and seeing his eyes I wrenched our mate bond wide open, not caring if anyone else heard.

Adam, love. Safe and well. A million complications.

He managed to convert what would have been a crushing embrace into a fierce grip on my shoulders, releasing a strong scent of roses, and struggled with himself for a second before his need and emotions crashed over me.


That’s just a summary transcript. The reality was enough to distract me for a long moment, during which I just clutched him back, as best I could with stick and dagger still in my hands, but as the pack bonds reopened — or refilled, maybe — crackling tensions hit me, and I heard Paul’s shocked whine that I had to be dead. I swivelled in Adam’s grasp.

“Wrong, Paul. Again.” I wondered for a second, then knew what he’d been saying. “It is not true that the Gray Lords kidnapped me. One summoned me. The matter is settled. And I am truly back. Which means you are done.” I turned back to Adam. “He challenged you?”

“Yes. Before outsiders and the camera. But I must answer him all the same, Mercy.”

And Bran as well as Charles would want to kill Paul for that, never mind Adam. But with the camera there the fight had to be avoided or Adam would be facing a murder charge. And it could be.
“No, you mustn’t, Adam love. Paul lies under our edict, remember, that one more misstep would see him cast from the pack. The moment he challenged you before any non-wolf, never mind on live TV, he forfeited his membership, especially as he did it while I was missing and you required loyal obedience, not distraction.” Adam also did not need time to worry about legalities and tradition, so I didn’t hesitate. “Our line, our call. Brace yourself. And all pack likewise.”

With most of the pack present Paul’s bonds spread in all directions, but hey, magic follows intent, and mine were both already fizzing. Perhaps the cloak was boosting me, or I’d picked up something from Underhill, but a sweeping circle with Manannán’s Bane gathered every bond that ran to Paul, and a sharp jerk pulled him down to his knees, grunting shock and pain as he hit the carpet hard. The tight loop the bonds made around the stick served as a ligature, and I looked down into Paul’s eyes, where spiking fear had for once stilled the hatred.

“Paul Robert Edward Harris, you had been clearly warned, yet have once again served your pack and your Alpha ill. You neither deserve nor will receive any answer to your challenge, and for your repeated disloyalty and disobedience you are cast from the Columbia Basin Pack, never again to hunt, fight, live, or run with us.”

And before he or anyone could say anything I swept Carnwennan across the clustered pack bonds beyond the stick, parting them like straws. Pain flared in my chest, and every pack member grunted. Adam’s share as Alpha was worse, but I knew his anger — and dawning relief at this bloodless solution, whatever the complications — offered a degree of shielding. Paul, though, got everything, and the noise he made was indescribable — a sort of hoarse, guttural whimper. He dropped like a stone, curling into a gasping ball at my feet — which was fine by me, but he’d already done damage that had to be controlled. Turning I saw Anna was offering Adam her Omega zen directly, one hand on his shoulder, as well as pumping it out to everyone, and calm was spreading. But Adam wasn’t yet ready to speak to anyone, eyes still all wolf and body tensed against the burn of Paul’s loss, so it was still Mrs Alpha’s turn.

“Honey, Ben, take Paul to the safe room and watch him until he recovers. He still has to answer to higher authorities for revealing wolf business without permission.”

I stood aside both so that they could lift him, and so that the camera could see he was still breathing.

“He’s in severe pain from my severing of his pack bonds, Ms Taylor, and all the pack feel it, but it’ll pass. And though none of this should ever have been broadcast, I hope what just happened is clear enough to everyone. Most wolves are very loyal to their packs, but some are troublemakers, or plain stupid, and Paul was both. He was also on a final warning.”

“Uh, right.” Taylor took a breath, looking after Paul as he was carried out and again showed real spine. “Why do you need a safe room?”

“Injured wolves get cranky. The safe room keeps them safe, as well as others.”

“Alright. And what will those higher authorities do to Mr Harris?”

“Not for me to know, say, or guess, Ms Taylor. I’m a coyote avatar, remember?” There was a kick in saying it in public. “I have authority in this pack as Adam’s mate, which is why I could cast Paul out, but none over any werewolf who isn’t a member. And that now includes Paul.” Time to change the subject. “Might I ask what you’re doing in here anyway?”

She blinked. “We were asked in to hear a statement by the FBI about your having gone missing, and were speaking briefly to Mr Smith and Mr Hauptman live when ah, Mr Harris interrupted.”
I shook my head in disbelief. “Make that, some are really stupid, Ms Taylor.” I wondered, though, because I hadn’t thought Paul suicidal. “But more importantly, as I’m not missing the statement’s redundant. And as I need to speak to my husband privately, perhaps you might head outside for a bit.”

She gave me a long look. “Surely, Ms Hauptman. It’s your house. And I’ll say I was horrified to hear you were missing, and I’m very glad you’re back safe and sound. But you might want to explain what you’re wearing and holding, because otherwise the questions won’t ever stop.”

That was true, but they wouldn’t stop anyway. Still, she was right that some truth to chew on would be better than pure speculation. I didn’t think mentioning Underhill was a good idea, which made things awkward, but the artefacts in my hands were now both warm, and I thought they deserved any fame they wanted.

“I’m wearing a cloak of rose petals, Ms Taylor, because the Gray Lord who summoned me did so rather … peremptorily, shall we say, while I was in the shower, so it was provided for my modesty and comfort. Pretty, isn’t it? The magic that returned me here was also fae, not mine. As to what I’m holding, the stick you’ve already seen, though I can add that its name is Manannán’s Bane, while this beautiful dagger is called Carnwennan. It means ‘white hilt’. Being summoned so abruptly was quite alarming at first, as you can imagine, and they came to me in reassurance. It was very kind of them.” The stick was preening again, and Carnwennan’s handle pulsed a little heat into my palm, so I squeezed gently back. “And while I’ll be happy to speak to you and the camera later, I really do need you outside for a while, starting now.”

She nodded, but there was another delay when Warren opened the door, and Medicine Wolf promptly put his great head through it, silver-on-gold eyes blazing at me.

“You are safe and well, Mercy?”

“I am, thank you. Please read me again, as swiftly as you can.”

It was the quickest way to be sure the manitou knew what had passed Underhill, and I met its eyes gladly, trying to offer what I wanted it to know. I felt its surprise at Underhill’s justice, acceptance than I really didn’t know anything about how that realm worked except what I’d read in old tales, and after a second understanding of what I had told the Gray Lords I would do. One of those blessed sheets of glass distanced me from the fear I’d been suppressing that was threatening to break out, and the remembered feel of blades sliding into Manannán’s flesh. Its voice was for me alone, and held an odd note.

You lead a very interesting life, Mercy. And you think swiftly and well, for the good of all. Do not be afraid. It is not my way to kill when I have no need. If the Fae or their dwelling place had harmed you I would seek to remove them from my territory, but I am glad I do not have to.

If I’d been thinking straight I wouldn’t have done it, but the warmth in its voice was a boon, and I stepped forward, laying my forehead on its muzzle and speaking very softly, so Taylor couldn’t hear.

“Thank you, Medicine Wolf. The pressure you exerted helped save me, again.”

It whuffed, breath and magic fluttering the cloak, and that was the second image of me that thanks to Jenny wound up decorating the nation’s chests and walls and pretty much everything else — my head resting on the manitou’s, the petal hem arching to reveal muddy and salt-crusted feet, with sunlight glinting on Carnwennan’s blade and the stick’s silver ferrule while also bringing out the glorious colours of the cloak. It made a pretty good poster, I’ll admit, and for some biker girl down
in Tucson one hell of a full-back tattoo, but I still got sick of seeing it long before anyone else. My
bad.

You are very welcome. We will speak again later.

“Surely.”

Medicine Wolf withdrew its head, a wide-eyed and reluctant Taylor left with Dilman and Hersch,
and Warren shut the door carefully behind them before leaning against it.

“Way to go, Mercy. Again. I am very happy you are alive and came back when you did.”


There was no time for more, because there was still one interloper who needed to be gone, and fast.
And when my eyes met Jesse’s, bright with tears and worry, I found that I had plenty of anger left.

“Hey, kiddo. Hang on just a little longer.”

She just stared at me, and my eyes shifted to Christy’s. I knew they were still golden from the heat
in them, and it took some effort not to raise either Carnwennan or Manannán’s Bane.

“I don’t know what you’re doing here, Christy, but whatever it is it’s not helping Jesse, it’s not
helping Adam, and it’s not helping me.” For the first time with a human I consciously pulled
Adam’s Alpha mojo into my voice, feeling his rage as well as my own. “You’ve had most of two
months to recover from the fright Guayota gave you, and enough is enough. You will go back to
your home in Eugene today. Darryl, Auriele, make sure she’s on the next possible flight.”

Christy felt the command but it wasn’t what she wanted, and she was deeply used to being selfish
and getting her own way. I don’t think I’d ever disliked her more, and I disliked her plenty the first
day I met her.

“I don’t have to obey you.” She sniffed a little, tearing up. “I only came to help.”

“Depends where you are, Christy. In Eugene you’re as free as a bird. Here in the Tri-Cities, when
you claim the protection of the pack, you do have to obey me. Adam’s is the only countermand.”
And Adam was saying nothing at all, which told me everything. “Darryl, the order stands.”

“And will be obeyed, Mercy.”

“Jesse needs me.”

My temper flared, and I battled it down. Mostly. I didn’t use Carnwennan on her, and that took
some doing.

“No, Christy. Jesse needs a mother, because her own is a woman who’ll leave her alone for a week
to go manhunting in Reno, and get off on the idea of Adam having to fight today even though she
knows he got shot twice yesterday.” The penny dropped, and I took a long step towards her,
making her squeak in fright. My voice acquired what I can only call a snarl. “And you’re not here
to help anyone but yourself. You heard I was missing on KEPR and headed straight in hoping to
grab Adam back while he was grieving. I’ve known nicer vultures, Christy.”

It was the truth, and she knew it. So did everyone else, and I saw her shoulders slump.

“And you are gone right now. Darryl, Auriele, get her out of my sight and the city. Go.”
They went, Christy putting up no further resistance. My conscience twinged, despite everything, and I turned to Westfield, feeling my eyes cool a little.

“And as she’s presumably put her face on camera here, AED Westfield, could you please ask the FBI in Eugene to meet her at the airport and see her safely home? We’ll contract security for her.”

He looked at me very carefully, his eyes wary and tired, and after a moment nodded. “I think we can do that, Ms Hauptman.” Fisher already had her phone out. “You continue to impress, and surprise. This was about to become very ugly despite your admirable restraint, Mr Hauptman. And your pack’s discipline, Mr Harris aside. Thank you, everyone. And while I imagine there’s a great deal you’re about not to tell us, again, Ms Hauptman, I need a better understanding of what happened to you this morning, if only because the Secretary’s visit is on hold, though he’s still in the air and not far out from Pasco.”

My mind spun. A Beltway bigwig hadn’t been what I wanted before I got kidnapped for the second morning in a row, and certainly wasn’t what I wanted now. But I did want the Federal Government talking to the Fae again, and this was a step towards that.

“So far as I’m concerned, he can come as arranged, AED Westfield. Adam?”

“You’re sure, Mercy?”

Adam’s voice was hoarse, and even without our mate bond I’d have known he was really asking if the cloak was hiding any injuries, as well as about my own state of mind. I sent all the reassurance I could.

“Yeah. I’m good, with some manitou help.” Getting back to the shower would be good too, but however cleanliness came after godliness it still had to wait. “And I’m afraid you’re right, AED Westfield. There may be things I can tell you when I’ve had some other conversations, but for now all I’m saying is what I just told the world.”

“Your privilege, Ms Hauptman. But a peremptory summons that took you out of your own bathroom, leaving several gallons of seawater, sounds like a kidnapping to me. And kidnapping is seriously illegal.”

“Felt like a kidnapping, too, AED Westfield, but it’s over. No harm, no foul. And not FBI nor any human jurisdiction. Other than that I’ll add only a reassurance that it was an individual matter, not anything to do with Fae policy, and it won’t be happening again.”

He gave Carnwennan a long look. “Glad to hear it, Ms Hauptman. Wikipedia tells me King Arthur had a dagger called Carnwennan.”

“So he did. Used it to kill Orddu. And your point is?”

“That’s it?”

His voice was for once more a boy’s than a senior Feeb’s, and I felt a welcome flash of amusement.

“To the best of my knowledge. I think it’s a friend of Manannán’s Bane’s, as well as of Excalibur’s.” His expression was priceless. “But I really do need some down time with my husband and daughter. Tell me in an hour what’s been arranged about the Secretary?”

Westfield didn’t like it much, but nodded. “Alright, Ms Hauptman, I can go with that.” He blew out a breath. “And I suspect some more congratulations are in order, besides an acknowledgement that
you were right to make us give up the guns. Can I take it the kidnapper won’t be repeating the
offence?”

“Oh yeah, you can take that. Two mornings in a row turns out to be bad for my temper.”

I saw his lips twitch, and Fisher smiled, but the best thing was that they and the other Feebs went,
heading back to their computers in the dining room. The pack was left looking at me warily and
barely containing their curiosity, but I told them they’d have to wait.

“Sorry, people, but besides Bran coming first, there’s need-to-know stuff involved. The fae who
grabbed me has been taken care of, and it’s cool, I promise, but there is no point taking
unnecessary chances.”

Warren took them downstairs to grumble and speculate, while I borrowed Adam’s phone and gave
my mom a quick call of reassurance. She was understandably concerned, and I promised a proper
talk as soon as I could. Then, after a long hug, releasing more rose scents, and a promise to get to
her as soon as I was done with Bran, Jesse went with Mary Jo to her room, and Adam and I took
everyone else — including Jenny and, at my nod, Andrea — back to Adam’s study. Adam was
silent, still not quite centred, I thought, and Charles drifted up beside me.

“More very good going, little sister, but take care now. Know that Da is climbing the wall, or was,
and ap Lugh did not answer his phone.”

“Don’t think he had it on him, Charles. But he’ll be in touch soon enough, I think. Does Bran mind
Andrea knowing about him?”

“No. Or he didn’t before you went missing. He agreed with you about her from yesterday, and she
has shown more helpful sense than I credited her with this morning. Shining confidence in you also
helped Jesse, and even Adam, who was frantic.” Adam’s grip on my arm let me know just how
frantic. “And Lucia says Joel went tibicena and spent twenty minutes acting like he was in a tug of
war with another one.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that my imagination would compel Joel, but it made as much sense as any
magic. “He was. If Bran’s on the screen, get Joel in on this on your phone?”

“Of course.”

By the time we were crowded into Adam’s study, Bran was up on one of the big screens. He
looked calm enough, but wasn’t, and his eyes had way more of his wolf in them than anyone sane
ever wanted to see. I found myself speaking fast.

“Bran, it was an attack, but by one Gray Lord only, and he’d flipped. Ap Lugh and others were
arguing with him, but overmatched by a very old one on a tear. He lied about me as well as
offering harm, so I called him on it, demanding justice of Underhill. Which it gave. He’s dead, and
ap Lugh said there is no claim between us, nor between me and any fae. He also said, as the Prince
of the Gray Lords, that by his word and command no fae shall offer me or mine harm, Underhill or
Overhill, and that all fae should heed me. You’ll know better than me how far to trust that, and
what it means, but it was formally spoken. Did you feel Carnwennan leave?”

As I’d hoped the unexpected question, coming after the string of reassurances and an issue to
consider, got through to him, and I saw his wolf fade back a little.

“I did, Mercy, not that I knew what it was at the time.” He had been taking in faces present,
stopping on Jenny and Andrea, who both swallowed and looked down. “Mercy, you think this wise
now?"

“I do, Bran. And necessary, however I deflected Taylor’s question about Paul.”

There was a pause while he thought it through. “Yes, I see.” And I knew he did. “Very well. Ms Trevellyan, Ms Lafferty” — they looked up and were held by his gaze — “I am Bran Cornick, the father of Charles and Samuel, and the Marrok. Alpha of Alphas. The rule is that no word spoken here be disclosed to anyone not present without my let. It must be followed, and the more so after the things exposed by Paul Harris.”

Bran was Bran, and his command was potent, but Jenny wasn’t a wolf, and she wasn’t a very good lawyer for nothing.

“Of course, sir. Full confidentiality. But I must also tell you that Mr Harris was, as a pack member, my client of record, and whatever his wolf status now he still is until I can file a revocation.” She took a breath. “And if I find myself being asked about his sudden death or disappearance before I can do that, I will not be pleading the fifth.”

I wasn’t surprised when Bran gave a short, scary laugh, and neither were Asil or Charles, but everyone else tensed.

“I hear you, Ms Trevellyan, but I’ve just agreed with Mercy that he must be let live, however killing him would be a great deal easier and by wolf lights more than just. And he is now a permanent problem. There is no pack in North America or anywhere else that will touch him with a stick after today, so what am I to do with him? And talking of sticks, Mercy, would I be right to think that Manannán’s Bane has but newly gained its name?”

“You would. Came with me Underhill, called Carnwennan too, I think, and did some translation for me. Meant I had iron and silver, as well as my magic, and you know all good things come in threes. It also cut off Manannán’s head while Carnwennan reached his heart, if he had one. His power was redistributed to other Gray Lords and to Underhill. Ap Lugh got enough to glow. Underhill gave me the cloak, which goosed them all. I have no idea what its full virtues are but it’s mine for life and gives me access to Underhill, apparently, as well as the power to leave it. When I used that power, ap Lugh, Nemane, and Baba Yaga gave me nods. Yo-Yo Edythe winked.”

Bran had actually blinked three times in the course of that, and what Andrea would be looking like I hardly dared think, but it was a strained Jenny who spoke first.

“You killed someone else with the stick, Mercy?”

I looked at her for a moment, and waggled a hand. “The else is debatable, Jenny. Tim was human. Manannán wasn’t. Ex-god covers it, so far as I know. But yes, I took a life. A fae life, in a fae place. I’m cool with it, so are the Gray Lords, and there is no body. It became water. Is there a problem?”

“Did you have a choice?”

“There’s always a choice, Jenny, even if it’s only to live or to die. Manannán had a choice, too. He could have settled for losing some power and walked away, but he said he’d drown me, and every wolf, and every human.” I shrugged. “He probably didn’t have the juice any more, but I wasn’t feeling like taking the chance, for myself or Jesse and Adam. Or you and Andrea, and everyone else. And it was the second time he’d tried to kill me. Call him human, and New York might get stroppy with me, but nowhere Western or Florida. And though he really wasn’t human, not even a little bit, he was the fae version of Cantrip. A human hater, and nowhere close to balanced.”
“Ah. OK, that's good enough for me, Mercy.” She frowned. “I’d represent you on a murder charge willingly, but I have to consider the commercial contracts agreed yesterday, as well as immediate stuff. If there’s any liability to arrest, I need to know.”

I shrugged again and tried to gentle my voice. “You heard Westfield. It didn’t happen within any human jurisdiction, no human was involved, and the Fae won’t be complaining. One warning, though — do not speak of Underhill to anyone who does not already know of it, which means those here now and full-blood fae only. That’s why I excluded the pack and Jesse. I suspect it’ll come out as a fact sooner than later, but the Gray Lords do not want everyone knowing that Walla Walla is a gateway to their sacred space.”

“Underhill like in the old stories?”

Andrea’s eyes were predictably alight.

“More or less, but I’m not saying any more than I have to.”

Jenny waved a hand. “Fae secrets I get, however weird. But you’re OK with killing this Manannán person?”

“Oh yeah. I am coyote, Jenny. And Andrea. Coyotes are predators, as much as wolves. Killing to live does not bother me at all, nor any wolf. Nor would Paul being dead bother me for a moment, but because the camera was there he is of far greater service to wolves alive.”

I took a breath, and looked at Bran, intent on us from the screen.

“What does bother me, greatly, is the standoff between humans and Faes, and what you also need to know, Bran, and maybe Jenny as well, is that as things stand after this morning I think there’s a chance to end it. Government humans who hate fae kidnapped me, and so did a Gray Lord who hated humans. The perpetrators are all dead, and both their highest authorities are a bit embarrassed about it all. If the President will acknowledge a personal belief that the Boston jury rendered a perverse verdict, and if he comes here to speak to Medicine Wolf, I think the Gray Lords would accept a wolf invitation to observe, or better. And I think Medicine Wolf would be willing to broker a three-way live and let live agreement. Or a four-way one, if wolves wanted in.”

I held Bran’s gaze, knowing the weight I felt from it was just him thinking, not his will to dominate, and let myself open fully to my bond with Adam, and through him to his fainter bond with Bran. What did or didn’t get through I’m not sure, but after a moment Bran shook his shoulders, rotated his head with an audible pop that made me wince, and nodded. When he spoke his voice was mostly calm again.

“If indeed, Mercy. And more thanks are due. I am as surprised as I am relieved that you survived such an attack, and extremely surprised you were able to kill that opponent. I will not be the only one.” He laughed again, much more humanly. “For the work of Lugh to be named Manannán’s Bane would please him, though, from all I know. The luck swirls roughly around you, Mercy, as it has ever done, but it swirls true, today as yesterday.”

“I hope. And yeah, ap Lugh said something about that. What did Manannán do to Lugh?”

“Drowned three of his sons.”

“Well, that’ll do it.” And it put the remaining son’s actions in an interesting light — or were there more ap Lughs? I wondered how much the one I knew had pushed Underhill, assuming he could, but speculation had to wait. “Anything else you need to know right now, Bran?”
He stared at me, quite hard, but I’d withstood it as a teenager, and I wasn’t feeling too yielding, just now.

“Yes. I want the full tale of this before I talk to ap Lugh. And we need to talk about pack bonds again, soon.”

Guilt hit me, and I looked towards Charles, holding up his phone, and projected my voice as best I could. “Joel, I’m so sorry. Are you OK?”

His voice was rough. <I am, Mercy. What happened to me?>

“I silenced Manannán with a pack bond, just like Paul, if you heard about that, and as I didn’t know how strong he was, or what he’d make of manitou magic, I imagined you in tibicena form pulling it as tight as you could. I didn’t know it would compel you to … mimesis.” I hoped that was the right word. “It worked, though.”

I heard his breath huff out. <Good. And I understand your need, Mercy. But I believe you owe Lucia a tin of your best brownies. We were … otherwise engaged when you forced me into tibicena form.>

Some appalling visions floated before my eyes, and I heard breaths drawn in sharply all around. Wolves did have good hearing.

“Oh sh … ugar. I’m so sorry, Joel, Lucia. Waiting wasn’t an option.”

<I don’t care about that, Mercy.> Even at this remove Lucia’s voice was sharp with worry. <Joel takes no harm? His tibicena claws have scored the carpet deeply.>

“No harm I know of Lucia, though I can’t explain the magic involved. I just needed a weight even an ex-god couldn’t ignore, and as I was using Joel’s pack bond for the manitou magic in it a tibicena was what came to mind. And the brownies will be on their way as soon as I can find time for the kitchen. Carpet catalogue will be there sooner.”

There was a long pause while Joel repeated my words.

<I hear you, Mercy. You take care, now.>

“You too, Lucia. And you, Joel. Come over if you need.”

<We will, Mercy, but what we need now is one another.>

“Tell me.”

I wanted to be alone with Adam more than anything, and he knew it. So did every wolf present, and Bran, who offered one of his blander smiles.

“A talk about pack bonds, as I said, Mercy. Is the cloak adding to that?”

My voice became quite tart. “Who knows, Bran? Probably. I might have collected some of Manannán’s magic, too — mine’s certainly fizzing. Coyote stirred it up some last night, I think, but this morning it’s been … augmented further. So how much is the cloak I really don’t know. Give me a chance to finish my shower and change, and we can try guessing some more.”

He stayed bland. “That sounds like more good thinking, Mercy. There are few things more annoying than an interrupted shower.”
“True.” I flipped him a brief finger, hearing his laugh and some indrawn breaths. “But one of them is being kidnapped two mornings in a row, and another is having to kill ex-gods before breakfast. Give me a break, Bran. I’m doing my best, even if I can’t not be coyote and annoying. And I’m sorry about putting Paul’s expulsion on camera, but I thought it was better than a fight that would have been a killing.”

Bran waved a hand. “Much better, I agree. And I don’t in the least mind a precedent that a wolf on final warning cannot issue a challenge, however thin the reasoning, especially as Charles, Samuel, and Asil have de facto endorsed it. But even after turning Joel, there is going to be a great deal of surprise that you could do what you did to Paul, Mercy. I would not have thought it possible.”

I shrugged. “I was angry and scared, I had righteous cause, and King Arthur’s dagger in one hand. See pack bond, cut pack bond. Or if you’d rather, file under side effects of manitou magic, which is also true.”

“So it is, mi princesa.” Asil was still very calm for him, and sounding happy again, his anger with Paul sloughed away. “It is just more of Mercy’s style, Bran. Be glad of it, as I am. And once they have picked themselves off the floor, any Alpha with even a grain of sense is going to be very relieved indeed that the scene being broadcast just before Mercy re-appeared ended wholly without bloodshed. She has helped us dodge Paul’s bullet. And though Adam’s restraint was astonishing, I suggest that Paul should be somewhere else very soon.”

Bran looked at Asil intently, before nodding. “Yes. The manitou really has helped you, amigo. I’m glad for you.” He sighed. “Send Paul to me, Adam, though he’s the last wolf I need in Aspen Creek. At least he doesn’t have a human family.”

Samuel stirred. “I doubt he’d survive Aspen Creek just now, Da. And though his hate might be enough for him, I think he should be on suicide watch too. Why not ask Angus to keep him in their safe room for a while? Once he’s spent a full moon or two locked in he’ll have to start thinking about what it means to be a lone wolf.”

“And one all wolves will now be very angry with.” Charles shrugged. “Samuel is right that we need to let some time pass with him out of sight and fading in mind.”

Bran thought, and nodded again. “All right. I’ll call Angus. He won’t be happy.” He frowned. “Ms Lafferty, you have something to say?”

Andrea took a deep breath. “There will be a lot of interest in Mr Harris, Marrok, sir. Can you … control what he would say in interview?”

Bran’s eyebrows went up. “If I were present. Charles could, also. You think he should be allowed to give one?”

“I think him being seen to be very remorseful, regretting his hot temper, and acknowledging that his … expulsion was deserved would be a lot better PR for wolves than his silent disappearance. And a lot easier for preterophiles.”

Charles nodded sharply. “Yes, it would. Mercy was right about you, Andrea. I’ll talk to him and to Angus, Da.”

“Alright. Just don’t scare him to death. And thank you, Ms Lafferty. Good PR advice is always welcome.” Bran became brisker. “Time’s passing. Mercy, give me your account and you can go shower.”
I thought about balking, but Bran did need to hear me before he talked to the Fae, and with everyone entitled to hear the story in full present at least I could get it over and done with. So as tersely as I could I ran through what had happened, what I’d done, what Underhill had done, and what various Gray Lords had said, not looking at anyone except Bran, though my bond to Adam was wide open and he was holding me hard. The silence deepened, and when I was done Bran surprised me with one of his sweeter smiles.

“Yesterday you slew Cantrip, and induced the Elder Spirits to out themselves. Today you have made sure Underhill is fully awake, as well as aware of the manitou, reminded it of old rules, and slain Manannán mac Lír without costing the Fae his power.” The smile became a grin I recognised. “And been given a rose cloak, all before breakfast. Attacoyote, Mercy. I think you are exactly his daughter. And thank you for all of it, including Paul. Asil was right about that. Now go shower before you do whatever to the Secretary of the Interior.”

The screens blanked, and a certain tension ebbed away. Bran does tauten the nerves even when he’s happy, and he still wasn’t, however he’d smiled. Charles was much the same, but gave me a deep nod.

“That was very well handled, Mercy. And I second the attacoyote, little sister.”

“Try attastick” I told him, and meant it.
It turned out the cloak unfastened when asked, and didn’t seem to mind being put on a hanger, though I made sure it was a wooden one. Still better, either one of its powers was healing or something else had helped me out, because though my stomach was still bruised the colours were fading and I was moving more easily. But my feet and other bits of me were just as muddy as I expected, so the shower saw some proper use before Adam joined me in it and more than the water got steamy.

It was the affirmation we both needed, short, a little violent, and very sweet, and if it didn’t do Adam’s knees any good it was a balm to us both all the same. We were both crying when we finished, and sat in a heap on the shower floor for a while, letting hot water beat down on our heads.

“God above, Mercy, I thought I’d lost you. I knew you weren’t dead, but I couldn’t feel anything through our bond. And even I could smell the malevolence of the magic in here before it faded very suddenly.”

“Must have been when Underhill took his power. I’m sorry, Adam.”

“Don’t be. You did nothing wrong and everything right. And the manitou was very helpful once it came back, telling me you were safe and would be returning soon, and giving me more glass. Then Paul pulled his idiot stunt and my wolf was furious. It was all I could do not to kill Paul just then.”

“I know.”

“Yeah, I got that from you, and why he has to live. I should have cast him out before this.”

“Nah. There were good reasons, love. And I didn’t think I’d be coming back for a while there, too. Underhill’s justice was another desperation gamble.”

“It worked, and that’s all that matters.” He hugged me very tightly for a moment, and then relaxed again, leaning back so he could look me in the eyes. “Thanks for Christy, too. Jesse was running interference for me until Paul bullied in with a formal challenge.”

“Good for Jesse, but she’s hurting, Adam. I should go talk to her.”

“Me too.”

Neither of us moved, and I still had some questions.

“Do you know what set Paul off?”

“Same as Christy, I guess. Thinking you were dead and there was opportunity.”

“But why such conviction when I was only missing?”

“Manannán rang a lot of bells with the power he used to grab you, Mercy. Manitou howled and vanished, and everyone felt it, even the Feebs. I was talking to Westfield and Fisher about the
Command Center and trailer they’re bringing in, and took off upstairs at a dead run, so they followed. As did the pack. And Taylor was already back on duty outside, so the pressure built. Paul was keeping out of my way, but I’d guess he indulged in some wishful thinking.”

“Huh. How long was I gone?”

“About three hours.”

“Huh again. Subjectively, it was much shorter, though I was in combat time anyway.”

“I bet you were. It’s not on you, love.” A genuine smile lit his face. “And your entrance was spectacular. I didn’t think you could cap marching out to the camera yesterday, but you managed it.”

“There’s always that.”

“What are the odds of rose cloaks at the next big fashion show?”

I closed my eyes for a moment in horrified contemplation. “No bet. And I’m getting wrinkly.”

Once we were dry Adam opted for a second power suit of the day with a clean shirt, and when he was decently into the trousers, and I had on underwear and sweats, we called Jesse in for a three-way hug she needed badly.

“I’m sorry the crap keeps happening, kiddo, and proud of you for handling your mom so well. And I’m sorry I spoke to her like that in your hearing.”

“You were right.”

“Even so. But she had to go, and I wasn’t a very happy coyote just then. How are you dealing with the latest scare, Jesse?”

“It’s alright now you’re back, Mercy. And the manitou calm helps a lot. Don’t worry about me.”

“Fat chance, kiddo. It’s what parents do, for better or worse.” A thought hit me. “Were you blurred in the broadcast?”

“Yeah, she was.” Adam’s grip tightened on us both. “I told Westfield to ensure that when he was persuading me to let Taylor in, and she said it was being done.”

“Good. You understand why I’m insisting on that, Jesse? And you’re OK with it?”

“Un huh. Not being recognised on the street or wherever by Joe or Jill Fruitcake.”

“Yeah, that covers it. But you know you’re gonna need some heavier security, at least for a while? Me too, however I don’t care for it.”

“I guess.”

“You guess right, kiddo. And yeah, it’s a lot like being grounded even though it’s good and you’ve done nothing wrong. No way round it, security sucks. But it also keeps people alive and unhurt. Meantime, keep close, hey?”

“I will, Mom.” That address was becoming more common, and it made me very happy. Adam too. “I get that Cantrip put the idea of using me as a lever out there. Andrea said it would boost the damages we can claim, and that’s fine by me. There’re a lot of feeds discussing it, too.”
“You’ve done some posting?”

“Only on the feeds I was on anyway. The support has been strong, and that helps. And I don’t say anything I shouldn’t — I always wait at least an hour and re-read before I post.”

“Never thought you did, kiddo. If there’s anything you feel strongly should be posted, that shaves the rules, ask me, or whoever. Bran, Charles, Anna. Maybe not Samuel, or Asil, though he’s gone very manitou mellow. One thing, though — did Andrea mean to tell you that, or did you overhear?”

“She meant to tell me, and she was right. I was venting about Cantrip yesterday, when she and Jenny talked to me about the suit in my name as well as yours, and she said yeah, the psychological impact sucked, but I shouldn’t forget practical impact, especially as it was good to feed real dollar costs into any claim. So we talked about the practical a bit, and I realised she and Jenny both took it as read that I’d need more personal security for a good while.”

“So that’s more points to Andrea, even though it pisses you off and bothers you some?”

Jesse nodded, and I met Adam’s eyes. “I believe we have us an ex-kiddo here, Adam. Very good personal security, and a bunch more privileges, hey?”

Adam looked at me gravely, then at Jesse. “Sounds about right to me, Jesse. But I’m still not agreeing to any tattoos or piercings until you are at least forty.”

I grinned. “What did you want?”

She grinned back. “A wolf head. Bicep.”

“Mnm. Visible in ordinary wear is out, but I can try to persuade him about a shoulder blade.”

“You can try in vain, Mercy.”

“Adam, we both have tats.” I knew the real reason it squicked him. “How about it’s a female inker and it happens here?”

He frowned, and I gave Jesse a wink. She grinned again.

“Actually, Dad, I wanted your wolf, not a standard one. Your colours, and brindling.” Her eyes narrowed. “I’ll trade undyed hair for three months. Or a colour of your choice.”

Adam threw back his head and laughed, and my eyes met Jesse’s with warm approval. Whether she really wanted a tat I’d have to find out, but she was Adam’s daughter, and she was as fiercely loyal to him as Paul wasn’t.

“I’ll think about it, Jesse. And bless you. I’m sorry for all the things I can’t help.”

He meant Christy, mostly, and Cantrip too, and me a bit, and Jesse narrowed her eyes.

“It’s not on you, Dad.” She cocked her head, reminding me weirdly of both Lugh and Bran. “And maybe you could do with talking to someone, as well as Mercy and me.”

Adam blinked. “You’re not wrong, Jesse love, but” — he tapped his chest — “Alpha. There’s only Bran, and he needs me strong.”

“Tony Soprano could do it, Dad, so you can.” I didn’t want to think about the implications of that comparison. “And there isn’t only Bran. What about Charles or Anna? Or Medicine Wolf?”
Adam blinked again. “Now that’s an idea. No secrets there, already.” He shook his head a little. “Good thinking, Jesse. But I do know where I’m at with your mother. I loved her until the adultery broke it, and I will always protect her because of you. But I confess I am very relieved Mercy acted as she did, because all of that means I have a harder time saying no to Christy than I should.” He sighed. “Which you know. And she knows. But today she made me … angrier with her than I should be. Her absence is … very welcome.”

“For me too, Dad.”

I left them to a father-daughter hug for a while, but when Jesse asked why I was staring into the closet I explained that I didn’t know what to wear for a Beltway bigwig.

“The cloak is really cool, Mercy.”

“And full of really unknown magic, Jesse.”

“Oh. Right. Dresses?”

“Skin.”

“So?”

“Not me. Not now.”

“Makes it tough, Mom. You don’t do anything else but jeans and tees.” She shrugged. “No-one you care about will mind whatever you wear. I vote for whatever makes you most comfortable.”

“Adam, suit, image.”

“Matching power, not matching style.”

“Huh. Point, ex-kid. I can manage a skirt and blouse, I think.”

At Adam’s insistence I added a fine gold throat chain he’d given me that he said matched my eyes when I was angry, and at Jesse’s some dabs of the kohl I sometimes used. It made the rest of my face look a little paler by contrast, but picked up the burn scars in a way that made me feel defiant — pirates could use their eyepatches and hooks or peg legs for fashion effect, so why not me and scars honestly come by? Carnwennan I left on my dresser, with warm thanks I thought it appreciated, and the stick I kept because I was tired and shaky enough to be glad to lean on it a little. By rights Adam should have been using it, and I don’t think it would have minded, but his Alpha testosterone wouldn’t let him show weakness and though I thought it was silly I knew there was no point arguing. Jesse changed as well, saying it was only her face that got blurred and she had friends who’d be watching, and though Adam rolled his eyes at the Dances with Wolves tee she chose he actually thought it was quite funny. So did I, and we came down the stairs in better humour than anyone expected, especially as half of them were already waiting in the hall with lists of questions.

Westfield got first crack, as the Secretary was now on the ground at Pasco and awaiting a green light, which Adam gave, subject to lead only being packed by his guard detail. We also learned the Mobile Command Center and trailer would be arriving very shortly, and were reassured that Adam’s earlier stricures about not poaching any of our ground too badly would be heeded. Then Warren reported that Christy was already in the air, on a private flight, the FBI would meet her, and Darryl and Auriele were headed back, Charles adding that Bran had dealt with the security she’d need in Eugene. Anna had been tracking newsfeeds and social media, and cheerfully told me that while people were a bit shaken by what they’d seen, and wolf approval had wavered, beating
up on a fae kidnapper and Paul as well as Cantrip would have seen my personal approval ratings soar except that, being jammed in the mid-high 90s, they had nowhere to soar to, and had solidified instead. That was the first I heard of the image of me resting my head on the manitou’s, and that Jenny and Andrea were already working with Morris on the licensing deals. I groaned, and Anna grinned.

“Don’t fret, Mercy. You were already destined for the nation’s chests and tote bags. Now they have a choice. You’re no worse off. Much better off, actually — by an increment of the buying public. And the Clean Up the Basin fund, as well.”

“Low blow, Anna.” My mind clicked. “Has anyone talked to Zee?”

Charles cleared his throat, and I gave him a quizzical look.

“He is at Hanford, Mercy. Some kind of filtration is being set up, and he and Tad are making lead boxes and shifting lumps that appear. He is also not answering his phone, which on-air coverage has remarked.”


Private turned out to mean Adam and the older wolves, including Warren for the pack, plus Anna, and because I gave no-one any choice, telling them all she was an ex-kiddo and feeling her mingled trepidation and pride, Jesse. Samuel offered to cook, Charles silently brought up a newsfeed that showed Zee and Tad at Hanford, and while I hit my speed dial I watched a longshot of lead being magically moulded with some fascination. Zee’s ringtone for me was something in old German he’d never explained, but when he heard it he had his phone to his ear in a second and was turned away from the camera.

<i>Liebchen?</i>

“Zee. Others can hear you.”

<i>Ah. You live.> I heard his deep breaths. <It is true, then? Manannán’s Bane? And Carnwennan? You called on … Walla Walla itself?>

“Yes, it is, Zee. I told you the stick met Excalibur and Carnwennan, and I have to believe it called her in. It wanted a name, you said, and now it has one, which is making it happy. I’ve no idea if you were involved somehow but my thanks anyway, Zee. You really are a prince.”

Zee was just about the only fae I’d ever offer direct thanks, and he knew it, but still demurred in a way that shocked me.

<i>Nein, nein. I thank you, Mercy, for myself and Tad. Manannán had lived far too long. Nothing could more benefit us than his death. And nothing but Walla Walla could strip him of his power sufficiently that you could have killed him, Carnwennan or no. She makes up her own mind, Mercy, but in so far as it means anything I gift her to you.>

I swallowed. “Thank you, Zee. She was critical, because she gave me iron as well as silver and magic.”

<i>Ah. I had wondered how you did it. Clever coyote girl.> A renewed worry came to his voice. <The others willingly let you go?>

“By ap Lugh’s word afterwards there is nothing between me and any fae, and all fae should heed
“Me too, Zee. But I do need some advice when you can, and if you will, about a cloak of rose petals something gave me, as clothing and to get home.”

“A rose cloak?” Zee gave an improbable shout of laughter, and on screen I saw Tad staring. <That has not happened in a long time, Mercy. I will be glad to see it.>

“Whenever’s good for you, Zee, and Tad if he wants.” Tad gave me a wave. “How’s the work going?”

<The radiation’s tickle is quite annoying, but the manitou does very efficient work. So does your Dr Tinton. It will take some days, but we make steady progress.>

“Good to know. The Secretary of the Interior’s about to show up, so I’ll tell him.”

<As you will, Mercy. Just don’t have him call me. I will speak to no high-ranking human beyond those here at Hanford before I have spoken to Gwyn ap Lugh and the others.>

“I hear you, Zee, but you might want to do that sooner than later. When I insisted on leaving he spoke of mutual benefit in longer discussions.”

<Ah. Be very careful, liebchen.>

“You bet. But I’m thinking the manitou might … act as a moderator for some negotiations.”

There was a silence. <That would be interesting. Perhaps Adam was right about your business cards.>

It took me a second to remember the joke about conflict resolution with a twist. “Oy! I’m just dealing with what lands on me, Zee.”

But he wasn’t altogether wrong, I knew. I was hoping for some peace to break out, and anyway, the line had made Adam smile. Zee said he’d see me when he could but should get back to work, and rang off. And Samuel set a heaped plate of pancakes and bacon before me, and a mug of chocolate. I thanked him with a mouth already full, and he grinned.

“You’ve earned it, Mercy, many times over.” He sat opposite me. “Like Zee, Arianna is surprised but very happy you could do what you did, and also interested in the cloak. She won’t come here while the pack is present, but she would like to see it when she can. And you.”

“No problem.” I told him about my faded bruises. “I think the cloak maybe has some healing power, but it could be a side effect of other magic, or time running weirdly in Walla Walla.”

“Mmm. Yes, it could. But travelling and healing go together in some ways, Mercy. Think of the powers Lugh set in his sticks originally — seeing truly, healthy twin lambs, and a safe way home.”

“Huh. Maybe.” I ate more pancake, thinking what an excellent thing real maple syrup was. “At least Zee didn’t have any warnings about it.”

“Nor Arianna. But not dangerous to you doesn’t mean safe, Mercy.”

“Tell me. And I’ve no idea what mind of its own it has, if any. Manannán’s Bane has plenty, these days, and Carnwennan is certainly wide awake.”
“So I gathered.”

Asil leaned forward. “Bran told me you had asked to see that one, Mercy, but he was very surprised it had come to you. He does not think it always had such a power.”

“It’s got older, Asil, and it killed Dana. But I think it mattered more that it met the stick. You heard me — Zee said the stick wanted a name, and now it has one. And a friend. I’m sure Carnwennan doesn’t dislike me, but I’d bet more on an alliance with the stick and maybe an old score to settle with Manannán than any particular favour to me.”

He smiled, warmly for him. “Perhaps, querida. Such a friendship is a charming thought. But after yesterday I find I am not so very surprised that Arthur’s bone-hilted witchkiller came to you in your need. Nor that the Dark Smith gifts it to you. And the scent of your magic has changed again, as well as strengthened. Charles?”

“I agree. More Manitou, more coyote, and something else that has water in it. And a touch of roses.”

“Water? Salt?”

He waggled a hand. “Not obviously.”

“Huh. Good, I think. That must be from Manannán — the water from him soaked away very fast, and I wasn’t trying to take anything in as the Gray Lords were, but I did get splashed. And immersed when he grabbed me. But if there’s no salt smell whatever it is has also been cleansed in some way. I hope.” I thought about it. “Samuel, can you ask Arianna?”

“Of course, but she is busy for a while now. This evening.”

I didn’t like it, but nodded. More strange magic in me and so the pack bonds was not going to be helpful, however it might prove useful. But I’d never had much affinity for water, and there was certainly none in my coyote magic, nor in Guayota’s, unless it was superheated steam. I’d have to be very cautious about exploring it, whatever it was, and the thought was unsettling, but a brisk knock on the door announced an equally brisk Westfield.

“Mr and Ms Hauptman? Secretary will be here in thirty. Do we have a plan for what happens next?”

Everyone looked at me, even Adam, and I sighed. “Let me finish my food, and we’ll go talk to Medicine Wolf and make one up.”
In the event, things actually worked out quite smoothly for once. Secretaries of the Interior have since 1945 pretty much all come from Western states, and Glen Sawyer was a hard-headed Idahoan lawyer who’d done a stint as state Attorney General and been known for going after a particularly persistent corporate polluter. He was more than a little freaked out by what he found himself doing, but had also been following what was happening at Hanford and was sharply aware both of how that was playing politically — no-one objects to getting rid of radioactive pollution — and of the enormous saving in his budget. So he climbed out of his black SUV — did the Feds ever buy any other colour? — behind his guard detail with a fixed look and some determination to do his job well, however weird it was proving today.

Adam and I were waiting out front to meet him, with Medicine Wolf crouched beside us and Taylor to one side with her crew. Westfield and Fisher were behind us, with Warren for the pack and Darryl, as our scientist, for whatever talks we were going to have. Sawyer’s guards gave us some hard looks, but I couldn’t smell any silver so I didn’t much care how miffed they might be. And Sawyer didn’t mention it, coming forward after only one brief goggle at the manitou.

“Mr Hauptman. Ms Hauptman. Thank you for meeting me.”

We all shook hands, and then I introduced him to Medicine Wolf, who spoke on a general band that had the guards jumping.

Greetings, Mr Secretary Sawyer. I am glad to meet one who has charge of the land, for much needs to be done. And undone.

“Ah. Yes, I dare say, Mr, ah, Medicine Wolf. And I am charged by the President to offer you his sincere thanks, on behalf of the nation, for your aid in cleaning up the radioactives at Hanford.”

It sounded straightforward, but if being grateful for the clean-up was simple, saying so on air wasn’t, given that there was no denying Medicine Wolf had killed six federal employees, and while Sawyer’s relayed statement didn’t decide anything it did suggest wisdom was prevailing over bureaucracy.

You are welcome, and I want those poisons removed. I have come to understand something of how the radioactive contamination happened, and while there were many errors, you were at war. Mistakes happen. Much of the other contamination, though, has no such excuse, and your ways must change.

I could hear Taylor repeating the manitou’s words to the camera, and when she finished I gave Sawyer a nice big smile.

“We do understand it’ll cost plenty, Mr Secretary, but given that the manitou’s saving you more than a hundred billion in projected costs at Hanford we figure you have some spare budget to reallocate. And you must understand that a commitment in all faith to clean up the Basin and stop further pollution is going to be necessary.”

“I realise that, Ms Hauptman. And yes, I have some budget. I also have an apology for you, from
the President, about Cantrip’s heinous actions yesterday. After the, ah, events of this morning he also asked me to convey his relief at your safe return.”

The sound of agendas colliding wasn’t unexpected, but I didn’t mind these moves. The apology was welcome enough, and the President was welcome to any recovery in his ratings he could get by doing the decent thing. And there were things I wanted to convey to him about events of the morning that he apparently wanted to hear, so that was good — but very much not for the camera. I gave Sawyer a more genuine smile.

“Thank you, Mr Secretary, and my respects to the President also. Medicine Wolf doesn’t fit into the house, as I expect you’ve seen, so we’ve set a table and chairs out back. Will you come through?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.”

A polite politician, yet, but he was a North-Westerner. Someone had given him some guidance about wolves, too. It didn’t stop him giving me a wary look when I told Medicine Wolf I expected we’d be a few minutes, but he wasn’t going to say anything more on camera. And though he wasn’t too happy when Adam and I both thanked Taylor and promised a statement later when we’d had a chance to find out what could and couldn’t realistically be done, he sucked it up. Once the door had closed behind us, though, he became sharper, and so did the senior bodyguard.

“You have quite an agenda, Ms Hauptman. And I’m not unwilling, but I’m not here to be pushed.”

“Aren’t you, Mr Secretary? Then why are you here, exactly, besides the photo op of a lifetime?”

“Not much more than temporary liaison, I suspect. But the environmental stuff is my own brief, of course.”

He hadn’t blinked and I appreciated his honesty. “Fair enough. But then again, you are the one who is here. You were sent, so as I told Dr Tinton, I’m taking it that you do have authority.”

“Within limits.”

“Noted.” The bodyguard was hovering, and I gave him an enquiring look. “You need something?”

“We need to check wherever the Secretary’s going to be, Sir, Ma’am. And as we’re packing only lead, at your insistence, please keep the number of wolves present to the minimum.”

Adam gave him a kinder answer than I’d expected, and as I listened I chalked it up to sympathy for a fellow security pro.

“Go ahead. Warren will show you the way. Pack members come and go at need here, but I appreciate your lack of silver, and they’ll keep out of the way. I’ll say also that Mr Harris remains in the safe room, and that no-one else will be doing anything quite so stupid today. And that Mercy and I greeted your principal as our guest in public for more than one reason. I’m not aware of anything but human bigots who would be willing to risk tangling with Mercy just now.”

Westfield chipped in. “You know the perimeter’s guarded, and KPD as well as the local SAC have men in the hills that are the only vantage over what Ms Hauptman called out back.”

He nodded, and Warren led him and another guard to make their inspection. I wondered slightly about someone who routinely worried about snipers, but Westfield wasn’t done.

“You saw the broadcast as far as Ms Taylor returning outside, Mr Secretary, and there’s nothing
further to report since I last updated you except one more Heuter property cleared. But I believe Ms Hauptman spoke to Mr Adelbertsmiter, though I have no idea what might have been said."

"I did. The only relevant thing was that he thought the clean-up was making some progress. It’ll be a few days, though, before it’s anything like done."

"A few days?" Sawyer shook his head. "Beats a half-century all hands down, Ms Hauptman. Our gratitude about that is very real. And the AED has been consistently clear that you are trying to help everyone, and largely succeeding under very challenging circumstances, so you are due thanks for that as well. But as you must know we are also very concerned about the Fae, given their statement yesterday, so if there’s anything you can tell me about what happened to you this morning, and what if anything else they might be doing, or going to do, we would very much like to know it. Specifically, so would the President."

"I bet."

Adam and I had anticipated this, and I felt his amusement as we took Sawyer and Westfield to the kitchen, where Darryl made fresh coffee, and chocolate for me, bless him, as well as offering brownies from a batch he’d already baked for Lucia, on my behalf. Sawyer gave me a half-grin too, taking one and relaxing a little.

"Thanks. Kitchen’s your comfort space, Ms Hauptman?"

"Yeah. Most times. You’re surprised?"

"Maybe. I’d never heard of you before yesterday, and since then you’ve, ah, come over as more the action type."

Adam and Darryl both laughed, and I just shrugged.

"Yeah, I know. But I’m actually a reaction type. Leave me be and I like cooking and fixing old German cars." And hunting rabbits on four legs, but I wasn’t looking to spook Sawyer deliberately. "But I don’t do well with threats. And that matters, as it happens, Mr Secretary, to my answer to your question. Which is in the first place another question, that you probably can’t answer but could relay. Would the President be willing to acknowledge in public that the Boston verdict on Les Heuter was perverse, and Gwyn ap Lugh and all fae thereby done an injustice?"

Sawyer’s gaze was intent, and his answer surprised me. Someone in the White House had been thinking sensibly.

"Yes, if it gained him enough." He shrugged. "It would be true, and we all know it, but the Constitution does have some things to say about separation of the Executive and Judiciary, so he’d take some criticism from more than bigots."

"There’s that, yes. The President’s entitled to have opinions, though. As to the gain, it’s more a necessary downpayment. Without it, nothing. With it — maybe, negotiations of some kind. So what might their agenda be? What’s needed to end the standoff? And to think about that, you do need to understand some things about this morning, but there remain sharp limits to what I can say."

"Good questions, Ms Hauptman. And something is better than nothing, which is pretty much what you gave to camera."

"For good reasons, Mr Secretary. And it wasn’t nothing, whatever you heard. I wasn’t speaking only to humans, and one problem is that I don’t know how much you actually understand or know
about the Fae, the Gray Lords in particular, and Walla Walla.”

“Much less than you, I’m sure. And I never did credit half of what Cantrip said. I visited Walla Walla, once, before Heuter happened. Didn’t see a damn thing out of the ordinary, but I was told that was their glamour.”

“Yes. Well, I’ll keep it as simple as I can. The Manitou is the game changer, obviously. It’s a power the Fae as well as humans have to respect, and Medicine Wolf has … let’s say adopted Adam and me. And Jesse. Which shouldn’t matter, except to us, but yesterday the Federal Government kidnapped me and Jesse, and got a lot of egg on its face.”

Sawyer nodded ruefully. “That’s an understatement.”

“And today a Gray Lord who’d gone a bit senile also kidnapped me, with unhappy results for itself, which means the Fae now have some eggy faces of their own.” He became intent. “Both Federal Government and Fae want a live-and-let-live agreement, or even a mutual assistance treaty, with the Manitou. And Medicine Wolf is here. So is the Federal Government. So if some Gray Lords were to come by also, there might be three-way negotiations, looking for an outcome more stable than the present situation.” I held up a hand. “Hear me well, sir. I cannot and do not and will never speak for the Gray Lords. Period. Nor can I promise anything except to ask them the question, if I am in a position to do so. But if the President were to make that apology about Boston, to the Fae and to Gwyn ap Lugh specifically, seeing as it was his daughter who was raped and crippled, and if he was also willing to come out here, I believe the Fae might be willing to come by to look seriously for a deal. Or at least to talk about what shape a deal would have to have.”

Sawyer was very surprised, but not unhappy. “Huh. Very interesting indeed, Ms Hauptman. But what about those Elder Spirits? Where are they in all this?”

“I don’t speak for them either, Mr Secretary, even — make that especially — my not-exactly father, and they can speak for themselves. You can bet Coyote will. But as far as I know their main concerns are their animal kinds and the First People, Native Americans, so if they’re anywhere in this — and they don’t have good memories of negotiating with Anglos or the Federal Government — they’ll be in the Manitou—human strand, and unconcerned with the Manitou—Fae or Fae-human strands so long as none of it impacts them or theirs directly.”

“Alright. That scans. And I don’t speak for the President, but let me relay all that, so he can start deciding, then we can talk to the Manitou.”

He went with Westfield and Fisher, taking his guards, and I leaned my head on Adam’s shoulder. He patted my leg gently.

“Don’t fret, Mercy. You’re still dropping people in it productively.”

Darryl laughed. “And then some. Tell me to mind my own, Mercy, but you really killed the Gray Lord who grabbed you? Manannán mac Lír, I’m guessing, from what you called the walking stick and all that seawater.”

“Yeah and yeah. Sort of. With some serious help, which is what I can’t talk about.”

“Hot diggety. Supercoyote’s about right.”

“Oh hush.” He and Adam both grinned. “Andrea’s wonderful, but she and Jesse have that job covered.”
“Nah. There ought to be songs.”

“Don’t even think it, Darryl. The images are bad enough.”

“The images are great, Mercy. And you know the pack will be wearing those tees before long.”

“I’ll ban them. So will Adam.”

“Maybe. But I want some myself, Mercy. And the chances of stopping Jesse wearing them are nil.”

That was regrettably true, and I sighed. “You can have me on your chest anyway. Why do you need a tee as well? Sounds like one thing I should do with the money is buy some more dead VWs for the field.”

Adam smiled and patted my leg again. “There, there. Filthy lucre’s not so bad, and they are important images too, remember. Also, if the figures Jenny was projecting prove ballpark, we should think about buying land — that corner parcel here we passed on is still on the market, and Ben tells me some of the hunting tract is for sale.”

“That’s a thought. And land’s much nicer than money.”

“Often. But money’s fun too, Mercy.” Darryl’s voice deepened some. “And I wasn’t just pulling your tail with Supercoyote. Pack were pretty freaked this morning, and seriously worried for you as well as Adam. How he held them down I’m still trying to figure. Or himself. And then fu- … Paul, sorry Adam, but really, had them jittering worse than ever. Until wham, bam, and thank you very much indeed, Ma’am.”

That won him a brief smile before I turned to Adam. “How are the pack bonds?”

“Odd, Mercy, but though it jangles me a bit it’s not worrying me too much. And that’s not just manitou or Anna zen, much as both help. There is some new magic, I’m sure, but it’s … harnessed. Like Joel’s. I think it’s just yours now, and overflows some, but what overflows is still yours and so protective of the pack.”

“That sounds better than worse. And my weird dominance thing?”

“Going strong, love. I think you’ll match me closely.” He gave me a smile that made me shiver a little. “My wolf just shrugs and says it’s magic, however odd. I don’t recommend it, but I think you could back down most of the Alphas now, especially if you had real cause.”

“Me too, Mercy. Those I’ve met, anyway. Wolf dominance just bounces off you, in any case. Always has. You were just scared of dominant wolves’ physical strength, but that’s ebbed. And every wolf’s going to be wary of you after what you did to Paul.”

“Yeah, I know. How are they with that, Darryl?”

“Shocked. Relieved. Beginning to wonder quite hard. For a moment there I saw what you did, the ribbons wrapped round the staff, and so did most of them. So one thing with the pack bonds is that they’re definitely … transmitting you better. You should watch for better reception, too.”

“Huh. Thanks.” I’d had problems with feeling other people’s emotions that way before, and it wasn’t always easy to realise that someone else was grieving or angry, not me. “Anything else I should know?”
“Not that won’t embarrass you. File under Triple Bow of Awesomeness, mostly.”

I shook my head wearily. “I get that from Tom at Yoke’s, who thinks Gwyn ap Lugh’s a dude. But the pack? They’re big bad wolves, not screaming Elvis fans.”

“Not so bad, mostly.” Darryl grinned. “And quite a few like Elvis. But I told you the broadcast last evening had left them all thoughtful, tallying your kills, and you’ve just added a Gray Lord to the bag. And it’s not so much that, Mercy, as that you saved the pack. Again. If Adam had killed Paul, which is what everyone was expecting by the time you showed up, we’d all be in a world of hurt right now. And even if he’d been able to restrain himself, a fight would have been a PR disaster.”

I held up a hand. “Yeah, it would. What do you think set Paul off, Darryl? Adam guessed opportunism and wishful thinking on his resentments.”

“Some of those, sure.” Darryl frowned. “But I don’t know, Mercy. He was keeping out of my way.”

“Mine too.” Adam wasn’t happy. “You think someone pushed him?”

“A private challenge I’d believe, maybe. But even allowing for stupidity, what did Paul suppose would have happened to him if he’d fought and won? He didn’t have the dominance to be an Alpha, Bran would not have let him live anyway, and he must have known that. So I’d like his phone checked, and any drives he had, with whatever accounts of him any of the pack can give.”

“Certainly. Ask Ben and Asil to get on that at once, please, Darryl.”

“Will do.”

As he finished talking to Ben on his phone Sawyer came back with his guards, as well as Westfield and Fisher, all looking thoughtful, and he forgot not to meet Adam’s eyes — but only for a moment.

“Whoa. Sorry about that, Mr Hauptman.”

“Apology accepted, Mr Secretary, and reciprocated. I’m not usually so touchy about eye contact, but it’s been a rough few days. Is there a problem?”

“Just a question. The President asks who would be the hosts if he were to come to meet … folks here? You and Ms Hauptman? Or higher werewolf authority?”

“Interesting.” I watched Adam think about it while wondering what difference such formalities might make. “I think that would be negotiable, but might depend on whether wolves were a formal party to four-way talks. Five-way if the Elder Spirits want in. Parallel bilateral talks, in effect, with a chunk of common agendas.”

I had reached one conclusion. “You realise talks would mostly have to be outside, Mr Secretary? Medicine Wolf doesn’t fit inside, and I’ll be surprised if the Elder Spirits don’t insist on dealing under the sky. Fae would be happier outside, too. So as the land around is Adam’s and mine, we’d be de facto hosts.” Which was an appalling thought, but it was where the logic led. Benny’s was due some heavy, heavy business if this all panned out. “Does the President have a preferred answer?”

“I don’t believe so, Ms Hauptman. He’s just trying to get his head around the idea. But some kind of resolution with the Fae would be very welcome, not least because there is now no functioning agency that has any formal responsibility for the relations of our human and … other citizens. And
it does seem that you can offer something, which is more than anyone else has yet managed. A whole lot of somethings, in fact."

Adam gave me a grin that lifted my spirits.

“You have that right, sir. And while I can’t say I’m happy at the idea of God knows how many people on my land and in my house for days on end, I do see the opportunity Mercy has created on the back of the Manitou’s awakening, so I’m prepared to discuss what will be needed. And so far as formal werewolf participation or hosting goes, I will make sure the question is relayed to the werewolf authorities and Gray Lords.”

“Can’t ask more. Yet.” Sawyer looked up briefly. “But it’s appreciated, Mr Hauptman. And Ms Hauptman, the President also asked me to find out if you’d be willing to speak with him on a secure FBI line this evening, when we have a better idea what the Manitou has in mind.”

I swallowed. “I guess. But I repeat, loudly, that I cannot speak for wolves, let alone for the Fae. I can relay, with limits, and given recent events I have some leeway each way, I hope. But that is all. I am playing coyote-in-the-middle.”

He gave me a lawyerly look. “So noted, Ms Hauptman. And I’m beginning to get some sense of what you mean. But right now you are the person to whom the President, Gray Lords, Manitou, and werewolf authorities are all listening. And listening hard. You are also at the centre of very intense domestic and international attention. And you have been using those facts with … some considerable discernment, so forgive me if I take what you say under advisement. Uh oh”

I knew my eyes had gone golden yet again, and swallowed the fear that had spurred my rage. “No, Mr Secretary, you take it to heart. My actions yesterday trod a fine enough line that most of the Gray Lords were willing to let them go. One wasn’t, and he tried to kill me this morning. Which he could do by magicking me out of my own shower before wolves or even the Manitou could stop him. And he was a lot scarier than Preskylovitch. Think about that a moment. I am alive now only because I had a great deal of luck, and whatever you think, luck is not to be counted on. It runs out, even for Coyote, and I am mortal.” I took a deep breath. “Yes, I want better human–Fae relations, and yes, I’ll do what I can, but if you or any Beltway warrior drops me, or Adam, or Jesse in it with any Gray Lord, I’ll throw them to the Fae, the wolves, or the Manitou any which way I can.”

Westfield took a chance. “It’s what I was telling you about thinking politically, Mr Secretary. Ms Hauptman says things carefully because she means what she says. Think about the wording, sir, but don’t doubt the substance.”

“You should also remember that my wife has survived two kidnappings in the last thirty hours.”

Adam’s voice was surprisingly mild, considering. Mine was still edgy, though I appreciated Westfield’s opinion.

“And that the senile fae responsible for this morning could have put any city he chose under a hundred feet of water a great deal faster than it could be evacuated. Other Gray Lords have equivalent powers. And besides tending to short tempers, they all have a lot of ego, very limited senses of humour, and no empathy or compassion at all.”

“Alright, alright. I meant no offence, Ms Hauptman.” He shook his head. “A hundred feet of water? Is this, ah, senile fae going to be a problem?”

“Not any more.”
After a moment he realised he wasn’t going to get any details, and we headed out back to talk to Medicine Wolf. It turned out that it had spooked and charmed the guards with Warren both by talking to them and, once it understood their worries, curling up round the table so that Sawyer would be shielded by its body from any line of sight except straight up. Bullets, schmullets. By prior arrangement Adam and I met its eyes in greeting, allowing it to read us for what had been said in the house and what we were making of Sawyer. Then it got down to business, as planned, and showed Sawyer just what a game changer it could be.

*I want two things, Glen Sawyer, and offer two things in return. One thing I want you must do, one we can do together, and one only I can do though you will need to organise yourselves around it.*

Sawyer nodded cautiously. “OK. What are they?”

*First, the pollution has to stop. That you humans must do, for it comes from your activities.*

“Yeah, it does. Clearly the radioactives are the top priority, and arrangements are being made to shift those lead containers Mr Adelbertsmiter is making and filling.”

“Shift them to?”

He grimaced. “Waste Isolation Plant in New Mexico, Ms Hauptman. I’m still pushing for Yucca Mountain, but it’s not going to happen.”

*Do you actually want the radioactive materials?* 

Sawyer blinked. “Want them? No, not at all. They’re by-products of weapons manufacture and power generation we have to store.”

*Then I can return them to the molten rocks below me, where they will be carried down into the deeps. They will do no harm there.*

There was one of those silences, before Darryl stirred. “That sounds wonderful, Medicine Wolf, but can you make sure that waste doesn’t come up again in any of the volcanoes?”

*I can.* It sounded amused. *The volcanoes expel only a fraction of what is consumed. Most of the ocean bed that is swallowed goes on down.*

“There was one of those silences, before Darryl stirred. “That sounds wonderful, Medicine Wolf, but can you make sure that waste doesn’t come up again in any of the volcanoes?”

*I can.* It sounded amused. *The volcanoes expel only a fraction of what is consumed. Most of the ocean bed that is swallowed goes on down.*

“Right. Does that make three things you’re offering in return?”

*It could do, Mercy, but opening a way for a few tons of metal to pass into the molten deeps is simple for me. The other thing I want is not simple, but it can be done together. The dams on the river system must go, to let fish return. Humans will then need a new way of generating the electricity you consume so voraciously, and the power of my water can be better harnessed. I can control the gradients of the river, within quite wide limits, so with the dams removed it should be possible to arrange enough stretches to have a flow sufficient to drive your turbines, but not so great that the fish cannot return upstream as they need. Salmon will be able to advise us about that.*

“That’s the Elder Spirit of salmon, Mr Secretary, not the actual fish.” I was trying to be helpful, but Sawyer gave me a dazed look. “The salmon-headed man who was a part of the dance last night.”

“Oh. Right. He’s called ‘Salmon’?”

“Yup. Just like Coyote. I expect he has other names, too, but Salmon’s the one that matters.”
Sawyer looked at Medicine Wolf. “You’re truly proposing to re-engineer the whole system without
dams? By … adjusting gradients?”

I am. What you call harnessing the river destroys its natural ecosystems. I will show you a better
way. As with the radioactive waste you create but cannot deal with safely.

There was some asperity in the manitou’s voice, and Sawyer winced.

“OK. I’m trying to understand. That’s going to be … a huge project. And a lot of people will be …
very opposed.”

“A lot of people will also be cheering, Mr Secretary.” Darryl was coldly serious, though he was
also setting up Medicine Wolf’s second offer. “The problems fish are caused by the dams directly
affect a lot of different groups, and bother a lot more. The Elwha restoration has shown dam
removal can be done, but being able to adjust the gradients — which is dazzling me as much as
you, sir — means every existing discussion of the problem of the Columbia and Snake is obsolete.
We need to rethink the whole thing from scratch. My guess is we’d need to use a lot more smaller
turbines, sir, but assuming seasonal flood risk can be managed — and if the manitou can control
gradient it can raise the banks where necessary — there would also be a considerable lessening of
overall risk. You’ll be aware that several of the dams are major earthquake hazards, and that’s been
red-flagged in recent FEMA reassessments of the overdue quake on the Cascadia Subduction
Zone.”

Which is the other gift I offer humans. I cannot stop the earthquake, and to moderate the force that
has built up is not easy, though I may be able to slow movement when it is released and reduce its
impact. But I can make it happen at an agreed time, allowing you to arrange evacuations in
advance, if we act before it happens anyway. If we do that soon, it may be possible to release the
northern and southern zones separately, which would also reduce the impact considerably.

“Whoa. We can … you can …”


“That’s … astonishing …”

“And very helpful indeed, sir.” Darryl was in on this for a reason. “So, Mr Secretary, the proposal
is for three projects, one human and two jointly between the manitou and humans. We tackle
pollution seriously, which after the radioactives primarily means fertiliser runoff, industrial
discharge, and landfill or dumping. And auto exhaust. Together, we re-engineer the Columbia to
eliminate all dams, and install new lower-impact flood control and power generation. And we get
to set a date for the Cascadia quake with everyone safely out of buildings. Yes, it’ll cost a good
many billions, but sir, that’s a huge net gain, on top of a hundred billion plus saved at Hanford.
And almost certainly a massive saving of life, as well as recovery costs in the trillions.”

FEMA advisories aren’t most people’s usual reading, but when one more or less shrugs its
shoulders and says that if the increasingly badly overdue Cascadia quake comes in at the upper end
of the estimates, everything west of I-5 is toast anyway, to the point that it’s not worth making any
rescue plans, it gets some airtime, especially among those living on top of the rockjam in question.
There was a New Yorker article that woke people up further East, as well. And anywhere on the
West Coast a brand new, manitou-serious means of doing anything effective about earthquakes was
going to be a huge political deal. I was watching Sawyer begin to process possibilities, not without
some sympathy, and wondering idly what Underhill would think of trying to time a major quake,
when my thoughts were interrupted by Coyote’s voice, and I sighed and stood, catching the senior
bodyguard’s eye.
“A very large coyote, or possible a coyote-headed man, is about to come over the back fence and join us. If you try to shoot him, he’ll be really unhappy, as he’s been kind enough to give warning.”

He blinked. “The same one from last night?”

“Un huh. My not-exactly father.”

Medicine Wolf raised its head, and we could all see Coyote heading on four legs down the slope beyond Adam’s land to jump the fence with ease. He looked pleased with himself, though not more so than usual, and his tongue was lolling. He stopped a few yards away, grinning at the wary guards, and morphed into his fully human form, still wearing the ornate buckskin jacket but with a long, striking feather I thought had to be Thunderbird’s in his hair. He held up a hand, palm out.

“How, Paleface of the Government.”

Adam and Darryl laughed, Sawyer blinked, and I gave Coyote a look that made him grin.

“Behave, you.”

“Oh, I am behaving, not-exactly daughter. I haven’t killed anyone this morning, though I did eat a rabbit or two.” He licked his lips. “Quite tasty. But do introduce me.”

It had to happen, and Sawyer shook the offered hand with the dazed look back in his eyes.

“Don’t worry about everything so much,” Coyote told him. “Even though you’re talking to a very large dire wolf, I thought seeing some magic would remind you that things you think impossible do happen. All the time, in fact, especially when my not-exactly daughter is involved.”

“So I’m gathering, ah, Mr Coyote? Chief Coyote?”

“Certainly chief, not mister. But Coyote will do. I’m not proud. Oh, and the feather’s for you, Mercy, from Gordon.” He picked it from his hair and leaned over to slide it into mine, with a little twist that somehow made it stay put. “He appreciated your entrance this morning, as we all did, and is quite tickled by that hashtag about calling him. And as this re-engineering business will mean arguments with tribes all along the river, we thought you could do with a sign of our authority as well as all the coups you’ve been counting for yourself.”

Adam gave me a look I recognised. “It looks really good on you.”

He had a thing about gear that made me look more Native American, and I sent him a ‘down, boy’ through our bond that made him smile. But there was an implication in such a gift that was anything but amusing.

“My thanks to Gordon, then, but if you think I’m going to supervise Native American affairs along the Columbia during this, think again. And what we need in the first place is a nice scientific hydro-engineering conference with Medicine Wolf so we know what the plan is. Darryl, would Wazzu or Hanford be better equipped for that?”

“Wazzu, I’d think, with the Hanford geophys staff involved from the beginning.”

“And all the Basin’s state governors.” Adam spread his hands a little. “If they see from the get-go that there will be lots of employment, creating as well as demolishing, they’ll come on board much more easily.”

“Which means the Canadians, too. Alberta and BC. You can deal with that, right, Mr Secretary?”
With everything confronting him a big conference was a route of least resistance, and in a surprisingly short while we had an outline agreement for overlapping conferences, hosted by Wazzu, the earlier to tackle the re-engineering, the later to tie it to the earthquake plan with its necessary mass evacuation. States as well as the Federal Government would send highest-level representation, and invitations would go to the Canadians for both conferences and the Mexicans for the second, because they would at least feel even a divided and slightly moderated Cascadia quake. The Japanese, for some reason Sawyer found cogent, would have to be content with a long-range possible tsunami warning. There was also some detail about curbing pollution, and even a hint of a timetable, with Medicine Wolf and Coyote making it clear that needless delay was really not an option, but at that point Sawyer held up a hand.

“I’m beginning to believe in this, truly, but I am so far beyond my authority I can’t even see it behind me.” His eyes narrowed. “Do you intend to make these … offers and demands public?”

“We need to tell the public something, Mr Secretary.” Adam’s voice was bland. “And just now as much truth as possible seems wise. So in outline, certainly.”

“Medicine Wolf’s demands and offers affect everyone, and though I’ll be relaying it, it will be his statement. You can make your own.”

His eyes were still narrowed. “You do play hardball, don’t you, Ms Hauptman. How soon?”

“How much time do you need before we do?”

“Enough to brief the President. He’s not so keen on getting major news from the TV without any warning.”

“Ninety minutes, then? I’ll let the media know Medicine Wolf will be making a statement after lunch.”

He didn’t think it funny, though everyone else did, even Westfield, to judge from his eyes, but headed back into the house to report fast enough, guards trailing. Westfield went with him, but Fisher lingered.

“Never a dull moment with you around, Ms Hauptman. And the AED doesn’t want to cause you any problems, but he is still concerned about your being kidnapped again this morning. So are the KPD. Detective Willis is asking us if we’re recording it as a crime.”

“Don’t bother, SA Fisher. I appreciate the concern, but there is no human action that would be helpful at this point.”

“I hear you. But what do you want us to say? A lot of reporters are asking questions that aren’t all stupid.”

I shrugged. “I imagine so, but I won’t be answering them. I was summoned. The matter was dealt with. I came back. I can’t stop speculation but none of us will be feeding it.”

“And questions about Mr Harris?”

“Are for me or Charles Smith, SA Fisher. Mercy was right to expel him, and that stands. No pack will tolerate persistent disloyalty. As a lone wolf, though, he has questions to answer about why he acted as he did. He’ll stay alive, and may be permitted to give an interview, but is in deep trouble. And depending on his answers, we may have something for you.”

“So long as he does stay alive, Mr Hauptman. A wolf kill here, now, would be very bad news.”
She went, and Coyote gave Adam a lazy smile.

“Let us know when he next goes hunting, and we could have some of Elk’s children step on him, if you want. Natural causes, for a wolf.”

Even the manitou stared at him, and Adam growled a little. Coyote just shrugged.

“You are my not-exactly son-in-law.”

“That’s … strangely tempting. I’ll bear the offer in mind.”

“You need lunch,” I told him. So did I, despite the late breakfast.
Darryl was willing to cook a proper lunch for not too many, including Sawyer if he wanted it, and for the pack and our various strays I placed another three-figure order with Benny’s. The clerk was very surprised to have me on the line, offering confused but sincere good wishes about whatever had happened this morning, and promised a young mountain of pizza would be with us soonest. I used the two-way to warn the gate, and got Willis in person, who asked if he could have a word, so I added him to the lunch roster and told him half-an-hour.

Adam went to make calls, starting with Bran, Coyote wanted to talk to Asil for reasons I decided not to think about, and I finally got around to calling my poor customers at the garage whose cars were on hold. They were pleased to hear from me, and more concerned about me than their transport, which was nice but still left them in the lurch. As there wasn’t much chance of my getting back to work anytime soon and I’d become richer, I agreed to cover rentals for them for a week, which made them happy and eased my mind. Then I went in search, and found Jesse tracking social media with Andrea, while Jenny argued vigorously on her phone with someone called Fred who seemed to represent a station in Arizona that had breached its contractual terms. I listened for a moment, but lost interest when I realised the breach had been using only the audio track, not re-editing visuals, and by then Jesse had noticed the feather in my hair.

“New style, Mercy?”

“Present from Gordon, apparently. Coyote says he likes the hashtag.”

“Cool. Coyote’s back?”

“Yeah, he is. Jumped the back fence and joined us.”

I told her how he’d greeted Sawyer, and Jesse gave the first real laugh I’d heard from her in a while. Andrea thought it was funny too, but had news, starting with the fact that her dad said he’d be honoured to debate with Bright Future bigots on Jesse’s behalf, and sent me warm congratulations and respects for yesterday.

“He messaged me this morning, too, first worried for you and then relieved and impressed all over again.”

“Good to know. Thank him for me?”

“Of course. More seriously, Mercy, if I’ve understood you rightly, there’s a lot of hashtag chatter about Carnwennan but much more about the walking stick. Lots of stuff out there about Manannán, but nothing at all on his Bane, so people are speculating hard.”

She had remembered Jesse didn’t know the full story, but I’d known in giving Taylor the name the stick had earned that this would happen and I wasn’t unduly worried. Me killing Manannán was in Fae terms about as declassified as anything could be, but the details were in a hazier area, and speaking openly of Underhill was out until at least one Gray Lord formally told me otherwise. Preferably several. And Jesse was giving me a look. I waved a hand.

“Thanks, Andrea, but that bit’s not a problem. He was the fae who grabbed me, Jesse, and it’s as
true I killed him as it is that I killed the River Devil. Yeah, sure, but, and some more buts. There was a lot else involved that I can’t talk about, but the new Manannán’s Bane is pleased to be famous. Aren’t you?” It was and warmed in my hand, and on impulse I held it out. “I’m not sure if you’ll feel anything much, but it warmed just now to agree it was pleased. You could try saying hello.”

They did, Andrea with a rather goofy smile, and Manannán’s Bane obliged them. Or me, but it was a nice stick.

“Please don’t confirm anything, or attribute anything to me, but you don’t need to pussyfoot around Manannán being dead, or that his Bane helped him get that way. It’s details that are the problem. Jesse?”

“Just taking it in, Mercy. I knew you must have, but … a Gray Lord?”

“I know, ex-kiddo. But grabbing me the way he did … broke some old rules, let’s say, and there were other Gray Lords involved.”

“And you’re OK with it?”

“Oh yeah. Straight up, Jesse. Kill or be killed. And it was all pretty quick. He’s gonna be very low on my nightmare list.”

“Good.”

I gave her a hug, glad to receive one back, and was wondering if I ought to check on whatever Taylor was up to when Charles and Adam came in, faces tight, with a concerned Westfield and Fisher trailing behind. Jenny took one look, told Arizona Fred they weren’t done and his employers would greatly regret any second offence, and cut the connection. Everyone settled in a loose circle, Charles took out a phone and speed dialled, saying nothing, so I knew Bran would be listening, and Adam gave me a nod.

“You made another good call, Mercy. Paul was set up. When Asil started asking it came out that Paul spent a lot of yesterday and this morning messaging. There were strong suspicions that he’s been seeing someone lately he wouldn’t talk about. He didn’t want to give up his phone but Asil forced him, and Ben stripped out some encryption to find increasingly amorous and inflammatory exchanges over several weeks with a woman in Richland. Sexting with intent.” A wolf’s personal life was his or her own, but Adam did not approve and his distaste was audible. “His challenge was her suggestion, and she worked him up to it very slickly. Charles did some hacking, and the billing for her phone is in the name of Sarah Richards, which rang a bell for him.”

Charles was not a happy man either. “It is a known alias of one Sarah Clements, who is Virginia old money and very John Lauren. And her like-minded daddy is a Harvard pal of Senator Heuter, which is why we’re bringing you in on this, AED Westfield, and Leslie.” He produced another flash drive and passed it to Fisher. “That’s all we have. I’ve only skimmed the messages but it looks like a classic honeytrap, playing strongly on Paul’s bigotries, especially against Mercy, and there are call records too. This morning the phone registered to Richards was certainly in Richland, but she’s clever enough to be long gone by now.”

Fisher nodded. “I’d think. I remember her from the data you gave us yesterday. She was the one who did pretty much the same thing to a wolf in Michigan, digging for info on a suspected wolf kill?”

“That’s her. What we don’t know, Leslie, and very much want to, is first, who if anyone gave her
orders to target Paul, and whether she’s connected to Preskylovitch or anyone higher in Cantrip, and second, for you as well, Jenny, whether there are legal issues here. Does Paul have a case against her? Or wolves generally? Or alternatively, is there any legal case against Paul?”

Fisher looked dubious, and Jenny shook her head.

“Adam might have a civil action, for breach of trust or something related, though I can’t see anything obvious. But if this Richards or Clements was under orders, intending exploitation and harm, and misrepresented herself to gain an intimate relationship, Paul would have a civil case against her and whoever gave her the orders.”

“Charles, you said you’ve only skimmed the messages. Did Paul know what he was doing?”

Charles hesitated, frowning. “In one way, no, Mercy. I don’t think he ever realised he was being pumped and steered. But he knew she wasn’t a wolf, indulged his resentment of you and Joel, and colluded with her to cause you and Darryl as much trouble as possible. And however she was priming him, he knew what he did today was … wrong. Why do you ask?”

Wrong meaning a wolf death sentence. I thought about that.

“She tell him Adam was weak enough after yesterday for him to win a fight? And that if KEPR was present it would protect him from the consequences?”

“Yes to both.”

“So she’s smarter than most, just as he’s dumber. All wolves ought to know about her, yes?” I felt a certain viciousness about this woman. “There has to be some mileage in a rich John Lauren daughter who goes in for seducing wolves under false pretences. Do her JLS friends know about her little furry habits? And sexting a wolf?”

Adam gave me a look. “That would be … satisfying. Especially if she is connected to Cantrip.”

“Wouldn’t it? I think Taylor might cover it very cheerfully, too. But I was thinking we could argue Paul’s guilty but with some mitigating circumstances, in that he’s unusually stupid, the pack really has had weird stuff to deal with, and he, dumbass single male who does not socialise well and tends to think with his … trousers, was targeted by a smart, wealthy, and I assume hot woman.”

“We could, love.” Adam was frowning, though he’d liked my euphemism. “Why would we want to?”

“I’m making this up as I go, again, but let’s say Paul was tried in a wolf court, with lots of dirt on Clements, John Lauren and maybe Cantrip, or Senator Heuter, and found guilty on a capital wolf charge. But, mitigating circumstances, so commuted sentence of incarceration for however long. Proceedings of necessity open to human view, and he could do the time in a human prison. He’s wolf enough not to be killed by any non-wolf, unless someone smuggled in silver, but it would be an education for him, and he’d be out of our hair. Plus de facto acceptance of a parallel but adequate justice. Or more, maybe, if we wanted more.”

Westfield and Jenny both looked thoughtful with a lot of dubious, and she spoke first.

“There would have to be a statute recognising the wolf court, Mercy, and that would not be simple, even with goodwill. What are its procedures, guidelines, precedents, and so on? AED?”

“I concur. But I’ll add that I think the idea has some equity, and that if the custodial term were not extravagantly long it would play politically.”
Charles shook his head. “We would have to reveal too much, Mercy.”

“And what about recognising the court by executive order, citing the special circumstances?” I gave Charles a grin as he blinked. “I imagine the President might disagree, but I feel like I’m scratching his back, so I figure he can scratch mine a little.”

“Actually …” Westfield really was thinking now. “That’s not bad at all, Ms Hauptman. Forgive the question, Mr Hauptman, but am I right to think that the camera is the only thing keeping Mr Harris alive?”

Adam exchanged a look with Charles, who looked at his phone for a moment, and shrugged at its silence. We took another step towards greater frankness.

“More or less. Even without the special circumstances, an Alpha has the right to kill any wolf who formally challenges his leadership. And given those circumstances, no wolf would blame me for killing Paul out of hand. We understand personal opportunity, and a wounded Alpha can be fair game, but not while the pack is fighting an enemy. It isn’t written down, but our way is more like a military code than anything civil.”

“Yeah, it would be. And disloyalty must be top of the tree. So although he’s now no direct threat, Mr Harris is in all sorts of ways still a headache for you and for those higher authorities who are listening?”

“That’s fair to say, yes. So far we had thought that the pack in Seattle could take him for a while, to make sure he’s behind silver bars during full moon.”

“Ah. Yes, alright, I see that. You do take responsibility, I’ve come to realise. And you, Ms Hauptman, are once again spinning really weird and interesting solutions for everyone out of far-left field somewhere. And either your intel is very good, or your instincts are even sharper than I’d credited, because besides having some hard feelings of my own about Mr Harris for giving me a worse morning than I was having anyway, I have reasons to think this might find some real traction upstairs. The FBI wants that law on scent evidence badly, as do others, and an executive recognition of reasonably transparent wolf justice would be interesting help. The attitude of any new agency to preternaturals who break the law is also high on several agendas, and this could be a useful precedent. The Fae are a different case, but wolves are very integrated, so separate but equal’s that much trickier.”

He debated with himself briefly, flicking a glance at Fisher and another back at me that became a brief stare.

“That’s some feather, Ms Hauptman. Thunderbird’s?”

“Yes. A present.”

“And it just keeps building. So please don’t quote me on this, anyone, but for my money things DC can do to make you happy are in some demand, Ms Hauptman, for now at least. Yesterday morning you manufactured an astonishingly powerful political lever out of serious adversity, and have since magnified its strength I can’t even count how many times — Hanford, your response to MacLandis, the Elder Spirits, and this morning. You’ll do it again with the Manitou’s statement, in spades. And with a new agency being formed, and the Columbia and earthquake projects, that power is going to be sustained, unless you do something really silly. Believe me, Ms Hauptman, a whole lot of people want to know what will appease you best.” He turned to Charles. “We’ll follow the data as fast and as far as we can, and I’ll keep you in the loop. Do you want me to float the other idea upwards?”
Charles lifted his phone to his ear, not that he needed to, and the wolves and I listened to Bran breathing for a moment before asking to speak to me.

<Mercy, do you have any sense of your new magics in this thinking of yours?>

“No.” I thought about it. “Still no. There’s revenge on Clements and Paul. He’s been a pain in the butt, and if she preaches hate and practices what her friends would call perversion, I don’t mind putting her sexts out there, nice and legally, next to my video.” It was an ugly thought, but so is putting out a doctored rape scene, and I believed in the punishment fitting the crime. “I took the cloak off a while back, and my magic just feels like me, if a bit fizzy. If there’s anything in this, it’d be Coyote, not manitou or cloak.”

<It is another good idea, then. Angus is listening, and agrees, though he is having more difficulty than me with what you are becoming.>

“Which is?”

<A power. Westfield is quite right.> Bran sighed gently. <Tell him yes, float it, and that we recognise there will be many deal breakers on both sides, but we hope they can be navigated. But stay on the line, please.>

I did, seeing Westfield’s eyes brighten while his brain was whirring with the implications of the scene.

<The other thing, Mercy, is that Gwyn ap Lugh has at last returned my calls, and you were right about the Fae too. He was as near as he gets to apologetic to me, very complimentary indeed about you, as well he might be, and unusually forthcoming. Manannán was not the only old one they have problems with, but he was the strongest and loudest, by some way, and the manners of his defeat and death — without complete loss of his power, which would have been very bad for water fae — have brought about what ap Lugh called a deep silence. So the Gray Lords say through him that if the President makes the statement you suggested, they will accept an invitation from you to attend negotiations with the manitou and meet humans representing the Federal Government.>

I was too tired to cheer, but let out a huff of breath. “That all sounds good?”

<Oh yes. Better, anyway. Ap Lugh was also pleased by what you said to Taylor and managed not to say. But when I told him what Medicine Wolf is proposing, and that you might be speaking to the President this evening, he made some calls and said that you were free to speak to the man about what happened, including Underhill, if it made anything easier.>

My mind skittered. That was a lot of latitude for the Fae. “Why would he do that?”

<1 am not sure, Mercy, but I have had three thoughts. One is that Underhill’s existence here is leaking anyway, and will leak further, so he is willing you should be a messenger. A more interesting idea is that as Underhill, whatever it may be, is no part of the US, its existence becoming public will help the Fae’s claim to be an independent, in effect foreign, power. And the third is that as Underhill recognised you, you have the right to speak of it.>

“Huh. I’ll think about those, but I’m not presuming the last, now or ever. Anything about the cloak?”

<No. I asked but he said that was between you and it and Underhill.>

“And a second huh.”
Bran rang off, and I passed the phone back to Charles before telling Westfield the highlight of the news.

“You hear the phrasing? Negotiations with the manitou, but only meeting humans. I’d guess you won’t get more until they know what you might be offering, but at least they will listen.”

“Yes. I’ll tell the Secretary. And about Clements.” He looked at his fingernails for a moment. “And though this can only be personal, Ms Hauptman, you have my best thanks for trying, whatever comes of it. You’re deeply bewildering, but you’re also getting a lot more done than I’ve seen happen in DC lately.”

He went, once again leaving Fisher, who gave me and Adam looks, before turning to a surprised Jesse.

“Miss Hauptman, we’ve talked to Mrs Bradley, at some length and to her considerable discomfort, and while she is Bright Future, through her rather weird church, and did invite Mr Milanovitch’s cousin because you were in her class, neither has any more serious connections that we can find. We will be informing the principal of your school about her behaviour, which was certainly grossly unethical, but she doesn’t seem to warrant any further attention from us.”

“Oh. Thanks, SA Fisher.” Jesse thought about it. “Did Mrs Bradley know what Crazy Courtney did to Mom’s garage?”

“Yeah, she did. She’s known her since Bright Future was formed and they both joined up as eager little haters in Spokane. But being assigned to your class was chance, as far as we can see, even if Mrs Bradley thinks it was God’s guiding hand. Then she and her pals got talking.”

“Fruitcake luck, then?”

Fisher smiled, and she wasn’t the only one. “Pretty much, Miss Hauptman.”

I’d been monitoring Adam through our bond, and he was both relieved there was no further connection and quite angry.

“I’d be grateful if that letter to Jesse’s principal could be ... vigorously worded, SA Fisher. You can take it that we will be having a conversation with her about Mrs Bradley’s ethics sooner rather than later.” He rolled his neck, easing tension from his shoulders. “And be aware we are willing to make this bit of bigotry public, at need.”

“I can see why that might be, Mr Hauptman, and it’s not a problem for us, though our interview with Bradley is not public domain. I have a daughter in school, and in your shoes my husband and I would be having some hard words with her principal too.”

Fisher went, promising updates on the property search and other enquiries after lunch — which as Kelly told us, eyes glued to the floor, was ready. Willis was waiting, and the Benny’s van almost through the crowd still hanging around outside. Adam thanked him, but before we went to eat spent a moment with Jesse and had questions for Jenny.

“A suit? Mmm. If the visiting speaker had visited, Adam, knowingly arranged as someone with a criminal history involving the parent of a class member, I’d say yes. But as a foiled plan? Not worth it. Still, they wouldn’t want to contest a suit with you and Mercy as appellants on Jesse’s behalf, so if the school doesn’t offer apologies and ensure at the least that Bradley isn’t taking Jesse for anything, I will — or Andrea will — be happy to write a letter to the School District
“Alright. I can live with that. But would you make sure your father knows, Andrea? I am … seriously irritated by Bradley’s behaviour.”

“Sure thing, Mr Hauptman.” Andrea had a sharper smile than I’d yet seen from her. “Self-righteous Christian supply teacher commissions hate speech from known vandal, targeting minor, would get some airtime and column inches.”

“Mrs Bradley’s Dim Future.”

Jesse was Adam’s daughter, as well as my step-daughter, and she understood payback. Andrea grinned, and so did Charles.

“Good one, Jesse. And I’ll be borrowing Dim Future, if I may.”

“Me too, ex-kiddo. You want to be there when we see the principal?”

“Maybe. But I don’t mind her so much, usually.”

“Your decision. But I note she hasn’t called to ask after you, despite yesterday, unless I missed it in all the excitement, so she gets no slack from me.”

“Actually, the school did issue a statement, Mercy.” Andrea waggled a hand. “It was on KNDU so not many people saw it, and it was pretty bland, but they were concerned and wished Jesse well.”

“Half a point, then.”

“Ms Linner messaged me, Mom. The one Bradley’s standing in for.”

“Helpfully?”

“Yeah. Wanted to know if I was alright, and if I wasn’t could she do anything. And if Dad was OK, and you.”

“So she does get the points.” I met Adam’s eyes, and knew he’d be having Ms Linner checked as well, though from all Jesse had said about her it probably was just genuine concern. “Anyone else been in touch?”

“Friends. Gabriel and his sisters and mom. Margi. Stefan. And Mr Christiansen, who said he’d also emailed Dad.”

“He did. Sent thanks to you too, Mercy, for Cantrip.”

“He’s welcome.”

And it was good to know Jesse was getting some support, but Darryl’s lunch was smelling pretty good too, and Willis was still waiting. From the sounds the Benny’s van had also bulled through, and the pizza riot was starting. At least some things stay reliable.
I’d ordered enough from Benny’s to feed Sawyer’s bodyguards and the Feebs, and ignoring their mixed embarrassment and gratitude I left Warren to sort out the distribution. Sawyer seemed taken aback by the show of kindness, and looked wistful as we left pizza behind for the kitchen, so I told him he’d get plenty of Benny’s little miracles if he was here for any negotiations that happened, and he gave me a grin.

“President likes pepperoni and pineapple. So do I.”

“Always good, though I’d add jalapeño.”

“Surprise, Ms Hauptman. You’re adding that to pretty much everything just now.”

I gave him a look, as did Adam, but there was Willis to introduce, who gave me another new look of his own with some uncertainty in it.

“I didn’t mean to intrude, Ms Hauptman, Mr Secretary.”

“You’re not, Detective Willis. Grab a chair, have some of Darryl’s pan-fried chicken, and tell me what I can do for you today.”

“If you’re sure.”

The chicken smelt wonderful, so Willis had an incentive, and once we were sitting and Sawyer got busy with his own plate, he relaxed a little. I noticed that Coyote hadn’t shown up, and wondered why. He usually liked his food, even if he had eaten those rabbits.

“AED Westfield tells me you’re not making any complaint about what happened this morning, Ms Hauptman?”

“Correct. It’s dealt with and there’s no point. And though you could say a kidnapping happened here, in your jurisdiction, the kidnapper was never present, and could not be indicted even if still alive. I appreciate your concern, Detective Willis, but the incident is closed.”

“OK. Chief Rodgers wanted me to make sure. Tony, too.” He had a speculative look, tilting his head. “Some more congratulations are in order, I suspect, it being on record that dead kidnappers don’t much bother us. But there is concern at KPD about Mr Harris. He may be out of your pack, and he’s undoubtedly a jackass as well as a wolf, but he is still a citizen.”

“Talk to Adam about that one, but it’s not urgent, I promise.”

“You can see him if you want, with Jenny present, but no talking yet.” Adam was eating fast, but he quite liked Willis. “Short story is, Paul didn’t go idiot pop all on his own. John Lauren certainly set him up, with a honeytrap, and Cantrip might have been behind it. No offence, Detective Willis, but he has people to talk to ahead of the KPD.”

“Sh—oot. OK. That puts a different spin on it. Is that why Westfield has the SAC and Richland PD raiding somewhere?”
“Yeah, though we’re expecting the … person of interest to have taken off. In the other column, turns out Bradley’s just low on ethics.”

Willis knew about her from the Feebs, and we let Jesse fill him in, which she did with some relish, ending with a very sharp question.

“I can see it’s not for the FBI, but I was wondering where else Mrs Bradley might have taught, and if anyone who’d been in her classes later joined Bright Future or did anything to attract police attention.”

“Well, there’s a thought.” Willis took out his notebook and jotted a reminder. “There’s a lot happening just now, Miss Hauptman, but I can run some searches. Hate crimes aren’t always properly recorded or flagged, but something might pop.”

Sawyer had an interested look, and passed Willis a card. “That number will get my private secretary, Detective. Screening for JLS and Bright Future is very much on the Beltway’s agenda right now, so if you run into any state-level opposition about juvenile records, let me know and I’ll pass the word to where it might do some good.”

Willis blinked. “You’re serious, sir?”

“Yes.” Sawyer grinned. “President said yesterday he liked your style, and so do I. We want this forensic co-operation and a scent evidence law, too, so you’ll find you have some strong backup on that.”

“Asil told you yesterday your weight was up.”

“Yeah, he did, Ms Hauptman.” Willis shook his head. “I wasn’t expecting to get famous at my age and rank. But my daughter likes it, so I guess I’ll learn to live with it.”

“She’ll have to live with it too, Detective Willis.” Jesse’s voice was flat. “It’s mostly good, but also bad. If she gets any hassle about it at school she could call me. I have some strategies.”

He blinked, and gave her a wide smile. “Thank you, Miss Hauptman. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but you’d know, and I’ll tell her. Anyway, one good thing, Ms Hauptman, is that both KPD and PPD have become oddly conscious of their debts.” He took an envelope from an inner pocket and passed it to me. “Consultancy fees for Finley, back-dated, and for the State Park, with the thanks of Chiefs Rodgers and Munday. Rodgers is also very happy with what the FBI and other agencies have been saying about the scent evidence thing, and looks forward to meeting Mr Hauptman to sort out a formal agreement.”

Adam said Rodgers was welcome to call, while I looked in the envelope and whistled.

“Five hundred bucks a pop for consultancy?”

“Top rate on the books for any civilian, Ms Hauptman, because of the nature of the scenes and the value of the assistance provided.”

And it was what they could do. I nodded. “Appreciated, Detective. The money keeps rolling in.” He grinned. “And I’ll say Chief Rodgers got some points from me last night.”

“From me, too. And the rank and file, though you got more from most everyone I’ve talked to.”

I had to ask the question. “And my coming out as a shapeshifter?”
To my surprise he laughed. “I think woot! covers it, Ms Hauptman. You had to be something, and being the daughter of the Coyote, not-exactly or however, seems like a good thing to be. Some speculation about the not-exactly, though. And that reminds me, I had a call from a Sherriff’s Deputy in Basin City to say he woke up to find a very unhappy-looking coyote locked in one of his cells, and could I please find out what he was supposed to do about it.”

I closed my eyes, knowing exactly who that coyote must be and that Coyote would not be findable for a while. But he might have said something to Asil, so I hauled out my phone. Calling someone downstairs was crazy, but I’d had enough running about. Adam was not the only one giving me a quizzical look.

<A coyote in Basin City, querida? No, I know nothing of that. But you’re right your not-exactly father left again, maybe half-an-hour ago, saying he had things to do and would be back.>

“May I ask what he wanted with you, Asil?”

<He asked if I had ever met a marid, and did it have a sense of humour.>

“A marid?”

<The highest form of djinn. I told him I had, and it didn’t, but an afrit I once met did. After its own fashion. Is there a problem?>

“Not by wolf standards. Sorry to bother you.”

I stashed my phone, and contemplated Coyote for a moment. “Detective Willis, given that coyotes do not have fingerprints, and that if they did this one would be of no concern to you, my advice to the Sherriff’s Deputy is to open the cell and outer doors, and stand back to stay clear of the dust.”

Willis looked at me hard for a moment. “If coyotes did have fingerprints, Ms Hauptman, what might this one’s tell me?”

“That it should be somewhere else.” I sighed, seeing Adam understand and suppress a smile. “But nothing involving any violence, Coyote himself bears the greater responsibility, from all I know, and the one in Basin City helped with Guayota, at considerable personal risk.”

“Good enough for me. I’ll make the call when I’m through here.”

“Thank you.”

“Your word’s golden, Ms Hauptman, as Mr Brooks said, and you’re owed more than those checks. Anyway, the other things I have to say — and I’m sorry to have to go there over food — are first, that with the FBI’s help we had the crime lab working all night on the Yukon, and all the evidence from it, with everything Sandys and his techs collected here, checks out. Blood, prints, ballistics, the lot. As expected, but there was one interesting thing — a coyote hair in the steel cuffs we found in the Yukon, that matches some human ones from the seatback.”

I had never known if my furry and human DNA matched, and told him so, seeing Charles was also interested.

“It means we can sign off formally on the finding of justifiable homicide, including your, um, expanded statement of events, and provide Ms Trevellyan with some more documentation for your suit against Cantrip. Second, Mr Hauptman, Blackwood Corp denies manufacturing Preskylovitch’s gun. The SAC in Spokane has agents all over them, and says there’s plenty to make his skin crawl that will help bury Cantrip, but nothing they can find on this weapon. That may be
right, too, because Jim took it apart with a guy Westfield had flown in, and they’re pretty sure it’s homemade by a good amateur, not industrial manufacture, so maybe Preskylovitch did the work himself.

“Could be. Blackwood was only one place to look.” Adam shrugged, but then gave an edged smile. “Anyone think we could get the NRA on board if we wanted a ban on low velocity modifications?”

There was a lot of laughter, Sawyer’s among it.

“Oh, please, Mr Hauptman. I’ve been a member since I first learned to shoot, and resigning would give me grief I don’t need, but they haven’t been thinking straight for a while. Opposing the existence of the ATF is just stupid, so anything that gives them a headache is fine by me.”

“I’ll bear it in mind. They used to lobby me to join until I came out as a wolf. I didn’t care for their arguments.”

“Because?”

“Vietnam.”

“Ah. They read a lot of vets wrong. But I’m interrupting.”

“No problem, sir. But the third thing is, I’m afraid. Mr Hauptman, Ms Hauptman, Jerry Riebold and the Pasco PD brass gave me a call. They would very much like to rule justifiable homicide on the Sacajawea SP killings, but feel they need a statement from, ah, Medicine Wolf to put on file. And they have another problem, in the shape of the dead men’s families, some of whom are flying out today.”

I winced. “What variety of family?”

“Wives, one with her own father and an infant, one with her dead husband’s mother and a six-year-old for whom there is apparently no other childcare available.”

“Ouch.” I didn’t want to be exposed to that much grief, but there was no helping it. “Don’t take this wrongly, Detective, but have any of the adults stated … any agenda?”

Willis waggled a hand. “Some, but I don’t think they’re looking for anything public. Pasco PD aren’t willing to release the bodies just yet, though Jerrie said he’s pushing for it, so that’s one thing bringing them here. Visiting the scene’s another, and that’s being cleared now.”

“Have they said anything about Medicine Wolf?”

“Not that I’m aware. I’d think Jerrie would have mentioned it, but he was pretty busy with a National Park Service brass hat who’s come out because the dead guys were on their books. He’s had plenty to say, I gathered, but none of it relevant.”

There was silence for a while, and I sighed.

“OK. The families have a claim on Medicine Wolf, so when we’re done here I’ll go break the news. The statement shouldn’t be a problem, and I think it’ll be willing to meet the families, if they want.”

Anna stirred. “Do the media know they’re due?”
“Not from us, Ms Smith, but I wouldn’t bet on it remaining that way. Besides the reporters still here, there’s a bunch at the State Park.”

“I’ve seen. Mercy, Medicine Wolf’s statement will be compelling, but Charles, if you went on first, to get all the stuff you want into the news cycle, we’d stretch the time, while the notice Mercy’s already given will be pulling the strays back here.”

“Which we want, Anna?”

“For now, Adam. We all know Mercy’s doing the job Cantrip should be up for, and I’m afraid liaising with families over accidental deaths by manitou just became part of it. It’s bound to get out sooner or later, and we’ll deal when it does, but for now helping them to privacy is good. And if Medicine Wolf is willing, we could also give a better timetable for Hanford and push that idea of Mercy’s about sending the media flacks to cover geiger counters all the way to the Columbia Bar.”

I’d been watching Willis and Sawyer, and raised eyebrows at Willis.

“I’d be good with all of that, Ms Hauptman. And Jerrie will be very grateful too. It’s not your responsibility and he knows it, but he’s feeling badly out of his depth.”

“I imagine he is. Mr Secretary, will you be making a statement?”

“Yes. Cautious excitement, and full commitment to the conferences so we can see what’s what and do some costing. The President said it made his head hurt, and the idea of evacuating the West Coast ahead of an earthquake is enough to make anyone’s eyes water, but I told him we have to go with it and he didn’t disagree. I’ve got people talking to Wazzu here and in Pullman so they’re not completely blindsided. USGS, too, as they’re bound to be doorstepped by the media.”

None of Jenny, Andrea, Jesse, or Willis yet knew about Medicine Wolf’s plans, and eyes widened as Sawyer spoke.

“The earthquake’s not imminent, people, and the statement will explain it. More good news, I assure you.”

“If you say so, Ms Hauptman.”

Willis’s expression gave me a lift, and I grinned. “I do. Promise. But there’s a couple of things. One is if KPD can let the mob at the gate know statements are imminent, and make sure they stay under control.”

Willis nodded. “Sure. I can call in some extra uniforms.”

“Good. And the other is to give Detective Riebold my number. Much as I don’t like Anna’s analysis, if Medicine Wolf’s willing I’ll see the families too, if they want. But if they’re losing it, we’ll need to be very careful, and not only because of Taylor. Uncontrolled grief will jangle, and that is not what the pack needs just now.” Nor me, but I’d suck it up if I had to. “So where we might meet is also going to depend.”

“Yeah. I get that.” Willis looked down for a minute. “Is there an agenda beyond not upsetting your wolves and not dumping on the manitou for … waking up grumpy?”

“I don’t know, Jenny?”

She frowned. “Insufficient data. Do you know anything about the dead men’s insurance, Detective? Or their families’ entitlements, given that they died on the job? If there are lawsuits in
the offing I would be concerned to know if Mercy, Adam, or Joel were mentioned in any way.”

“Huh. I’m not sure, Ms Trevellyan, but I do know the NPS pays out to firefighters who get injured or killed. Had to deal with that, once. And liability might be why their brass hat is here.”

“So I thought, yes. Get me Detective Riebold’s number, and I’ll talk to him and the NPS hat.” She glanced at her watch. “Or Andrea will.”

“Sure.” Andrea hesitated, and I gave her an encouraging look. “I don’t mean to distress anyone, but did any of the Cantrip agents have family here, or headed this way?”

Willis’s eyes narrowed a little. “Yeah, but we’re on that, Ms Lafferty. Preskylovitch was a complete loner, so far as we know, and his parents are deceased. But Kerrigan had a wife and children in Pasco, and Orton and Kent both had live-in girlfriends in Richland, all of whom have been taken into protective custody by the FBI. They’re being looked after but the adults are persons of interest to the continuing enquiries into Cantrip’s crimes. Any particular reason for asking?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just …” Andrea swirled a finger thoughtfully. “Connections. I have a PR brief, Detective, so I’ve been tracking news and social media with Anna and Jesse. Most commentary is very positive, but among the bad is some odd stuff about Medicine Wolf as a widow-maker. Both the NPS guys and the Cantrip agents are mentioned, mixed up with victims of Guayota and the River Devil. It doesn’t feel organised, but it could build if anything fed it.”

“OK. Widow-maker’s not my first choice of terms, with all that’s happening, but it takes all sorts. I’ll give Jerrie and the safe-house guys a heads-up. We can put some extra security on the hotel the NPS families have booked, and make sure everyone’s alert.”

I thought about it, but my alarm bells weren’t sounding. Then a thought hit me hard. “Was MacLandis married?”

Both Charles and Jenny sat up, and she waved him to speak first before looking apologetic, which he ignored.

“Yes. The FBI were due to interview her, but I haven’t seen any report. And she’s old Massachusetts money, as he was, as well as newly widowed, so who knows how hard any questions were asked?”

“If she’s repeating or promoting her late husband’s libels, I’m not the only one who needs to know. And widow or no, if she is, she’s liable, and can be shut down by court order.”

Everyone was frowning, including me, and Adam took charge.

“Jenny, please take that up with Westfield as soon as you can. Given their wounded agent in Atlanta I’d think they’d be less than sympathetic, but perhaps you could lend some weight, Mr Secretary, if there is an old money or church problem in the Commonwealth.”

Sawyer nodded cautiously.

“Not my area, Mr Hauptman, but I can pass a word.”

“Thank you, sir. Please do. You will understand that I have zero tolerance for those who uploaded that Cantrip video, or anyone who credits it, however recently bereaved. Good catch, Andrea, and please provide Jenny and Charles with URLs or equivalent for what you saw.” She nodded, pleased with his praise. “Detective Willis, I do have sympathy for the NPS guys’ families, and with Mercy
will do what I can. But I also want them looked at, hard if discreetly, and doubly so if they will be coming onto my land — full personal history and known attitudes. There’s almost certainly no link, but after Clements and Bradley I’m making no assumptions, and shock or grief can make for odd behaviour, never mind both. No offence to Pasco PD, but please ask Detective Riebold to liaise with the FBI and Charles as well — both have greater resources — and give Chief Munday a heads-up.”

Charles and Anna were already on their phones, and Willis nodded.

“Will do, Mr Hauptman, but I have to say I got no vibe from Jerrie that we’re dealing with anything more than bewildered grief, where the NPS families are concerned. Mrs MacLandis I can believe, though — he can’t have completely hidden that much hate at home.”

Adam nodded but his voice stayed hard. “I don’t disagree, Detective Willis, but I’ve been blindsided five times in thirty-six hours, and it rankles. What’s worse is that Mercy and Jesse have taken the brunt of the hits. So I’m stepping security right up.” He blew out a breath. “That mostly means intel, but now I’m up and about there’s no need to keep the pack passive, so there will also be wolves, in wolf form, on the perimeter and the gate. Anyone coming in gets scented as well as searched. And Charles, if David Christiansen is free, I want him and his troop here, as personal security pro tem for Mercy and Jesse.”

Charles was between calls, and for the first time I’d seen since he arrived he gave Adam a return look, and some Alpha tension flickered.

“He has nothing on as far as I know, Adam, and I will ask. But don’t over-react. Of your five blindsides, Cantrip and MacLandis were the same thing, and probably Clements. Manannán blindsided everyone, and is as dead as the first two. Only Bradley was truly unseen, and she got no further than an invitation before Jesse got her stomped on. Fort up, by all means, and no blame to you. But beware how much you bristle.”

Charles had a hand on Anna, telling her not to soothe Adam, and she wasn’t. But wolf rules didn’t apply to me, and I didn’t care who saw, so I got up and leaning on the stick walked round to Adam, standing behind him to rest hands on tense shoulders and work fingers into the muscles.

“Christiansen and his boys would be nice. And it’ll do the pack good to change and go snarl at things. But we’d want to talk to anyone they caught. Put a sergeant on each shift?”

He tipped his head back, seeking me though our bond, and I felt him will himself to relax. He’d had to endure a lot of feeling helpless and being passive, which Alphas do not do well, and his need to act was strong, but he knew Charles had a point.

“Do we have sergeants?”

“Darryl’s your lieutenant, but Auriele, Warren, and Honey are kinda sergeantsome. Sergeantish? Maybe Mary Jo. Ben’s a corporal. And Asil can be an honorary, I dunno, alcalde? He’s manitou-calm, and serve him right for telling Coyote about afrits with a sense of humour. Whatever they are, they don’t sound like a good connection for my not-exactly father to make.”

“True.” My proximity, and fingers, took some effect, and his muscles eased. It showed in his voice. “Mind you, love, you wanted Asil to be more talkative about his history.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “And Coyote’s been in and out of my head enough to pick up anything. He’ll play it bland about Gary when he’s back too, I bet.” I thought about it, and leaned to look in his eyes. “You know what? We should get Margi down here. If there’s anything short of his sisters
that can bring him up short, it’s my mom.”

Adam had seen Margi on top form, and grinned. “Also true. She drives you crazy after a short while, though.”

“Yeah, but she’d have Coyote to cope with too.”

“Sneaky. I think we should wait until things play out a little before we add complications, though. And thanks for the soothing, but if everyone’s done eating I should talk to the pack, and you should go talk to Medicine Wolf and get to making statements.”

“Yeah. More fun.”
Detective Willis and Jenny came with me, and I explained to Medicine Wolf what Pasco PD wanted and the problem with visiting families. Then Jenny, a little nervous at speaking to the manitou for the first time since she’d arrived yesterday, and a little bemused at it becoming her client of record, explained the legal importance of Pasco PD ruling justifiable homicide, and what Washington and federal law said about it. It listened intently, and whuffed a little.

*I understand, and am willing to make this statement to the police in Pasco. Tell them I will go there when I am done here, before I go to Hanford to open the shaft.*

Willis looked relieved. “Thank you, sir. I’ll tell Detective Riebold to expect you when he sees you’re done here. Main station is on West Nixon, but you won’t fit inside. Would Volunteer Park be good? It’s just across the way.”

Medicine Wolf thought about it for a second. *Yes, I have that location from reading you yesterday.*

“OK. I’ll tell them.”

“And the families of the dead?”

*I will do what I can, Mercy, if they wish it. I am sorry I killed those men when I find it was unnecessary, and for the grief their loss causes their kin, but I do not feel guilt.* I felt the equivalent of a mental shrug, and so did Willis and Jenny. *I am sorrier it lands on you, and though you need to accept your recent memories, as Jesse does, I will shield you again if these people come, and you wish it.*

“Thank you. I’ll see. And all the statements are lining up nicely. We’ll be ready to roll pretty soon.”

It was happy with that, but as we headed back inside Jenny had a troubled look.

“Sorrow but no guilt?”

“Predator form, Jenny. And how many living things do you suppose die within the Basin every day? I’d bet Medicine Wolf has some awareness of each one, down to bacteria. It does have rational regret for deaths that in retrospect seem unwarranted, but no emotional weight. Which doesn’t surprise me. Or worry me, frankly.”

It worried her some, but she put it away, got Riebold’s number from Willis, and went to call him before finding Westfield. Willis told her he’d join her shortly, and cocked an eyebrow at me.

“You said the name Gary earlier, Ms Hauptman, and it rang a bell. Would our oddly locked-in coyote be one Mr Laughingdog, a prison escapee?”

I sighed. “Yeah, probably. He was called here last night for the dance, but four-legged it afterwards because he thought it was insane to stay at a house with both Coyote and lawmen. So my not-exactly father is dumping on him, again. Gary seems to do himself far more harm than he does to anyone else.”
“Mmm. Well, you’re only guessing it’s him, and what do I know? Besides, I’m thinking coyotes probably don’t do so well in prison.”

“Nor do Native Americans.”

“There’s that. And just now I don’t mind stretching a point. I’ll tell Basin City to open doors and chalk it up to stray magic from last night.”

“Thank you. I owe you one.”

“No you don’t, Ms Hauptman. I owe you one less.”

“I’m not counting.”

“I know.” He shifted subject. “Did Medicine Wolf help Miss Hauptman? I gathered from Fisher she had a flashback last night.”

“Yeah, from seeing Adam going at Tim’s corpse. Surprise. I may need those names, but manitou glass is working for now. And Jesse wasn’t wrong that your family will get attention.”

“I guess. Her kindness surprised me, though it shouldn’t, after all I’ve seen. I don’t know what problems my Sally might run into, but she said the teachers yesterday gave up trying to stop kids watching KEPR on their phones, and joined them instead. Not much teaching got done by anyone except you, which is fine by me, but my screen time brought her more attention than she’s used to, so it’s starting already. If Miss Hauptman’s offer is good with you and Mr Hauptman, I’d be glad to take her up on it.” His voice became drier. “And Sally’d be pretty thrilled, I’m sure, though she’s at the age to play everything down.”

“How old?”

“Turns fifteen in a month.”

“So less than a year younger than Jesse, on paper. Might be more in practice, given what Jesse has seen.”

“I’d think, but Sally knows what I do, and why.”

“Then her calling Jesse is fine by me, Detective, so long as she’s willing to learn and follow wolf rules for any time she’s here.”

“I have no problem with that. And that’s a really good kid you’ve got there, Ms Hauptman. My Sally might learn a lot from her.”

“You bet, though Jesse’s now a really good ex-kid, we decided.” I was coming to like Willis quite a bit. “Andrea gently let her know yesterday that she’s going to have to put up with much tighter personal security, and she gave Andrea points for it although it pisses her off and bothers her, not unreasonably. And this morning, despite being terrified by my absence, she tried to keep Christy out of Adam’s hair.”

“Impressive. Divorce is often hardest on the kids. And I heard that, ah, the former Mrs Hauptman was hustled onto a flight out.”

“She was.” I still had a lot of anger at Christy, and a quick check told me Adam was occupied with the pack, so I let off some steam. “She was getting off watching Adam struggle not to fight Paul, sick bitch. I wanted to gut her, and Carnwennan was willing, so getting her gone fast seemed a
good idea. She may be Jesse’s birth mother, but she’s as selfish as humans come.”

“Which is saying something, but yeah, I get that. And that there aren’t many people you can say it to.” He scratched his head. “That was really King Arthur’s dagger you were holding, like Westfield told me?”

“Yup. Turned up in Seattle a while back, as I understand it.”

He gave me another of his looks. “You lead a very strange life, Ms Hauptman.”

“Medicine Wolf agrees with you, though I thought that was a bit rich, considering.”

Willis was startled, but laughed. “Point. But King Arthur is … I dunno. Different. Elder Spirits kinda go with the manitou, somehow — animal forms and all. And fae stuff is always weird. But he’s more like history, I suppose, though I thought it was just a legend.”

“A lot of it is, I believe — mediaeval fantasy, mostly, with a bunch of politics mixed in. But Carnwennan is real. And maybe not so different, because she’s of fae make and has a mind of her own, luckily for me.” Manannán’s Bane warmed in my hand, so I gave it a stroke. “You, too.” I offered Willis a crooked grin. “It’s very pleased with its new name.”

I got yet another look to add to my growing collection.

“I am too, Ms Hauptman. I meant what I said about this morning.”

“I heard. And now I’m a proper civilian consultant, make it Mercy?”

He offered me a hand. “I’d be honoured. It’s Clay.”

We went on in, well pleased with one another, to find the flurry of phone calls generated by lunch had been sorted, and a serious interview with the Widow MacLandis had gone to the top of the Boston FBI’s agenda. A JLS-minded cardinal would also be getting a visit, but the NPS families were coming up clear, and would be financially looked after, at least so far as government pensions go. Clements was in the wind, as expected, but the FBI had put out an All-Points Bulletin and had someone senior heading to her family house, which I hoped would come as a nasty surprise. But Adam had stuck to his guns with Charles, as well as deciding he had things of his own to say, so when our very mixed party set off for the front gate, flanking Medicine Wolf, Sawyer had his guard detail, looking resigned, and we were surrounded by the pack in their finest furry forms.

Werewolves can do pretty strict military discipline when they have to, but one thing they do not do, ever, is close formation, and they were swirling round us as we approached the gate. The KPD had let what looked like hundreds of reporters and camera crews through the further barrier while keeping gawpers back, and sight of us had hushed most chat while adding the flashes and clicks of massed photography. Taylor, I noticed, was making sure Hersch covered the other media as well as us, and gave her points, because when Adam, giving me a glance with some amusement in it, for once pulled on me through our bond and let loose a wave of Alpha power that had more than a little manitou in it and released a faint scent of roses, the pack went straight into two lines flanking us, looking out intently but not snarling, and the silence became profound. Adam took my hand, and we went forward to the bundle of mikes.

“Ladies and gentleman, I am Adam Hauptman, Alpha of the Columbia Basin Pack, Jesse’s father, and Mercy’s husband and mate. Most of the statements that will be made, by my brother wolf Charles, by the guardian avatar of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin known as Medicine Wolf, and by the Secretary of the Interior, are very good news for everyone. But before we get to
that, I have some things to say, of importance to any media remaining here, and anyone intending to come this way. I advise you to listen very carefully.”

He was preaching to the converted on that one, but the little pause worked on them just the same.

“You are all aware of the criminal assaults on me, Mercy, and our daughter yesterday, and that there were further incidents this morning. K-K-Kantrip is suspended, for which we can all give profound thanks, but there are still agents out there unaccounted for, and others hostile to the preternatural, including members of the John Lauren Society and Bright Future who have been actively targeting all three of us on social media and in other ways, including some events of this morning. In particular cases legal action, criminal or civil, is being and will continue to be taken, and for many reasons site security here is being stepped up. I have no intention of giving details, save one — that wolves, in both forms, will be on duty 24/7, patrolling and searching by scent. Anyone with a legitimate reason to enter will be smelt as well as frisked, and no silver weapons of any kind will be permitted through this gate. And I caution reporters and everybody else not to attempt entry to my land in any other way. My wolves will be looking to capture, not kill, but in wolf form that means claws, teeth, and weight, and you will understand that none of us are very concerned about injuries to illegal intruders.”

Bran had forbidden him an Alpha roar, but Adam did let his wolf roll out another wave of power, again tinged with roses, and I swallowed what would have been a very unmannerly giggle at Asil’s expression. But amusement died as power hit media people, who might not understand what they were feeling but knew it wasn’t for ignoring. Adam gave them a toothy smile.

“The polite, unarmed, and serious, however, human or otherwise, will be welcome here, and there are going to be a lot of them, so listen now to my brother wolf Charles.”

We stepped back and Charles came forward. He was in his buckskin jacket and back to looking like a serious warrior, but less worked up than Adam had been. He didn’t really do suave, but he was being clear and, for him, quite gentle.

“My name is Charles, I am Salish, and in the Anglo world I go by Smith. I am also a wolf. You may recall me from Boston last year — I and my wife and mate helped the FBI on the Heuter case, and testified against him. I am Mercy’s adoptive brother, and so Adam’s by kin ties. I count Jesse as my niece. And for all those reasons, I am today a very angry man. And wolf. Think about it.” They did, shivering a little. “I am also empowered to speak today for all werewolves in North America, to tell you that we have two new policies.”

I wasn’t sure how it could but the silence thickened, like heavy winter fog despite the sunlight. So did their shivering.

“Think back to the Heuter case — sixty-two beings kidnapped, tortured, raped, and murdered by two humans and a half-fae, and of those sixty-two, forty-four were fae or half-fae, eleven were humans whom Cantrip mistakenly believed to be fae, and seven were werewolves. All were innocent of any crime warranting execution. Les Heuter, his uncle, and his cousin were not. But the jury was persuaded to acquit him, not because they thought he had not kidnapped, tortured, raped, and murdered, over and over again, relishing it, but because they decided those whom he had victimised — the innocents he raped and murdered, of every kind — had no rights. You all know this. So I have a question for you. Do you think the revelation yesterday that the CNTRP is K-K-Kantrip came as a surprise to any wolf? It seems to have shocked you, but to us it’s old news. We have had as little respect or justice from this nation as the Fae. Or Native Americans, human, wolf, or avatar. Or African Americans, human or wolf. Or women, human or wolf. Or the QUILTfBAG communities, human or wolf. And we recognise, and thank all those communities for, the rage that
began to rise yesterday, on our behalf and their own, after Mercy’s valour showed you all exactly what vileness and evil officially sanctioned bigotry was committing in your names. We heard it in the protests against K-K-Kantrip in DC and elsewhere, and in the Pink Rallies planned for Saturday, which we endorse and which senior wolves will by invitation be addressing.”

And wasn’t that going to be fun, but Kyle had asked, and Bran had said yes. Wearing pink was optional, though.

“So our first new policy is that we will no longer tolerate official prejudice, nor individual or organised actions that would be criminal if the victim was human. We want crimes against any preternatural being classified as hate crimes, with appropriate sentencing, and a Constitutional Amendment ensuring there can be no abrogation of civil rights based on identity as a wolf, avatar, or half-fae. We will openly defend ourselves against and protest such hate crimes, defend our own legally, and bring civil action against perpetrators if the relevant authorities do not bring criminal ones where we believe it warranted. We will also film bigoted behaviour, and post videos naming and shaming those who hate without reason and would injure without cause.”

I couldn’t see Charles’s eyes, but I sensed his wolf coming forward, and the tension rose sharply.

“When we run under the moon, we hunt for the food a wolf likes, deer and rabbits, and for the joy of running, and being alive. But from today, those who hunt us will find themselves hunted in turn, relentlessly, and we have started by sending the Watchdog Times, for publication in their next issue, next week, the names of all those we can prove to be members of the John Lauren Society and Bright Future. Watch for it, because there will be names that surprise and shock you.” Brother Wolf faded a little in my senses, and tension eased. “This policy is the Path of Assertion, and as we begin to run it we offer associations of mutual defence to others suffering the attentions of bigotry, whether for race, gender, creed, or orientation, and will be conducting our first talks next week, with the NAACP and the Black Caucus.”

They actually had a werewolf Representative, not that they’d known it. Nor me, until today. Anna had also told me, grinning, that his wolf had an oversize white mask, and his pack mates ragged him about it.

“Our second new policy is the reciprocal those talks indicate, that we will also now offer our strengths and aid more openly. As the FBI saw in Boston, scent evidence can be a powerful forensic tool, and with their support and that of the CIA and DEA, as well as other agencies, we will push to see it become admissible in law. Chief Rodgers of the Kennewick PD is a strong supporter, and the first trials will be here in the Tri-Cities — Adam will make wolves available to assist the Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland PDs, where they believe such assistance will be of material benefit. Police authorities elsewhere are invited to contact their local Alphas to the same end. We will also be talking to North-Western Governors and FEMA about assistance with mountain SAR and other emergency response. In both forms, wolves have great strength and endurance, as you know, and whether in blizzard, fire, or flood those capacities can and will be better harnessed for the good of all. This is the Path of Mercy.”

I’d argued as hard as I could against that phrase, but Charles had insisted, and gave me a warm smile as I rolled my eyes. But I hadn’t known he was going to talk about it, and felt myself flushing.

“It embarrasses my sister, as you see, but it is a true name. We came out half-way, acknowledged but holding to the shadows, because we knew the bigotry there would be, and though we hoped more productive relations would develop as fears on both sides eased, K-K-Kantrip prevented that. But yesterday they made a catastrophic mistake, and Mercy has dealt them a mortal blow. Standing
here yesterday morning, golden-eyed with rage for Jesse and soaked in Adam’s blood, spilled by Cantrip bigots with badges, she asked when common sense would step up to the plate. For all American wolves, it does so from today, on the Path of Assertion as necessary, and the Path of Mercy always.”

What Alphas were going to say about it I dreaded to think, though Adam had found it both funny and serving me right. He had a point, but I was still cross about it, and glad of the zen Anna sent me, brushing her fingers against my free hand, before I stepped forward again, Medicine Wolf extending his head beside mine. I’ve often thought that bunched microphones make a really ugly object, and this bundle was no exception, but it was being put to very good use.

“You know, people, my objection isn’t so much to being embarrassed, though I am, but to putting me front and centre. Because whatever you all think, this stops being about me right now. It’s about the manitou, Medicine Wolf, and important as wolves are to me, and my own identities as a Blackfeet and a coyote girl, and a wife and mate and mother, this is bigger, by orders of magnitude. I know you each have a zillion urgent questions, and some are probably good questions, but you’re not getting any more answers from me today. What you are getting is the Path of the Manitou, in its own words. I’ll be speaking them into the mikes, but everyone present will hear them in their heads direct, so don’t misunderstand — I am relaying this, not making it up, and you all need to be far more concerned with the message than the messenger.”

Darryl had had some very good thoughts about how to shape what the manitou wanted to say, and Medicine Wolf let out a little pulse of magic that tingled the nerves before it began, pausing regularly to let me repeat its words.

As you have learned, I am the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin, and I have accepted from the First People the name Medicine Wolf. — Now fully awake, after long retreat to the depths of rock below me, I am aware of every living thing within the Basin, whether plants, animals, humans, or magical beings. — As I am myself alive, so I welcome life in all its forms and ways, but there must also be balance — the harmony the First People knew long ago, and animals have always known. — And with you humans there is no harmony, so this must change.

To begin with, two things must be done, and in return I will help you in ways beyond your own abilities. — In addition, I require you all to study the balances that are wrought and re-established, and learn from them.

First, you must stop polluting and despoiling me. — I am the water and the land, the trees and fields, and I itch from the chemicals and objects you vomit upon me. — Sleeping, it woke me. Awake, I will not tolerate it. — And in return for this effort and expense on your part, in changing your ways, I will remove the radioactive contamination you have spilled into my rocks and waters — through the mishaps of your wars, and the heedlessness of your ways. — I have begun to do so, in good faith, as you can watch — and I will add to this a related boon — for I can take the radioactive waste you produce and convey it to the molten rocks deep below me — where it will be carried within, and do no harm.

And second, you must remove the dams from my waters. — What you say you harness, I say you deform and destroy. — For the fish and river creatures, and much more, the dams must go. — I will assist, for I can change the gradient of the river, and raise or lower its banks, as I will — and so your needs of power generation and flood control can be met. — I know it will cost you much money and effort — as it will cost me time and great labour — but it must be done. — As the pollution you inflict makes me itch, so the dams make me feel bloated and cross. — In return, I will do all I can to moderate, divide, and enable you to prepare for — the great earthquake I sense building, and almost ripe — where the plate that bears the ocean is drawn under the plate that
bears the land. — I cannot stop the earthquake — the planet has its own rhythms — but I can seek to minimise its effects on you. — I cannot change its depth or total force — but I can trigger, extend, perhaps divide, and so dissipate that force. — I can save you, and animals, many lives and much sorrow — and save you much of your money, to set against the costs of removing the dams.

That is all. And it is much.

What anyone had expected I had no idea but it hadn’t been this, and the expressions I could see ranged from shocked to bewildered, though there was also some dazed pleasure I thought had more to do with being spoken to by the manitou at all than by what it had said. The wind gusted, ruffling Medicine Wolf’s fur.

“This is me again now, Mercy Hauptman, and you heard Medicine Wolf. We stop polluting, and with its help, and Mr Adelbertsmiter’s and his son’s, we get a way cheaper, very much faster, and permanent Hanford clean-up. We also re-engineer the Basin’s hydrography, Columbia, Snake, and Flathead, that we’ve messed up, and in return we get a more efficient system and a definite date for the overdue Cascadia quake — meaning time to evacuate safely ahead of whatever infrastructural damage can’t be avoided. And as saving the taxpayers lots of billions of dollars, and any number of fatalities, seems a really good idea, we’ve put a rush on it, and that’s why the last statement today comes from Mr Secretary Sawyer, for the Federal Government. Mr Secretary, sir?”

Medicine Wolf only had to pull its head back, sitting more upright, but I had to take some steps back and took the opportunity to gesture Sawyer forward. He gave me a nod, murmured thanks, and slid into a more folksy persona than I’d seen from him before — a courtroom as much as a political style I guessed, and he’d been a good prosecutor. His opening also grabbed attention, but there was no chance the nation’s chief executive wasn’t watching with everyone else.

“Mr President, and all my fellow Americans, we’ve had a big surprise and a bad shock. We got called to the TV yesterday, and we saw our world — and our nation — change. And change again, as events unfolded.

“We knew about the Fae. We knew about wolves. We wondered about more — and now we know. There are manitous, and Elder Spirits, and we have to — have to — come to terms with it. With them.

“I came out here today as jittery as oil on a hot griddle. The news that Ms Hauptman was missing, and seeing her astonishing return, didn’t help any. And I don’t mind saying that my pulse is still racing, and my palms a little damp right now. But you know, since I got here, I’ve been increasingly relieved, impressed, and happy. I’ve been spoken to and heard courteously by all kinds of folk with every reason to be angry and distressed. I’ve been offered cookies warm from the oven, and fed some excellent food. I’ve heard a whole heap of very good sense. And I’ve been offered wonders beyond my wildest dreams.

“Ms Hauptman is exactly right. Even sticking to hard facts and what’s already happening, the Hanford clean-up is budgeted to cost $112 billion, and take at least another half-century. It costs over a million dollars a day right now. But thanks to Medicine Wolf — and, like Ms Hauptman, I don’t forget Mr Adelbertsmiter and his son — we can make that less than fifty million, tops, and completion some time next week. And I tell you all, that’s a miracle that’ll save a lot of lives right there.

“Then there’s what’s proposed. Do I welcome the cost of re-engineering more than a hundred dams and the biggest hydropower and flood-control system in the world? Not hardly. Do I think it’s worth it for a better system and a definite date for the Cascadia quake, which the USGS estimates will be force 9 plus? Hell, yes. In a heartbeat. One’s money, the other is a lot of our lives,
as all you folks living west of I-5 know, and plenty of folks east of it too. And if the idea of evacuating the coastal strip wholesale gives me a real headache, I still know it’ll be a whole lot better than trying to search the rubble.”

He held up a hand.

“Are there questions? Only a million or two. Do we yet understand exactly what Medicine Wolf can do? Of course not. Do we need to find out what’s going to be needed, and what the details are? You bet. So I’m announcing today that the Department of the Interior will sponsor two major conferences, hosted by Washington State University here in the Tri-Cities, that Medicine Wolf will attend. One will be about re-engineering the Columbia hydro-system, the other about preparing for the Cascadia earthquake, and though dates haven’t been decided, they will happen as soon as possible. The President will be attending, Governors of all affected states will be invited, and so will delegations from Canada and Mexico. So watch this space, folks, because some stuff that’s as serious as it gets is gonna be happening.

“And just one more thing, for today, which is to offer Medicine Wolf, and Mr Hauptman, Ms Hauptman, and Miss Hauptman, some formal apologies and thanks, regarding yesterday’s events, on behalf of the President and us all. I don’t think the apologies need much explanation given what we all saw yesterday, and have heard today. We — all of us, the citizens of this great nation — deserve a lot better than we saw from Cantrip. And that’s where the thanks come in, because by exposing them, Medicine Wolf and the Hauptmans have exposed something — a lot of somethings, that stink to high heaven. The President will be making a statement over the weekend, when things are clearer, and I don’t want to anticipate him, but I can say the FBI are already cold certain that the charges arising from their investigation will not just be for the crimes we saw committed here, but multiple counts of kidnapping and murder, as well as every kind of gross malfeasance. So brace yourselves for all that too, because we have some major cleaning up to do in DC as well as here in the Basin, and we owe it to our medicine manitou, and three very upstanding citizens. Remember them in your prayers, please, and God bless America.”

It was a good speech, and I thought ‘medicine manitou’ might make a headline or two. Still better, Medicine Wolf took care of any idiot attempts to shout questions by standing, announcing it was going to Pasco to give a statement to the police, then to Hanford to open a shaft for filtration, requesting coverage of the radiation counts as they started falling, and giving a general farewell with a whuff of magic that tingled everyone before loping down to the Columbia — where it went straight on, paws not even dimpling the current. It had been Andrea’s laughing suggestion that if Medicine Wolf could walk on water, it should, and by the time the massed media stopped goggling at it heading past Burbank Slough we were all back inside a closed gate. I was feeling cheerier than I had in what seemed a long time, and when I saw Taylor and her crew tracking us at a respectful distance I caught Adam’s arm, and despite his look we went over, most of the pack with us.

“Mr and Ms Hauptman?”

She was looking at the wolves with more curiosity than fear, though not being a fool she was still wary.

“Ms Taylor. You’re owed that interview with my not-exactly father. He’s been in and out, but next time he’s in I’ll remind him to find you. And meantime, given all you’ve done in the last two days, I’m minded to offer you a present of sorts, coyote style.” I grinned at her look. “I said no more answers from me today, but I’ll give you exactly one, if I can and may. What’s the question?”

Taylor’s lips tightened and Adam shook his head reprovingly, though I knew he thought it was funny too.
“That’s …”

“Nice of me?”

“Not quite what I had in mind, Ms Hauptman.” But Taylor had half-a-smile on her face. “Which of the zillion should I choose? And who isn’t going to second guess me? I’ll go with what I can see, because it’s been eating me up. That’s some feather you’re wearing. Tell me about it?”

I’d honestly forgotten it, and Adam became even more amused as he realised I had. But I was still feeling cheerful, and a pre-emptive strike might save me a lot of hassle.

“Good choice, Ms Taylor, and yeah, isn’t it just? My wardrobe’s had some joy today, after a rough start. The feather is a gift from Thunderbird, who says he likes his hashtag, so I’ll take the chance to tell your Native American viewers in the Basin, and especially anyone living on or near any river frontage, that yeah, you’ll be affected by the re-engineering and getting rid of dams, and yeah, you can all grumble about it, not that anything could stop you. But no, you can’t block it or hold it up for personal or tribal advantage, and if you try you’ll get nowhere fast and probably painfully. Medicine Wolf wants it to happen, so it will happen. Get your heads round that now. The Elder Spirits will be looking out for you all, as well as their own kinds, but if someone’s being a real problem they’ll also be looking in on them. And while Thunderbird’s a real nice … Thunderbird, as Elder Spirits go, you don’t want that at all. Nor, God help you, a visit from my not-exactly father. Ask your medicine man, if you’ve forgotten the tales. And think about what it will mean to have the salmon back in proper numbers. Yum, for one. Oh, and the recognised tribal federations should choose some delegates for those conferences who understand maths as well as manitous. That do you, Ms Taylor?”

“I guess.” Her expression was complicated. “So it’s, what, an emblem of sorts?”

“It’s a really pretty feather. And I’ve got people to see and things to do. But I expect there’ll be some food available for you, Mr Dilman, and Mr Hersch later, as KEPR still hasn’t got you a corporate account at Benny’s. Suits over there, you’re making plenty out of this, so start seeing to the comfort of the people doing the work, hey?”

Adam grinned, and a couple of the pack yipped amusement as we swung away. The others, including Sawyer, had waited for us, listening in, and Charles gave me a long look.

“Da was right, Mercy. You are very much Coyote’s daughter. What are you going to do when someone is a real problem, which knowing Native Americans someone will be, and no Elder Spirit chooses to turn up?”

“How should I know, Charles? But it’s a feather from Thunderbird, given me by Coyote, so I’ll probably try tickling them with it. Something ought to happen.”
Not so surprisingly, social as well as news media had exploded, and the USGS had a very busy time providing talking heads who actually knew something about plate tectonics, but the house stayed calm, for a change. Some of the pack were on wolf patrol, and after talking to Westfield and various PDs Adam let those with families head home, though there was a roster for guard duty and strict rules about their own security and dealing with the media. Sawyer headed back to DC, after telling me the President would still like to speak to me this evening, but had no idea yet what time he might be free. Who knew what the Feebs were up to, but as they were in their MCC and trailer whatever it was was fine by me. I changed back into jeans and a tee, wriggled in relief, laid the feather carefully next to Carnwennan, and did some more baking.

I also got to watch Medicine Wolf, who after giving its statement in Pasco decided to stay visible while walking to Hanford, and attracted serious crowds. It also — occasionally, and on what basis I couldn’t work out — stopped to talk to people. Quite a few were children, and it was clearly greeting police hurriedly stationed along the route, but the adults seemed random — all ages and colours, and perhaps that was the point. It made for an interesting show, not least in that while there was awe on most faces, there was a lot less shock than anyone might expect. Jesse, Anna, and Andrea had come to keep me company while scanning media and stealing bits of chocolate, and shared my curiosity.

“Maybe it’s zenning them a little.”

“Could be, Anna, but I think they’ve got to ‘it may be a fifteen-foot dire wolf but it’s our fifteen-foot dire wolf’ sooner than I’d have thought possible. And that they’re filing under celebrity — it’s a TV star, so going to see it in person is what you do.”

“All of that, Mercy, but that’s a kind of worship, and so is this.” Andrea was smiling as she watched. “It’s so wonderful why wouldn’t everyone want to look for themselves?”

“Huh. You think my attitude’s catching on, then?”

“For sure. And your numbers are up, again. Ninety-eight percent and change under forty giving strong personal approval, despite doubts and worries about the river and earthquake plans, and it’s rising into the higher seventies for the over-forties. Everything lupine is doing well too — Charles made a big impression, and anything with Path of Assertion, Path of Mercy, Path of the Manitou in its tags is trending way up.”

“Four legs good, two legs bad.”

Jesse was deadpan and we all laughed.

“Some of that, Jesse.” Andrea looked thoughtful. “But it’s more the, um, decisiveness Mercy’s shown and induced, I think. The thing with Mr Harris has played oddly — a lot of people didn’t like what they heard him say, and most seem to think he got exactly what was coming to him. But it’s resonating with Medicine Wolf stopping Cantrip yesterday as well as what Mercy said introducing Sawyer, about putting a rush on it, and Sawyer’s own speed in saying what he did. He’s done himself a lot of good.” She was flicking pages, or feeds, and suddenly gave a wide grin.
“NBC’s nailed it, Mercy — *Wolves Rock America.*”

“Now *that’s* a tee I want.” It didn’t mention me, for one thing. I slid more baking trays into the oven and straightened, feeling my back tell me I’d done enough. “And thanks for the analysis, Andrea. I hope you’re right, on all counts. And for the walking on water idea, which worked a treat. Is that trending too?”

“Ohhh yeah.” She put some drawl in it, still grinning. “The religious feeds are getting really confused. Yesterday didn’t cut it, despite everything, but the *Christian Science Monitor* is already asking if today saw a miracle in the Tri-Cities. And the fundamentalist pastors who’ve been talking up stewardship in the dominion debate are recognising the manitou as what they’re calling a corrective Godsend. But most demographics are tipping, Mercy, even ones I didn’t expect.” She looked up and shrugged. “One day, and it was *huh?*, two and it’s *yay!* Do you know what happens next?”

I returned the shrug, with interest. “Not a clue, Andrea, beyond what’s been said. Except that someone will do something. They always do. And if they don’t, my not-exactly father will. He owes Taylor an interview, for all he’s been stalling on it.”

“Have not.” Coyote drifted forward from the doorway, making Jesse and Andrea jump. “I’ve been busy.”

“So I’ve heard, not-exactly Dad.” His eyebrows rose. “What did Gary ever do to you except get conceived?”

“You don’t want to know.” His hand drifted toward a cooling brownie as he gave me what he obviously thought was a soulful look. “Are you so cross with me you’ll deny me your excellent baking?”

“No if you give Taylor that interview before dusk.”

“Done.” The brownie disappeared, closely followed by another. “On the other paw, your not-exactly aunts liked what you said to her, and even I think it shows some promise. You know what to do with the spotlight, which Gary doesn’t. Did you persuade them to let him go?”

“Yeah. And if you mess with him again, I’ll ask Gordon to make you swallow a cell phone and give Margi your number.”

He beamed at me. “That’s my girl. And I haven’t forgotten your very exactly mother, I promise, nor your unpesky sisters and lucky old Curt. They’re still feet deep in media, shouting over Bran’s splendid security types, but as soon as that ebbs a little I’ll drop by.”

“Give Mom some warning?” I was deadly serious and he heard me. “You bounce a lot better than she does.”

His voice gentled. “I will, Mercy. Joe loved her a lot in the time he had, so I do too for all my much longer time.” Enough was enough and we both knew it. “Aren’t you going to demand reassurances about the *marid*?”

“What’s the point?” I pointed to a third brownie and made a cut-off sign it didn’t survive. “You’ll do what you’ll do, with or without humourless *djinni* to help. Just *don’t* do it here when stuff that matters is happening.” I considered. “In so far as you were priming Asil to be more forthcoming, my thanks. But leave him be as well, hey? Because I ask you, if for no other reason. At ten and whatever thousand, you’ve forgotten the pain he’s in, manitou glass or no. And wolves are *so* not
He was busy looking indignant when, surprising both of us, Jesse slipped off her stool and went to stand in front of him.

“We haven’t been introduced, sir, but I’m Jesse Hauptman. And you’re Coyote.”

“Yes, I am. So?”

“So you’re my not-exactly grandfather?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “You could say, not-exactly granddaughter. What of it?”

He got a grin that had more edge than anyone Jesse’s age should be able to manage, and I sent up a silent cheer as he blinked.

“It means your sisters are my not-exactly great-aunts, yes?”

“Not-exactly so.” He shrugged slightly. “But you could argue it.”

“Can I meet them? And may I?”

“Maybe. It’s not so easy, not-exactly granddaughter. And your not-exactly mother should find a less clumsy way of putting all this.”

Jesse wasn’t distracted. “Dad has no siblings, but Mom’s sisters are cool, so I like aunts. Great-aunts sound even better.”

Coyote sent me a harassed glance, and I folded my arms, leaning back. He stuck out his tongue, and I just smiled. Jesse was a force to reckon with when she wanted to be.

“There are rules, granddaughter.”

“And you obey them, Gramps? Mom says otherwise.”

“Gramps? Have you no respect?”

“While you do, lots. I’ll make you chocolate and brush you anytime. But if you give Mom any headaches, I’ll tie a firebrand to your tail in a heartbeat and tell my graunts everything I know about hair dye.”

He tried staring her down until a grin spread over his face. “Now that sounds promising, Graught. Step-grand-niece is pushing it, but things do go sideways in our families, and maybe they have with you.”

Abruptly he became more serious, and with an easy motion sat cross-legged on a chair, putting his head closer to Jesse’s eyeline.

“Yes, I’m a trickster, and irritating my more-exactly-than-she-thinks daughter is in my blood, along with ignoring everybody else’s rules. But what she’s doing now is very important. I wouldn’t be here otherwise and I won’t mess with it, just … lighten up the edges a little. Laughter matters too. And meeting my sisters isn’t so easy because they don’t walk in the world the way I do, but if you come with Mercy to the next big Yakama pow-wow we might be able to find a space you can both be in for a little while. Do I get a pass?”

Jesse gave him one, but he’d also been looking at me.
“You always do. But yeah. I was just pissed about Gary, and the pack wouldn’t have been too pleased if he’d wound up back in jail. Especially Honey, and I do not need her upset. Nor does she.”

He rolled his eyes at me. “Alright, alright, I’ll leave him be. For now. But he’s going to have pull his weight a bit more, Mercy. Everyone is.”

I couldn’t argue with that, and had my own doubts about Gary, so I let it go, and as it was clouding over and the wind had picked up a little, I agreed Coyote could do his interview in the room we’d used last night. Anna went to tell Taylor, while I gave Mom a heads-up, and took the chance to tell her what I could about this morning and assure her I was OK. She wasn’t too happy with how much I wasn’t saying but knew there were reasons, and was more nervous than she was letting on about Coyote, which led to some babbling about me having looked good on TV. I talked to my sisters too, exchanging reassurances and laughing with Nan about the Time and National Geographic covers, while waiting on the last batch in the oven and wondering how many people would need feeding this evening. Then KEPR’s coverage of the manitou ended as it cleared the city limits and sped up, and the Coyote fun began.

After her introduction, Taylor not unreasonably asked him if he really was the Coyote, about whom so many tales were told, and instead of speaking he just went coyote, giving a twirl on the couch and cycling through his animal-headed form before reverting to looking human.

“Youp, Ms Taylor, that’s me. Mercy and the other avatars can’t do the mixed form or manage clothing when they change, and they have regular-sized animal forms, because they’re not Elder Spirits. But I’m the quintessence of coyote, and I’ve been around a long time — twenty thousand years or so that I remember, and who knows how long before that that I don’t? As to stories, the First People usually get them about right in the oral traditions, but in print it all gets muddled up because most of you Anglos can’t tell a catamount from a catflap. I can tell you a true one, though, if you’d like.”

He picked the one about the cheating Anglo trader — what the Sioux call was’ichu, or fat stealer — who reckoned he could outsmart and rob any dumb old Indian, and lost his clothes, new hat, gun, and horse to wind up bareass naked in the afternoon sun while Coyote rode off with the lot. And I have to admit he told it really well, with vivid detail and a switching accent that made it clear the was’ichu was an Easterner, as well as a pure relish in the trickery. But he ended on a sober note.

“I pulled that trick often, but it didn’t stop the was’ichu in the end. They just kept coming, until there was no more fat to steal and not much lean either. Coyote as I am, I couldn’t match the trickery and conniving you Anglos got up to, any more than poor old Bison could stop you slaughtering all his children for the dark pleasure of killing. He’s still in a bad way. But now the Great Manitou’s back and being Medicine Wolf — isn’t it a good name? I don’t think I’ve ever been grateful to the FBI before — we’re having another go. And we’ve been studying up on your tricks for a long while, now, so seeing it make you all jump sideways is … pleasing. Makes for a change.”

For a while after that he stayed serious and on message, so far as I understood what it was, while I shifted the last batch of brownies to racks to cool. Humans mostly saw pollution as a nuisance, but for plenty of animals it was a killer — especially chemicals and plastic. The yokes for packs of beverage cans got special stick, as did the microbeads they use in stuff that really doesn’t need them, and the habit of saturating cattle with antibiotics. Taylor didn’t have a problem with any of that, but she did ask about predation on livestock, and got an eloquent shrug.
“Of course my children eat sheep, and cattle when they can, though bovines are too big mostly. You’ve filled the plains and everywhere else with them, and reduced the deer and rabbit ranges. Humans feeding my children is not good, because it gives them ideas and confuses them, but if you shared the land better the problem would reduce.”

It didn’t seem likely, even today, and I’d always been able to see the ranchers’ point, even if some ninety thousand coyotes being shot every year was a stat that always made me wince. But all that went out of my head when Taylor got him onto the River Devil. She was cautious, mentioning the sacred silence Charles had explained but wondering if there was anything he could add, and he gave her a grin.

“But you came alive again.”

“You’re heroes.”

She sounded quite plaintive.

“Of course we are, Ms Taylor. The tales are always about us.” He grinned. “Could I get a Purple Heart, do you think?”

Adam, who had several, had come in and was sitting beside me, eating a brownie he nearly choked
“You have to be serving in the military, I believe.” Taylor was still shocked. “But I’ll agree you ought to get something. So should Ms Hauptman. She really cut out its heart?”

“It’s the only way, Ms Taylor. Took a lot of knives, too, and some timely help from Manannán’s Bane, as I heard the story. But you’ll have to ask her about that, not that she’ll tell you — I was dead at the time, remember? Didn’t get back until next morning.” He grinned. “But the River Devil didn’t get back at all, until next time, and that should be a long while. It’ll also be a lot easier to find if the dams are gone — having so much deep water for it to hide in didn’t help much, this time round. Just be glad we got it, as we are.”

“Oh, I am. Is there anything else like that out there?”

“Nope. Only one River Devil.” He frowned. “Wendigos aren’t much fun, but they’re not in the same league by a long way. Enough salt will usually do the trick. And they prefer the ice, silly things, so stay south of it and you’d be very unlucky to bump into one.”

Taylor swallowed. “Salt for wendigos. Right. Sasquatch?”

Coyote laughed. “Nah, though leaving extra big footprints is always a good trick. Apes didn’t make it to North America until the First People came along. I don’t know about yetis, though — never been to Asia, but they do have monkeys, so maybe. Wouldn’t it be fun if there were?”

“Fun?”

“You bet. Playmates are always good. And we’re all hoping some more manitous might wake up. There’s certainly Great Manitous of the Mississippi and Colorado Basins, and there used to be a baby one of the Great Lakes, though I haven’t seen it in a long time.”

That brought things back to Medicine Wolf and what it wanted, segueing into stories about life in the Pleistocene and what the great floods from Glacial Lake Missoula had been like. Coyote had a low opinion of smilodons, which he said had had no sense of humour at all, but he regretted the stag moose — “Very good eating, when I could get it” — and sabre-toothed salmon, both of which had Jesse and Andrea consulting Wikipedia and raising eyebrows. Who knows how long it might have gone on, but Taylor reluctantly curtailed it to say Medicine Wolf had reached Hanford, and was preparing to open a shaft, so coverage would switch. After offering thanks Coyote acknowledged with a modest look that made me grin, she signed off, and after a while he brought her, with Dilman and Hersch, through to the kitchen.

Coyote was mostly after more brownies, and the others were willing enough to take some when I offered, but more awkward with me than they’d become by the end of yesterday. KEPR’s coverage of Hanford was keeping everyone a little quiet, though, because while Medicine Wolf wasn’t obviously doing anything except glowing a little, which looked very pretty as the sky darkened, its magic was hard at work. A shaft had already opened and was steadily deepening, and a drone camera was providing a bird’s-eye view. Zee had been in the shot once or twice, hanging a geiger counter on a metal arm over the opening with a mike next to it, and when the clicking began rapidly to increase in volume and frequency, rattling up to a steady buzz, he and Tad lugged over some big coils of plastic piping, dropped them in, and started the pumps. There were other geiger counters by the filters, and when they started buzzing too I felt a grin start, that others shared.

On one hand it was pretty boring — just a filtration system doing its job with a soundtrack that could have been as annoying as flies in summer. The net result was a dull gray, nasty-looking sludge that Zee showed the drone when after twenty minutes or so he paused the pump to switch
out the box where it was accumulating for an empty one, before carefully tipping sludge into one of the waiting containers. But it felt wonderful, because the crap was coming out of the groundwater, and the voiceover let us know only minutes later that contamination levels detected in Hanford Reach and the Yakima River had already begun to fall — only a very little, as yet, but moving in the right direction. Adam broke out some beers, telling me ruefully that we needed to restock, and I caught Coyote as he sauntered out back to drink his.

“Any particular reason you put the technicolour version of the River Devil business out there?”

He gave me an unreadable look. “Finding fame a bother? Don’t. You’re using it well. And you heard Ms Taylor — she thinks you should get a medal.”

“You can be the hero, and welcome.”

“Spot’s already taken this time, and you’re it. With Medicine Wolf. And of course I had a reason — several of them. You danced round it very prettily last night, but you’re far too modest, and given what the maggot-brained MacLandis had put out there already it’s better to have it all straight. Saving the otterkin, of course, and they’re all dead, so who cares about them? The others agreed. And it’s not as if we’re going to need that plan again anytime soon.”

He finished his bottle in a long chug, and handed me the empty.

“Good beer. Besides, oh not-exactly daughter, you’re going to need all the juice you can get to keep pushing things. You can’t tell the humans you killed all those vamps, or that Gray Lord this morning, and you didn’t kill Guayota though you made a pretty good mess of his avatar, but the River Devil was your kill. Well, with that nice walking stick. I bet it’s not cross with me. And now you don’t have to pussyfoot round it any more.”

“I’m not cross, I don’t think. I was just surprised. Your version of Gordon’s feather, then?”

He laughed. “If you like, though I was only following your example and putting truth out there. We Elder Spirits being so brave and big-hearted we deserve Purple Hearts doesn’t hurt either, of course, but once I’d told Ms Taylor we all died in the doing, who else but you could have done the actual killing?” He gave me a sly smile. “You could say death throes again, next time someone asks. It sounded pretty good to me. But after all that sitting and talking I need a run, somewhere there aren’t so many wolves. I’ll spread the word about searching some more, too, and I’ll be back tomorrow or the day after, I expect. Sooner if I’m needed.”

I remembered something, and held up a hand. “It’s not urgent, but Charles wants me to ask you about scent, and whether mine gets any magical boost. Talk to him when you can?”

“If he wants, but Bear’s better at that than anyone else.”

He changed and trotted off, tail swishing slightly, and I went back in, thinking with some regret that a second beer should probably wait until after the President called. And a third.
I found Adam asking Taylor in a carefully neutral voice how long she was planning to stay.

“I’m not objecting, Ms Taylor. And I’m grateful for the courage and tact you’ve shown, as well as your stamina last night. I also understand that Mercy and I will have to suck up being a reality show for quite a while, however we get tired of it. But I have more security than site physical to consider, and your camera is … a complication.”

“I get that.” Taylor ran fingers though her hair. “And what Carl expects me to do here now is not at all clear to me, but when I suggested we call it a day he had conniptions though there’s nothing else scheduled of which I’m aware. You could always just throw us out.”

Adam’s eyes met mine, and I sent him a jumble of stuff that added up to a shrug. There might be plenty to cover, but there was also plenty that couldn’t be broadcast, and as we’d want and need a friendly KEPR team in future, giving offence would not be sensible. Anna, Andrea, and Jesse kept quiet, Adam growled frustration, and I reconsidered.

“Tell you what, Ms Taylor. Tell Radzinsky we’re kicking you out for now, because with Medicine Wolf at Hanford, and nothing happening here, we don’t need to be live and it’s an imposition. But we’ll agree a contract with KEPR covering, oh, let’s say a month in the first instance. If Medicine Wolf is here, you can be too, front exterior only except by specific invitation, with the reciprocal that if we call and ask for you to come, you — and I mean you, with Mr Dilman and Mr Hersch — will be on your way as fast as you can. No ifs, no buts, unless one of you is ill.”

She thought about it for a moment, and nodded gratefully. “Yes. That’ll wash. Thank you, Ms Hauptman.”

“No problem. Meantime, why not pack up your gear but stay to eat with us, if you will, not as media on duty but just as friends? I’ll tell you straight, what I’m reading is that you’ve all been a bit weirded out all over again today, some by seeing me this morning, some by Medicine Wolf’s speech, maybe a little by someone from DC actually doing something, which is ringing my bells too, and a bunch more by Coyote spilling all the River Devil beans. About right?”

“Not wrong, Ms Hauptman, though your not-exactly father did some weirding before that. But yeah, I’m still dealing with then it ate me.” Taylor shook her head. “And what am I doing complaining to you about that? You must have seen it.”

“He came back.” I shrugged. “And no, that wasn’t fun at all. But I don’t want to talk about it, and I do want friends. If you’d rather go, no offence. But if you’d like to eat, make it Mercy and let’s get cooking.”

She was still bemused, and so were Dilman and Hersch, but they agreed to stay and I tallied numbers. Adam had let Darryl and Aurielle head home to a Christy-free space for the first time in two months, and Warren was on duty with Asil for the remaining pack, who would stay on four-legged patrol. I told Warren to give Kyle a call, and went to check on the Feebs and admire their high-tech MCC, but a sagging Westfield declined, saying that after the evidence of lunch he’d agreed to run an official tab at Benny’s, and might have faced a riot if he hadn’t. He and Fisher
also updated me on the property search, which had had some locations added from Cantrip’s DC databases but was still finding zip.

“I think it must be a purpose-built facility, Ms Hauptman. There’s nothing in Cantrip’s DC files, and full of crimes and crap as they are it looks as if the really black ops were kept very isolated. I’ve asked for a search of Senator Heuter’s financial records to look for anything that might indicate construction. Warrant’s hung up, but it’ll happen tomorrow. So though I really hate this line of thought, we’ve done the searches on missing persons, fifteen to forty, with tags for membership of gyms, sports clubs, and so on, to try for the criteria Mr Smith mentioned. There are quite a few, the more so as the only limit we have is three and some years back, when wolves came out, so I was wondering if there was anything else we could be using as search parameters?”

I thought about it, increasingly unhappily. “Charles thought Cantrip would have stuck to men, for increased survival rates, but I’m not persuaded. Experiments on healing suggests to me they’d have wanted to check male against female, and given Preskylovitch was a rapist and straight, I’d expect sexual predation.”

Westfield winced, but nodded.

“And I assume you’re cross-matching with known fae or half-fae?” They were, but those records were very patchy, the fae being past masters at skewing anything that might reveal them. “Right. But given Cantrip’s embedded racism and whiteness, they might have skewed to non-whites as, what, more deserving victims? And even if the wolf they had doing the attempted Changes was very skilled, which I’d think he or she wasn’t, they’d have had a lot of remains to dispose of. Burial? Or cremation? What do I know, but I’d think that would take some pretty specialist purchases that could be tracked. They’d have needed a lot of silver, too. And if they were trying to tranq wolves, the other probable ingredients would be Ketamine and DMSO.”

Something was nagging me, and I made myself think about the practicalities of holding preternaturals over a sustained period. I knew a little about how Gerry Wallace had tried it, but he hadn’t been operating on the scale I thought Cantrip might have tried.

“Going the other way, AED, with missing people searches, it might be worth eliminating dates on full moons and maybe a day either way. Captive wolves would have had to change, and Preskylovitch or whoever might have found he needed troops at home. Any collaborating wolves would be moonbound as well.”

“That’s good, Ms Hauptman.” Fisher was already tapping keys at speed. “Human disappearances are statistically pretty constant, though with spikes at major holidays. If anywhere has a sustained pattern of fewer disappearances over full moon it ought to pop.”

“Not knowing numbers makes this chancy, but they’d also need a lot of food — meat above all, but dairy too. Protein. If the wolf doing the Changing — or any collaborating wolf — is dominant enough they could force changes when they wanted, either way, but it takes a lot of energy, and werewolves will become emaciated and unable to change a lot faster than a human would starve to death.” Another consideration hit me hard. “And letting wolves who’ve been shot bleed out, they’d either need a lot of blood to give them afterwards or be prepared to leave them be for quite a while.”

“We’re looking at that, but you can get blood from anyone.”

That was depressingly true, and so was my next thought. “Who says they only tried bullets? Silver blades, common and rarer poisons. Given this is Cantrip, I’d bet on aconite, for one.”
“Because?”

“One old name for monkshood is wolfbane, AED, and there were medieval beliefs it could cure lycanthropy. Plant’s everywhere, but I’d hope prepared sources are pretty limited.”

Westfield did some key-tapping himself, Fisher still being busy, and blew out a breath. “That’s in Cantrip’s database, with lots of flags, so that’s another good call, Ms Hauptman.”

“So is the moon.” Fisher’s voice held a note of excitement. “Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, Cheyenne, Laramie, Rock Springs, Ogden, and Salt Lake City all have elevated figures for misper in the fit younger category over the last year and none of the excess coincides with a full moon. Casper, Billings, and Bozeman add in as maybes. There’s also a significant skew to African Americans and Hispanics. And somewhere in that cluster would fit with Preskylovitch’s inferred movement.” She turned to me. “Orton and Kent didn’t leave Pasco PD until after eleven pm, Ms Hauptman, and reached Cantrip’s office in Richland about half-past. We assume they only reported then, because MacLandis didn’t contact Judge Cray until nearly one am. Preskylovitch picked up the subpoena here just after six, so one assumption was that he couldn’t have been more than about a four-hour flight away. It didn’t rule out much, but northern Colorado or Utah, and southern Wyoming, would all fit nicely.”

Westfield blew out another breath. “Sounds good, Leslie. Refine it all you can, then get it to behavioural analysis with a red flag for probabilities, especially north or south of I-80, and I’ll talk to the Pentagon about satellite imaging.”

Impressed despite myself, I left them to it, and back in the kitchen passed on that there might be a break in the search. Regretting Coyote’s absence, I put in a call to Jim Alvin, telling him the area of interest and asking him to let Gordon and whoever know as soon as he could. Adam and Charles were making their own calls in Adam’s study, Jesse told me, stroking Medea on her lap, and Anna added that Jenny was still chasing Arizona Fred and someone from Texas about breaches of contract. But Kyle had arrived, Asil had come in while I was gone, and the conversation I’d interrupted had been about Hanford, where Zee and Tad were still tipping toxic sludge and talking with Medicine Wolf amid the buzz of geiger counters.

“That is good, mi princesa. Let us hope they find something soon.” Asil really was relaxed, and I blessed Medicine Wolf, hoping Bran could also receive some of that help sooner than later.

“Caroline was just asking how you met Zee.”

I noted the Caroline with interest. “I was in the Tri-Cities looking for a job and had trouble with my Vanagon. Zee’s was the nearest garage that could deal with a VW, and it turned out he needed a mechanic. Worked for him for a few years and wound up buying the business.”

“After his, ah, problems with the KPD?”

“Before, when he was told to come out. He decided being a fae business owner would be too much trouble.”

“I get that, um, Mercy.” Taylor — Caroline — watched me hauling vegetables out of the fridge. “Can I help?”

“No need, thanks. I like chopping. You can all lay the table, though.”

“Sure.”

“And we’re getting low on beer after last night, but help yourselves from the fridge, if you want,
and reload it from the box there.”

They did want, and with beer in hand Vince the soundman cocked his head. “Did you know your boss was a fae?”

“Yeah. Coyote here, remember? I smell fae. Can’t describe it but I know it, same way I know you’ve got a cat.”

“Oh. Right. It didn’t worry you?”

I sliced peppers and thought about how I wanted to answer that. Zee was now in a lot of spotlight too.

“Made me wary, and there are still things I’m careful about with Zee, but I know the rules for dealing with fae. Very careful wording, mostly, when it comes to anything that matters — treat them as you would a hostile lawyer in a live case. No offence, Kyle, Andrea.”

Kyle grinned. “I take it as a compliment, Mercy.”

Andrea looked thoughtful. “You mean any ambiguity is exploitable? That’s in the old stories.”

“And it’s right. Fae can get very literal-minded when they want. Even Zee. That’s why you don’t thank them, and they don’t thank anyone. It creates an obligation. But for one thing, Vince, I was interested because he was a metalzauber, what he calls Iron Kissed, and that’s rare, and for a second, he knew I was something too, because he could sense my coyote magic. We also soon figured out we were both more interested in fixing old German cars, so that was good. And I was able to give him some help with Tad, who was short of a mother just then, and hurting.”

I set a wok to heat with a little oil, and switched to slicing zucchini.

“I can’t generalise about the Fae. They are a very varied lot. And I surely can’t tell you they aren’t dangerous, even the least of them. But while there are fae you and I seriously do not want to meet, ever, that is just as true of humans. Most fae and half-fae are looking to get by, like everyone else. You might want to consider that, as Alistair Beauclaire, Gwyn ap Lugh worked as a lawyer in Boston for more than twenty years without incident, and seems to have been liked by his grateful clients.”

“Yeah, I could do that, couldn’t I.” Vince sounded tired, which didn’t surprise me. I was feeling it myself. “Truth is I haven’t known what to think about the Fae for a while. God knows he had cause to behead Heuter, but with Walla Walla so close the tension hasn’t been good. And my wife swears she saw something like a horse that wasn’t, swimming in the Yakima a few years back, the night two children drowned.”

I remembered the case and so did Jesse, who knew some things and gave me a look I returned as I tipped zucchini into the wok. The Fideal had been very careless or reckless, and I thought I might pass that on when the chance came. Anything that got him in trouble was good by me.

“She’s probably right, Vince. I have reason to believe one of the ones you don’t want to meet was causing problems about then, and a swimming horse that wasn’t would fit the bill. So would drowned children, I’m afraid. But I also have reason to believe that one is presently … constrained, let’s say. And while it’s not exact, unless your wife thinks all humans are like Preskylovitch, she shouldn’t think all fae are like the one she saw.”

“Read folklore, amigo.” Asil was still being gentle but his voice had some force. “The kind Andrea mentioned. Yes, there are the monsters, things that drown and steal lives away, but also beneficent
creatures — brownies and pookas, and their like, as well as the gifts humans received. Mercy’s walking stick, for one. And the consistent thread is that if you play fair and do right by most fae, so will they, by you.”

I could see Caroline wondering about Asil’s experiences, and didn’t blame her, so I was relieved when Anna joined in. Listening, I set a big pan of water to boil, and added some salt.

“Consider also that Gwyn ap Lugh did not break with humans when or because his daughter was assailed, vile as that was. He did it when injustice was thrown in his face. Pain he would take, but not dishonour and bad faith.” She drank beer, looking sombre. “Charles and I saw him under the greatest strain, in despair and in hope, and he is as honourable as he can be. And not unkind, however remote. He called to wish me a happy birthday, only a few weeks after Lizzie Beauclaire was recovered.”

“Huh.” Caroline was frowning. “I hadn’t thought about it like that, Anna. Damn. You were right about my seeing the worst, Mercy. I saw that he’d been driven to it, but stopped with the perversity of the Boston verdict. And the idea of a birthday call from a Gray Lord …”

“Did he ever thank you and Charles, Anna?”

“No directly, Mercy.” Anna grinned. “There are limits. But after today, if he knows when your birthday is, you might get a call too.”

“So many things to look forward to.”

Caroline was still curious but I wasn’t revisiting this morning with her or anyone just now and went into the imperative mood that is a cook’s prerogative. Asil went to check on the wolf patrol, and the others set about laying the table, not that much was needed. After a lot of meat-heavy meals, I’d decided I wanted something lighter and opted for tagliatelle, the pretty three-coloured kind, with a sauce heavier on vegetables than meat, though I’d added diced bacon and pepperoni for the calories. Anna went to warn Charles and Adam food was imminent, and I added chopped tomato and fresh herbs to the wok before deciding four pounds of tagliatelle ought to be enough, lining the bags up, and belatedly checking on the powdered mozzarella in the freezer, relieved to see there was enough. Al the camera was staring.

“You’re gonna cook all that?”

I grinned. “Three ounces each for six humans and one coyote, half-a-pound apiece for five wolves. Given how good Darryl’s lunch was, there might be some left over, but probably not, Al. Wolf metabolisms run high, and I’d bet Adam and Charles burned a lot of nervous calories talking to the cameras this afternoon. So did I. Warren’s changed twice, as well, and that takes it out of a wolf fast. Hurts, too.”

He sounded thoughtful. “Tell me to butt out, Mercy, but you might think about letting us do a day in the life. Until yesterday I thought of werewolves as, I dunno, dangerous cool, maybe. Superstrength and the healing thing. But I didn’t think about the costs. I can still hear you saying that your husband got to heal fast but without anaesthetics, and I broke my patella once so I know just how bad that pain is. And right now I’m hating to think what your grocery bills add up to, or the Benny’s account — it must run three hundred bucks just yesterday and today.”

“It’s up there, yeah.”

I was dropping some oil in the boiling water, to stop the tagliatelle sticking to itself too badly. I should have used the pack saucepan, but a ten-gallon pot takes up too much room on the hob.
“I hadn’t thought about the responsibilities an Alpha has either, and the idea of a Mrs Alpha never crossed my head. Caroline had asked Carl twice about food for us, and got nowhere, but after you brought it up on air we got a Benny’s account, charged to KEPR, within an hour. Why would you take us as your responsibility?”

“You’re on Adam’s and my land, Al. In and out of my house, doing right by me, and wolves, and the manitou. And food’s a habitual response for me — if you’re ever dealing with an antsy wolf, buy it a stack of whatever meat’s nearest.”

“Or even a calm wolf?”

I laughed. “Yeah, but if he or she’s calm you can take time to ask what they prefer by way of fast food. Some go KFC, though I’ve never understood why, and I know a Mexican wolf who swears by tacos.”

He wasn’t distracted. “Willis said yesterday you were the best leader he’d seen in a long while, and I’m convinced. Think about a day in the life, will you? I see you’re not happy about getting so famous so fast, but believe me, it’s not gonna go away anytime soon. We can do a completely honest piece that’ll make people think harder than they already are.”

“Are they?”

“Oh yeah. Wolves Rock America is true, but Mercy Rocks America wouldn’t be wrong either.”

I was wondering what to say when Andrea cut in, voice a little edged.

“Mercy will think about it, Al, and so will Jenny and I. I can see the PR side, but legal might clash in some ways. And you must have realised Mercy gets a little antsy when it comes to praise.” Her voice softened. “I’m pretty preterophile, as you’ve seen, but one thing I’ve had to pick up fast is that it’s a better mindset than agenda. Be grateful, by all means — so should we all be — but be a friend, not a fan.”

Jesse had grabbed a wooden spoon and come to stand beside me, stirring pasta. I slung an arm around her shoulders.

“Thanks, Andrea, and that’s about right, Al.”

I was saved anything more by the arrival of the assorted strays. Asil said only that all was well, and Warren was busy giving Kyle a hug and getting one back, but Charles and Adam wanted to know about the search, and Jenny was interested too. I told them while I drained, mozzarella’ed, and served the pasta, Jesse wielding a sauce ladle. Anna had some questions about what I’d suggested to Westfield, and whether he’d been talking to the Pentagon, that made for human stares and won me an approving look from Charles, but with everyone tucking in the conversation turned. Asil, of all people, wanted to know why I froze and powdered mozzarella, and I didn’t mind talking about that.

“Only way I’ve ever known of making it behave like anything except hot rubber, Asil. Like this, it makes every piece of pasta grab some sauce, and any other way it’s as indigestible as an overcooked snail.”

When and where I’d experienced how rubbery snails could be took us a surprising distance, not least thanks to Asil. Who knew there were — or had been, until they got eaten into rarity — giant Pyrenean snails that cooked a lot better than the garden variety? Or that no kind of slug tasted good, but if you carbonised them they’d keep you alive without gagging for long enough to
improve your diet? We were all contemplating how Asil knew that when Warren said he was more interested in why stag moose had been good eating, and we went Pleistocene for a while, nine-foot fanged salmon and all. The tagliatelle was gone, with all the sauce, and I was serving slices of a cake I’d sacrificed the brownies to save for dessert, when a slightly out-of-breath Fisher knocked at the door to tell me I had a call.

Adam and Charles rose to accompany me, and Jenny looked a query, but I shook my head.

“Not this time, Jenny. And Caroline, Vince, Al, who knows how long I’ll be, so thanks for all you’ve done, and see you whenever.”

I picked up the stick and we went out to the MCC, where Fisher stayed outside, saying with a smile that direct dealings with the White House were above her pay grade. I was less nervous than I’d expected, and figured that after the last two days anyone who wasn’t kidnapping me didn’t count as a threat, but Adam was tense, with complicated emotions that went back to Vietnam, and Charles had a stonier face than I’d seen since he arrived. The screen behind Westfield was wallpapered with the Great Seal, a camera peering at us above it, but once we were all seated Westfield hit some buttons and it cleared almost at once to show that familiar view of the Oval Office, and the President looking like he always did on TV — except he was looking at us, eyes tracking across our faces. He seemed to be alone, but I’d bet the room had a variety of eyes behind the camera.

“Mr and Ms Hauptman. Mr Smith.” His familiar voice was a little hoarse, but it was gone midnight in DC and he’d probably had as long a day as I had, if less violent. “Thank you for agreeing to this. And I’ll start by repeating my apology about what happened yesterday. I’d been told Cantrip had serious problems, and had not learned from the Heuter case, but no-one suggested it was this bad. And to give that apology some substance, I’ve instructed the Attorney General not to contest your lawsuit against Cantrip.” His eyes went to Charles while Adam and I digested that. “Mr Smith, are you still being, what, Deputy Marrok? Speaking for all werewolves?”

It was weird to hear an outsider use Bran’s title, but I’d known the President knew about him.

“At need, Mr President. I’m here now because there might be and Mr Hauptman speaks only for the Columbia Basin Pack, but also as Mercy’s sister. You wish to speak to her of the Fae, and that is a dangerous business.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, Mr Smith.”

I took him at his word, ignoring the vocative. “I haven’t spoken to any Gray Lord since the … incident this morning, Mr President, but the Marrok says Gwyn ap Lugh told him the one who grabbed me, Manannán mac Lír, was the, I quote, ‘strongest and loudest’ of those ap Lugh has been … having problems with. So ap Lugh is in a better position to make a deal than he has been. And so are you. Are you going to take the opportunity?”

He looked at me for a long moment. “Glen said you cut to the chase, Ms Hauptman. And everyone says you’ve been dealing with us fairly, so I’ll tell you straight, I haven’t decided yet. This Manannán is dead?”

“Yes.”

“And just how did you manage that?”

“Iron, silver, magic, a great deal of luck, and the fact that he broke some rules grabbing me.”
“The Fae have rules?”

“Oh yes. And unlike Cantrip, Mr President, they obey them scrupulously.” That won a wince, and I took the opportunity. “Have you really decided Cantrip has to go?”

“Yes, Ms Hauptman, I have done that. What you did yesterday morning and evening, with what the FBI have already found, make it necessary, despite the chaos it’s going to cause.” He did not look happy about it, but I was. “Besides everything they did to you, they’re at best complicit in the murders of dozens of citizens, and their senior people will be going down for that. The scandal’s going to be long, loud, and very messy indeed, and I have no intention of spending my last years in office fighting to defend an agency that’s clearly unfit for purpose. What shape the legislation will take is not altogether clear, but there is already a sufficient bipartisan consensus that I’m confident a bill will pass, so yes, they’re gone. God knows what will take their place.”

I doubt he meant it as an invitation but I had some ideas about that.

“Start with a better acronym, Mr President. Combined Nonhuman and Transhuman Relations Providers was always a stupid name, and wherever Cantrip came from as the vocalisation it was either ironic or satirical — look it up. In any case, Cantrip did trip, flat on its face and yours, because the thinking behind it was always tainted. You don’t provide relations, you have them, good or bad. And they’re two-way streets. Cantrip only ever thought one-way. And, sir, I’ve been trying to make what’s happened an opportunity for you as well as everyone else. A proper federal bureau of preternatural affairs is a resource we all need. And remember what Charles called the Path of Mercy. The name may embarrass me but I’m all for the idea. Why wouldn’t you be? I understand the Fae are a different problem, but I can’t see any good reasons for not wanting that. Can you?”

“Depends what you call good, Ms Hauptman. Just how much funding it would need is one. If even half the stuff you and Glen were proposing this afternoon comes off, the National Debt’s set to grow considerably.”

That was probably true, but I didn’t much care. “So start with what was Cantrip’s budget, as well as all their equipment and real estate. What matters is its name and vision, and how it behaves towards all citizens. Give it a Fae section if you want, but even if there is a deal full-blooded fae are not going to be mingling much for a long while yet. But wolves are right here, and so is the manitou. If you start looking out for the land and the animals, the Elder Spirits will be as on board as they get with anything. But you have to be sincere. You have to mean what you say, and stand by anything that’s agreed. And treble that in spades for the Fae. But the other side of it is that they, like wolves, will keep their end of any bargain, and while I have no idea — none at all, sir — what the Gray Lords might want, I do know that Gwyn ap Lugh would not be willing to talk at all if he didn’t think something could be achieved.”

“So I’ve been told, Ms Hauptman. And I don’t disagree with you about a bureau of preternatural affairs. But if I meet the Fae I’m de facto recognising their secession, and that’s a serious problem any which way I cut it. I cannot alienate territory within any state, even for this. The politics are impossible.”

“But politics needs to catch up with reality, Mr President.” In more ways than one, I thought, sensing Adam suppress a smile at my bluntness. But my mind was spinning. Clever Gwyn ap Lugh. “Sir, bear with me a moment, if you will. The fact is that the Fae have seceded. They have the power, and used it. So in effect the United States has four internal enclaves that do not recognise its sovereignty or laws, and there’s nothing anyone human can do about that. But the Gray Lords are letting Mr Adelbertsmiter and his son help Medicine Wolf clean up a major human
problem. And so are you, which is manifestly the right thing to do. That’s reality, too, however new. But I do understand why a lot of people have a problem with alienating territory, and I believe there might be a workable solution.”

"Not that any of my advisers have come up with, Ms Hauptman."

"Perhaps because they’re short of some facts, Mr President.” I took a deep breath. “Or one fact, anyway. I was being very careful earlier not to say this to camera or the FBI, because it is not my secret to reveal and I take the penalties for that kind of indiscretion very seriously. So should everyone. But I have permission, from Gwyn ap Lugh via the Marrok, to tell you, specifically. Is there anyone you want out of the loop before I do?"

“No. Those listening here need to know whatever it is.”

“Alright. The land forming the Fae reservations is granted but not given to them, yes?”

“Correct.”

“But the Fae are not actually living in the reservations, Mr President. They are living Underhill. And though I can’t explain it any more than I can explain a fifteen-foot dire wolf who can do what you’ve seen Medicine Wolf do, I can tell you absolutely that wherever Underhill is, it is not here. I have stood in the basement of a house on the Walla Walla reservation and looked out over an ocean — a real ocean, salt and strong, with a far horizon. And it was not fae glamour — it was what was behind the glamour. This morning’s venue was another wide space, with a different sky than I’m used to, where the roses that made up that cloak you saw grew like time-lapse film. Or time ran fast — I thought I was gone maybe half-an-hour, when it was three hours here, and one thing all the old stories agree about is that time Underhill and Overhill are not the same. A day here, a century there, or vice versa. So it does not seem a stretch to say that, however it may be now connected to and accessible from certain places within US territory, Underhill is not here but, for want of a better term, in another dimension.”

"Forgive me, Ms Hauptman, but so you say. And if so, so what? I’m well aware there had to be something behind that cloaking the Fae manage, and something like that’s been suggested before. I’m interested you say so, and I’ll credit that you believe it, but where does it get us?"

Not so clever President. I didn’t have the cloak, but I did have Manannán’s Bane, and I stroked it a little. “Can you summon the cloak?”

It pulsed, and the cloak appeared in a billow, its scent filling the room and a few stray petals floating in the air. I looked back at the screen, where the President was bolt upright and a little white.

“Yes, Mr President, I do say. And where it gets us is this. The US recognises Underhill as a sovereign dimension, home of the Fae, and designates existing reservations as embassies, with the usual diplomatic courtesies. Gwyn ap Lugh’s word is unbroken, and you set no precedent.”

There was silence while he thought about it and Adam reached across to lift a petal from my hair, and take my hand. Charles’s eyes were also approving, and though Westfield was professionally blank his pulse and breathing were elevated.

“Right out of nowhere …”

It was no more than a whisper, but Presidents have sensitive mikes.

“No, sir, left out of somewhere. Just somewhere else. The cloak was hanging in my closet, but it is
of Underhill. And Manannán’s Bane is of fae make, so they can talk. But the point is that you are
being offered a resolution. Gwyn ap Lugh would not have been so permissive for any lesser reason.
Do you want it?"

There was more silence, and when the President broke it his voice was soft.

“T believe I do, Ms Hauptman. Though not everyone will. It smells of climbdown fudge, but I don’t
care. It’s a way out, and we need one.”

“Say it’s a way forward, then, for both sides. And though I wasn’t thinking about this when I did
the Hanford stuff yesterday, a statement of how glad you are to Zee Adelbertsmiter, who is doing
what he is with permission of the Gray Lords, to our great benefit, gives you a reason to make the
necessary apology to Gwyn ap Lugh and Ms Beauclaire.”

It was almost a sigh. “Yes, it does, Ms Hauptman. That’s some of why I told Glen what I did, and
one reason for this call is that I wanted to ask you about any necessary wording. Or if you like,
who exactly am I apologising to, and for what, as you understand it? Any of you?”

When I thought about it that was a harder question than I’d quite realised, but Charles had been on
the Heuter case and didn’t hesitate.

“The Boston verdict offered grave insult to five distinct sets of beings, Mr President, two explicitly
and three implicitly. Explicitly, first, the sixty-two dead victims and their families. Second, Ms
Beauclaire as the living victim, and her family, including her father. And implicitly, third, the FBI
team and others who had worked the case, found Ms Beauclaire, and identified Heuter, because he
was released to continue killing as he chose. Then fourth and fifth, the Fae and wolves, because we
were both shown, very clearly, that we were less than full citizens, that the bigotry Cantrip
represents, and Les Heuter embodied in extreme form, is so entrenched and potent that it can
pervert justice beyond legal remedy. All five matters should be openly addressed.”

The President nodded, looking more tired than he had been. “That’s clear enough, Mr Smith.
Thank you. Mr Hauptman, Ms Hauptman, anything to add?”

Adam’s voice had a growl in it, but he’d been doing some thinking too.

“From any point of view, Mr President, except Cantrip’s, the Federal Government has been
very slow to deal with them. Whatever anyone did or didn’t say to you, the Marrok pushed for a
proper enquiry into Heuter and how much who at Cantrip had really known about him, and got
nowhere. No-one wanted to turn over the rock and find out what was under it. I call it dereliction,
as well as stupid, and I count yesterday as a direct result. But by the same measure, I welcome what
is happening now. Taking Cantrip apart in every way and prosecuting maximally is the substance
of any apology. The exact words don’t matter to me much, though they will to the Gray Lords —
what does is justice seen to be done, and building up some concrete evidence of real change.”

The President was frowning. “So you think I should make the apology at the same time as
announcing the emergency bill to abolish Cantrip?”

“I do, sir. Your words need to be full, not empty. This is not just political, for me or any wolf. Nor
for any of our families. It is very personal, too.”

“That I get, Mr Hauptman.” He frowned some more, then nodded, face clearing. “You’re a
Vietnam vet, aren’t you? Rangers?”

“That’s correct, sir.”
“Right. I was there for sixteen months, and not only as an REMF, so I know a bit.” Genuine curiosity flickered. “Were you a wolf then?”

“That’s where I became one, sir.”

He sat straight. “For real? That’s not in your file.”

“Because no-one wanted to know.” There was some rage in Adam’s voice, though he was swallowing a lot. “My squad were sent after one of those warlords operating from beyond the Cambodian border. Turned out he was a wolf warlord, and only David Christiansen and I survived. But did the brass give one single flying shit?” Adam never swore in front of me, and I let a hand rest on his thigh. “I’m sorry, sir, but it still rankles. David and I both figured we needed to drop off everyone’s radar for a while.”

After a while the President nodded, slowly. “So a double betrayal then, and another from me now.” He straightened. “What can I say that’s worth a damn, except that I expect I’ll be taking your advice, which is also the FBI’s, and Glen’s. But there’s still this thing about the Fae and wording, and I’ve got some very unhappy speechwriters. Understandably. Any advice for them?”

I shook my head to clear it, breathing in roses. “Sincerity, exactitude, and formality of address, Mr President. Forget rhetoric. Wolves hear lies, and it won’t impress the Fae at all.”

“Formality of address, Ms Hauptman?”

“Yes, sir. Gwyn ap Lugh is the Prince of the Gray Lords. You don’t need to use the title every time, but don’t shorten the name. Calling him Mr Ap Lugh would also not be good.”

“Huh. Well, that’s practical. Thank you.” He sat back, steepling his fingers. “So. Let’s stipulate I do as you’re variously asking, pretty much across the board, and that I come to meet … Medicine Wolf. How does anyone think this other meeting would happen? Mr Smith?”

“The wording used to the Marrok implies that you, with whoever, and Gwyn ap Lugh, with other Gray Lords, would coincide while both visiting Medicine Wolf. That much would of necessity be public spectacle. And after that it would depend, though the Marrok will pass on any proposal you wish to make, open or sealed, and convey any reply.”

“Well, that will help. I am not supposed to enter serious negotiations without a script.”

He meant it as humour, I think, and I gave it a brief smile. “I understand, Mr President, but it will be your personal word that is needed. The Fae do understand how badly our politics can work — they’ve been watching them since before the Declaration of Independence, after all — but their politics works by oaths they do not and often cannot break. My strong belief, sir — and it is only belief, not certain knowledge — is that the goal should be a new, reciprocal oath that eases both Fae and human tensions. A non-aggression pact, in essence, with some provision for dealing with difficulties, and as it settles in some basis for exploring possible co-operation.”

“What sort of difficulties are you thinking of, Ms Hauptman? And what sort of co-operation?”

“The obvious ones, Mr President. I’m expecting captive fae as well as wolves when we find Cantrip’s prison, for starters, and you’ve said they’re responsible for multiple murders. There must be fae or half-fae among the victims, so there will be legal and compensatory issues arising with fae who are now Underhill. And there are more fae with kin still living Overhill than Mr Adelbertsmiter, some of whom would like to be able to visit. In the other direction, so would some of the kin, who are still unquestionably citizens. So there are … consular issues, I suppose. And as
for co-operation, lots of fae have powers over earth and water, and others great physical strength, while those at Walla Walla will have concerns about re-engineering the Columbia and Snake systems. Medicine Wolf will probably ask them directly for any assistance they can give, as a part of its agreement with them, and you could facilitate that. Then we could all have lots of nice publicity about three-way co-operation saving months of effort and great heaps of taxpayers’ money.”

He was staring. “And you think that’s obvious, Ms Hauptman?”

“Yes I do, sir. And that you don’t, apparently, is more of what I meant yesterday about Cantrip never having been able to do the job they were nominally supposed to do. There’s two and whatever thousand years of stories saying the fae can be as miraculously helpful as they can be inhumanly dangerous, but within a year of their coming out pretty much every notion of mutual advantage had been forgotten. It has to come back, and the waking of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin, territory which includes Walla Walla, is a golden opportunity. The Elder Spirits saw it so clearly that they reached a decision to come out themselves in less than a day, and the Marrok’s followed suit. From the numbers I’ve been given, a big chunk of the public has caught on too, so while I don’t mean to be disrespectful, Mr President, you need to recalibrate faster than you are.”

He was holding up a hand. “Mercy, Ms Hauptman. I’m talking to you, aren’t I?” Then he flushed. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to use your first name.”

“No offence, sir. And yes, you’re talking to me, and you’ll win some big points with wolves, and I would think, the Fae, by dumping Cantrip. But you still have to grab that opportunity for the nation. Adam fought for it, and we’re both patriots, sir, so I ask you, beg you, even, to take it. Not for me, or Native Americans, or wolves, but for everyone. A Cold War with the preternatural can no longer be risked, and thanks to Medicine Wolf there can be a thaw.”

“The Marrok agrees.”

“And the Columbia Basin Pack will do all it can, for our nation as well as our kind, if we are asked to act as hosts.”

There was a humming silence for a while, before the President nodded. “I hear you all. I’ll sleep on it, and I’ll be in touch. Thank you all for your time, and goodnight.”

Whether he or Westfield blanked the screen I don’t know, but it was over, and we all found ourselves stretching to ease muscles that had become tense and knotted. Westfield let us out, and I saw Fisher waiting, her curiosity ill-concealed, especially when she saw the cloak over my arm. My own curiosity rose as he silently took out his wallet and handed her a ten-dollar bill. Adam and Charles raised eyebrows too, and Westfield gave us a small smile.

“She bet me you’d treat the President just as you’ve treated everyone else, Ms Hauptman. Which she described as hey, where did my trousers go? I expected to lose, and I’m very glad I did. If you ever stand for federal office, you’ll have my vote. See them to the house, Leslie? I owe the Pentagon a call.”

He stepped back into the MCC, and Fisher gave me a wide smile.

“Don’t tell anyone, but I never did like the President’s trousers. Way to go, Ms Hauptman.”
Chapter Thirty

Everyone with homes to go to had gone to them, and Warren was back on patrol, but Asil and Anna were keeping Jesse company in the kitchen. Charles wanted me to call Bran right away, but I told him he and Adam could take care of it, and after a little staring they did, from Adam’s study, with me curled up on the rose cloak, head on Adam’s thigh, Jesse falling asleep in my arms to the drone of voices, and Asil a quiet but intent auditor. Somewhere in there one of Bran’s phones rang, and after he’d greeted Gwyn ap Lugh I raised a sleepy arm.

“Tell him I’m gladdened by his actions, and that he’s a very clever Gray Lord, not that he doesn’t know that.”

The ensuing silence made me raise my head to find four pairs of wolf eyes looking at me.

“What? It’s true.”

“Go back to sleep, Mercy.”

Adam’s voice had some growl and I opened my eyes wider in protest.

“I wasn’t, love. What’s the problem?”

“No problem, Mercy.”

“Well, then.”

I hugged Jesse a little tighter and resettled my head on Adam, finding the smell of roses restful. I vaguely wondered if Asil did too, but couldn’t be bothered to ask. Somewhere I heard a laugh I knew was Gwyn ap Lugh’s, but that didn’t bother me either — he had every reason to be cheerful, so far as I knew. And though I was drifting, I wasn’t being idle. The cloak was in my thoughts, as well as my nose, with ap Lugh’s words as I left Underhill, that three steps would take me anywhere I willed. And after my conversation with Westfield so was Cantrip’s prison and what it might contain, living or otherwise. I didn’t like any of the answers and a while later Charles caught my attention.

“Coyote brings change and chaos, Gwyn ap Lugh, and from our stories has always done so. But it is often good chaos. My sister has set the world on end, using Medicine Wolf, but the Fae have been more exposed by Manannán mac Lír than anything she has done, and she has fought for you and all fae as much as for wolves and the Elder Spirits. Are you repining the permissions you granted?”

I propped myself up on an elbow and found that Gray Lords did teleconferencing. Who knew? Bran was on one half of the big screen, and Gwyn ap Lugh on the other, in what I thought had to be one of the bigger houses at Walla Walla. He had a silver goblet of something in his hand, and raised it to me with a quirk of one eyebrow.

“The sleeper awakes. Greetings, Mercedes Hauptman.”

“And to you, Gwyn ap Lugh. I wasn’t asleep. I was thinking. And are you repining? Did I
“Not at all. I was merely telling your adoptive brother that the … tumult you have wrought has complications as well as opportunities. It does not mean we will not be making the most of both. And from what he and your husband say, you understood exactly. So I am likewise gladdened by your actions, and think you are a clever coyote.” He sipped, delicately, looking at me, and I knew the silent toast was more than an acknowledgement. “I am also interested that Manannán’s Bane could call the cloak to you. Few such things have ever been able to travel unworn.”

“I didn’t know it could, or would, Gwyn ap Lugh, I just hoped and asked.” The stick was warm against me. “Manannán’s Bane is into making friends, I think.”

“Is it, now?”

There was some Welsh in ap Lugh’s voice, reminding me that Bran too was a Welshman, and I wondered how that played between them.

“The Dark Smith told me it had acquired new powers and wanted to be famous. It certainly took its chance. And the cloak’s full of goodwill.”

“That does not surprise me half as much as Underhill giving it to you in the first place. I wonder if, with Bran Cornick’s let, you might tell me what you experienced as Manannán seized you Underhill.”

Bran shrugged, and I could see no reason not to, so I sat up carefully, rearranging Jesse’s head on to my lap, and saw the cloak shift to cover her, which made ap Lugh smile wryly. I told him what I could as clearly as I could, and he listened intently, asking for clarification only when I mentioned using the pack bond. After a half-nod from Bran I answered him but with as little detail as possible.

“So you were holding Manannán’s Bane as you were brought Underhill. It came with you, not after you. But Carnwennan came to you Underhill, from Aspen Creek?”

“That’s right.”

“And only after Manannán’s Bane had rooted itself in the earth you stood on were you able to understand the words you heard spoken?”

“Also right.”

“Well, now.” He thought about it, sipping from his goblet, and came to some decision. “I would be gladdened if this went no further, but to those here I will say that I believe I understand what happened. Manannán was using Underhill’s magic as a … conduit for his own. His water in Underhill’s pipe, perhaps you might say. And within his water, Lugh’s last walking stick, made to ensure healthy twin lambs but now greatly augmented, by its quenching, by Coyote while he had it, and — I am guessing, but it must be so — by the magic claimed from Guayota. To bring Carnwennan to Mercedes it must have reached through Manannán’s power to Underhill’s, and diverted some of his spell to bring you an iron weapon. Similarly, the power of translation can only be Underhill’s own, tapped through the earth. So truly the walking stick was Manannán’s Bane. And I am minded that one who once held it also received a rose cloak, so I wonder if Underhill accepted a suggestion. What I do not know at all is where, if anywhere, Medicine Wolf’s power was involved, or how much of Manannán’s power his Bane took for itself.”

“Huh.” The stick seemed a little smug. “It’s not disagreeing. I’d got as far as wondering if it had … taken a very active approach to seeing me safely home, the powers of its brethren being closest to
“That is an attractive thought, Mercedes, and it might be so. But this melding of magics is to me very Coyote, and it echoes what you are doing politically — a bringing together of possibilities.”

“Yes.” Bran joined in at last. “Mercy has always been caught between kinds, as Gordon Seeker says, and now she is bridging them. With a vengeance, literally.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “Coyote at his best, maybe, though I suspect Mercy is the trick Coyote set up, and now he’s mostly watching it play out even better than he can have hoped.”

“Oy!”

But I wasn’t really protesting, and I could easily imagine my not-exactly father breezily arguing for trying out a half-Anglo avatar, just to see what happened. That my Mom must have been a bombshell in her teens — she wasn’t doing badly now — would have been neither here nor there, of course. Bran ignored me, in any case.

“What surprised me most, Gwyn ap Lugh, is that a pack bond could be used against such a one as Manannán mac Lír. How much did it matter that Mercy chose her bond to Joel Arocha? That her choice was potent is clear, but was it necessary?”

Ap Lugh shrugged very elegantly. “I would think so, Bran Cornick. Your surprise is shared.”

“By Manannán too.” My voice had some bite, and they looked at me. “And I intended that. The manitou magic isn’t mine, exactly, but it is integrated into what I have. Adam agrees. So is the cloak’s, or his uses of power this afternoon wouldn’t have smelt of roses. In every way.”

Adam laughed, and Asil gave me a serene smile that relieved a worry.

“It’s not my usual style, but I shan’t be complaining.” Adam’s arm came around me. “Even if it’s going to be embarrassing to add perfume to dominance contests.”

Anna grinned at me, and I grinned right back. Testosterone with roses had to be better than without.

“And Mercy’s right, so far as I can tell. She always says magic follows intent, and that’s true. But it is also true that other people’s magic does not follow their intents around her. And what I get from the stories about Coyote, as well as the old … Elder Spirit himself, is that he thinks pretty much everything should follow his intent. So getting back to the business in hand, I believe the President might agree that another of Mercy’s names should be Bender of Intents.”

This time Charles and Bran both laughed.

“You’re acquiring quite a collection, little sister.”

Charles was clearly bent on disseminating the one Coyote had added to, and told ap Lugh about it, to his wary amusement, so I added Fisher’s contribution about missing trousers.

“It’s not quite Native style, but it works. Then I could insist anyone being stroppy has to use it. I completely disagree sounds so much weaker if you have to add Hey, Where Did My Trousers Go.”

There was a long silence during which Anna struggled not to laugh, and everyone else regarded me with consternation.

“It’s true.”
“Undoubtedly.” Bran sighed. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Mercy, but it would be good if you went to bed. Coyote humour is wonderful, and very important, but it is not in short supply just now.”

“Oh pish”, I told him, which was up there with ‘death throes’ but sounded good to say. “And tush, whatever that means in British. Think about Andrea, Bran — humour’s how humans do Omega zen, mostly. Doesn’t resolve anything, but it moves tension sort of sideways. Eases things along some. And she gets it — Medicine Wolf walking on water was her idea, and it was perfect. Gwyn ap Lugh, I do realise that humour is … not the strongest point of many fae, but you might consider that Underhill seems to have accepted the idea. It did give me what is in effect a permanent tourist visa.”

There was some more silence and it was the Gray Lord’s turn to sigh.

“There is that, Mercedes, much as I dislike the formulation. I strongly suggest you defer visiting for a while, however.”

“Indefinitely, if you like, but I would ask one question.”

“Only one? Ask it, then.”

“It comes with a scenario. You said that wearing the cloak, Underhill, three steps would take me anywhere I willed. Let’s stipulate that Cantrip’s prison is found, and there are fae, wolf, and vampire prisoners to rescue. The FBI and whoever are scrambling SWAT teams and who knows what else. Would it be possible, and if so permissible, for a wolf team, perhaps with others, to take three steps with me from here to the middle of some roses, join with whomever you are sending, and take three more steps to wherever the prison is — which if you don’t already know is now probably southern Wyoming or thereabouts?”

Wolf eyebrows rose, and Adam did not look at all happy, but I sent him what reassurance I could muster, and after a moment ap Lugh inclined his head.

“What a very interesting question, Mercedes. Possible, yes, though all would have to be touching the cloak. Permissible … is a challenging notion, but just now I believe it might be so for wolves. And avatars. But not humans and certainly not vampires. They can translocate, and so long as they offer no harm to any fae we will tolerate them, in this, but no undead may come Underhill, now or ever. And I do not want their coming out added to our current circumstances — yet if Cantrip have been holding vampires, we must assume that the prison will also contain records revealing their existence.”

That was one of the answers I hadn’t liked one bit.

“Yes, we must, and there may be nothing anyone can do about that. Westfield hasn’t said anything to me, but the FBI already have whatever Cantrip had in DC. And there will be records among anything found that we and the FBI will need — of abductions and worse. But, and it’s why I asked the question, if wolves and fae are there first, which would mean taking the risks of any necessary assault, we might be able to … edit any hard drives there were to be found. Or just steal them. And that might be a very good thing for more than vampires, including the Federal Government, which would not find itself tempted by a set of data to rival Josef Mengele’s. So, unless anyone knows any magic that will selectively scramble hard drives, we’ll need either some very fast computer work or to remove the drives until they’ve been … sieved. And then there is the testimony any prisoners taken could give.”

“I said it was not meet that those who employed torturers should live.” Asil’s voice was calm,
despite his words. “Nor is it meet that torturers should live.”

“I don’t disagree, Asil, but killed opposing an assault is one thing, and summary executions another.”

We went back to silence for a bit, until ap Lugh shook his head.

“For this prize, wolves and avatars may travel to and from Underhill with Mercedes, taking no step aside.” That last bit was a warning, and I nodded. “And though I would wish death upon those we consider, I must agree it would make for difficulties I do not want. But human memory can be ... adjusted so none such would remember anything. If it satisfies the justice of wolves, we can leave any torturers not knowing their own names. But I do not know of any fae magic that will affect computer memory so delicately, though much that can bring fire and water.”

Charles stirred, raising a hand. “Melting the hard drive will not achieve what we need, though it might be a last resort.” He signalled equivocation. “Mercy, without knowing how any mainframe or database is set up, we cannot know how protected any drives will be. Joel in tibicena form might be a help — his heat and strength can open many things.”

“That’s a thought. The Dark Smith has blades that will slice metal. And there’s vampire strength. What about vampire magic, though? Anyone know?” No-one spoke. “Shall I ask them? And if so, Gwyn ap Lugh, am I allowed to mention Underhill?”

“Marsilia knows, and Wulfe, with whomever they might have told.”

“Bran?”

He muttered something I didn’t understand, or Charles, from his look, but it made ap Lugh twitch.

“Go ahead, Mercy. You are still on a roll, however absurdly.”

I ignored the sarcasm and called Marsilia. She was her usual charming self, but listened as I laid out the scenario and asked the questions. Then the connection went dead, but only a minute later my phone started playing Philip Walker’s ‘Bad Blood’, meaning Stefan.

<Mercy. The Mistress accidentally crushed her phone, but the answers you need are all yes. We want in, we’ll keep strict peace with the fae, the Mistress and I can translocate to a GPS co-ordinate, and Wulfe thinks he can help with wiping data. He asks to speak to you.>

I thought about that one, and decided that while nothing would make me wish Wulfe anything much except dust and ashes, I didn’t mind greater respect, so long as it was.

“All right, but strictly business mode, Stefan, or I’ll cut the call and we’ll do what we’ll do without further reference to vampires.”

<He agrees, Mercy.>

Stefan’s voice was no cooler than usual, and I hoped he’d taken no offence. He didn’t like Wulfe much either.

<Wulfe was being as brisk as he ever was. <You are being interesting just now. Who else hears me?>

“Multiple senior wolves and Gwyn ap Lugh.”
Wulfe laughed. It was better than Marsilia’s, and had genuine amusement in it, but still creeped me out.

<Splendid. Then let me say that while complete physical destruction of any hard drive would be preferable to us, I see the problem, and I can cause chosen ones to become zeros. But, much as I dislike admitting it, it is very draining, and without knowing what volume of data we are talking about, I can guarantee nothing.>

I thought about that. “Is it fast?”

<In itself, yes. But preparing and recharging are not.>

I thought some more. “Plans for any captive vampires rescued?”

<Are awaiting the event. It will depend, and there is nothing you can do about that.>

“I know. And we’ll let Marsilia or Stefan know as soon as anything happens, so the calls may be daytime. What you do about that is your problem. And vampires have another. Wolves know about you, the Fae know, and God knows avatars know. So does Medicine Wolf, for all it’s willing to be discreet. And very probably, Cantrip, one way or another, so also the FBI and an increasing number of humans. No preternatural will tell on you, and Adam managed to keep you out of it when Gauntlet Boy was playing his little game with Cantrip and us, despite everything, as I did with Blackwood. But you’re going to leak out anyway, sooner or later, and if that works to our disadvantage because you can’t manage the timing, we will not be happy preternatural campers. Nor will Medicine Wolf, and you might really want to think about that.”

There was another of those silences.

<So we might. Make the call to Marsilia’s phone, anytime.>

He cut the connection, and I leaned back into Adam’s safe hold. “Chosen ones into zeros? How vamp is that?”

Bran was resting his chin on his hands, with a look I hadn’t seen since I was a teenager and he was holding back temper while explaining how the world worked — or the world according to Bran, anyway.

“Mercy, you’re not wrong, but I doubt the vampires can make such a decision.”

“More fool them. Bran, did you hear what Jenny said yesterday about me needing to come out, because if I played human in the spotlight for a few weeks and then my being coyote leaked, it would be much worse PR than just saying it sooner? I think the same consideration now applies to us all. You agreed to the Path of Mercy, and I’m happy to do the forensics bit. But what do I do if I’m taken to a crime scene and smell vamp? Or any wolf? And if we keep them secret from humans, until they get outed anyway by something, how will it look? God knows I don’t want any more trouble with them, but I think you have to put them on notice that wolves doing forensics will speak of what they smell, whatever it may be. And isn’t the bottom line that we need humans a lot more than we need vamps?”

I liked Stefan a lot, but he was the only vampire I liked at all, except maybe Thomas Hao. And pretty much all other vamps did a lot of needless and messy killing, besides giving their sheep a very bad time.

“You have a point, Mercy. But we do not need any more complications when we are involved in all you and Medicine Wolf have already started.” He rubbed his chin. “No false forensics is a
useful minimum, though, and might play well. I will think about it.”

“Thanks. But going back to any data we recover, it doesn’t sound like any magic will help much with getting it done fast, unless … Gwyn ap Lugh, is there electricity Underhill?”

“No.”

“Bother. Or any way of extending Underhill’s slow time to Charles and whoever’s working on purging data?”

I got a long look that I met unapologetically.

“Maybe. I will think about it.”

Bran gave me a slight nod. “It would be very helpful, Gwyn ap Lugh. If the FBI have a scene half as bad as we fear, and we have obviously removed data, the pressure will be considerable.” They exchanged a look. “Is there anything else?”

Adam grunted. “Yes. Gwyn ap Lugh, if the President comes to meet the manitou, and to … coincide with your delegation, is there anything you can tell me about what to expect? Juggling my security with heavy Presidential security, cameras, and the rest will be … taxing. Sudden appearances might not be taken well.”

“Indeed. No decision has been made, Adam Hauptman, but I can say that if we come, you will have notice and see us coming.”

That sounded to me like it might be more fun than it wasn’t, but it also tickled my memory.

“Anything you can say about who ‘us’ might constitute?”

“The Gray Lords and entourage, Mercy. I can speak alone when I must, but consensus is better.”

“No problem. But make the entourage very careful fae, if you will. Far be it from me to drop The Fideal in it, but only today someone was telling me of a woman who swears she saw a horse that wasn’t swimming in the Yakima the night those children drowned.”

“He will not be leaving Underhill any time soon, Mercy.” Ap Lugh’s voice was hard. “But I take your point. And I will take my leave of you all, after a very surprising day.”

“Surprises aren’t all bad. I said yesterday started with kidnapping and killing, and ended with a peace dance. So has today, so we must still be doing something right.”

Ap Lugh gave me a long look that became a smile of sorts. “You are a strange being, Mercedes, but Underhill was not wrong to declare you an Elf-friend. Add that name to your collection, and tell your Andrea of it, if you dare.”

His part of the screen blanked as I stared at it and Asil laughed. Gray Lords read Tolkien? Maybe I’d been unfair about fae senses of humour. There were some other things to check with Bran, though, and we did that for a while until he shook his head.

“Go to bed, Mercy. And you, Adam. You’ve healed very quickly, but you need more rest, not that you’ll get it.”

His screen blanked too, and everyone relaxed a little, but Adam was giving me a hard look, and his voice was flattened by the control he was exerting.
“Mercy, I see the advantage of getting to Cantrip’s prison first, but it means you will be walking into danger again.”

“I’ll stay back, Adam, I promise, and with Christiansen if he’s here and willing. But I couldn’t see any other way we could get there faster than the Feds, especially if they find it before the animals do. If it was just to try to save vamps from discovery I wouldn’t have thought about it, but I really don’t want the government getting hold of experimental results. Who knows what Cantrip might have tried or found out? And we so do not need anyone being given ideas about our vulnerabilities.”

He didn’t like it at all but he could see the sense, and after a moment the conversation turned to whom it might be good to send, besides Charles, Joel, and Adam himself. Asil was unwilling to fight unless it was absolutely necessary, but Anna would be good for any wounded wolves, though Charles felt about that much as Adam did about me being there. Mary Jo’s skills might be useful, and she could handle herself as well as a gun, and Warren had fought in the Civil War, but the pack didn’t have anyone besides Adam with more recent military training. We did have a cop, and George went on the list. I doubted it was what ap Lugh had had in mind but he had said wolves and avatars, so I suggested Fred and Hank Owens, and after explaining them to Charles I gave Adam their numbers. And the Seattle pack apparently did have a soldier or three, so Charles agreed to call Angus in the morning. And on the other side of things, if we were bringing injured and traumatised wolves back here we needed more safe rooms, and more medical cover than Samuel alone could provide.

Asil would watch security, Charles and Anna took themselves off, and Adam carried Jesse upstairs, so out of it — and I thought, perhaps a little cloak-zapped — that she didn’t wake. I took off her sneakers, slipped her phone from her pocket, and pulled the covers over her, and we headed for our own bed, glad to cuddle together as humans, silently save for the emotions running through our bond, and let the day slide away behind us.
Chapter Thirty-One

Thursday : Humans

Chapter Thirty-One

MY sleep wasn’t unbroken — I had a nightmare about drowning, thanks to Manannán, and one of those anxiety dreams where you know you’re supposed to do something and nothing happens right, that I chalked up to playing coyote-in-the-middle — but each time Adam’s arms and warmth let me drop back into quieter darkness. He had a nightmare of his own, about me and Jesse from the emotions I could pick up, but my arms worked for him, and when we both woke with false dawn we were feeling refreshed, if not wholly recharged. My stomach was almost clear of bruising, and Adam said his knees were better than expected, though he’d still be sitting as much as he could, so that was good. And I made it through breakfast without being kidnapped, which was even better.

Adam had a serious work backlog, as well as wolf and avatar calls to make, and headed for his study, while Jesse reluctantly admitted to some waiting schoolwork, but what I was supposed to be doing wasn’t clear to anyone, including me. Darryl and a day shift from the pack were on security, Charles and Anna were making calls when they weren’t on their computers, and the only thing Fisher had for me was a no-progress-yet report. David Christiansen and his team were due late afternoon, and the families of the NPS guys wanted Medicine Wolf more than they wanted me, so that was on hold too. I ordered beer from Yoke’s, and thought about the cars waiting at my garage, but even if I’d felt like getting oily Adam didn’t want me going anywhere I didn’t have to, and with plenty of reporters still hanging about the gate, as well as a fresh crowd of gawpers, he had a point. There was always Hanford to watch, where Zee and Tad were still tipping sludge, and I stayed tuned long enough to hear that radiation counts were falling as far downstream as The Dalles, but whatever Zee might be saying to Medicine Wolf wasn’t audible. One bit of the human commentary was interesting — a plan being floated by dive clubs all along the rivers to spend a couple of weekends clearing all the trash people dump or lose into them from the beds — but the talking heads were mostly rehashing things I already knew.

An interesting distraction turned up when a spooked courier delivered the apology from Judge Cray. It seemed honest, with some genuine upset behind it, and I spent a while composing a reply that accepted it as graciously as I could manage while pointing out that, however His Honour supposed he had been talking to experts, if anyone with actual knowledge of the preternatural, or even video editing, had been shown Cantrip’s clumsily manufactured evidence they could have told him straight off that it was less than credible. Nothing controlled the River Devil, or manitous, and identifying Guayota with Medicine Wolf was as comprehensive a mistake as locating Tenerife in the Columbia Basin. Jenny and Andrea came in while I was finishing up, both with briefcases and Andrea with a stuffed shopping bag and a grin on her face. I looked a query but Jenny was in brisk mode.

“Yes, Andrea has goodies for you, Mercy, though I’m not sure you’ll like them, and before that there is a chunk of paperwork to clear.” She sat beside me, and took a formidable stack of it from her briefcase. “You’ll need a pen.”

“Can I run this by you first?”

I gave her the apology and my draft, and she read them, eyebrows rising a little, before giving me a look.
“You’re not wrong, Mercy, but that’s a handsome apology, sent fast, so telling His Honour he was an idiot as well as sucker-punched isn’t the wisest course. I’ll get you a draft for approval and signature tomorrow. Now, paperwork.”

The scale of the licensing she’d lined up was staggering, but as some tens of thousands of tees, tote bags, and other stuff had apparently already been printed, and would be reaching stores today, I didn’t have much choice but to sign where she told me to. There were also tallies of the money involved, which gave me a very strange feeling, and Jenny recommended an accountant—a woman in Pasco who had experience with Wazzu Cougars merchandising, and, Jenny promised, no problem working for me. I checked briefly with Adam, who agreed with keeping it all separate from the pack finances, at least for now, so I made the accountant’s day by calling her. Jenny would courier paperwork over, and we made a provisional appointment to meet. Then it was National Geographic and my need for a press secretary as well as an accountant.

“I realise you hate this, Mercy, but I can’t keep dumping it on Andrea, however she says she’s willing, and I’ve had to pay a colleague to field it today, and give her a break. She will continue to tell all enquirers that nothing can be agreed for some days at least, too much being up in the air, but the return calls will start before long, and they will not stop anytime soon. Now you can have the goodies.”

Andrea’s bag had copies of the national dailies from yesterday and this morning, and I had made the headlines two days running, without exception. Yesterday the pictures had all been the same, and seeing myself in glorious four-colour print, golden-eyed and bloody, with Medicine Wolf’s head looming above me, looking out from the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times and all the rest, was deeply disturbing. The headlines were mostly versions of MANITOU! EEEK!, which was fair enough, and though I only skimmed the stories weren’t too bad, with a very healthy dose of shocked rage at Cantrip, and some interviews with the DC protesters suggesting I’d been right about their motivations. I also got detail on how comprehensively events in the Tri-Cities had taken over Beltway business, with both Houses going into emergency session, announcing enquiries, blowing a lot of hot air, and demanding that the President do something, though what, exactly, wasn’t so clear.

This morning’s issues were much more varied, however I remained a common theme. The editors had had a glutton’s choice, with MacLandis’s video and my response, the appearance of Elder Spirits and Coyote’s interview, rumours about my disappearance and sight of my return with the cloak, Carnwennan, and Manannán’s Bane, and all the statements about wolf policy and Medicine Wolf’s demands and offers to deal with. The NYT had coped best, I thought, with a boxed front-page editorial that started by admitting they felt like they imagined the River Devil must have after swallowing seven Elder Spirits. They’d also given over most of the front section to the story, with everything else that was going on in the world relegated to bald summaries on the last few pages, and the rest were much the same. Some photographer outside the gate had gotten lucky with a telephoto shot of the dance that caught Coyote and Thunderbird with me just in focus behind them, and that appeared several times, but there was also the one of me touching heads with Medicine Wolf, and several of it crossing the Columbia. But the re-engineering and earthquake projects were also getting the kind of analysis I’d hoped for, and the WSJ had somehow tentatively concluded that the first might pay for itself financially in the longer term, while they and everyone agreed that the second was pure gain, even if only partly successful. The practicalities of a mass evacuation of the coastal strip were also being explored quite constructively, if with a strong sense of bemusement. And a cold disgust with Cantrip with both Houses going into emergency session, announcing enquiries, blowing a lot of hot air, and demanding that the President do something, though what, exactly, wasn’t so clear.

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porn soundtrack to footage of a rape.

“The international press is similar, so far as I’ve seen, Mercy. And the weeklies will be, too.” Andrea was being gentle. “No-one has yet breached the security you have around your family in Portland and Eugene, but media interest will not go away unless it is fed. Others are also under pressure — Detectives Willis, Riebold, and Montenegro, staff at Benny’s and Yoke’s, more or less anyone who knows you — and that will get worse while you are declining interviews. A press secretary could co-ordinate something, and reduce the pressure all round.”

I did not like it one bit, but neither could I let my family and friends go on like this, and I knew it. But what did I know about hiring good press secretaries? And who did I imagine I could work with? I stalked off to the kitchen, Jenny and Andrea trailing, and made chocolate for three without receiving any sudden inspiration, so I made myself think logically and started listing the necessary criteria. It had to be a wolf or someone with experience of wolves, or they’d cause difficulties when the pack was around, and I’d prefer a woman, though that wasn’t essential. Broad-mindedness about other preternaturals and human variety were, with an even temper, and enough confidence to tell me when I was being stubborn about the wrong thing. Cheerful would be good, and complete discretion was mandatory. I sent a query to Adam, and when he was next between calls took the list in to show him.

“If you don’t know anyone, love, can that go out to all Alphas with a polite request to think hard and call soon with any names they come up with?”

He thought about it, added patient, grounded, and teen-friendly to the necessary criteria, which made me smile, and said he’d see it done within the hour.

“I know you’re not happy about it, Mercy, but Jenny and Andrea are right. I have PR people who could do it, and they will in any case have to co-ordinate, but I agree you should have someone of your own. Probably two someones, for a while at least. And if Margi and your sisters are willing to talk, please let them — they don’t have many secrets to keep now, and harmless human-interest stuff would relieve the pressure. Willis and Montenegro could talk up forensics too.”

I was still grumpy but didn’t disagree and spent an hour making calls of my own. Mom wanted to meet Coyote before she spoke to anyone, but Nan was happy to tell the world about my teenage indiscretions and the saga of my wedding to Adam, and Ruthie promised to keep her honest. I needed more chocolate after that, but Clay and Tony were willing to talk about coyote forensics in Finley and Pasco, given how much of it was public domain anyway. My self-outing as an avatar was actually making things easier, in this at least, and I got my first laugh of the day when Clay told me the Sheriff’s Deputy in Basin City had found two freshly caught rabbits on the hood of his patrol car. If Gary was starting to pay his debts, things were still improving.

By then it was time to cook lunch, but everyone except Jesse and I ate fast and went back to work as soon as they were finished. Jenny left to see someone in Pasco, Jesse said she was done with schoolwork and would be surfing with Andrea, and when I found myself wondering whether I should talk to the reporters at the gate just for something to do I got a grip and went to pester Westfield instead. He’d got some sleep in somehow, and was brisk. All the known Heuter properties had been cleared and they still didn’t have any definite fix, but after chewing on Fisher’s data the behavioural analysis people had all said the first place to look was Wyoming north of Rawlins, along Route 287. It carried a lot of semi traffic from as far south as Port Arthur, I learned, as well as tourist traffic for Yellowstone, so Cantrip activity would have had good cover, and there was a lot of empty land in Carbon County and its neighbours as the Rockies started their climb towards the sky, as well as forested areas. A computer somewhere was cross-checking satellite imagery, visible, infra-red, and maybe something else, against known construction, but eyeballs
were needed to assess what it found and nothing had popped to warrant investigation on the
ground. Needles and haystacks came to mind, but I called Jim Alvin to pass on the refined target
area, and comforted myself as well as surprising Westfield by saying that at least there ought to be
plenty of coyotes, ravens, and eagles about with that much landscape to feed on.

“Ravens have good memories, and they’re scavengers, so we might get lucky.”

Westfield shook his head. “You’re an education, Ms Hauptman, in more ways than one.”

“Glad to be, AED.” I wasn’t going to broach the question of what happened when we did find
something until I had to. “Did you get the warrant for Senator Heuter’s financials?”

“Oh yes. He’s in very deep water, given the funds siphoned into Cantrip that we’ve already
identified, and it’ll get deeper. I suspect he will be arrested by the end of today, though as he has
lawyers to spare, probably bailed as well. But there are a lot of numbers to crunch, and they’re only
just getting started.” He hesitated. “And this remains classified, Ms Hauptman, though I have
permission to say what I’m going to. We have finally received Preskylovitch’s file from … a
certain unit in the military, and it does not make happy reading. Grew up in hardscrabble
Pennsylvania, joined up the day he turned seventeen. He was first tagged for sniper training, and
did … let’s say reasonable black ops for a while, but then spent time in Iraq, and you were not
wrong to identify him as a torturer. The military let him go when they came under scrutiny after
Abu Ghraib, and he dropped off their radar. After that all we know is that he was registered to vote
and paying some taxes in Fort Worth, but his name is in Cantrip’s database as a sniper, and it looks
like he made some preternatural kills at their instigation before someone pulled him inside and
vanished him again. When and why he became so strongly anti-preternatural isn’t clear, but the
profilers say it could be anything, and a trivial incident wouldn’t surprise them — he needed an us
against them structure to function, and Cantrip offered it, as well as a security blanket he was used
to and some ego stroking.”

I brooded about it, depressed by such a narrow waste of a life. “I realise anything he did in uniform
will stay buried. But what about their letting him go, without tabs, when by the sound of it he
should have been court martialled and locked away somewhere?”

“Questions are being asked, Ms Hauptman, I promise. But yeah. The best I can offer is that the
military’s habit of doing that has annoyed people before, and Preskylovitch will widen that
pressure a fair bit. I know it’s not much, but there’s a better chance today that something will be
done than there was two days ago.”

“But don’t hold my breath.”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Not on you, AED. Or not much. But you should ask someone to tell Donald Rumsfeld that if he
ever comes into the Basin I’ll ask Medicine Wolf to Preskylovitch him at the first opportunity.”

I left him wondering just a little if I was serious and stomped back to the house, deciding I really
would suggest to my not-exactly father that making Rumsfeld’s life deeply miserable was a worthy
end. The thought of him or Cheney confronted by that humourless marid cheered me up, and as the
first person I came across was Asil, who’d just finished his version of breakfast, I told him what
I’d learned and what happy fantasies were consoling me. Adam had come in almost as I started
speaking, drawn by the roil of emotions he’d have felt through our bond, and showed what a wise
Alpha he was by just holding me and letting me vent myself silent before asking me anything.

“I have some contacts who were on the shady to dark side in Iraq, Mercy. Do you want me to ask
“Not really, Adam. What would be worth knowing? He was probably skewed to begin with, but they made it far worse and then abdicated responsibility. But I’d be happy if being Preskylovitched became wolf slang for a human getting themselves deservedly eaten. He may have been a born loser with a humanity deficit, but he deserves some lasting scorn. Jesse was right about that.”

“Jesse? What did she say?”

“When Willis interviewed her the tone of Preskylovitch’s voice came up, with what happened to him. She said the puke got puked.”

Adam’s rumble was only half laughter, but Asil found a wide smile.

“English is sometimes very pleasing. As are you, mi princesa, often. But Adam, I would like you to discover what you can. We may have to be content with fae magic for their prison staff, but I have not changed my mind about their employers.”

I stared. “Asil, during the Bennet business you told me you couldn’t afford to kill any more.”

“And now I have met Medicine Wolf. But it will probably not be me, Mercy, nor Charles, as he is busy. Anna would object, in any case, even if Bran didn’t. But he will not mind action being taken, and there are others who will share that view. You know that monsters must sometimes be killed. So must the makers of monsters.”

Adam’s arms tightened a little around me. “I won’t disagree. And Mercy, the Army has enough uses for wolves that letting a few key people know, bluntly, that they really need to think about screening hard for some bigotries among those they train and let go will at least get their serious attention. Examples would not go amiss, Asil, but they’d have to be very clean disappearances. That could be Preskylovitching.”

“So it could, amigo.”

Some of me was squicked, but a lot wasn’t. Countenancing rape and kin rape as a means of coercion was a capital crime in my book, and if the proper authorities wouldn’t do anything about it, which Westfield had all but admitted, I didn’t have a problem with wolves taking up the slack. But others might, and there could be a nasty clash between that and any beneficial publicity, however narrowly targeted.

“Just don’t let anything happen that Jesse couldn’t be told if the need arose. Execution, yes. Torment, no.”

“Such a wise coyote. We shall deal in prevention, not revenge. And it fits well with the Path of Assertion.”

I couldn’t argue with that either, and let Adam get back to his work with only one kiss. Asil stayed with me, drinking coffee and surfing with an abstracted look. He helped unload beer when the Yoke’s van dropped it off, and went back to it while I again sought the calm of baking. This time I went for gingerbread and a fancy recipe for some white biscuits I’d picked up online and been interested by because the proportions seemed off. The results were pretty good, though — a little dry, as I’d thought, but very tasty and zinging with almond oil, the fresh almonds toasted on top bringing it out. Asil agreed, and so did Jesse, drawn by the smell.

“New recipe, Mom?”
“Off the Net.”

“It’s good. Could you do it with chocolate and a coffee bean?”

“Don’t see why not. But do you want chocolate this dry?”

“I always want chocolate. Any new form is good.” That was unarguable. Jesse snagged a slice of gingerbread as afters, looking thoughtful. “Ginger version might be interesting as well. Or cinnamon, though I dunno what you’d use as a topping.”

“A single green leaf, added for the last few minutes of cooking.” Asil stopped, looking surprised with himself. “Or so it was a long time ago.”

I took a chance. “In Cordoba?”

“Yes. The Romans brought cinnamon to Spain, but under the Caliphate it became much more popular, and the trees were widely planted in the south. They are long gone, now.”

“Has Medicine Wolf made memory less painful for you?”

“Yes, somewhat. But even with biscuits, mi princesa, I cannot but think of those who once baked them. I can call it a celebration of lives lived but it remains knowledge of lives long lost, and some dear to me.”

“Mmm. Is less personal easier than more so?”

“A little, yes. Why do you ask, Mercy?”

“Because Adam’s known age and appearance are going to blow werewolf longevity wide open sooner rather than later, and I’m wondering how we’re going to handle that.”

He looked thoughtful rather than offended. “Bran, too. And Charles and Warren, though they are yet young to me. Forgive me, Mercy, but how long do avatars live?”

“I don’t know, Asil. I have some reason to think longer than humans, in the natural way of things, maybe by quite a bit, but nothing to suggest anything like the werewolf spans a few achieve. Vamps have killed a lot of us, though, since they got here, so my sense of it might be skewed.”

“You might ask if you get the chance, mi princesa. It is a thing Adam must wonder about. Knowing is better. And though it will be some years yet, Jesse, you would be wise to consider how it will be when you look older than your father. I stopped having children a thousand years ago because that drove so many of them to attempt the Change, and only two ever survived. To make sure you do not take that route, querida, you will need to be strong and very clear in your own mind.”

I could hear the sadness in him, behind the Manitou’s effect, and on impulse I looked at the pack bonds that radiated from and to me, and tried a tiny puff of magic into them thinking of what I wanted. The smell of roses thickened the air and he gave me a surprised look.

“Good smells for bad memories, Asil.”

“Mi princesa. Such kindness to an old lobo.”

“A wise old lobo. Anna said she met your son Hassan at the meeting in Seattle.”

“So I gathered.” He gave me a crooked smile. “I haven’t spoken to him for some years, because I
was cross with him. But today I feel grateful he thwarted me, so perhaps I should make a call to Spain. He will be very surprised.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me, Jesse?”

She’d been looking down and her voice was on the small side. “I’m OK, Mom. Just trying to take in ‘a thousand years ago’.”

“And looking older than your Dad, maybe? Asil’s right though, ex-kid. While we all survive that will happen. It’ll have to wait a bit, but I can take you up to Aspen Creek sometime, if you like. There are some families where the husband looks twenty-odd, but his wife is a pensioner, or vice versa, and any children graying. Takes some getting used to, but some of them would probably be willing to talk to you about how they’ve dealt with it.”

“I … maybe. Dad always said I was too young to visit Aspen Creek.”

“He wasn’t wrong. But you’ve been getting older every day.”

“You grew up there.”

“Yeah, I did. Which wasn’t always so easy, Jesse. But however some of Bran’s pack hated it, I did have a furry form. Human visitors are a different issue, but I don’t think Bran would mind you coming with Adam or me sometime. Think about it, hey?” As if anything would stop her, but she nodded, and I chased a thought. “Asil, is there anything besides Medicine Wolf that might make it easier for older wolves to talk about the history they’ve lived through? I don’t mean personal stuff, but Romans using cinnamon leaves and whatever.”

Asil shrugged. “Maybe. But the far past fades, Mercy, as it should. I remember a great deal more about Franco than about the Franks. Though I will grant that Medicine Wolf has stirred up even the oldest layers. That is why a memory of cinnamon leaves came to me, I expect.”

“I figured. I’ve been wondering if Andrea might be a good choice for some of this PR, when it happens.”

“Perhaps so. But the oldest wolves will not be speaking, Mercy, and Adam’s position will not move them. Nor would publicity about centuries of life help to prevent the wannabes.”

“Mmm. I don’t disagree about truly oldest, Asil, taking that to mean you and Samuel and Bran. Your sons too, obviously. But with anyone, oh, let’s say post-mediaeval, there are other considerations. If there’s a wolf who ever met Washington or Lincoln or whoever, that could be very powerful. Adam says he and Christiansen have spoken once or twice about becoming the only surviving Vietnam vets. And remember that episode of True Blood where Bill comes out as a Civil War vet?”

Jesse did, but Asil snorted. Vamps were not much like that imagination of them, though the propensity to violence was right enough, and the version of wolves was way off — which hadn’t stopped most wolves I knew from watching it avidly.

“I take the point, querida. And it has worked for Medicine Wolf and your not-exactly father, yes, with all those extinct animals. But I do not think either quite lives in time as wolves do.”

“There’s that. Oh well. But I still think we need to find every way we can to make it work for us. The working against will take care of itself.”

“That is true, alas. Querida!”
The last was to Jesse, who’d been surfing on her phone and looking surprised, interspersed with glances at Asil. She dropped her eyes.

“Sorry, Asil, it’s nothing. I’d never heard of the Franks, and looking them up made me think about how many people you must have known. I didn’t mean to stare.”

“You didn’t, querida, and my wolf is easy today.” He sighed. “Many people, yes. Far too many to remember. The fae are born immortal, but saving only Charles wolves are not, and when it is thrust upon us it is as a part of our curse.”

It might have gone downhill from there, but the two-way stashed by the phone crackled, and the uniformed gate sergeant let me know that Christiansen and his men had arrived a little earlier than expected. Warren had cleared them, despite two Hummers filled with a lot of weaponry, and was that OK with me? It was, and I sent Adam the good news.
Christiansen had brought both his grandsons, Connor and John-Julian, and three others — all human, equally dark-complected African-American vets, who answered to Travis, Vinnie, and Lincoln and looked at me as warily as they did at everyone. We’d done introductions to Westfield and the other Feebs on site outside, as well as to the wolves presently on patrol, and once we were in the house we added Asil, Charles, and Anna. Everyone knew their werewolf protocols, but Christiansen was strongly dominant, for all he was a lone wolf, and with four Alphas in one spot the testosterone couldn’t help rising. With a sigh, Anna asked Christiansen’s permission, and zenned him, as well as offering some calm to the others, and his face smoothed.

“That’s real good, Ms Cornick. Thank you. I’ve heard about you being an Omega, but never met one. And you’re owed some thanks too, Mercy, Sarge. How are the knees?”

“They’re good, Corp. You got here fast.”

“Air Force gave us a ride to Lewis-McChord, Hummers and all. Someone goosed them, but the crew didn’t know who.”

Adam shrugged. “We’re good with the Feds just now and they knew you were coming, and why. But let’s get out of the hall and do some proper briefing.”

With so many people we used the den room, though Connor and John-Julian helped Andrea and me bring coffee and biscuits through to add some ease to the necessary business. Adam’s primary concern was Jesse and me, and he wanted us covered anywhere and everywhere off his land, which was going to make for an interesting discussion at Jesse’s school. That, apparently, was already pencilled in for Friday — tomorrow, I realised, my sense of the week having gone AWOL — so her return to school on Monday, unless anything further happened, could be set up. Adam explained about Mrs Bradley, and threw in Clements and what had been done to Paul, bringing some surprised looks and, when Andrea added a summary of what hate posting she’d seen, a swift, efficient set of questions from Connor to Jesse about the social media she used.

“OK, Miss Hauptman, that’s all good. But if you ever see anything you think is any kind of hinky, tell us at once, please.”

Jesse agreed, and we did some more practicalities about who had access to the house, my floating plans to get back to the garage next week, the press problem, and what else was or might be scheduled, before turning to what training Jesse and I had with guns, and what Christiansen expected from us if any of his men identified an active threat. He was unfailingly professional and polite but I had to suck up irritation, knowing it made sense but pushing back a little all the same.

“I get it, David, and I promise not to be stupid. But you are thinking only about physical threats. Do you sense magic at all?”

“Not well.”

“Any of your humans?”

“No.”
“Then if I tell any of you there’s some about, you need to listen. And trust my call on it. Just because someone appears from nowhere doesn’t mean they’re a threat — could be Coyote or another Elder Spirit, could be my friend Stefan, who’s a vamp and translocates, could be a fae, and none of them will be at all pleased by being shot. I’ll warn anyone I know is coming, of course, but stuff happens. And then, going the other way, be aware there are fae artefacts of power in the house — Manannán’s Bane, Carnwennan, and the rose cloak, all able to move on their own. Oh, and Thunderbird’s feather, which isn’t, so far as I know. Don’t touch any of them. They might not like it.”

“Fair enough. Appearances from nowhere will be tricky, and it would be good to avoid those, but I don’t use anyone who’s trigger-happy.”

We kicked it around a little more, until Adam was satisfied, and he then asked Andrea to keep Jesse company for a bit. They were both curious, but went, and Adam shifted register.

“There’s something else, Corp, but it’s for you alone, and your call.”

Christiansen was surprised but told his men to unload gear and familiarise themselves with the house. Asil and Charles went with them, as guides and to remove alphas from the mix, and Adam faced his old friend.

“You know the Feds are looking for Cantrip’s prison?”

“Yes there anyone who doesn’t?”

“Current probability is southern Wyoming, but wherever it is, when it’s found we have a problem. We don’t just need to free the captives, of whatever kind, we also need to grab whatever records there are before the Feds can.”

Christiansen frowned. “I can see that would be good, Sarge, but I don’t see how it can be done, given it’s the Feds who’ll be there first.”

“Maybe. But we might have a window. Mercy?”

I tried to keep my voice matter-of-fact. “This is going to sound weird, David, because it is. And you’ll have questions I can’t answer. But one, more than the Feds are looking, and two, if I’m wearing that rose cloak from yesterday, I can take three steps to somewhere, and three more to southern Wyoming, or wherever. And I can take people with me, but only wolves or avatars, though between steps three and four some fae will be joining us.”

Christiansen didn’t blink but he was very still. “That sounds real handy. Is somewhere dangerous?”

“It can be, but for this it shouldn’t be providing no-one takes any step aside. Those with me will need to be holding the cloak, and we pass through as fast as we can. Not talking about it afterwards would also be a very good idea.”

“I’m not asking you to join the assault, Corp, but I do ask if you’ll stick to Mercy like glue. We need her to do this, and it’s worth some risk. She and Anna will be staying back until we’re in, but assuming some traumatised wolves to control and who knows what else I will be busy and distracted.” Adam blew out a breath. “And our assault strength will be a lot less than I’d like, so I can’t leave anyone else with them.”

“How do you figure, love?”

“Having to hold the cloak limits it sharply, Mercy. With everyone we thought of it’ll still be a
squad doing a company’s job.”

“Don’t forget whoever Gwyn ap Lugh picks, which I bet will include himself and some serious fae power. And Stefan, with whoever. Some vamps will be translocating to join us there, David, if they can, in case Cantrip has vamp prisoners too.”

“A full preternatural alliance?”

“For this, and this only, yes. No-one wants torture data out there.”

“Alright. Count me in, Sarge. It doesn’t sound like a party to miss, and rescue’s what I do for choice.” Adam nodded gratitude and Christiansen sat back, studying me. “Seems you’re making even more things happen than the media have said, Mercy. Anything else I should know?”

“I don’t think so, David. The biggest threats left are human, not preternatural, and like Adam I’m more worried about hardline bigots, Cantrip or otherwise, who reach meltdown, and the fruitcakes who’ll pop up.” Fruitcakes always did. “Oh, one thing, maybe, because your name did come up in a conversation last night, with the White House. Adam ripped at the President some about the way you and he were treated, and the man agreed you’d suffered a betrayal.”

This time Christiansen did blink, and looked at Adam. “You spoke to the President?”

“Mercy did, mostly, but yeah.” Emotions curled in Adam’s voice. “He asked if I’d been a wolf in country and I blew some steam.”

Christiansen’s laugh had very little humour in it. “I imagine you did, Sarge. Man was an REMF for a while, wasn’t he?”

“He said sixteen months and not entirely an REMF. Didn’t say how or where, but he knows enough that he understood where I was coming from.” Adam’s smile was just as edgy. “He was straighter than I’d expected, but it was still fun watching Mercy crank his head open. I can’t do details, Corp, but she told him politics had to catch up with reality, and made it stick. Some, at least.”

“And the miracles do not cease.” I got a more genuine smile from Christiansen. “I’ll repeat the thanks, Mercy. It’s been a much better week than I was expecting when I first saw you and the Manitou on TV and heard Sarge had been shot. You’ve boomeranged it all onto Cantrip very nicely too, and I’m always happy to see them get it in the neck.”

Fae and vamp secrets were one thing, human ones that would soon be out anyway another.

“You’re welcome, David. And Cantrip are gone, by the way. Abolished, with lots of prosecutions to follow. It’ll be announced in a few days, as best we know. Maybe after the Pink marches on Saturday.” I grinned. “Whatever replaces them still needs a name and a new acronym. I’ve got as far as Central Resources for Associating with the Preternatural, but suggestions are welcome.”

It raised the laugh I’d hoped for, and that I thought Adam needed, and we got on with what needed doing — in my case a call from the kitchen to a very wary school principal, who had already had the FBI’s letter and seemed relieved there was something as practical as bodyguards to discuss as well. Crosseer with her than I’d quite realised, I unsettled her with some bland thanks for the school’s public concern about Jesse’s wellbeing, and warned her that we’d almost certainly drag a media pack with us, leaving her fretting — which I didn’t mind at all. Jesse listened with interest, and we talked for a bit about what any of her classmates and friends might have to say about her having a guard detail, then got on to her offer to Sally Willis, what Clay had told me about her
school experience, and what Jesse had meant by strategies.

“I’ve been thinking about that, Mercy. I tried to be quiet about Dad at first but it didn’t work. Just made them push at me more. So I switched to being up front, but I dunno how she would do that.”

“Up front how, Jesse?”

“Like, yeah, my Dad’s an Alpha werewolf. Comes in at about three hundred pounds, not counting his teeth. What’s yours?”

I laughed. “Good one. Does it work?”

“ Mostly, except with the haters.”

“Many of them?”

“No. I’d have told you, Mom. It’s just a few kids whose parents are heavy bible types. But they pretty much steer clear, in case preternatural cooties are catching.”

“Alright.” I thought about it. “Sally Willis is about a year younger than you. I bet Clay Willis could be someone a ninth-grader really didn’t want to have angry with them. The point is to let people know they can’t get in your face without consequences. Not so different from David and his men, really — they can’t guarantee to protect us from everything, only that anyone trying will have to pay a very high price. Or, assuming you get on with her well enough, how would you feel about her saying, yeah, I’m a friend of Jesse Hauptman’s and I hang out with wolves — you want to talk to them about it?”

The idea that she might herself be someone to invoke tickled Jesse, but also unsettled her a little, and she stayed quiet, petting Medea, while I began to think about food. With David plus five humans added to the list we were talking quantity, again, but I still wanted variety and opted for a venison risotto as heavy on vegetables as the pasta sauce had been. The mince did better cooked quite slowly, so I got it going first, and to my surprise Travis and Lincoln drifted in while I was chopping vegetables and offered to help. Both proved very efficient with knives, and I found I didn’t mind their curiosity — it wasn’t disrespectful and they didn’t push, but when they found me willing to talk questions came. Some were professional — Preskylovitch’s gun, how much of my reaction speed was coyote magic as against training, what martial arts I favoured, and the new safe rooms some of the pack were finishing downstairs — but manitous and Elder Spirits were in there too, and I found myself enjoying the reality of not having to conceal what I was. Coyote having blown the true story of killing the River Devil made things easier too, though I didn’t say anything about obsidian blades or my not-exactly aunts, and they had the tact to avoid dumb questions about seeing beings I knew get eaten. While we were talking David and his other men came in with Adam and Andrea, but no-one interrupted until I’d finished a story about the first time Nan and Ruthie saw me go coyote and found themselves far more squicked by the idea that I could happily eat my meat raw than by my having a furry form.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you about, Mercy.” David sounded a little wary. “Sarge doesn’t like it much, and I understand that, but while Connor, John-Julian and I remember from when we first met, Travis, Lincoln, and Vinnie need to know what you look like on four legs. And none of us have seen you change. Sarge says it’s instant, like your, ah, not-exactly father did on TV, not like a wolf.”

I looked at Adam, who sent confirmation that he didn’t like it but thought the request reasonable. He added that food would be imminent — no small thing if I’d be doing two quick changes — and sent me an image of Andrea, so I raised an eyebrow at her, seeing her pinken a little.
“I am curious, Mercy, as you know, but it’s not just that and I’ll leave if you’d rather. There have been many requests for a picture of your coyote, and a lot of money offered. I didn’t think you’d want to gouge National Geographic for an exclusive, but this could make you big bucks.”

The nudity involved bothered Adam more than me, and everyone here would have seen the rape video anyway, but while I understood the media requests they irritated me all the same. I pushed that down and thought it through a little.

“What did Jenny think?”

“That we were obliged to inform you, and have no particular advice except that there is money to be made.”

“And you?”

“That a shot in here, on the table with the pans behind, would be very good PR. Home from the range.”

There was some laughter, including mine, though my desire to be photographed remained very low, and I could see what Andrea had in mind. “Another tee to license?”

“For sure, Mercy, though it’s all your call.”

“Right.” It didn’t feel like it. “What sort of big bucks?”

“High six figures at least, maybe a lot more.”

“Huh?” I caught my jaw before it dropped too far. “That’s insane.”

“That’s celebrity, Mercy.” Andrea shrugged, unrepentant. “For any picture desk your coyote is the biggest missing image. And Mr Hauptman, a second shot of you with Mercy would push up the take. They got Mercy with you in wolf form for free, or at most standard prices, but they want the reciprocal, too.”

I looked at Adam, who shrugged, and made a decision. “Alright, Andrea. David’s request is reasonable, and if there’s that much money to be made I’d be a fool to pass it up. But ten percent goes to Clean up the Basin, and twenty-five percent to Jenny and you, for everything you’ve done already. No protests.”

She went mulish. “It’s not proper, Mercy. Conflict of interest.”

“Nope. Coincidence of interests. Yours is to make me money, with good PR, and mine is to give credit and pay where it’s due. Just because you’re enjoying yourself doesn’t mean you haven’t earned a hefty bonus either. The rest goes to Adam to pay for security and our Benny’s bill.”

There’d be some more arguing to do with Jenny, I knew, but Adam was in amused agreement. He also agreed to stir the mince as needed, and I got on with it, turning to David and his men.

“Gentlemen, you need to give me your backs for a moment.”

When they had I stripped, remembering doing this for Jean Ryan when I was trying to get Zee out of jail, and gave them my own back, nodding to Adam. When he nodded in return I took a breath and went coyote. The sudden increase in the intensity of cooking smells reminded me why I didn’t usually change in the kitchen, and it took a sneeze or two to adjust. My hunger also notched up, and I deliberately went to the utility room door, away from the range, so I could give myself a proper
shake. I got a good scratch in too, before turning and going back to parade myself before the men who needed to see me, and with a welcome sense of mischief my furry form always brings I did the nearest a coyote can get to a sashay, hearing Adam and Jesse laugh.

“Coyote, all right.” David looked thoughtful. “Thirty-some pounds?”

Adam agreed for me.

“Can you change if you’re injured? I’m thinking that if we ever needed to carry you out of anywhere, you being able to shed most of a hundred pounds could be very good.”

Adam knew the answer, but checked with me. “Depends on the injury, Corp, but in principle. Pain’s a distraction, and avatars never shift involuntarily.”

“Right. And how fast are you in this form?”

“Faster than me.”

Adam braced himself, arms cupped, and I landed in them hard enough to make him take a step back. I also gave his face a lick, and he gave me a long-suffering look before setting me down on the floor again. He crouched and let me show how fast I could dodge even a wolf’s hand, and someone whistled softly.

“OK, that’s good too. Let’s note colouring and specifics. Plenty of wild coyotes round here.”

The chance of confusion seemed slight but they were professionals, and looked very carefully. As a coyote I’m a little larger than average but it’s a true coyote form, with none of the differences a werewolf has from a timber wolf, and my colouring wasn’t distinctive. With a mental sigh I showed them the pattern of buckshot scarring on my rump, long-healed but still with a roughness I could feel when I washed, and visible when the light caught my fur right, as Darryl had been amused to inform me. I thought David was amused too, but he stayed serious.

“Thanks, that’s helpful. Other questions, anyone?”

Travis cleared his throat. “Ah, how strong are you in that form, ma’am?”

“Physically, about what you’d expect, soldier.” Adam shrugged. “Nothing like werewolf strength or healing, and though Mercy’s human strength is high from work and training that isn’t reflected in this form. But her speed adds a lot of impact, you don’t want to be bitten, and her senses are up considerably — sight, hearing, and smell.”

He sent me an unexpected query, and I yipped agreement.

“And she has magic, which she can use just as well in this form. Expect a brief pressure around your mouths and noses, and know it could be a lot higher.”

I used my bond to Adam, starting with David, who frowned, and gave it a few seconds each but no more than an inability to breathe.

“Shoot. What is that, Sarge? Felt wolf, somehow.”

“Pack bond, Corp. To Mercy they’re ribbons, and she can use them as garrottes. Tourniquets, too — did it the other morning, on my leg.”

“OK.” His look was reflected in a slight shake of his head. “More useful, however weird. Any
particular vulnerability in coyote form?"

“Again, not like wolves. No equivalent of silver, but no immunity to lead. No wolf rage, either. She’s always herself, however many legs.”

“Right. Anything else we should ask or see?”

There wasn’t, so it was photo time, and though Andrea had her pretero-heaven smile on she had her phone ready. Feeling the mischief again after being very patient for a coyote, I trotted over to Jesse and greeted Medea, who was her usual unafraid self until I gave her face a quick lick and dodged an avenging paw. I’d done it often enough before that she didn’t bother to leave Jesse’s lap, but did give me a reproving hiss before settling down again. And as always, it amused Adam. Then I hopped up on to the table, and gave Andrea a coyote grin. Her smile got a little goofier, but her brain was still running.

“That’s good, Mercy, but can we do several looks and see which turns out best?”

My human self had some different feelings, but my coyote self knew itself altogether right so I didn’t mind posing a little — full-on and three-quarter profile, sitting and standing, jaw closed and tongue lolling. Then Connor took over stirring, Adam joined me, sharing his sense of how ridiculous it all was but feeling much easier with security up some more, and Andrea had him try standing by the table and leaning against it, with me leaning against him and sitting more upright. Jesse was finding it funny, which gave both of us another reason to put up with it, but enough was enough, and we were both hungry. David and his men gave me their backs again, and I shifted and dressed, feeling my stomach growl with the energy drain. Adam handed me a couple of almond biscuits and a slice of gingerbread, and the sugar helped. Andrea offered me her phone, and I paged though the shots with Adam, thinking we both looked pretty good in all of them.

“Your call, Andrea. You have a better sense of this, and I need to get food cooking. Just not the one of me licking Medea’s face. I wouldn’t mind, but I don’t suppose Medea’d be too happy, and there’s a bit too much of Jesse visible.”

“No, that’s for me.” She laughed. “And maybe my dad, if you don’t mind. I’ll crop Jesse out and tell him not to let it go anywhere else.”

She explained to the curious about her father, while I reclaimed the mince, decided it was done, added vegetables, and set water for rice to boil. The men pitched in with military efficiency, clearing, wiping down, and laying the table, and with David’s permission accepted a beer apiece. Once the cooked rice went in the smell brought Asil, Charles, and Anna in from whatever they’d been up to, with Darryl, who’d been sergeanting, and Anna was pleased I’d agreed to the photos. The one of Medea made her laugh, and Charles gave me a very wolf look, but he’d always been a little scornful of a cat that wasn’t afraid of werewolves, so I ignored it. What none of us ignored was the news he had — Senator Heuter arrested and despite Westfield’s prediction not yet bailed, though his lawyers were very unhappy, and Cantrip DD James Hobson still not talking but formally charged with gross malfeasance in office, perjury, false accounting, and conspiracy to kidnap, with other charges pending.

“Westfield said conspiracy to kidnap was because while they still don’t know exactly how much he knew, they have proof MacLandis spoke to him between receiving Kerrigan’s report and calling Judge Cray, and a panicked voicemail from him on MacLandis’s phone, left just before he was arrested, that demonstrates prior knowledge of the plan to get to you using an improperly obtained SSC subpoena. Perjury’s because he signed off on doctored evidence with the SSC application. He knew about the intent to shoot Adam too, but the lawyers can’t decide what they want to go with on that — conspiracy to assault, attempted murder, reckless endangerment, or something else they
haven’t thought of yet. The malfeasance is as of now primarily financial, and he seems to have been the money man — he was certainly the conduit for Heuter’s funding — but Westfield promises it will be broadened when they feel clearer about who was giving what orders, and who just knew they were being given. And there will be a considerable number of murder charges announced tomorrow, concerning freelance kills listed in Cantrip’s database — perpetrators where they’ve already arrested them, and the Senior Supervisory Agents who gave out the target data.”

It gave us all a lot to chew on as well as my seriously good risotto, and Andrea had some interesting legal points, but mindful of Jesse I shifted subjects after a while. Adam liked the idea of weighing three hundred pounds not counting teeth, and we had fun kicking around good threats to deter and reform tenth-grade bigots in the making. The wolves didn’t go for it much, because all they ever needed to do was let their beast show in their eyes, but David’s men had all grown up in places where a credible threat was a valuable tool, and so had Darryl before his brains took him to college very early. Andrea did some laughing with everyone else, but then brought us all up short with a very smart idea, and one I should have thought of myself as I’d been using it all week.

“I’m not good at verbal threats, or any kind, but when I’m going to be facing someone who worries me I have a lapel cam that goes to remote storage, and I make sure they know it. Contract’s expensive for occasional use, but well worth it, and Jenny got me some discount. And I hadn’t thought about it for schools, but you know, Mr Hauptman, seeing as you have your own remote storage facility, if the costing is viable you might think about offering that as a service for kids at a price their parents can afford. And given your Path of Assertion, maybe a lower rate for families with a preternatural member.”

Adam liked it a lot, as did Charles, and I spread some love by telling Andrea that was a good example of why she deserved big bonuses, and suggesting to Adam that if it worked out she should get a percentage of his profit as well as a free account of her own. Embarrassing other people didn’t bother me too much, and as Jesse was intrigued by the whole idea and agreed with me wholeheartedly we managed to send Andrea off home — with a KPD escort — more resigned than not to becoming richer. Once the table was cleared and the washing-up machine loaded, David and his men also said their goodnights, and Darryl took them off for an evening round and to meet the pack’s night shift. Asil was going to call his son, Charles had work, and Anna said she’d see Jesse to bed, so Adam and I were free to plead tiredness and head upstairs ourselves. Truth to tell, we were exaggerating a little when we said it, but not by the time we fell asleep still holding one another.
Chapter Thirty-Three

Friday: Children

Chapter Thirty-Three

THE morning did not bring any of the updates Adam and I most wanted. Westfield was busy, but Fisher told us the search was still striking out, satellites or no, and without saying anything we all knew the chances of recovering anyone alive were falling fast. In the plus column, if you could call it that, murder charges had been announced in time for the East Coast morning news — seventeen independents Cantrip had set up and paid, and six SSAs, with a total of twenty-four counts of homicide. Seven misidentified humans were among the dead, with eleven half-fae and six wolves — three loners and one each from the packs in Amarillo, Tucson, and Baltimore. Fisher told us, eyes down, that there were a dozen more cases where they had hard ID on a shooter in the wind, but risked a more open look when she added that Clements had been found and detained, in the first place because she’d sent at least one obscene image across a state line, and was howling blue murder to no avail. So was her father, but as Senator Heuter still hadn’t made bail, and the JLS was in considerable disarray, he was also getting nowhere fast, to his great annoyance and everyone else’s satisfaction.

Adam had some technical questions about how the hits on wolves had been managed that left me a little queasy, though I understood the need to know. I also noted with interest that they increased Fisher’s already considerable respect for him, and that she answered as freely as she could. She also had detail about the bereaved families at her fingertips, and impressed us both by saying the FBI had contacted the Amarillo, Tucson, and Baltimore Alphas before breaking the news.

“Each of them came in person, bringing legal representation for the bereaved, and I’ve seen a report that the Tucson Alpha was particularly helpful because the victim’s father is also a wolf, and nearly lost it. Said some things, but no harm, no foul. We do have a request from DC, though, that a senior wolf eyeball cases where we’re still looking for the shooter and tell us if there’s a … bigger problem than the obvious.”

“Ask Charles.” I could hear sadness in Adam’s voice, underneath the anger. “He has more recent knowledge of other packs, and what he doesn’t know himself he can check with less hassle.”

“OK, thanks.” Fisher shifted mode a little. “The AED told me not to push this at all, Mr Hauptman, but we’re interested that you’ve called in Mr Christiansen and his team. We know you served together in Vietnam, of course, and we’d assumed you knew one another as wolves, but the AED said to tell you there was some curiosity about something you’d said to him, and if you and Mr Christiansen were willing to be debriefed so late — his words — you would be listened to.”

Adam’s face was still, and I knew he had some mixed emotions. Did a report on meeting a wolf warlord in Cambodia forty-some years back matter to anyone now? The rest of Adam’s squad had died, so it might, but it wasn’t something he liked talking about.

“Maybe. I’ll talk to Christiansen and let you know. And as a heads-up, late morning he’ll be escorting Mercy to see Jesse’s principal. I’ve asked KPD to provide an escort and keep media back, but as it’ll be the first time she’s left here since Tuesday they’re expecting some excitement. And though I want Jesse to get back to school next week, which is one reason Christiansen is here, I have some concerns. The school’s security is adequate under normal conditions, but one thing is
that while we’re not intending to leak Bradley’s name to anyone, yet, we have no control over what the school might say, or Bradley herself.”

“Right.” Fisher considered it. “That’s more for the local office than this team, and I’ll pass it on, but if Mr Christiansen thinks anything suggests any organised threat to Ms or Miss Hauptman the AED would want to know fast.”

Adam nodded, and after expressing her hope that I’d pin some school ears back, Fisher left. So did Adam, to talk to David, and I set about preparing myself for what was going to be a difficult meeting. I hadn’t checked email in several days, and there was a bunch of junk to delete, but at least my address didn’t seem to have leaked beyond friends yet. There were good wishes from people I knew — customers at the garage, Sylvia and Gabriel, and, surprising me considerably, an apologetic Lin Armstrong, the only sane and half-way sensible Cantrip agent I’d ever met. Where he’d found the time I couldn’t imagine, but while I sent customers brief thanks, and Sylvia and Gabriel something warmer, I sent Armstrong a much more ironic message making sure he knew he still had a job even if no-one else transferred from Cantrip to the new agency. I also found what I was looking for, the email from Colin Taggart in Aspen Creek with details of previous problems affecting the schooling of wolves’ children.

It was a very mixed bag. In a few cases, mostly where a school had a strong religious ethos or someone senior who was JLS or Bright Future, kids had wound up being withdrawn for their own safety. In more, though, something had been worked out, with some teachers at least willing to watch for anti-wolf bigotry and come down hard on what they saw. And in a few, including my own trip with Ben when Jesse was still middle-grade, Colin had tagged them as successes. No-one else seemed to have taken a wolf in on four legs, but there had been some instances of what I called Werewolf 101, allaying fears, as well as some versions of Jesse’s strategy, scaring would-be bullies sufficiently to deter. The Alpha in St Louis had worked in reverse, inviting some genuinely scared parents to meet him with a couple of his pack, convincing them that being a wolf didn’t mean being out of control, and that his son was in any case not a wolf in the first place. I thought about that one, but inviting more people in wasn’t what Adam or I needed just now, and with Andrea’s dad provisionally on board I was inclining to asking for the school debate anyway — though what was actually debated would be an interesting question.

Jesse didn’t want to come, thinking it would be easier for me if she wasn’t present, but David asked her to reconsider so she would be party to any agreement reached about the presence of his men. That meant her changing into school-acceptable clothes, and I went for another skirt and blouse — the cloak and feather were tempting but would not help to discourage media. I did take Manannán’s Bane, though, and as I was carrying a bag, and Carnwennan didn’t seem to mind, I slipped it in, more on principle than anything else, and let David know I had it.

With both Jesse and I on the move David brought his full strength, putting one of us and a trio of guards in each Hummer. They were both H-1 Alphas with the Duramax engine and a lot of internal customisation, but no more seats than most Hummers. The rear windows were sufficiently darkened that I couldn’t be seen, but as we cleared the crowds outside the gate behind our KPD escort several vehicles scrambled to tag along. When we reached East Riek a Fox van joined us, and on South Finley NBC and CNN, so it was quite a caravan that reached the entrance to the school’s parking lot, but the KPD had a car waiting to block the way in behind us. It didn’t stop people shouting questions when they saw me hop out, but Jesse was shielded from view and we made it inside without incident.

KPD also had a uniform sergeant inside with the school guard, an older light-skinned man who won points by greeting Jesse warmly and praising her bravery. They managed not to look at me and Manannán’s Bane too much as they politely checked everyone’s ID and Christiansen’s bundle
of Washington State licenses to carry, concealed or otherwise, everything up to a bazooka, so far as I could tell. He and his men all had LEOSA privileges, but the state licenses covered him under the Federal School Zones Act, and they impressed the sergeant.

“Do you have licenses for every state, David?”

“Have to have, Mercy. CIA sorted them for us when we first got into the rescue business.”

Their guns were also inspected and admired, and we were done, but the sergeant asked me if I’d be willing to make a statement to the media afterwards.

“You don’t want to, ma’am, that’s your privilege, but it’ll make it easier to get you back out of here if you throw them something.”

“David?”

“Your call, Mercy. Our job is looking after you whatever you do, not deciding what that is.”

“Then maybe, sergeant. I don’t much want to but I take your point.”

“Those Hummers give you an option.” The school guard shrugged. “Groundsman won’t be happy, but you could go up the bank and round the edge of the baseball field to the service gate. I hold keys for that.”

“Thank you, sir.” David gave him a nod. “Options are always good.”

“You’re welcome, sir, and I figure I owe you anyway.” At David’s questioning look he smiled. “Got twin grandkids, boy and a girl, just turned ten. They still share a room, and that poster of you with those kids you rescued is just about the only decoration they can agree on.”

He got a return smile. “Good to know, so thanks again. I’ll be around some with Miss Hauptman, so if you bring the poster in I can sign it, if you’d like.”

He did like, saying his grampa status would soar, and we headed upstairs to the Principal’s Office. Only David and Connor, as the heads of each trio, came in with Jesse and me, the others taking stances on either side of the doors, outer and inner, which spooked the Principal’s secretary. The woman herself — Barbara Stallings — was made of sterner stuff, but wanted to co-operate, within limits.

“As I’m sure you will understand, Ms Hauptman, Jesse, some people are not at all happy at having armed men on the school grounds, but we do understand your concerns at this time, and the KPD assure me that Mr Christiansen and his men are exempted from the Federal law that would seem to be infringed. How do you propose this will work?”

We got down to the details of Jesse’s schedule, and Stallings was relieved to find David as flexible as he could be. For classroom stuff men would be outside door and window, and someone would be with Jesse during all breaks, which didn’t thrill her but she accepted. Sports were trickier.

“I’m concerned with Miss Hauptman’s privacy as well as security, ma’am, and we have to expect long lenses. You have decent fencing, but the mesh won’t stop photography. I know you have a school policy against it, but the School District here doesn’t, so legality’s arguable and the media pack are very hungry.”

We could all hear them outside, despite the noise inside as a class period ended, and Stallings nodded grimly.
“Could affect your other students too. They’re likely to be approached by journalists wanting anything on Miss Hauptman and her parents they can get. Can’t stop it, but I’d ask two things — first, that every student gets a letter, so parents are alert, and a reinforcing talk from me in your assembly Monday morning to make sure they all know this is a serious business. And second, that you consider getting opaque plastic sheeting on your fences — Mr Hauptman is willing to do that work at cost.” David set a flash drive on Stalling’s desk. “Suggested text for the letter, points I’d make verbally, and a set of estimates are all on there. Please don’t email any of them to anyone — if you don’t already, you need to assume that anything you send unencrypted will be read by a lot of media eyes.”

Stallings nodded even more grimly. “Yes, I realise that. The letter I can do, the fencing I’ll have to refer to the School Board, but I’ll be talking to them after this meeting anyway, and if we can afford it I’ll press for it. But how much effect talking to the student body will have is moot, Mr Christiansen.”

David shrugged slightly. “It’s worth trying, ma’am. I can usually get through.”

“You can? Most are decent kids who’ll understand, but we have our rebels and our share of … the less responsible, and given how close we are to … events, there’s a considerable interest.”

“I imagine, Ms Stallings. Did much teaching happen on Tuesday?”

“No it didn’t, Ms Hauptman.” She shrugged. “Though it depends what you count. You were live on KEPR before seven-thirty, attendance across all grades was only about sixty percent, and those who did show were glued to their phones. So were the staff, so I put it on the big screen in the assembly room and we did manitous, civil rights, forensic procedures, and Hanford.”

I gave her a smile. “No complaints here, Ms Stallings. That strikes me as a good call. And I’m sorry Cantrip and Medicine Wolf between them tanked your attendance figures.”

“Yes, well. You had other priorities.” She frowned. “Mr Christiansen, how do you get through to kids whose reaction to any prohibition is to break it as soon as they can?”

“I make an impression, ma’am. You know I’m a wolf?”

“Yes of course.”

“Ever felt wolf power?”

She frowned again. “I’m not sure. Mr Hauptman has considerable presence, but he’s always scrupulously polite.”

“You’d know if you had, ma’am. Feels like this, and you’ll want to watch my eyes.”

I saw the wolf yellow flicker, and felt the power — less than Adam’s, but not by much, and very focused. Stallings recoiled as far as her seat let her.

“It’s not a thing I do lightly, ma’am, but it works and I won’t neglect a tool that does. Let me know who your real troublemakers are and I’ll do some quiet one-on-ones. You should find troubles get a fair bit rarer.”

“I imagine.” Stallings’s voice was dry, though I could hear shock underneath. “I don’t think I object, but I’ll need to take some advice on that, also. We aren’t supposed to scare students into obedience.”
“Could’ve fooled me.”

Jesse’s mutter was very quiet and I wasn’t sure Stallings had caught it, but David had and I saw him suppress a smile. I opted for diplomacy.

“Being scared of things that are scary isn’t wrong, Ms Stallings, and the preternatural should be a little scary, at least. The point is that it isn’t only scary — it’s also helpful, responsible, and in this instance directly concerned with the welfare and safety of one of your students. And while I know it’s arguable, and might depend on the age of any … transgressor, there are legal issues. Most people who’ll be asking and offering bribes will be simple journalists, in so far as any journalism is simple, but you realise the bigger issue is wolf haters? John Lauren, especially, but Bright Future types too. The flash drive Mr Christiansen gave you has summary data on online threats to Jesse and me that we’re tracking. It doesn’t make good reading, I warn you — and in case you’re wondering, Jesse is familiar with it. Which brings us to Mrs Bradley.”

“Yes, it does, Ms Hauptman.” The grimness was back. “I was extremely surprised by the letter I received yesterday — hand-delivered, no less. But Mrs Bradley tells me it is grossly exaggerated, and that she had no knowledge of Ms Portson’s alleged vandalism when she issued her invitation.”

“Alleged?” This was why I was toting a bag, and I took out the sheaf of prints, spreading them one by one on Stallings’s desk. “These are the official KPD shots of exactly what Ms Portson — Jesse and I think of her as Crazy Courtney, by the way — did to my garage. You can check with the KPD — Detective Montenegro handled the case, but Chief Rodgers is willing to talk to you about it. And the FBI told me, explicitly, that Mrs Bradley did know about it. She issued her invitation to Ms Portson to speak to Jesse’s class knowing full well that she had committed trespass and worse. She also knew Ms Portson is first cousin to the late Timothy Milanovitch. I gather she believes having Jesse in her class is a divine prompt to action.”

The photos had shaken Stallings, and so had the datum. Distaste flickered on her face.

“These are … not good, I agree, Ms Hauptman. And I was not aware of any relationship to Mr Milanovitch. I agree Ms Portson is not an appropriate speaker, and her invitation will be withdrawn. But I cannot simply take your word over Mrs Bradley’s. I owe her professional support, as well as owing you pastoral support for Jesse.”

I understand looking out for your own. “Fair enough, but let’s have Mrs Bradley in, please. Then we’ll see who’s lying.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Ms Hauptman. Mrs Bradley is not willing to meet you, knowing you are a preternatural, nor to meet Mr Christiansen.”

I thought about that one for a second, feeling temper kick. “Won’t wash, Ms Stallings, legally or any other way. Mrs Bradley is assigned to Jesse’s class while Ms Linner’s on leave. She doesn’t get to refuse to meet Jesse’s parents on grounds of personal bigotry. So you have a choice. Stick to this line, and we’re out of here, informing the media of exactly what the problem with Jesse continuing her schooling is, and chopping Mrs Bradley into very public mince. Call it Cantrip parva.” Anna had taught me some of her father’s habits with Latin, and Stallings winced satisfactorily. “Alternatively, fetch Mrs Bradley in, whatever she wants, and you get to decide who’s lying and whether your greater responsibility is to a student at risk or a substitute teacher who’s attracted serious attention from the FBI because she’s allowed personal beliefs to trump whatever professional ethics she has.”

Stallings drummed her fingers on her desk. “I don’t disagree, Ms Hauptman, but I can hardly force her in here.”
“If she refuses a direct instruction to meet a parent, fire her, and we’re good.”

“I have thought about that, believe me, but she is citing religious belief, so the legalities are very complex and we cannot afford to fight a case she says her church would back. Uh … your eyes …”

“Yeah, Ms Stallings. I’m getting cross.”

But I wasn’t going to go off half-cocked, not with Jesse’s wellbeing on the line, and I called Jenny. She was already talking to someone but I had a priority and she switched calls after only a few seconds.

<Mercy? Problem at the school?>

I laid it out, and heard the surprise in Jenny’s voice.

<A religious privilege not to meet the parents of a student she’s teaching? Huh. I don’t think she could win that, Mercy, but if she really does have financial backing she could get a hearing at least, and with the Constitution invoked it would probably get messy.>

“And if the Principal invites me into a room where Bradley happens to be?”

<Principal has that right, but Bradley would have the right to leave.>

“Mmm. There’s some space between having a right and exercising it.”

<Yes there is, but be very careful, Mercy. Any claim of harm Bradley could make would not be good.>

“I hear you, Jenny, and I’ll keep you posted.”

I hung up and looked at Stallings. “Where is Mrs Bradley right now?”

She didn’t even check her watch. “Pre-lunch break, so staff room.”

“Good. Formal request, Principal — I want to meet the woman who as my daughter’s home-class teacher chose a known vandal to address the class and hear her explanation of what I and the FBI call grossly unethical behaviour.” I reclaimed the photos. “Let’s go.”

Stallings didn’t like it much, but I don’t think she liked Bradley much either, and we went. The first-floor corridor was full of students, and David and his men brought a sudden silence as he politely asked them to clear a way. Jesse was looking down until Tom from Yoke’s called her name, and when she glanced up gave her the triple bow of awesomeness he’d said he would. It made her smile, and I blessed him.

“Way to go, Jesse. You OK and all?”

“Yeah, I’m good, thanks, Tom. You?”

“No problems. Your dad looked better on TV yesterday. Awesome. Give him my best?”

“Of course. Thanks again.”

“Nada. And hey, you guys, let’s hear it for Jesse and Ms Hauptman.”

They gave it up, too, with some whistles amid cheers and clapping, and Jesse was walking taller so I sucked up my discomfort. Fortunately the staff room wasn’t far, and faces looked up as Stallings
opened the door, including one who had to be Bradley — mid-fifties, carrying twenty-odd pounds she shouldn’t, and a face etched with disapproval.

“What’s the noise, Bar—”

A thin-faced man to my left fell silent as Jesse, David, and the others followed me in, bar Connor and Vinnie, who bracketed the door, and Bradley came to her feet with anger mottling her face.

“What is she doing in here, Mrs Stallings? I told you I would not meet any of these monsters, and certainly not this murderess.”

“You don’t waste any time, do you, Mrs Bradley?” I kept my voice conversational though I knew my eyes had gone wholly golden, and I had one hand on Jesse’s shoulder. “Less than ten seconds to your first actionable statement.”

“It’s the truth. The whole world’s seen you kill.”

“Yup. But justifiable homicide isn’t murder, Mrs Bradley, and as you’ve clearly seen what was broadcast Tuesday night you must be aware of Chief Rodgers’s flat statement that both the KPD and FBI made that ruling. So say it again and you’re going to need every bit of that financial backing from your church with which you threatened Ms Stallings. And I’m here because I want to know why you thought it appropriate to invite the cousin of my rapist, a known vandal, to address my daughter’s class. Jesse’d like to know, too. Isn’t it grossly unethical behaviour?”

That seemed to be news to thin-face and the rest of my audience, and some deep frowns appeared.

“You can’t threaten me!”

“I didn’t, Mrs Bradley. You made a slanderous statement, and I told you if you ever repeat it I’ll take legal action. Now answer my question.”

I pulled some of Adam’s mojo into my voice and though Bradley took a step backward it was enough to make her speak.

“Courtney Portson is not a vandal. You’re the one making slanderous statements.”

“Wrong again.” I pulled out the photos and gave them to thin-face. “That’s what Ms Portson did to my garage. You have any problem calling that vandalism, sir?”

He looked through them, eyebrows rising, and passed them on to a balding man beside him.

“No, I don’t.”

“They’re forgeries.” Bradley’s voice had risen. “Nothing she says can be trusted.”

“Got KPD stamps on them, Mrs B.” His voice was cold. “And I’ve got a question of my own. Did you know Ms Portson was Milanovitch’s cousin?”

“She’s done nothing wrong.”

“Not what I asked, Mrs B. Did you know?”

“What if I did?”

He stared. “You don’t see a problem with asking someone related to the rapist of a student’s mother to address her class?”
“He wasn’t a rapist!”

“Sure looked like one to me. And the KPD.”

“And the FBI. Which is another thing, Mrs Bradley, because you told them, under formal caution, that you knew about the vandalism, but you told Ms Stallings you didn’t. So were you lying to them, or to her?”

She glared but didn’t answer, and thin-face came in again.

“The FBI are involved in this?”

“They are, Mr … ?”

“Sorry, Alan Quinn, Deputy Principal for Academic Affairs.”

“Mr Quinn. Mrs Bradley made her class announcement of speakers on Monday, Jesse told me that evening, and Cantrip turned up on Tuesday, so yeah, not being big on coincidence we told the FBI. They found nothing illegal, meaning no Cantrip connection, but tagged Mrs Bradley as Bright Future herself as well as a long-term acquaintance of Ms Portson, and wrote to Ms Stallings about the ethics violation. I came today mostly to sort out the presence of Mr Christiansen and his men as a security detail for Jesse while there’s so much attention on us, but also to deal with this. Then Ms Stallings told me Mrs Bradley refused to meet me or Adam on religious grounds, which under the circumstances I’m not prepared to accept, so we came down here to short-circuit the problem. And I’m still waiting on your answer, Mrs Bradley — did you lie to the FBI under caution or did you lie to your Principal?”

“I do not lie to anyone.”

I could hear the lie in that but humans might not, so I pulled out my phone again, called Fisher, and asked her, on speaker, to confirm her identity and that Bradley had admitted to membership of Bright Future and knowing about the vandalism. Fisher checked with Westfield, and did. At her request I left them listening in.

“That what Mrs Bradley told you, Ms Stallings?”

“No, Ms Hauptman, it wasn’t. She denied any such knowledge.”

“So you did lie to Ms Stallings, Mrs Bradley, no matter how you slice it, which tells me you knew you needed to lie about it. And you knew Ms Portson well long before her cousin raped me and I killed him, so you also knew about their relationship. But you still thought inviting Ms Portson to speak to Jesse’s class was a good thing.” I pushed down rising anger. “The FBI is right that your ethics suck. What disciplinary action you take against her is your business, Ms Stallings, but my bottom line is that she cannot teach Jesse, nor have any authority over her.”

Stallings was back to grim, but nodded. “No, she can’t. And I accept both that she has lied to me — she explicitly denied being a member of Bright Future as well — and your characterisation of her ethics. Heaven knows where we’ll get any cover, but Mrs Bradley, you’re suspended pending a disciplinary hearing.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Yes, I can. You can explain to the School Board why your actions don’t warrant being let go permanently. Alan, go ask Jim to escort her off the premises, please.”
“I’ll speak to the media. You’ll regret this.”

I gave Bradley a smile that made her blanch. “They’re right outside, Mrs Bradley. Go ahead. But you should be real careful what you say. Slanders on air incur very hefty damages. And you can tell them I’ll speak to them when you’re done, to fill in all the details you’ll leave out. Might have some things to say about Bright Future, too, and why they and the JLS need to be kept out of classrooms, like all organised hate groups.”

Bradley drew herself up, trembling slightly, and looked at Jesse, a different light in her eye.

“I was trying to save your soul, you stupid girl. You can’t help your father being a monster, or mating with another, like the beasts they are. Open your heart to Christ and get away from them or you will be damned, as they are.”

I wanted to throttle her, but Jesse was still standing tall herself.

“I’ve seen all kinds of monsters, Mrs Bradley, on four legs and two. And being self-righteous about your faith doesn’t save you from ranking right up there.”

“Don’t you understand? You’ll burn, for e—”

“Be silent.”

I hadn’t done it consciously but all Adam’s dominance was in my voice, and from the thick smell of roses a chunk of my newer magic too. Manannán’s Bane rose in my hand to point at Bradley, the tip shimmering. Despite my rage I knew I’d caught everyone in the room, and I spent a moment pulling power back in, though the scent lingered, and Manannán’s Bane didn’t move. I also sent Adam what reassurance I could.

“No-one gets to abuse my daughter, Mrs Bradley. Not Cantrip agents with threats of torture and rape, and not Bright Future stooges with fantasies of hellfire. Mr Quinn, perhaps you could do as Ms Stallings asked.”

“I’ll take her myself, Ms Hauptman.”

Fear had dampened Bradley’s zeal, and despite looking daggers at me she let Quinn steer her out, Manannán’s Bane tracking her. There were still a lot of students outside the room, and from their faces I knew they’d felt some of the power too, but as they realised Bradley was under Quinn’s escort a low jeer started. David shook himself slightly, and shut the door behind them, eyeing Manannán’s Bane warily as it stopped shimmering and let me rest it back on the floor.

“That was … interesting, Mercy.”

As a wolf he’d have felt the power more keenly.

“Yeah. Sorry, David.” I looked at the phone in my hand, wondering if Westfield still wanted to listen, and decided I’d let him for now. “Let Adam know all’s well? And Jesse, give Andrea a call and tell her about the slander and to watch the coverage outside, if she isn’t already?” They both got on with it and I looked round, seeing wary faces. “Apologies for the overspill. Pack magic’s not very … focused.”

“That was pack magic?”

The speaker was a willowy brunette who looked more interested than scared.
“Mostly, yeah. Alpha command, pulling from my mate. But Manannán’s Bane joined in, as you saw, so there was some fae boost. That’s why the roses.”

“Huh. Is that what you did to stop the police drawing on the manitou, in the Sacajawea State Park video?”

“Pretty much, Ms … ?”

“Oh sorry. God, we’ve all lost our manners today. Helen Zeeman. Drama. I taught Jesse last year and will again next. And you can talk to my class anytime you like about making entrances, Ms Hauptman.”

Laughter including Jesse’s eased the remaining tension, and I gave Zeeman a wry smile. “I don’t plan them, Ms Zeeman.”

“Natural talent, then.” Her face sobered. “Let me say I was shaken rigid on Tuesday, and I’m so glad you got away from those Cantrip agents. And very happy with what’s happened since. My husband works at Hanford, and he’s over the moon about what Medicine Wolf’s doing.”

Others agreed, but before things could get too cozy Quinn returned.

“She’s off the premises, Ms Hauptman, and the guard knows she’s not to be readmitted without explicit instructions. But despite your advice she has marched across to talk to the media.”

As I’d expected — Bradley had a lot more zeal than sense.

“Fools rush in, Mr Quinn. Means I will be talking to them, David, but I don’t want Jesse on screen.”

“No problem, Mercy.”

“Then if we’re all done here, Ms Stallings?”

We were, and after I’d told Westfield he’d need to listen on TV if he wanted more, we headed out.
The corridor was empty, because what seemed like the entire student body had piled outside. Most were watching Bradley shrilling something at the media, but some were admiring Hummers, and when I spotted Tom among them I waved him across. From the sounds I knew the media had seen me.

“Hey, Ms Hauptman. Something I can do?”

“If you will, Tom. I want to get Jesse into the front Hummer without her being filmed. You and your friends want to help shield her?”

“Sure thing, Ms Hauptman.”

All the Hummer lovers were happy to be involved, especially with a promise to let them see the interior, and with David’s men between Jesse and the cameras as well we got her inside with Connor. Then I set off to the gate where Bradley was trying to hold court but the media had already switched to watching me. They were shouting questions, but the noise faded as they felt the scanning scrutiny of David and his men, and died away when I raised a hand. Bradley’s voice came clearly.

“Don’t trust her, for the love of God. You mustn’t. Preternaturals serve the devil, all of them. Abjure her, revile her. Oh Christ, Lord and Saviour, deliver us from this evil, deliver us—”

Enough was enough, and I put a little power in my voice to let me slice across her. “Go pray somewhere else, Mrs Bradley. Someone want to tell me what she’s said to you all? You.”

I pointed to the nearest body, who was CNN.

“Uh, she seems to be repeating MacLandis, Ms Hauptman. Called you a murderess and said you’d had her fired because she’s Bright Future.”

“And the damages I’ll be getting just keep going up. The facts about Mrs Bradley, everyone, are that she is a substitute teacher, filling in for someone on maternity leave, and was assigned to my daughter’s home-class. She has not been fired, yet, but she is suspended and barred from the school pending a disciplinary hearing because, one, she lied to the Principal about matters she admitted to the FBI, including her membership of Bright Future, and two, she knowingly invited my rapist’s cousin, who also vandalised my garage, to address my daughter’s class on behalf of Bright Future. She then tried refusing to meet me for a requested parent–teacher conference, claiming religious objections.”

CNN blinked. “She did what?”

“Yeah, that was my reaction too. She also seems to think the child of any preternatural should leave their parents, and urged my daughter to do so on pain of hellfire. You think that’s an acceptable thing for a teacher to do?”

“Uh. No?”
“And you’re two for two. Religious bigotry is still bigotry, however it treats faith as a fig-leaf. So I think we need a serious debate about whether anyone who is Bright Future or JLS should be thought an acceptable speaker at a school or college. We wouldn’t allow a Klansman, or anyone from an organised hate group, and that’s what they both are. Ask your viewers what they think, hey?”

“Bright Future don’t hate — we love mankind, as Christ did. We must save our children fr—”

Manannán’s Bane was feeling twitchy in my hand, and I didn’t want another display, so I half-turned and put something more in my voice.

“My daughter is not your child, Mrs Bradley. Nor is any student you teach. And I am getting very tired of your lies.”

It wasn’t a command, but it rocked her back a couple of steps and I faced the mob of faces and lenses again.

“My daughter calls them Dim Future, which as they seem very short on common sense as well as ethics sounds about right. The preternatural is not going away, and all citizens have their rights. Mrs Bradley may think of it as saving children, but frankly, that’s a crock, and what she and Dim Future are calling for is very close to what Cantrip wanted. You must all have heard about the murder charges announced in DC today. How many children and parents did Cantrip bereave?” I thought of Tucson. “And while we’re on the subject of abusing minors, media people, you might notice that you are currently besieging a school. I strongly suggest you all discuss that with your editors, soon, and be aware there will be legal action against anyone who tries to interview any student here without their parents’ consent, and against trespassers. Given what’s been happening, I accept that besieging me at home is not unreasonable, however irritating, but following me everywhere, even when my daughter’s with me, is a great deal less reasonable, not to mention ethical. Now, I’ve got things to do, and people waiting on me, but I’ll answer three questions, and three only, before you all make nice and let the Hummers through without their drivers having to worry about running over your feet, which as those suckers top four tons, laden, you really do not want. CNN, you get to go first.”

CNN didn’t do as well as Taylor, but after a strangled moment he asked me what had happened on Wednesday morning.

“A Gray Lord who heard what I said on Tuesday night was concerned about something. The problem was straightened out. You’re next.”

I used Manannán’s Bane to point to a short red-haired woman I’d seen jostled back by men pushing in front of her, and she gave me a dazzling smile.

“Penny Ligatt, KTNW. Thank you. You said Mrs Bradley invited Mr Milanovitch’s cousin to address her class. That would be Courtney Portson?”

“It would.”

“And Ms Portson vandalised your garage?”

“Yes, she did, a few days after Mr Milanovitch’s death. KPD are aware and have images, though given the obscenities and racial epithets, rightly and wrongly spelled, you couldn’t broadcast them. In return for cleaning it all up again I didn’t press charges.” I shrugged. “Sat a little wrong, but Ms Portson found it hard to accept what her cousin had done, which I understood, and she was grieving. But there was a promise of no further harm as well, so now that she’s conspired with Mrs
Bradley to confront my daughter, which I take as an attack on me as well, I might see about reinstating the charges. Talking to my lawyers about that is one of the things I have to go do. And number three is … you.”

I didn’t mind favouring women over men two-to-one, but soon wished I hadn’t.

“Loretta Bostock, Fox News. Why are you so down on Christian faith, Ms Hauptman?”

I looked at her for a few humming seconds, discarding my more impulsive answers. “As I am a Christian, Ms Bostock, I find your question … strange. I’m not concerned by Mrs Bradley’s faith, in so far as it is Christian, but with her bigotry and what I consider her gross violation of professional ethics.”

“You claim to be a Christian?”

“Been a church-goer all my life, Ms Bostock, rain or shine.”

“You took part in that pagan dance.”

“Pagan dance? Oh, with the Elder Spirits, you mean? That was magic, not worship. Besides, my not-exactly father invited me, and I believe in family values too.”

“So what is this not-exactly business? He either is your father or he isn’t.”

“You think? Avatar theology is complicated, Ms Bostock, and your question intrusive. But I know there’s curiosity, so I’ll say that Coyote was incarnate as Joe Old Coyote, Blackfeet out of Billings, when he sired me, but though he was Joe, Joe wasn’t altogether him. Joe died, and he didn’t. Not-exactly covers it adequately. Go figure.”

“Incarnate? Only Christ has ever been incarnate.”

“Again, you think? I believe in orthodox Christian doctrine, Ms Bostock, but it’s been a very long time since I thought it explained everything, especially things native to the New World. How the Baptists, or the Vatican, or Salt Lake City, want to try to explain the Native American beings they now know to exist is their business but, troubling as it may be to some, they’ll need more than the Bible. And tough as my not-exactly father sometimes makes it, I’ll add that I think of him and his kind as roughly in the same class as angels. Sometimes you have to wrestle with them to find the truth, but they’re immortal guardians and messengers all the same.”

“So that feather you were wearing is a claim to be a divine agent?”

I looked at her again while I swallowed my irritation. Mostly. “You know, Ms Bostock, I could get to finding your version of bigotry a real bore. I’m a mixed-race woman who found out still in the crib that I also have a coyote form and identity. Grew up Christian all the same. And two, no three days ago now, I was quietly waiting to see my daughter off to school when Cantrip turned up, shot my husband twice, and kidnapped me and my daughter with some of the vilest threats I’ve ever heard. Everything rolled from there to here, where I’m trying to deal with a bigot who seems to think her faith justifies any cruelty to the students she’s supposed to teach, and with you. So I’ll inform you and your station straight, right now I’m having some trouble telling you and Mrs Bradley apart where ethics are concerned. You both come pre-paid, and more interested in attacking than understanding. It’s a failure for a journalist as much as for a teacher.”

She didn’t like it at all, and lost more control than I had. “You turn into a pest good farmers shoot on sight and preach tolerance of a great deal worse. You’re changing the country to suit yourself. Every journalist ought to be looking at you as hard as they can, and every citizen.”
My laugh took her completely by surprise. “You think they’re not, Ms Bostock? You’re really not paying attention then, and I can double as a teacher — I have a history degree from Wazzu. So you know what, Ms Ligatt, if KTNW puts Ms Bostock and her reporting for Fox under the same constant scrutiny I’ve been under since Tuesday morning, for, oh, the next four hours, I’ll give you a thirty-minute interview next week.” Divide and rule worked, however amoral it might be. “Toilet breaks, but otherwise she’s on camera, starting now.”

Ligatt was no slouch. “Deal. Swing that camera, Dwayne.”

“Call my lawyer, Ms Trevellyan, and she’ll set it up. Enjoy the lesson, Ms Bostock, and think about just how many hours I’ve spent live on screens worldwide since Tuesday morning. And remember what those Hummers weigh, everyone.”

I was walking away, David falling in beside me with his men behind, shielding me, before the noise started, and he gave me an unexpected smile.

“Might have to run over some feet anyway, Mercy. Done it before.”

“Be my guest.”

“Yeah, I will.” He shook his head a little. “Might be joining the Moor’s aficionados de Mercy club as well. That was well done.”

“Asil’s started a club?”

“Call it popular demand, Mercy. Only wolf deal I’ve ever felt like joining.”

He was driving the lead Hummer, with Jesse, so I was left to climb into the second pondering his words. That David hated being a wolf I knew from Adam, and for all he belonged to the Aspen Creek pack Asil wasn’t much more sociable. Or hadn’t been, before Medicine Wolf got hold of him. Connor, who’d switched back to drive the trailing Hummer, compounded my confusion.

“Nice one, Ms Hauptman.”

“What was, Connor? And it’s Mercy.”

“Grampa’d have my hide. And all of it, but I meant putting PBS on Fox’s case. Silencing Bradley inside, too — I felt that even through the door, and Miss Hauptman was telling me about it while we waited.”

Travis was riding shotgun, and chuckled. “That got my vote too, Con.”

Conversation was interrupted by a dashboard speaker relaying David on tannoy, saying the Hummers were coming through at three mph, and feet were their owner’s concern, not his. Connor thumbed some buttons on a keypad set in the wheel, and I felt cruise control kick in. So far as I could see the media scrum was standing safely aside, but flashes were popping all round and I couldn’t stop my shoulders hunching. Lincoln was in back with me, beyond the driveshaft tunnel, and noticed.

“They can’t see in, Ms Hauptman.”

“I know, Lincoln, but neither of me likes it. Thanks for the thought, though.”

“Too much like being prey? The Boss hates doing PR, though he has to, and he gets that way sometimes.”
“Some of that, yeah, but it’s also the behaviour. They know it won’t get them anything, but they do it anyway.”

“People, lemmings.”

I laughed, because that was true enough, but I was watching Bostock interviewing Bradley, on air from the look of it, while Ligatt had her camera on the pair of them, and wondering how much more my damages were going up. The legal process was another thing I really didn’t look forward to, but the upside would be tying Bright Future in and putting as big a crimp in their resources and energy as we could manage. Our KPD escort cleared the media pack, and we sped up, retracing our way down South Finley and East Riek. A little siren from the KPD got us through the media who’d remained outside home, and to my surprise the police car preceded us through the gates.

“Boss wants to thank them and review procedures”, Lincoln told me. “SOP when we’re liaising with any PD.”

That made sense, and when we were out I thanked the officers myself, telling David to use the kitchen if he wanted. “I’m heading there myself for a chocolate fix. I need one after all that.”

It would help take away the taste of Bradley’s hateful faith too, but as I went inside I found Adam already giving Jesse a hug in the hall, and a flick of my head had David steering the officers kitchenward while I made the hug three-way. Adam had some wolf in his eyes, and from the image and emotions he sent me I knew Westfield had told him what Bradley had said, but Jesse was upbeat.

“Mercy chopped her off, Dad, and I already knew she was a fruitcake. The cheers were way more help than she could cancel out.” She told Adam about Tom’s bows to her, with a genuine laugh, adding that he sent his best, and gave me an unexpected kiss. “It may be secondhand popularity, Mom, but I’ll take it.”

“You got the bows, ex-kiddo, and you’ve shown the spine. Nothing secondhand about your cool.”

That got a smile before she scampered upstairs to change, taking my bag with a promise to liberate Carnwennan respectfully. Half-way up Medea joined her from somewhere, and Adam looked at me with less wolf and more confusion in his eyes.

“Tom who bags and delivers for Yoke’s?”

“That’s the one. He seems to have decided Jesse’s as much a dude as Gwyn ap Lugh. Likes Hummers too, and with some pals helped shield Jesse from the cameras when we left.”

“I saw that, but they were zoomed in on you.” Adam breathed me in, consciously relaxing. “I’m glad she has some support at school, but I’m sorry you had to deal with more stupidity, love.”

“Me too.” I shrugged. “Not what we wanted. But when Bradley wouldn’t agree to meet in the Principal’s office I didn’t feel I had any choice but to confront her, and it blew from there. And she’s not an innocent fruitcake, Adam — she said she didn’t tell lies knowing it was a lie. Made me wonder if Dim Future are targeting other children of preternaturals. I should ask Willis to bump that up his agenda, and maybe Westfield too.”

“Feebs are already on it, Mercy. CNN guy didn’t tell you, but Bradley had already said all preternaturals were unfit parents and their kids should be taken into care. And Bostock’s on Charles’s Dim Future list — could be chance, as she’s been in the mob outside, but there might be more to it.” Adam gave me a smile that was all wolf. “I’ve let Ligatt’s boss at KTNW know, and
asked him to pass it on. There should be something else to please you as well.”

“Oh?”

“Wait and see.”

“Huh. Well, what will please me in the meantime is hot chocolate and biscuits, if there are any left.”

The kitchen was quite full with David’s men and the KPD officers, still deep in talk, and after offering the officers his own thanks Adam left them to it while I heated milk. But he did put on the TV, the volume so low that only he, David, and I could hear it, and I gave him a look because it was KTNW’s coverage of Bostock, who was still giving Bradley airtime. The rant sounded much the same as ever, preternatural meaning emissary of Satan, but just after Bostock served up another cue by asking about the talk Ms Portson was being so wrongly prevented from delivering, Ligatt’s voice cut in, overriding the others though I realised she was all but murmuring to her mike.

“Wrongly prevented is an extraordinary claim, and patently false. They’re talking about a woman they both know committed an act of gross vandalism, as the KPD sergeant confirmed, and who is related to Milanovitch. No-brainer right there for addressing a class with Miss Hauptman in it. And yet another plug for Bright Future from Bostock without any admission that she’s a member. Made me laugh when Ms Hauptman said Fox came pre-paid, but this really is grossly unethical journalism and I doubt I’m the only one saying so.”

As Bradley’s voice came up again Adam gave me a smile.

“She’s not. Bostock tried getting in her face, and when she said she’d keep her word to you and was already nationwide on PBS, the Fox mike caught it. Net result is that for the first time ever PBS has about three times Fox’s audience and rising fast, so you’re still doing something right, love.”

“For real? PBS over Fox? I can live with that. What’s anyone else saying?”

“More good things about you. School issued a statement confirming the facts you gave, and supporting the right of any parent to meet any teacher of their child. Talking-head lawyer on CBS agreed, and so does the state of Arkansas, which ruled rather reluctantly a while back that some very Baptist teacher couldn’t refuse to have a Wiccan in his class or to meet her folks at PTA. There’re some precedents about religious shunning, too, that Jenny’s cross she didn’t think of.”

Who knew there were Wiccans in Arkansas? While I poured milk I wondered how they blended in, or didn’t, and what the kid had felt about it all. I hadn’t thought of it as shunning, either, but that was what it amounted to, and not directed against an individual for apostasy, which I could understand without liking — what had I done to Paul, after all? — but against whole groups lumped together. The chocolate was comforting, and just as I heard Jesse clatter downstairs David’s meeting ended with everyone rising, Bradley’s voice broke off, and Adam jacked the volume on the TV.

“Here we go. You guys might want to watch this before you leave. You too, Jesse.”

“What’s up?”

Jesse came over to us, and Adam put an arm round her.

“A little justice.”
On screen Andrea bounced out of her double-parked Subaru with several thick envelopes in her hand, and marched straight over to Bradley and Bostock.

“Here you go, Mrs Bradley, as promised.”

Bradley took the proffered envelope automatically. “What is this? You’re interrupting.” Her frown deepened to a scowl. “You’re that lawyer who likes abominations.”

“That’d be preternatural beings, not abominations, Mrs Bradley, but yeah, that’s me. And what you’re holding is a writ for multiple wilful and malicious slanders against Ms Hauptman. State court’ll let you know when a hearing’s scheduled. And given that you’ve continued to broadcast repetitions of those slanders, Ms Bostock, these ones are for you and your employers.”

“I won’t accept them.”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid.” Andrea reached up and put them on top of the Fox camera before the operator realised what she had in mind. “You’ve been served, there are about a gazillion witnesses, and if you fail to respond to the court you’ll be in contempt.”

Bostock was too shocked to say anything, but Bradley’s face was once again mottled with fury.

“You are serving Satan.”

“Nah.” Andrea gave a wide grin. “Don’t have a writ for him.” Ligatt’s half-suppressed snort of laughter could be heard. “And I can’t resist saying that I’m serving you right, but as I try to be helpful, I’ll caution you that damages claimed will increase with every repetition of each slander. And your lawyer would tell you courts don’t much like repetitions of the offence after a writ’s served. Goes to reckless disregard and malice, which factor heavily in assessing damages, so if I were you I’d take a deep breath and be very quiet until I’d talked to legal counsel.”

“God knows better than any human law.”

“Not in America, Mrs Bradley.” Andrea knew a good punchline when she delivered one. “See you both in court, sometime soon.”

She crossed to Ligatt, offering her a card.

“Give me a call this evening, Ms Ligatt, and we can arrange your interview with Ms Hauptman next week. And thanks for the commentary — you’ve been spot on. Now might also be a good time to ask Ms Bostock about her undeclared membership of Bright Future.”

“That’s a lie.”

Bostock’s voice was almost a shriek but still told me it wasn’t, and Andrea just shrugged.

“Afraid not, Ms Bostock, as you know full well. You joined the Hayes Chapter of Bright Future in Los Angeles five years ago and you’re a regular attendee. You’re on the list the Watchdog Times will be publishing next week. And as I’m double-parked, and greatly prefer to be law-abiding, I’m gone. Talk to you soon, Ms Ligatt, and good luck with your day.”

The camera saw her back to her car, entered with a cheery wave, and swung back to an aghast Bostock as Ligatt moved in.

“You might want to put those writs somewhere safe, Ms Bostock. Losing them really won’t help your cause. And I’ve been wondering on air — we’re nationwide on PBS — about how you can
justify your constant promotion of Bright Future without having disclosed your own membership. You’re entitled to belong, of course, but the conflict of interest is glaring. Would you care to explain your professional ethics, or lack of them, for yourself? And will Fox be seeking to defend your conduct, do you think?”

“Turn that damn camera off.”

Bostock’s voice was ragged, and followed by an incredulous silence.

“Can’t do that, Ms Bostock.” Ligatt’s voice turned thoughtful. “But I understand it’s a hellish pressure. Makes me think about the times I’ve used it, and whether I understood quite what I was doing. Being complicit in, anyway. And about how Ms Hauptman, who isn’t a professional screen face, coped on Tuesday and has gone right on coping.” Her hand rose to her earpiece for a moment. “You’re no longer live on Fox, by the way — they’ve cut coverage and started in on unwarranted attacks on the freedom of the press. You’re still live on PBS, though. Anything you’d like to say about any of that?”

There didn’t seem to be, and after a few second Bradley thrust herself in front of Bostock.

“Leave her alone, you Dupe of Satan. Can’t you see she’s in shock over these vile attacks on her that you are supporting? Have you no conscience?”

Ligatt didn’t blink. “I’m not aware of any attacks on Ms Bostock, Mrs Bradley, beyond asking her to tell the truth. And if you think my conscience should be troubled, where was yours when you invited Ms Portson to address a class including Miss Hauptman?”

“Poor Jesse needs rescuing. Are you deaf? I’ve said it again and again.”

I felt Adam’s arm tighten around Jesse, and added my own, but she was more interested than upset. So was Ligatt.

“Which doesn’t make it true, Mrs Bradley. Why does Miss Hauptman need rescuing? And from what?”

“For the love of Christ, are you stupid as well as deaf? Her father and step-mother are beasts of the field and servants of Satan. Unnatural and accursed. God alone knows what he’s done, but the world knows she’s a mur—”

Ligatt’s voice was sharp and her mike still had an override. “Doug, cut her sound now. I’ll talk until you can — thanks. For your information, Mrs Bradley, freedom of speech does not include the right to slander. Fox may have been willing to let you indulge your reckless disregard of the truth on air, but KTNW isn’t. And no, your religious beliefs do not give you any immunity when it comes to wilful and malicious slander. Try reading the Constitution — Article Six for starters, though how you … say what?”

Doug gave Mrs Bradley back some sound, though he could be seen keeping his finger on a slider, and we listened in deepening silence as she denounced the Constitution, the godless Separation of Powers, the Founding Fathers, Congress, and both main parties for spineless apostasy from Christ. Somewhere in there was a call for a Christian uprising to cleanse the nation, and hellfire came into it more than once. She was still spewing, lost in her own exalted rhetoric, when the camera swung because Bostock was walking away with her crew and Ligatt stuck to her agreement, skipping after her with Doug and the cameraman — Dwayne, I recalled. There was a slump in Bostock’s walk, the envelopes crumpled in her hand, and the look she gave Ligatt was tired and empty.
“Go away.”

“No can do, Ms Bostock. Still most of three hours to go. Do you agree with Mrs Bradley about the Constitution?”

“No.”

“Or anything?”

Bostock stayed silent until they reached the Fox van, where she leaned against the side panel, face blank. “Less than I did an hour ago. I knew she was Bright Future, so I gave her a chance. But she’s speaking for herself and her church, not for me.”

“Is this argument that preternaturals are intrinsically unfit parents an official Bright Future policy?”

“It’s been discussed. How can any monster be a fit parent?”

“You think all preternaturals are monsters?”

“Don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. Some are, sure, but the ones I’ve met have all seemed like decent people, and some seem pretty special.”

“They turn into animals, and they eat people.”

“Humans are animals all the time, Ms Bostock. Some can turn into other sorts of animal. I find it more interesting than frightening. And I grant you Medicine Wolf ate Preskylovitch, but I know which of those I’d call the worse monster, by far. Didn’t Preskylovitch horrify you?”

“He overstepped, yeah, but I agree with the job he was doing. Cantrip were right, however Hauptman’s spun it. She is a preternatural, and she was involved with those things in the Columbia Gorge and Finley.”

“Right? They were as wrong as they could be — she didn’t start or control the River Devil, or Guayota. She stopped them. And overstepped is … it makes me feel a little sick, actually, Ms Bostock. You said you agreed with the job he was doing — which bits of it? Felony assault? Kidnapping? Threatening a minor with rape and mutilation as a means of controlling her mother? You agree with that?”

“No. No, I don’t. I don’t know what I’m doing any more.”

The last wasn’t much more than a mutter, and Bostock began to cry. After only a few seconds Ligatt gestured and began talking in override as the camera swung away and she followed.

“I hope it doesn’t cost me my interview but I’m saying ethics now trump the deal I made with Ms Hauptman. Ms Bostock’s in meltdown, and continuing to film her would be wrong. And in so far as Ms Hauptman made the offer as what she called a lesson, I’d say it’s been learned. But I’ve been trying to tally how many lessons there are in this.”

Ligatt and her crew reached their own van, and she stood with the station logo visible behind her.

“I have to say that number one is not to attack Ms Hauptman or her daughter.” Adam and Jesse both gave me grins. “And number two is that Bright Future is a much more troubling problem than I’d realised — both the women we’ve been hearing from are experienced professionals, and while I
can’t speak for Mrs Bradley, Ms Bostock’s done some decent work. But involvement with Bright Future seems to have been very bad indeed for both their ethics. Then add Cantrip — or K-K-Kantrip — and what we’re discovering about its ethics, from Preskylovitch to those twenty-four murders listed on this morning’s news, with who knows what more to come. So I’m itchy to see those lists the Watchdog Times will be publishing, and I’m beginning to wonder what scale of enquiry — and soul-searching — we need to happen. But it’s lesson number three that’s the biggest, and it’s not easy to analyse, so bear with me a moment.”

Ligatt looked down and took several deep breaths.

“I’ll start where I should, with myself. Why did I accept Ms Hauptman’s deal so readily? Turning the camera on a fellow reporter is dubious behaviour. I wanted the interview, of course. And I was offended by the tone of the questions Ms Bostock asked Ms Hauptman — I live here in the Tri-Cities, and covered the Milanovitch case, so I know Ms Hauptman is a regular church-goer, and I admire her strength in surviving all she has. But I realise I was also … well, imitating her, in a way, because ever since she marched up to KEPR on Tuesday morning and announced those three conditions — blurring out Miss Hauptman, showing everything every time so there’s no false fact picking, and the tithe to Hanford — she’s been using the massed attention saturation coverage represents to do things. To shine a light on some very disturbing things that have been scuttling in ugly circles as a result. And it’s just happened again. Whether Ms Hauptman knew Ms Bostock was Bright Future, I don’t know — I’d think yes except I also think that if she had known she’d have said so straight out — but whichever, she was right. Again. So you could say the lesson is that when she points at something and says, we have a problem with that, believe her. But there’s another angle on this, so bear with me again.”

I was holding Jesse hard, more for my comfort than hers, but my dominant emotion was curiosity. I’d acted on impulse more than anything, and the only lesson I’d really had in mind was the first — though I’d also seen in Ligatt’s sensible and informed questions a first answer to what Andrea had said about taking the pressure off friends and family.

“Right at the end there, Ms Bostock said something about Cantrip being right, however Ms Hauptman had spun it. And I suppose you could say she was spinning hard when she took us through that awful video MacLandis uploaded, explaining each bit. But it would be truer to say she unspun it, because it was already spinning. And what did Ms Bostock mean by it. She spun it. But what is it? So I thought, how did she spin the manitous? And I stopped dead. We’ve only known of Medicine Wolf for three days, but does anyone think it’s a being you can spin? I mean, hello, fifteen-foot talking dire wolf here. I just ate your Yukon. Spin me handsome, will you?”

I couldn’t stop a grin.

“But Medicine Wolf spins itself handsome because whatever it is, it’s right there. It’s real. And Ms Hauptman’s the same. She’s shown pretty much everyone alive more of herself than anyone should ever have to, and said a lot of seriously strange things, and so far as I know not one has been shown to be untrue, even when she was carefully leaving bits out. She still is where Wednesday’s concerned, but as she admits that whatever happened involved a concerned, which I’d guess means angry, Gray Lord, I accept she must have good reasons for giving very limited answers — and I’d remind you all that those reasons might well involve requests or orders from the Federal Government, on top of extreme caution about offending very powerful fae. I’d say I’m doubtful about her being minor league as a magic user, but what do I know? She’s known manitous existed a lot longer than I have, and if she told me that what she means is Medicine Wolf is a ten and she’s a one, or a half, I’d believe her, so minor league might be no more than plain fact, to her. If I get the interview, I’ll ask. But for all I don’t know, what matters in all this is an old truth, that seeing is believing. We’re beyond trusting photographs — as a form of guaranteed truth they’ve been a
casualty of the digital revolution — but even the digital world hasn’t yet undermined rolling live coverage as direct and unmediated reality, and that’s what Ms Hauptman understood immediately on Tuesday and has been using, ruthlessly, ever since. So in the end it doesn’t matter that she’s using it, because it is reality. And once you realise that — see that — you also see the third lesson, which is deal with it. Ms Bostock wasn’t, just cherry-picking facts, trying to see what she wanted to see, what suited her. Mrs Bradley, too, though frankly, I think she’s delusional — overwhelmed by faith, maybe. But whatever else she’s doing, Ms Hauptman is dealing in reality, however weird it may seem to the rest of us. And she used me to make Ms Bostock deal in it too, for a little while, with … shattering results. I said she unspins things, but if you want a really simple version, she’s telling us that where the preternatural is concerned, and a bunch of other stuff, we need to grow up. Shooting the messenger won’t work any more. And I’ll say one more thing before I sign off, and do some weeping myself.”

You could have tried to cut this silence with a knife and found it badly blunted.

“I’m told I have a lot of viewers who don’t often watch PBS and prefer Fox News. I imagine a lot of those citizens are quite shocked, as I am, but might not agree, or want to agree, with some of what I’ve said, and they have every right to feel that way. But I’ll ask everyone to consider this. Ms Hauptman was right when she said the preternatural is not going away, and I remember something she said Tuesday night, that fae and wolves and manitous have been around for a very long time, and our knowing about them doesn’t make them more dangerous to us, it makes us more dangerous to them. Mrs Bradley and Ms Bostock were keen to call them animals, but the other side of that is that cornered animals are dangerous. We’re already in a stand-off with the Fae thanks to a verdict that said a man should suffer no penalty for committing sixty-two rapes and murders because most victims were fae or wolves, and we don’t seem to have a plan for dealing with that. Every reported technological attempt to do anything to them has failed, completely, and if anything that hasn’t been reported had worked, it would have been. So ask yourself, do you really want to escalate against wolves, the Manitou, and Elder Spirits, and very probably other things we still don’t know about? Because that’s what Bright Future and Cantrip want. I think Ms Bostock broke down because she began to see what it might really mean to go down that road, not just because she realised she’s … taken her career into far-left field, let’s say. God knows we’re a deeply divided country, but surely we can agree that we prefer live and let live to kill or be killed? I really hope so. Mrs Bradley says she wants to protect children, but Ms Hauptman was here today to protect her daughter from Mrs Bradley, and it’s very clear she had good cause. This is Penny Ligatt, for KTNW in Kennewick, signing off after what feels like a very long morning. Be safe and well, everyone.”

Adam flicked the TV off before the studio talking heads who’d popped onscreen with surprised expressions could get going, and I felt our bond wide with a query about my welfare. But I didn’t know what I felt beyond some admiration for Ligatt, some pity for Bostock, none for Bradley, who had dug her own grave and whose attitude to Jesse I would never forgive, and simple relief that a fair chunk of what I’d been trying to say to everyone since Tuesday had been understood by someone who was plain human. So I just shrugged.

“I can agree with most of that. When I knew Tuesday morning was live on air I made a choice we’re all having to live with. It’s brought some big good and some heavy bad, and I hate the way the consequences are spilling onto you and Jesse, and my family and friends, but I’d make it again, because I still think the other choices would have been worse all round. Call KTNW and tell them Ligatt hasn’t lost her interview?”

He dialled without speaking. The senior KPD officer gave me a nod.

“Good decision, Ms Hauptman. So was Ligatt’s. I see it’s hard on you, but I think you’ve made
some very good moves all along. And Ligatt was right about those lessons, too, so hang in there.”

Jesse gave me a squeeze. “And you got another name for your collection, Mom. *She Unspins Things.*”

There was always that. And as lunchtime had been a while back, and notably free of lunch, I put in a call to Benny’s.
Even with the KPD gone, Adam in his study, Jesse upstairs, and David’s men dispersed, the kitchen didn’t stay quiet because Charles and Anna brought in Westfield and Fisher, who both gave me looks I couldn’t interpret and welcomed an offer of coffee.

“Out of interest, Ms Hauptman, did you know Bostock was Dim Future?” Fisher gave me a grin. “A while back the AED said we could call it any damn thing we want, and while I can’t in public I do prefer Miss Hauptman’s version.”

“Yeah, it’s a good one to spread.” I’d used it on air because ridicule was a powerful thing. “And no, I didn’t, though I was wondering. I couldn’t really smell her in that crowd, but her voice was off — too much stress for a pro — and she was trying to provoke me. She succeeded.”

“I got that. Having her served on air was pretty good, and the case against Fox for reckless disregard will be really interesting. Someone upstairs there thinks so too, because they’ve switched anchors and are being as careful as they ever get about what they’re saying on air. And would I be right to think you’re hoping to peg Bradley as having been speaking for Dim Future to argue it has liability for the damages she’ll owe you?”

“I haven’t spoken to Jenny yet, but something like that. Mostly I felt I had to draw a line with Bradley, and as biting her would be illegal, suing her was about the only option with real consequences.”

“After what’s happened now you could probably get a gagging order. And putting a serious crimp in Dim Future’s budget will make a lot of people happy, including us.”

I looked at Westfield, who nodded.

“You keep putting new things at the top of all sorts of agendas, Ms Hauptman, and there was a great deal in what Bradley and Bostock said to concern us. There are grounds for charging Bradley with incitement, or even sedition, though I doubt we’ll bother, but we will certainly be re-interviewing her because we had not understood that her intention to harass Miss Hauptman was not just a personal action but BF’s policy.”

He frowned because I’d smiled, remembering something Ben told me.

“Sorry, AED, when the Brits say BFs they mean ‘bloody fools’.”

“Ah. Apt enough. Anyway, there’s also the matter of an undeclared BF member skewing national coverage in favour of a fellow member, to promote a policy of harassing minors, and from Mr Smith’s lists Bostock was probably enabled by at least one Fox editor in NYC. Conspiracy’s a tricky area, and investigating a national broadcaster is not a burden we need just now, but BF are going to come under serious Federal scrutiny. So we’d very much appreciate statements from you and Miss Hauptman, specifically about Bradley but also to put in one place your wider experience of what BF means in your lives.”

It wasn’t my idea of a good time, but it was a good cause. “Alright. Now?”
“No, but today if at all possible, please.”

“After lunch is good, if nothing else turns up. I need to call Jenny though, and maybe Tony Montenegro, about Crazy Courtney.”

“Of course. Now, Mr Smith?”

I’d noticed Charles’s and Anna’s silence, and he spoke very carefully. “Mercy, AED Westfield had some sensible questions about what the FBI should be doing in anticipation of there being injured fae and wolves to care for when Cantrip’s prison is found. I told him we will each take care of our own, and he asked about statements from them, as well as assistance with transporting them. He also shared your concern about any records found that would form evidence against anyone facing charges arising, and chain of custody came up.”

I bet it had, but when I’d been thinking about the torture records and what we could do I’d accepted the consequences. I’d also spoken to Adam and Bran, and I’d hoped to deal with them by asking forgiveness rather than permission, but I wasn’t willing to lie to the good guys and Westfield had been straight with us.

“There are a lot of variables, AED, but assuming we find survivors, at the earliest opportunity, meaning as soon as a joint fae and wolf team is present, all preternatural captives will be taken into our care. I cannot speak for the Fae, and there are legal issues with their status as witnesses, but any wolves will be here, and though their wellbeing will be the priority they will be available to make statements. What they’re willing to say, however, will be subject to policy.”

“So Mr Smith informed me, Ms Hauptman, but he wouldn’t tell me how you propose to transport them or what the policy was.”

Charles shrugged, a glint in his eye. “You and Da set it Mercy, and I haven’t had any formal brief on it.”

It was my turn to give him the fish eye, and I did. “Thanks a bunch, Running Eagle.”

He stayed deadpan. “Eagles don’t have trousers to lose, little sister.”

That was unarguable, and Anna’s laugh an ease. So was Fisher’s expression.

“Bottom line, AED, is maximal suppression of any data obtained through torture and illegal experimentation. Being more open doesn’t mean giving detailed accounts of vulnerability, and caring for our own does mean suppressing anything the former captives don’t care to have known. Given what we’re facing out there, that overrides facilitating prosecutions.”

“I can understand that. What concerns me is whether you’ll be pursuing your own justice against anyone who may be charged.”

“I won’t. But you’re right to be concerned, because, one, others might, and two, any failure to charge or technical acquittal because potential witnesses refuse to testify will not help you with Gwyn ap Lugh.”

“We won’t be able to overlook murder, Ms Hauptman.”

“No-one will ask you to, AED. Cantrip started a war against magic users, and if the people they employed as torturers underestimated their risk environment, that’s their problem.”

Westfield blew out a breath in a way that had become familiar. “Well, that’s a line I can use. But
we will not be able to keep any data we recover anything like as confidential as you’d prefer.”

“I know.” His eyes narrowed, as did Fisher’s. I held up a hand. “You’ve shown yourself an honest man, AED, so I’ll risk an honest question. Do you want anyone to have whatever data Preskylovitch was working from?”

“No. Not for a moment. But I swore an oath.”

“To support and defend the Constitution.”

“Yes. Upholding the law is implicit.”

“Would it break any law to give us the GPS co-ordinates of any suspected site of Cantrip’s prison as soon as you have them?”

He thought about what that question really meant for a while, and spoke carefully. “I have been instructed, several times now, to be as accommodating as I can be to any reasonable request from you or Mr Hauptman. Wanting to know exactly where your people might be seems reasonable to me.”

“Thank you, AED. For the sake of whichever of your own people is in charge on the ground, it would be good if that data came to us at latest when you start a team scrambling, not when they arrive on scene.”

He thought about that too. “You think you can beat us there?”

“I think there’s technology, and there’s magic. I also think whenever your people get there they may not only have to deal with upset and angry wolves — a Gray Lord might be there, and who knows what other fae acting as … support staff. And I think it’ll be a lot easier for them if they get there second, and only have to note what they find, than if they get there first and feel obligated to try to prevent a Gray Lord or a wolf doing what she or he finds imperative.”

“So you’re looking out for us?”

There was less irony in Westfield’s voice than there might have been.

“I’m trying to look out for everyone, AED. And I’ll add that it has been agreed on PR grounds that while executions would be warranted by fae and wolf standards, that won’t be happening.”

“Decided by?”

I wasn’t sure what Fisher did and didn’t know, but Charles had already mentioned his da. “The Marrok and Gwyn ap Lugh.”

Anna gave me a bland look. “And Mercy, who made them both think about it. You won’t get a better offer this side of eternity, AED, and what she isn’t telling you is that she took some serious risks to secure it.”

I stared at Anna with real surprise. “Bran or ap Lugh?”

“Both.”

“Not even close, by my standards, Anna.”

Charles laughed, and Anna glared at him.
“I said you weren’t calibrating for Mercy. Da has a very clear memory of sitting in peanut butter, and ap Lugh has Carnwennan to think about.”

There was a silence while Anna looked at Charles, thinking, and Westfield and Fisher looked at them both, with glances at me. After a moment Fisher cracked.

“Sitting in peanut butter?”

“It’s a long story, SA Fisher, but that figured, yeah. I’m a coyote girl, not a wolf, and I was early teenage mad. Don’t ask about Carnwennan, though — that’s fae business.”

The Benny’s van rescued us all, and as I’d over-ordered from sheer habit Westfield and Fisher got boxes as well as everyone else. David’s men took their prizes downstairs, but he and Asil joined us, with Adam and Jesse, drawn by the smell. Between bites of a double pepperoni to which I’d added double jalapeño to discourage competition, I filled Adam in on what had been under discussion, and between bites of tuna and sweetcorn — he had some really odd preferences — he took it up with Westfield.

“You should know some other wolves will be here by this evening, AED Westfield. Medical wolves are rare, but Dr Cornick will have some support against contingencies. And the Alpha in Seattle is lending me some currently serving wolves, for the same reason.” He sent a query and I nodded. “Some hawk avatars too. Also vets. Make interesting scouts. Media’s filled the hotels and motels, so they’ll be staying with the nearest pack members. The Seattle transport will be taking Paul back with them, because we may need all the safe rooms we can get. And I’m willing to give you that debrief. Corp?”

“Yes. But only for the sake of the dead, and you’d better get hold of someone who was in country at the wrong end to do it.”

There was a lot of pain in David’s voice, and I looked at Adam.

“You tell David about the Medicine Wolf effect?”

“He did, Mercy, and I’ll be happy to meet it whenever it’s here.” David shrugged. “This still means remembering stuff I don’t like at all.”

“Mmm.” I pulled my phone out and called Zee.

<liebchen?>

“Phone to speaker, Zee, and hold it up for Medicine Wolf?”

<five seconds, mercy.>

I counted them, and spoke. “It’s less important than what you’re doing now, Medicine Wolf, sir, but how soon could you be back here?”

Its voice was definitely further off, but perfectly audible, in my head at least, and I wondered about its learning curve with technology. Or just waking curve, maybe.

As soon as you like, Mercy. I do not have to stay here to continue concentrating the radioactives in the water. I have just been enjoying my talks with Zee and Tad.

Being a fly on the wall for those would have been fun, except that it would mean being lethally irradiated.
“It’s not urgent, but we have some humans and a wolf staying, as security, that I’d like you to meet. The wolf could do with some of your glass, for a very particular reason, you’d gain useful perspectives, and there have been other developments you should know about.”

_I saw you speaking to the reporters this morning, with what happened afterwards. Is there more?_

“Some, but that’s the main thing. None of it’s on you, but it will affect public perceptions of what’s going on, and Dim Future targeting children is also generating some official reactions.”

_As it should. I do not approve of that at all. I will come to your house later today._

“Thanks.”

Medicine Wolf’s disapproval had sounded severe, and I had a happy image of it visiting Bradley’s chapter of BF to tell them so. Tad’s voice took me by surprise.

_<Hey, Mercy, you continue to entertain and inform. How’s Jesse?>_

“She’s good. You want to talk to her?” He did, and I passed the phone. “Medicine Wolf said it’d come by later, David, so you might want to wait on that debrief until it has.”

Fisher looked surprised. “I thought I was just being human deaf, but you were hearing Medicine Wolf directly, Ms Hauptman?”

“Yup. No-one else did? Huh. And no, SA Fisher, I don’t know why or under what conditions distance becomes no matter. Live and learn, maybe.”

“Fair enough. Was Ms Ligatt right about why you call yourself a minor-league magic user?”

“Pretty much. I hadn’t thought about ‘minor league’ sounding untrue because it isn’t. There’s no measurement I know of, but though I have a lot of unpredictable resistance to magic, I don’t have much I can use. I could only get out of those cuffs by shifting form.” Honesty prodded, and I thought about it a little, but Ligatt would ask and I’d have to answer her. “I have picked up some boosts lately, though, what with one thing and another, so I may have to rethink that phrase, but if the comparison is with Medicine Wolf, Elder Spirits, or Gray Lords, I’m still in low single digits and they’re in three. Nor am I in the same league as any full-blood fae, or stronger human witches.”

“OK.” Fisher looked thoughtful. “Adjusting my head to what’s normal for you is not so easy, but I have to say you don’t come over as minor-league anything. And that command to Bradley had some punch even over the phone, wherever the power came from.”

She looked at Adam and eyed Manannán’s Bane where I’d left it on the side, but I wasn’t taking the bait and neither were they.

“Good thing, too, SA Fisher.”

Jesse returned my phone, looking cheerful, and before hanging up I spoke briefly with Zee, who wanted Medicine Wolf back sooner than later as tipping radioactive sludge and making plain lead boxes was seriously boring, however necessary. He was pleased with my morning’s work, and from something he said I thought any rescue party might have his help, which was good news.

Everyone was done eating and heading back to work, but Anna stayed a while to tell me how this morning’s show was playing with the public, and Asil stayed with her, as silent as he’d been during lunch.
“Smaller audience so far, Mercy, because it was working hours, but those who did see were pretty freaked by Bradley, and it’ll build as people catch news. Ligatt stirred up the Fox audience she poached, and Dim Future are taking a hit — targeting kids is never popular. Biggest bump so far though is the religious feeds and shows. I don’t think you said anything they haven’t thought themselves, but you focused it, and you should expect religious questions. So should Medicine Wolf, if anyone gets the chance.”

“Their business. Coyote says there’s a Great Spirit but nothing about it. What a manitou thinks is anyone’s guess. How did Andrea go down?”

Anna grinned. “Very well. Fox have said they’ll vigorously contest your claim for damages, but Jenny put her wording in the public domain and the lawyers have all gone thoughtful. Everyone agrees Bradley’s cooked on malicious and willful, but the Bostock and Fox writs allege only reckless disregard, and Ligatt’s behaviour underlined it. And I’m not sure if you know, but before you got back Bradley also alleged a magical attack by you and Manannán’s Bane to prevent her speaking truth, and the school’s issued a further statement I think you’ll appreciate.”

She passed me her phone, displaying a PDF. There was a brief preamble about Bradley’s account of events, then it got down to business.

_Shortly before being escorted from the school’s premises, on disciplinary suspension, Mrs Bradley began to threaten a student with eternal torment. Ms Hauptman commanded her to “Be silent”, and the words had power she informed all present was pack magic with a boost from Manannán’s Bane. At the time it smelt of roses and, in the opinion of every staff member who witnessed it, still does. All repudiate Mrs Bradley’s contention that Ms Hauptman ‘attacked’ her with magic as willfully false, not merely exaggerated, for whatever magic was involved did not make an attack but prevented one. This further instance of willful falsehood will be included in the evidence presented at the disciplinary hearing by the School Board, and that dossier will also be sent to the District and State Boards for their urgent consideration._

There were seven names below Stallings’s, including Quinn’s and Zeeman’s, and I did appreciate it though I was surprised by the tone. I thought Zeeman might have written it, but Stallings had signed off on it. What it left out was interesting too, and I wondered if anyone else had seen Manannán’s Bane shimmering as I had.

“That’s interesting, Anna. I didn’t decide to pull on Adam that hard, I just did it. And I was holding Manannán’s Bane back — it reacted to my anger and for all I could tell rose of its own accord.”

“Huh. That’s a thing to watch for, then. And while you’ve had every reason to be angry, all week, I wonder if you’re getting more wolf temper through the pack bonds. Watching you deal with Bostock felt very like watching an Alpha hold it in and then snap just a little. Charles agreed.”

“As do I, _mi princesa_. A strong Alpha with excellent control.”

Adam wasn’t there so I indulged in a Power Word. “Not good. Try zenning me some, Anna?”

She put a hand on my arm and I felt my furry self’s pleasure, but nothing else seemed to relax in any way I could identify.

“My coyote likes it.” I shrugged. “I’ll try to watch for that too, and warn Adam and the pack.”

“Your magic is very … associative, _querida_. I do not perceive magic as you do, but pack bonds are in their nature a medium of exchange, and you have given them much new magic. They will be seeking balance.”
That felt true, and after thinking some I rose and fetched Manannán’s Bane. Asking it to try to filter any wolf tendency to rage out of whatever was coming to me through pack bonds probably sounded stupid, and certainly raised Anna’s and Asil’s eyebrows, but it was warm in my hands, and I thought it was interested in the challenge, and pleased to be useful. I thanked it, and kept hold of it so it could study my bonds close up, which made Asil laugh.

“I do not think that one is much concerned with distance. But to ask is well done. How did I miss seeing that you would become such a wise princesa when you were in Aspen Creek?”

“Self-absorption, Asil. And you were scarier than Bran so you didn’t see much of me. In any case, what’s this about an aficionados de Mercy club?”

Anna grinned, and Asil signalled mild demurral with a hand.

“There is no club, querida. It is only that this old lobo is not alone in admiring your style. And on guard duty one must talk sometimes to stay alert and pass the time.”

“Must one?”

“Indeed. As one must graciously accept admiration of one’s style.”

“Right.” I clearly wasn’t getting any change out of Asil, but I gave him a look all the same. “I ever find any merchandise, Asil, you’ll owe me a week on KP, and there’d better have been a tithe to Clean Up the Basin.”

Anna laughed, and I left them to whatever they needed to do while I called Jenny. It took a while, because she wanted my own account of silencing Bradley in lawyerly detail, and we also got onto Crazy Courtney. KPD were reviewing the vandalism file, and would interview her and Bradley about what they’d done, but weren’t immediately convinced there was a breach of promise that warranted reinstating charges.

“I have to say I don’t blame them, Mercy. I think it’s arguable, but if Portson says she merely accepted an invitation in good faith, which I’ll bet she will, there’s a good chance they’ll decide against. And it might be more useful to let her know that if she says anything in public that indicates any disbelief in the police record of Milanovitch she’ll tip the KPD’s judgement on reinstatement.”

I didn’t disagree, and Jenny was more upbeat about making BF liable where Bradley was concerned. I relayed what Westfield had said, and we kicked it around a little. I also gave her a minimal heads-up on what else I’d discussed with Westfield, promising a fuller account when she could make it out to the house. She was wary, warning me about obstructing Federal employees in their sworn duty, but accepted that liberated captives came first. We also had a tussle over the twenty-five percent from the coyote pictures. It bothered Jenny, and the take was already even higher than Andrea had thought, but I insisted, though I did agree her fees incurred since Monday could be considered paid. She also had a draft of the reply to Judge Cray that I had to admit was a good deal more diplomatic than mine while still making the point, and she sent it to me. I printed it out, signed it, and took it to Adam for his own signature and consignment to a courier. Then I went to collect Jesse and find Fisher.

Jesse didn’t mind dishing Mrs Bradley at all, but some of her wider thoughts raised my hackles. She had almost as keen a sense of Tim as a BF member as I did, and some of the crap she’d been dealt at school had been from kids happy to identify themselves and their parents with its variety of bigotry. She also named a previous substitute teacher as a subtler purveyor of hatred than Bradley, and as he turned out also to be on Charles’s list, Fisher wanted detail. Then it was my turn, and I
had some problems filtering what I wanted to say.

“I first heard of Bright Future when I was nineteen or twenty, and what I soon understood was that the brightness they wanted was one where I and everyone I knew and loved was dead. Nothing since has changed how I feel, except to deepen my contempt. I avoided them at Wazzu, and spoke against their views when I felt among friends. I felt bad about not doing so several times, when I didn’t, but I’d heard stories about petty but very hurtful treatment of what they called perverted lovers of the preternatural, and they scared me. Still do. When I started working I found them easier to ignore until I needed to clear Zee, met Milanovitch, and wound up attending a chapter meeting with him. Portson was there, and others.” I described them, leaving out The Fideal’s human persona. “It felt … so suburban. Like a reading group, or knitting circle, but they talked about what they wanted with no sense they were salivating about causing death and injury. Juvenile but not innocent. But also less than active. Learning what Milanovitch was, and was happy to do, came as a surprise. Portson, too, though I was in such bad shape then that I still don’t have much perspective. And I’ve been surprised again, today, that they’ve upped their game as far as co-ordinated action. Someone must have taken charge, somewhere.”

Fisher assured me that was being looked at hard by several sets of people, but wanted details of everything. She also had the local BF chapter membership, and asked about what she called Mr Fideal.

“He was a fae plant, and that’s all I’m saying about him except that I’ve been assured he remains in Walla Walla and will for some time yet.”

She wasn’t happy, but accepted it because she still wanted all the detail I could dredge up, and drew Jesse back in by way of knock-on effects. That made for miserable listening, and when Fisher came back to me over my widest sense of what facing organised bigotry meant I sifted my rage for any anger except my own, and with a careful hand holding Jesse’s vented some of it. I didn’t say vamps were a far more serious threat to avatars than humans, but both as a Native American and a preternatural I knew what exposure to sustained bigotry meant.

“The analogy I used on Tuesday and protesters nationwide have accepted holds good, SA Fisher. If you want to know how I feel about BF or the JLS, how any preternatural feels, ask yourself how an emancipated slave felt in the decades after the Civil War as the Klan and Jim Crow came to Southern power. Read Faulkner and think about Snopeses. Read history and think about the real Vardaman and Bilbo. I didn’t know before Tuesday how much data Charles had put together, but I’m very pleased it’ll soon be out there, and the only good thing about this morning besides protecting Jesse is that Bradley may have exposed BF to serious financial liability, as Bostock has exposed them to your scrutiny. They rank behind Cantrip and the JLS as threats, but the gap’s narrowed of late. And if you do find someone was responsible for their upgrade, please look hard for a JLS or Cantrip brief. Speaking of which, what has Clements been saying?”

Fisher looked down, and when she looked up found my eyes hard.

“Detail is privileged, Ms Hauptman, and I’m not cleared to override that, though the AED might be. I will say that she is talking, and certainly did not target Mr Harris off her own bat. But the possible charges range from trivial to non-existent, however it’s clear that Mr Harris, and perhaps you and your husband, would have viable civil suits. Miss Hauptman, too. And I realise that’s worse than useless to you, but I can’t do anything about it. On the up side, I can tell you that although Senator Heuter has now made bail, he’s also been charged — financial offences in the first place, but there will probably also be charges of accessory to kidnap and murder.”

I knew Heuter might be one of those let off a legal hook by any data suppression we managed, and
could shrug that off, but Clements had got under my skin. I pushed Fisher a little on whether that
privileged detail would be available to Paul’s lawyer if he filed suit against Clements, and she said
she’d pass the question up. Then we went back to BF and their plans, and Jesse did better than me
— she knew about custody battles, and Christy’s hopeless parenting, and she had plenty of mad at
the arrogance of Bradley’s thinking. She also enjoyed getting it off her chest, and produced another
line I knew I’d steal when she lined up Preskylovitch and Bradley as child abusers.

“He wanted to rape my body and she wants to rape my mind. And though I’m just a way to get at
Dad and Mom, I think they both like their side benefits.”

Fisher blinked. “That’s … striking. You think Bradley’s a sadist?”

“Underneath the Christian cosy, yeah. She gets off on hellfire and it’s always other people burning.
But who knows what she does with Mr Bradley.”

I didn’t want to think about that, but Fisher shrugged.

“There isn’t one, and as far as we can tell never was, though her church says she’s a widow. But I
think your take is a smart one, and her religious views allow her to indulge a latent sadism. Or not
so latent.”

There was a little more, circling back to Crazy Courtney, and we were done. I spent more time with
Jesse, sharing some therapeutic baking with chocolate, and preparing a pork roast. It was still early,
but with wolves around you need big cuts, and they take time to cook. And there were
interruptions. Charles dealt with Seattle arriving to collect Paul, and I listened with mixed feelings
as he told Paul to read the file on Clements carefully and think hard about making a public
statement or giving an interview. A little later Kyle called to check on me and laugh about Andrea,
and so did Tony, to reiterate Jenny’s caution about the chances of reinstating charges against
Courtney. Expecting me to be upset, he was relieved I wasn’t and liked the idea of warning her
about the consequences of impugning me. I also put in a call to Stallings to thank her for the
statements, give a heads-up about the other substitute teacher Jesse had named and the FBI’s
renewed interest in Bradley, and ask if the school was interested in holding a debate on a motion
that Bright Future made for unacceptable teachers. She was taken aback, but saw the advantages in
getting a handle on the media and better PR for the school, and promised to do some consulting.
Then I talked with Jesse about what she wanted to do if it happened.

“You can speak if you want to, ex-kiddo. You’d lose a lot of anonymity, but chances are high
you’ll get snapped sometime soon anyway, and this way you control that some. But it’s up to you.”

“Huh. Who would be doing what, after Andrea’s dad?”

“No idea. On the dark side, after today I doubt even the Dims would put up Bradley, but we’d have
to invite them to put up someone. And for the light … I’m not sure who to ask, Jesse. And what
sort of audience would we want to invite, over and above the school community and KEPR? A lot
of people might accept now who wouldn’t have last week.”

We were still at it when a tingle of magic told me Medicine Wolf had arrived, and I collected
David and his men from the den where they’d been channel hopping. Adam came for David’s
sake, and we headed out back. They had some apprehensions about its sheer size and power, but
once they’d been spoken to that eased, and after Adam’s explanation of being read all the humans
consented. I was standing back, not wanting to know secrets, but when it was David’s turn I stood
beside him with Adam, and with the Vietnam smells of death and jungle I picked up the self-
loathing his forced Change and its consequences had brought him. Medicine Wolf spent longer
with him than anyone else I’d seen read so far, and I could feel the calming magic in its breath.
When it was over David’s face was relaxed in a new way, and his men instinctively turned away to afford him privacy, while Adam did as Alphas and Sarges do, and held him. I looked at Medicine Wolf and spoke quietly.

“I wanted you to do that for more reasons than helping David. One of Bran’s rules is that no human should be Changed without consent. It still happens, as it did to Anna, and though she found Charles and has her Omega strength, the results are always serious. David and Adam have both coped but it’s been very bad for David. And if we do get any Cantrip prisoners out alive, they will probably all be forced Changes, and beyond physical torture may have been forced to actions that haunt them, so I was thinking it might be a very good thing if you can be here soon after they arrive. If they do.”

Willingly, Mercy. Your friend is strong but you are right about his pain, and Bran is right to enforce his rule. Werewolves are interesting, but forced Change is a subversion of will I find unacceptable.

“Oh yeah. Thanks. The other thing is some magic we’re hoping will give us an edge.”

I explained the six steps to wherever plan, and learned we needn’t worry about any notification as the magic of our return would be felt.

You were right that the presence of Underhill helped wake me, Mercy. It is very interesting and most unlike me. I am all here, and it is all somewhere else. Talking is a problem, but we are working on it.

“OK.” I gave up thinking about that one fast. “I can see you’d have things to talk about.”

Many, including you. I think it was happy to have its justice invoked, and that the fae had been taking it for granted.

“Good to know. The cloak’s been very helpful, for sure.”

I passed on Anna’s warning about religious speculation concerning its beliefs, and got a wolf jawclap of amusement.

I do not mind telling them I was not born in what they call 4004 BC, nor that I am an eyewitness to evolution. For such clever animals, humans have some very silly ideas.

I held in my laugh because David was waiting to offer Medicine Wolf thanks. He also became the first person besides me to give the dire wolf a caress, his hand resting for a moment on its face, and then with a general farewell it rose and vanished, headed back to Hanford. Everyone was quiet until we were inside, but over coffee and biscuits, with the roast beginning to smell good, I relayed Medicine Wolf’s comment. You couldn’t say the floodgates opened, because none of them were men who dealt well with emotions, but they knew David better than anyone except maybe Adam, and were moved for him as well as by their own experiences. They also needed to get manitou impact out of their systems but when they got on to seeing me with it on Tuesday I checked with David, doled out beers, and started chopping vegetables. After a while he joined me, peeling potatoes with a smile, and I understood the offered thanks, which he underscored when we were done by leaning down to kiss my forehead. It felt like a blessing, because it was.

As smells thickened others drifted in, and the day got rehashed a little until Jesse brought up the proposed debate. There were ideas I filed away to consider, and smart questions, including Fae and half-fae representation, with a comment from John-Julian that gave me pause.
“Tell me to shut it, Gramps, but if you’re easier with it now I think you should let it be known how you and Mr Hauptman were Changed. It was in the line, and no citizen should get to preach hate about you, whatever SCOTUS said about those idiot Baptists. Besides, you hate what you are more than BF ever can, but you taught Connor and me to be wary, not bigots, and if I think about it some of the best people I know are preternaturals.”

David didn’t disagree, though he was as antsy with praise as I am, and Jesse kept the discussion moving. Tom and Tad had done a lot for her self-confidence, and she was easier with Charles than she had been — which I thought also down to Anna, whose zenning of him had become clearer to me. His control was always excellent, but the week had been a strain, the captives were bothering him because they were bothering Anna on a very personal level, and Brother Wolf did need a run — but her presence and constant, low-level soothing was doing a great deal. It led me to think about the sharpening of my magical perception, which seemed more manitou or coyote, and how much I might be seeing as an Alpha would, reading another it was tolerating on its territory. There was some of that, but like the other magics I’d grabbed it also felt like me, not anything or anyone else. My furry self told me firmly it had no objection to being an Alpha coyote, and found the idea funny as well as useful, and if I still balked at testosterone preening I found I could accept that Mrs was not a qualifying adjective when applied to Alpha.

Given the smells I had plenty of help mashing potatoes and draining greens, while Adam carved ten pounds of pork. We were just sitting down when I felt something that was more like Coyote than anything else, but all itself, and a moment later Raven’s raven settled slightly precariously on the windowsill and tapped an oversize beak on the glass. Amid silence I went to open the window, and he hopped in, shifting before he landed into a figure Adam and I recognised, wearing what he had been when we first met him a year before, down to the hemp belt and small brass bells. He rotated his head with an audible pop, and shook himself the way a bird does when it bathes.

“She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars. Something smells good. Wyoming’s a long way, but we’ve found what you are looking for.”
Chapter Thirty-Six

Though the back of my head was spinning hard I discovered the front was thinking coldly. “David, how much do your men know about the preternatural?”

“As much as I can tell them, Mercy. They know about vamps, if that’s your worry.”

“OK. No offence, guys, but nothing said here now gets repeated anywhere else.” I moved on. “Raven needs food and so will anyone who’ll be heading out. Set another place, please, Jesse. Adam, call those who need to be on their way here while I call ap Lugh and Marsilia?”

Wolves don’t have the kind of speed True Blood gave vamps, not altogether wrongly, but they can multitask over food if what they’re eating isn’t something they’ve just killed. With four of them dialling, Warren, Joel, George, Mary Jo, the Owens brothers, the Seattle wolves, and Samuel with the other medics were set in motion, and the gate warned, while I carved slices for Raven and saw him seated. I left a terse warning of imminence on Marsilia’s voicemail before for the first time hitting the speed-dial for a number Bran had given me.

<Mercedes?>

“Gwyn ap Lugh. Raven just arrived saying he has a location. Raven, would you give your news so the Prince of the Gray Lords can hear you?”

Raven was tucking in, but having a mouthful seemed no impediment. “My children called me to a place north-east of what Anglos call Muddy Gap, in Wyoming, and I smelt many wolves and some fae and vampires. And rot. No humans now, not alive anyway, but they have been there until recently, and ghosts still are. All is underground — an old mine. What Anglos call trona, maybe. It felt deep. But there are ventilation shafts that smell of pain and death, and lots of tyre tracks, though my children remember nothing there until a few years back.”

“Many wolves?”

“More than anything else.” Raven shrugged. “Scent’s not my best thing, but it seemed like many.”

Rescuing more wolves was good, but dealing with many traumatised ones was going to be a major problem. First things first, though, and Charles had already fired up the laptop that lived on the side for when a phone screen just didn’t cut it. When he had the general area on GoogleMaps he switched to satellite view, and slowly zoomed in, as Raven directed, on a sprawling but isolated ridge formation.

“There. The track doesn’t end the way it looks on that. It hugs the cliff under an overhang and stops at the mine entrance. Ventilation shafts are among the scrub trees here.”

Adam and David were looking over Charles’s shoulder, and seemed to agree about something without saying a word. Adam pointed.

“We need the co-ords for there, Charles. Gwyn ap Lugh, this is the URL of what we’re looking at.” He read out the numbers clearly. “Raven is indicating that the mine entrance is forty or fifty yards west of the end of the visible track. We want to arrive just behind the crest of the tributary
ridge above it.”

After a moment Charles gave a set of GPS numbers, and I could hear ap Lugh using a keyboard.

<Yes. May I ask how many wolves are coming?>

“Wolves and avatars.” I reeled them off, adding Asil. With many wolves to control Alpha power would be needed, and he didn’t object. “We’re not at our best underground, though vamps are. If you have anyone who is, that might be good.”

<Yes.> His voice was dry. <How soon?>

Adam and David exchanged another look.

“We’ll aim for two hours from now, Gwyn ap Lugh. Wolves have to get here, kitting up, briefing, dealing with the FBI. Mercy can call you when I start briefing, if you want.”

<I do, Adam Hauptman. And we will be waiting for you Underhill in two hours. Mercedes, that your kind has found this place is noted.>

He rang off, and I paused in eating to give Raven an apologetic glance.

“That’s the nearest to thanks you’ll get from the Fae, I’m afraid. But wolves acknowledge the debt.”

Raven waved a hand, still eating. “We owed you. And maybe it should be Dinner Woman — this is good food. Don’t worry about the fae. I won’t.”

“Alright. Thanks anyway.”

Charles was still working the laptop with a frown, his phone on beside him, and I guessed Bran was now listening.

“It was a small trona mine. Privately owned, opened in the 1940s, closed in the ’80s. Only places there might be plans on file are Casper, as county seat, or Cheyenne. One for the Feebs. And no indication of sale I can find, but without knowing what township number might be assigned I can’t usefully search.”

“I don’t think we should give Westfield the co-ords until we’re closer to going.” Adam waggled a hand. “I trust him, but there’s no point stretching him. And I’m more concerned about many wolves. A few we can handle, but if we’re talking double digits …”

Wolves were silent, thinking about it, and it wasn’t good. Had any involuntarily Changed victims been able to control their wolves? Or had any help in doing so while having who knew what done to them?

“Necessary supervision of family contact means maximal openness, and an answer other than death if any victim can’t learn to control their wolf.”

<Probably so, Mercy.> Bran’s voice was flat, and tired. <But we will have to know what we are dealing with before we can plan.>

“Un huh. So let’s pick a number. Three hours from now, say, we find twenty surviving forcible Changes who are all anywhere between grossly traumatised and psychotic. Some in each form. We can’t bring them back here. What do we do? And say, when the FBI team turns up?”
“Nearest packs are Green River and Cheyenne, but neither has anything like the resources for that. Denver could help some.” Charles shrugged. “We need to know how dominant any of them are before we know who might deal with them. But you should put all those Alphas on alert, Da. And yourself, for if any of them are too trapped as wolf.”

This was wolf magic that I’d only seen rarely, twice in Aspen Creek with new wolves who lost sight of the way back, and once here, the other way, when Adam had forced Mac back to human when he was losing it. And we had some other magic we might be able to draw on.

“One thing might be to get them into the Columbia Basin somewhere, anywhere, so Medicine Wolf can get to them.”

<Yes. The worst cases, at any rate. Boise, maybe. As to what you tell anyone Federal, Mercy, while you are the one on the ground it will be your call. But you will not be dealing with Westfield, at least at first. Be very careful, please.>

“Oh yeah. But the problem is that while they are wolves, they’re also human victims. And how did Cantrip get as high a survival rate as many implies? Or are we talking about a lot more victims than anyone’s been thinking?”

There weren’t any answers, and things started to happen. The wolves who’d be travelling went to change and kit up, David trailed by Connor and John-Julian, and I lingered only to check what Raven wanted. He said he was curious, needed rest, and was happy to wait for whatever happened here. We were all out of guest bedrooms, but Travis said they had a spare bedroll he could use, and that seemed good, so I left them and Jesse to defrosting packs of beef mince, and packing them in rucksacks.

I wasn’t putting the cloak on until I had to, but I talked to it about what I’d be asking it to do as I switched to snug jeans and hiking boots, with upper layers that had good insulation and sufficient pockets for whatever one might need on wolf-rescue missions to the wilds of Wyoming, besides plenty of meat. I had a belt holster for my Sig, and a belt sheath for a hunting knife, while a pocket took Carnwennan until I could get a proper sheath for it from Zee. Others took spare magazines, lead and silver, a small but powerful LED flashlight, my phone, and — after some thought — a compact vidcam Adam had given me. I also had Manannán’s Bane.

Back downstairs everyone else had arrived, and after greeting Warren, Joel, George, and the Owens brothers I was introduced to the two soldiers from Seattle, who went by Simon and Chris and seemed more excited than grim, and to two docs who’d be with Samuel — a submissive from Chicago called Rashid, and a low-ranking dominant from the Twin Cities called Artie. I noted with mixed feelings the wary respect all the new wolves showed me, and consciously stuffed any Alpha-ness I was projecting down and away. Adam didn’t need anything that might suggest competition when he already had three other Alphas in the room. Wolves stared at me.

“That’s … where did it go?”

Adam grinned. “Mercy can do that, Simon. She’ll pull it back up if she needs it. Mercy, make that call. Now, what we know so far is this.”

He was in briefing mode, and once I’d dialled ap Lugh I listened until Adam had run through a solid outline of what he wanted to happen on the ground and the necessary flexibilities given all the unknowns. When he got into Q.-and-A. about more narrowly military concerns I sent a query, made a note before giving Adam my phone, and slipped out with Anna. Westfield and Fisher, with others of their team, were standing outside their MCC, alerted by the traffic, and Westfield gave us a long look as we approached. I didn’t want to mess him about any more than I had to, so I went
straight to it.

“A private word with you and SA Fisher, AED?”

He ushered us into the MCC silently, and shut the door.

“Turns out I was right about ravens in Wyoming. We have a location.”

Smells I always remember, and poems I learned at school have stuck with me, but strings of numbers do not stick unless they really have to. I handed Fisher the co-ords Charles had worked out, and as she typed I gave a summary of what he’d found, with the request to look for any plans and sales records once they had the township reference number. Then I added what Raven had sensed, minus vamps, and took a breath.

“We haven’t talked much about the Change, AED, or what it might mean to have it forced on you. Anna can cover that.”

While Fisher zoomed in and made calls, Anna did, briskly and brutally, by running through a list of the rules about Changing that Bran enforced, and why, before bringing up the question of survival rates and the implications for the total number of victims.

“But if there really are tens of surviving forced Changes, AED, there is a big problem. Will they want to be reunited with families? Probably, in the worst way. And the families will almost certainly want them. But what if they are not in control of their wolves? We’re only six days from full moon, when they’ll have to change, and an out-of-control wolf can come through anytime. Three, or five, or even eight we could absorb and hope to save. Tens are going to be … very awkward.”

I’d had a chance to think it through a little. “As wolves, however forced, they are our responsibility, AED, and we will not shirk it. Whatever resources we can draw on, we will, but that cannot stretch to permanently assigned wolves with sufficiently greater dominance to control them unless they are in one place. And they may still self-identify as human, having every reason to be terrified of wolves, including themselves. Psychosis and worse are very probable. So the crunch is that if a rescued forced Change insists on leaving our care for human care, someone will have to take responsibility for controlling them, and if that’s not a powerful magic user, they’d better be packing silver and prepared to pull the trigger. Probably on the eve of the next full moon, though we can make a sufficiently dominant wolf available if we’re allowed to. This time — not thirteen times a year in perpetuity.”

Westfield was listening intently, and held up a hand. “I hear you, Ms Hauptman. Leslie?”

“Cheyenne can roll in about ten, but it’ll take them two or three hours at least. Nothing yet on the site but DC’s on it. IR satellites can’t retarget for ninety minutes. Hospitals in Cheyenne and Green River are standing by, and two air ambulances.” She gave me a card with a number. “Assuming you have coverage, that’ll get me here, Ms Hauptman, and I can relay any request to where it’s needed.”

“Got it. But the upside of living wolves, even out-of-control ones, is that physical injury should not be a problem. What we might seriously need, though, is meat — we’ll be packing all we’ve been able to defrost, but if we’re talking tens it’ll be gone fast. Any kind is OK, but assuming injury, exhaustion, or starvation — and if the … facility is now human deserted, that’s a real possibility — then minced or cubed would be good.”

Fisher blinked, once, and went back to typing and dialling. Westfield, Anna, and I listened for a
minute, until we heard her tell someone in Green River to call his cousin the butcher and get his stock, minced or cubed, aboard a chopper *soonest*, and Westfield shook his head.

“Some orders you only get to give once. You going to beat us there, Ms Hauptman?”

“Yup.”

“How?”

“Cloak.” I flicked eyes at Fisher. “She know what I told the President?”

“No.”

“Here to there. There to Wyoming. We’ll arrive in” — I glanced at my watch — “fifty minutes and six steps. And while I can’t give details, because I don’t know them, you won’t need SWAT teams. We’re not going to be stupid, militarily, but we are going straight in, as full bore as necessary. Think very magical marines set to as-minimal-as-possible, but no upper limit.”

After a moment, Westfield sighed. “Oddly enough, I find that more comforting than not, but Cheyenne will take a SWAT team — it’s SOP for anything like this. Is there any chance that I, or Leslie, can accompany you, blindfolded if necessary?”

“No. I’m sorry, AED. The way we’re taking is not open to humans, period. Put yourself in the air to land on 220 or 410 and you’re welcome to join us as soon as you can, but that’s the best I can do.”

He was dialling before I’d finished speaking, and used a brief hold someone put him on to meet my gaze.

“I’ll be there asap, and once I am I’ll be senior. Until then it’ll be SAC Todd Vance out of Cheyenne. Didn’t know him before … two days back, but he seems a good man.”

“Straight arrow?”

“Yes, but you don’t get to be an SAC somewhere as large as — General, thank you for taking my call so late. I need to ask for the fastest possible transport.”

Fisher was still talking, and Anna and I left them to it, receiving sketchy farewell waves. Outside, excluded Feebs looked at us with curiosity we ignored, and back in the house Anna gave me a long look.

“That went better than it might have, Mercy. And you are still thinking *very* clearly.”

“You mean ruthlessly.”

“That too.” Anna shivered. “Captives in cages.”

“Like Mac.”

“Yes. He still haunts me, Mercy.”

“Me too. But you know, Anna, I wonder how he’d have done, if he’d lived. His control wasn’t good — Adam had to Alpha him off me at the garage — and he was still grieving his girl. I think he could have made it, but I won’t swear he would have. And how would either of us feel then?”

Anna was silent for a moment, while we stood in the hall.
“I can’t think like that, Mercy. If Charles had had to … put Mac down, I’d be … very conflicted. But I can see the realities. And so could Mac — he was running from his family for their safety as much as from Leo and Gerry for his own.”

“I know, Anna. I heard him call someone in his family the first day he turned up at my garage. Does your zen help you with your own rage?”

“Some. I don’t get that indiscriminate wolf rage, but I’m very happy Leo, Isabel, and especially that shit Justin are seriously dead.” She shivered. “There are so many ways this could go badly wrong, Mercy.”

I knew it, but what choices were there? We rejoined Adam’s briefing, which had moved on to checking weapons — the usual sidearms but also compact SMGs that had to be David’s. He’d also supplied the things he used when there were hostages to save — smoke and gas grenades, flash-bangs, and tasers. Everyone had acquired body armour, except Joel and the Owens brothers, who were wearing one-pieces so they could strip to change more easily. Anna put some on willingly, and I did less willingly — it blocked pockets, and besides hating the feel of it I thought the cloak would make it redundant — but it appeased Adam, and I saw Asil’s slight smile at my compliance. I also reclaimed my phone and entered Fisher’s number, as well as a memo of the GPS co-ords.

Time was nearly up, so rucksacks of meat were claimed from the kitchen while I went to get the cloak. It settled around me with what felt for all the world like a sigh of contentment, and my spine tingled, Manannán’s Bane warming in my hand when I picked it up again. I glanced in the mirror and allowed myself one twirl, thinking that whatever else Underhill’s magic might do, it had superior tailoring down cold. The hush in the crowded hall as I swept down the staircase was good for my ego, too, and I felt the anticipation rise into tension.

“Three things to do first, everyone.”

Jesse was watching with John-Julian and the other humans, and I gave her a rose-scented hug.

“We’ll let you know when we’ll be back as soon as we can, Jesse, but it might be a while. Hang in there.”

Then I called Marsilia, who answered this time, and gave her the GPS co-ords with a terse description and a polite request to arrive silently and follow Adam’s plan, as the fae would do. And with the time pleasingly close to two hours exactly, I called Gwyn ap Lugh.

“Coming through in one.”

With the phone in hand, showing the GPS co-ords we’d need, I stood towards the door and checked that everyone had a hold on the cloak before asking it to open the way to the place of its making. The archway formed, and we went.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

The thicket of roses Underhill had clearly gone right on growing, but it had also formed a clearing large enough for us as well as the waiting fae, and my priorities shifted a little.

“Underhill, we are gladdened by your courtesy. And by yours, Gwyn ap Lugh. May I name those who travel with me?”

He gestured, and I did, seeing interested fae eyes. Ap Lugh stood with Nemane, and a half-dozen of the knights who’d appeared with him outside the courthouse in Boston. They weren’t mounted this time, nor using glamour to conceal their appearances and the silver swords they carried. Nor was Zee, who gave me a fractional wink. It was always a shock to see his true form — seven foot of bronzed warrior — and I’d never seen him quite like this, with two swords as well as three daggers on his belt. But even he was nothing to the pair of trolls, who were not only in Medicine Wolf’s league when it came to size, but female and naked except for what I had to call loincloths and very large pairs of leather gloves. What kind of leather I didn’t like to think, but it was thicker than anything natural had ever had as skin, and I realised they would be able to grasp iron or steel.

“We hear your names, wolves and avatars. Be welcome Underhill. My knights answer to none but me, and I will not name them, but the others here besides myself are Nemane, the Dark Smith Loan Maclibuin, and the sisters Þorgerðr and Irpa. All heard your briefing, Adam Hauptman, and will conform to it until we have full control. Tell Underhill and your cloak where we must go, Mercedes.”

Giving Underhill GPS co-ords seemed very odd, but I included them with as clear a description as I could manage, naming the isolated ridge formation and specifying the tributary ridge above old mine workings. I also kept in mind an image of what I’d seen on the Google satellite view, and I think that helped more — it wasn’t like the manitou’s reading but something brushed my awareness just as an archway opened, large enough to let everyone move forward at once.

The Wyoming air was not only much colder — we’d gained a good four or five thousand feet — but a great deal damper. It wasn’t raining, but it had been, and the rock glistened when the moon came though the remaining cloudwrack. We were exactly where we’d wanted to be, and without speaking Fred and Hank stripped, packing boots and clothes for Simon to tote, and shifted to hawk forms, one wheeling up for an overview while the other slipped over the ridgeline and headed down. Nemane also shifted to her crow form and vanished into the night. The rest of us extended whatever senses we had as fully as possible, wolves’ eyes gleaming yellow as their beasts lent them night vision, and though in human form I couldn’t quite pick them out clearly I already knew what Raven had meant about a smell of pain and death. But nothing was moving in the night that shouldn’t be there, so far as anyone could tell, until a faint pop announced Marsilia, Stefan, and Wulfe some thirty yards away. I raised a finger to my lips, and gestured around to show what we were doing. After a moment Adam shrugged, and we ghosted to join the vamps and go a little way along the back of the ridge before crossing it and moving downslope to the scrub where Raven had said there were shafts. All the fae were using magic to silence any sound they might make, even the trolls, and after a while I decided ap Lugh was letting some of that extend to us. The smells slowly strengthened, although the light breeze made them intermittent, and by the time we reached the scrub I knew exactly where the shafts were. Adam gave me a glance, then Charles, and I
steeled myself before leaning over one, Charles beside me, and slowly breathing in.

It took something not to gag, but I sorted though it as best I could. “Blood, dust, and hunger. Ghosts. Silver and iron. At least two dead wolves and several dead humans, more than a score of living wolves, two or three vamps, an oakman, fae that smell of brine and fish, others of earth. And something that smells fae and … root beer?”

I saw Charles’s mouth twitch. “It’s wintergreen.”

Ap Lugh nodded. “That would be a dryad. And probably selkies, with brownies and other small garden fae.”

Both hawks circled back in to land and change, and spoke with their backs to us.

“Doors are shut tight, Adam, and look very solid. Steel. Tracks are SUVs or big pickups, and from where the overhang’s protected them I’d say the topmost are at least three days old and heading out. Nothing else down there that I saw or sensed.”

Fred nodded. “Same here. Some animal life but not much above rodents on the ridge, and nothing bigger than ravens and a coyote moving between here and the roads. Couple of semis headed south on 220, nothing on 410.”

“Good. Thanks. Anyone else sense anything? Mercy, Charles, you’re definite on no living humans?”

“Unless they’re masked by magic with no smell.”

“Guns or explosives?”

“Not that I can tell, but there’s plenty of metal down there.”

“Any of you vampires sense human life?”

Wulfe’s face went blank for a moment — blanker than usual — and he shook his head with an odd delicacy. “Wolves in human and wolf shape, and bad shape, and fae, and vampires, but nothing that feels mortal.”

“Alright. Then it’s probably just getting in, but Fred and Hank, back upstairs, please, as lookouts, Simon and Chris, rearguard, Mary Jo, George, and Warren, flanks.”

Adam took point, with Charles second, and David and Asil bracketed Anna and me, with the medics. Samuel’s face was stony and distant, but when Anna brushed his arm he managed a brief smile of thanks. A steeper section took some concentration, and for me a handhold, but the slope soon eased off and the valley floor was hard and level despite the surface dampness. Until we reached the doors Adam remained very cautious, but all was still. I looked at them with some dismay, because they did look very solid indeed and my nose told me they were made of some pretty serious steel, as well as flush enough with the rock that only a faint smell of death was getting out.

“Charles, any trace of explosives?”

Charles smelt at the edges of the doors as high as he could, then along their base, and shook his head. “Rot. Nothing else I can pick out.”

“Alright. Then it’s getting in however we can. From the marks they open outwards.”
The trolls rolled forward and contemplated the doors for a moment.

“No handholds.”

I wasn’t sure if it was Þorgerðr or Irpa, but the voice was surprisingly melodious. A very large finger prodded at the doors.

“They’re thick. We could punch them, but breaking the rock would be quicker.”

“I can blast them, but it’ll be bad for what’s inside.”

Wulfe’s face was neutral, and Adam shook his head.

“Last choice, then, Wulfe, and if then, for the hinges.”

Zee had slipped between the trolls, and set a dagger to one door, by its junction with the other. It sank in slowly, and Zee moved it a little before withdrawing it and feeling the blade.

“I can carve it, but it won’t be fast. Easier if the metal can be heated, because the blades will heat less as they cut.”

That was the main reason we had Joel with us, and he turned away to strip. His tibicena form got some looks from ap Lugh’s silent knights, and I wondered, not for the first time, what kind of beings they were, and what if any autonomy they had, but when he let his magmatic aspect dominate, flanks glowing with heat, almost everyone was looking and I wasn’t unhappy to see Wulfe and Marsilia shift away a little, though Stefan didn’t bother and gave me a wink. I was very glad that whatever I’d got from Guayota hadn’t included any overt vulcanism, but Joel said it didn’t bother him any more than having presa canario and room-temperature tibicena forms, and I’d reminded him during the briefing of what he’d done for Adam with his immunity to bullets, suggesting he might be able to do the same thing with his magma heat if he willed it. He’d looked at me doubtfully, but promised to try if it was needed, and as the trolls moved aside, looking interested, he reared up, planting two huge paws of crusted lava where Zee had been cutting, and stood there a moment, as if in contemplation. I could feel manitou magic gathering, and in so far as I could encouraged it, lending Joel my willed intent through his pack bond and adding whatever power of breaking and opening any of my magic had. And when Joel let it out through his paws, punching it into the metal, everyone knew.

For maybe a foot around each paw, joining in the middle, steel barely had time to glow red before it became incandescent white and the reek of hot metal filled the air. Joel pushed himself away to land on all fours, steel dimpling under his pressure, and Zee’s blades, one in each hand, sliced in, twisting to flick out chunks of glowing metal, five, six times before he paused.

“The same place, deeper if you can, Herr Arocha.”

Joel complied, paws resting two or three inches into each door, and when Zee got back to work he stabbed both blades in, carving out a circle that he was able to push in. He looked at the hole, asked Joel to heat the lower edge, and two more cycles enlarged it to something workable for troll hands. Magic crackled as Zee made a gesture, and I heard metal creak complaint as the heat was dumped somewhere. The trolls leaned in, peering.

“That’ll do nicely.”

Everyone stood back, Joel reverting to his room-temperature version, and the trolls each got a gloved hand in, gripping and beginning to pull. Looking at their musculature as it swelled I thought they probably had pentaceps or hexiceps, and their feet dug six inches into the earth as metal began
to groan and bulge. Still pulling, one spoke.

“Bolts.”

Ap Lugh went to stand between them, staring at the base of the doors, and water that smelt fresh began to churn and foam hard-packed earth, scouring out a trench and biting into rock. It was much more like the sea’s power to erode, hugely accelerated, than anything lakewater usually did, and I filed the thought away. A shiver ran through the doors, and ap Lugh leaped back as the bottoms of the doors abruptly rose, bolt-sockets tearing through weakened rock. Each troll got a hand under a leaf, shifted so they could use more of their legs, and began to straighten, metal screaming until the upper bolts smashed out of their sockets with violent cracks as rock shattered. The trolls staggered back, letting go, the doors swung open, and the smell hit me like a brick.

The reek of heated metal and magic had been masking it, but there were bodies close, and they hadn’t died well. The tunnel ran straight into the rock, and it was too dark even for coyote eyes, but there were a lot of beings in there and the mix of fear, rot, illness, sewage, hunger, and hope was brutal. A puff of roses from the cloak served to block it a little, letting me recover, and I murmured thanks. Then ap Lugh flicked a ball of magic into the tunnel that rose towards the roof brightening into a blaze of what I’d bet was marshlight. It certainly didn’t bother the vamps at all, and I gave the fae points for honour. Two of ap Lugh’s knights and the trolls stayed on guard, and we went in.

The area immediately inside the doors had clearly been the vehicle park — there were oil-stains on the rock, and a lingering trace of gas and exhaust fumes. But it was in what must have served as an unloading area that the bodies lay — a half-changed wolf riddled with silver bullets, and four human bodies that had to be its kills before someone stopped it. All had been gutted and had their throats ripped out, and the congealed blood was thick and studded with fragments of tissue. The dryness and sealed doors had inhibited but not stopped decay, but blood exposed to air does what it does, and I forced myself to smell it clearly as well as letting my eyes roam and assess. Several ghosts were flickering in and out above the mess, and my voice sounded flat to my own ears.

“This happened late Tuesday night or early Wednesday morning. Maybe after news of MacLandis’s death leaked. Humans wanted to leave. Wolf disagreed and lost it. Fifth human was packing silver. Please hold a moment, everyone.”

I managed to extricate the vidcam from under my body armour, and shot a wide-angle view before taking a step forward, zooming in, and tracking across the bodies. FBI forensics should make it clear they weren’t on us, but every little might help. Then I reached for the magic that had always been mine, and snapped an order at the ghosts, vanishing them.

“Charles, you know the wolf?”

He went forward carefully, and stooped to look impassively at the distorted corpse.

“Face is more than half-changed and just as shot away, Adam. But it might be a loner called Michael Travers, who was reported drowned four years ago.” He straightened, frowning. “Travers was older than me by some way, and only middling dominant. Might have flipped. Warren?”

Warren also went and looked, his face a mask. “Only met him … twice, briefly, but could be.”

Adam’s voice was neutral. “Wolf magic can’t reverse a change in one dead. Witchcraft can but I don’t have a witch to hand. Anyone capable?”

If anyone was they weren’t saying, and Zee’s voice cut across us from a side chamber.
“Generator that closed those doors is in here, run dry, but there’s gas in cans. You want it running?”

“Gwyn ap Lugh, is that light any drain on you?”

“Minimal.”

“Then not yet, Dark Smith. Light would be good but I’m thinking electrified bars.”

“Ja. One moment.”

Light flared in the side chamber, and after a moment we heard some snaps and thunks.

“Outputs disconnected except for one labelled lights.”

“Go ahead.”

Gas glugged, and a moment later a throaty roar and some exhaust smell preceded a slow flicker in the overheads. As they brightened their light became a harsh glare, illuminating a lot of tunnel and bringing cries from deep within. Wordlessly we moved forward, skirting the carnage, and forty yards in, past a kitchen and utility area with a table that would have seated twelve at a pinch, a recreation area with sofas, a big-screen TV, and a gym mat with some weights, a wide side tunnel had a cage containing three emaciated but conscious male vamps. Marsilia had been silent, walking with Wulfe and Stefan to one side, but blurred into motion, stopping in front of the cage door. The vamps were huddled against the far side.

“And why did you not break these bars?”

Marsilia’s voice was deadly level, but the most alert-looking of the captives shrugged fractionally, not meeting her eyes.

“Starvation, old one. There is a limit to how much we can feed on one another, and we have had nothing else for months. And there is something in the bars — even well, I doubt I could bend them.”

I didn’t see Marsilia’s arms come up, but she was gripping two bars and pulling for a long second before stepping back.

“Wulfe?”

He drifted forward, and looked at the bars, then leaned forward and licked one slowly. Somewhere magic flickered, though I knew it only in my gut.

“Cores of tungsten and a very hard ceramic. It’ll take me a minute, Mistress.”

He laid his hands on two bars, and froze. My gut told me some more about magic at work, and I could see others feeling it. Nemane had reappeared from somewhere, and was looking at Wulfe with narrowed eyes, as was Zee. With a faint pop both bars Wulfe was holding vanished, and he spoke in a voice heavy with power.

“Come, all three. You have much to explain, but you will be heard and a sun will pass before any decide anything.”

The captives came forward, squeezing through the opening. Marsilia grasped the first — the one who’d spoken before — and vanished with him, but as the second came through and Stefan opened
his arms to grasp him I forced myself to speak.

“Wulfe, two things before you go.”

Everyone looked at me, Stefan’s eyes concerned and Wulfe’s blank.

“We will do all we can to acquire all records, but there is no guarantee. If the Feds ask directly, with knowledge, what would you have us say? And please cleanse that cage of all evidence.”

“Stefan, go.”

Stefan picked up his load, gave me another fractional wink with a mouthed ‘thanks’, and vanished. Wulfe offered a hand to the third, ordering as much as helping him, and looked at me even as his free hand spilled a fizz of gray magic through the cage, scouring its floor and rising up the bars. How blank eyes saw so much I didn’t like to imagine.

“If the Feds learn and ask, Mercy, give them my cell number. And I, as the oldest surviving wizard vampire, say you have aided us in this, without obligation, and so have my protection. The Master of the Night will be informed, and all will know.” He sighed, eyes flickering presence. “Such a shame. No other avatar is protected, but we will not hunt if we are not threatened.”

He and the vamp held casually with one arm vanished, and ap Lugh’s voice was sharp, though he was looking at Nemane.

“Well and good. Our own kinds wait as they should not.”

No-one was arguing, and we went deeper. I had the camera running again for the record. The smell of old death thickened, and the cries the first light had provoked had died away. A second side tunnel was narrow and held nothing but a heavy steel door, locked but not sealed underneath, the air carrying no smell of life beyond it, so we ignored it for now, though there was a scent I remembered. A third, opposite, gave onto a dormitory with some empty beds that had been stripped to the mattresses. Searching it could wait too, as could a fourth with a single empty cage that smelt of blood, some simple lab equipment — scales, burners, retorts — and a metal-working bench. But a fifth, perhaps seventy yards in, held nine faded and miserable fae in iron cages, three with lank whiskers and all showing scars, and just beyond that the main tunnel opened out into a big rectangular chamber. A large metal plate with a central hatch filled the centre of the floor, leaking the smells of rot from somewhere below, and I guessed it must cover the mine’s main shaft which had been seen as a handy disposal place. On the far side was a space holding a large tank that stank of chemicals and sewage, and ghosts were coiling everywhere, some old and tattered, some much newer. But what mattered more were the silver cages lining three walls and the twenty-six living and three dead wolves they contained. The dead were all half-changed, eight of the living were in wolf form, the rest naked human, and all were starving, but that wasn’t what was keeping them still. That was Alpha power, and my eyes found her at once, appreciating the irony despite the context — an older, square-jawed Hispanic woman with a will of iron. The others were all younger, mostly female, and except for five who looked Anglo either African American or Hispanic. I couldn’t read all the dominances, but a very high proportion were touching one another through the bars and felt like submissives, which was completely unexpected, and none was remotely the woman’s match. Opening my magic as wide as it would go I decided they weren’t properly a pack, because they didn’t know how to become one, but they’d formed a gang, and she was the gangboss — because she had enough that I thought most of them did have control of their wolves, perhaps because submissives had an easier time with that anyway. She could also sense the Alpha power that had just walked in, and she was torn between hope and fear, her eyes flicking between Adam, Charles, and Asil.
“We are here to free you, not hurt you.”

“Seen you on TV. You’re the Tri-Cities werewolf.”

Her voice was a croak and Adam swiftly offered a water bottle through the bars. I completed a quick pan and turned the camera off.

“Right. Adam Hauptman, Alpha of the Columbia Basin Pack. You might know David Christiansen’s face too. Everyone else is fae, wolf, or other shapeshifter. You won’t know Anna, and I don’t know if you know about Omegas, but she can help you stay calm while we get you out of here.”

“That fucking tranquilliser?”

“No, nothing like that.” Anna managed to smile, though it lacked her usual wattage, as she went forward holding out a hand. “Just touch me.”

A loud clang from the side tunnel where the fae were made the captives jump.

“Not a problem, people. Just some fae friends starting to bust their own out. Then we’ll break your bars. That’s the sort of thing you’ll find easier if you let Anna help. We can also get you some food.”

“Who are you? And what are you wearing?”

“Adam’s wife and mate. Mercedes Hauptman. I go by Mercy. A rose cloak — fae present. So’s the stick. Please let Anna help.”

After a moment she shrugged, extending a hand carefully through the bars for Anna to hold lightly. Her face slackened, and she sighed.

“That’s … a miracle right there. Alright, let her do this, all of you. It’s like the wolf going to sleep. No pain and lots of gain.”

Asil and others were breaking out packs of mince and gathering water bottles, and went round behind Anna, who was speaking softly but clearly as she offered her calm and tensions began to ease.

“We’re assuming you were all kidnapped by Cantrip and forcibly Changed. Anyone that doesn’t fit? OK, then. Know that what was done to you was as wrong by the wolf code as by human law. You are owed compensation, and you are under wolf protection, but we cannot undo what has been done. Not won’t, can’t. The Change is irreversible. We will help in every way we can, but we cannot do the impossible. Better news is that those responsible for what Cantrip did to you are dead, under arrest, or running. We think a man called Preskylovitch was in charge here. Yes?” The abrupt spike in tension answered her. “Don’t worry, he’s among the dead. A very large friend of Mercy’s ate him on Tuesday morning. Barfed him up again, after he was dead, though. Truly. We’ll show you the security-cam footage. You’ve got lots to catch up on, and I know there’ll be family and friends you’ll be desperate to contact. We’ll help with that. And the FBI will be here in an hour or two. Also good guys. We’ve been working with them …”

I crossed to Adam, tuning Anna out a little. “It’s a mess, but it’s way better than it could have been.”

“Yes.”
“And we need what’s behind that steel door — it smelt of Preskylovitch.”

He gave me a look, eyes very yellow. “Did it now?”

“Yeah, it did. Get Joel to melt that lock out? Samuel and Asil can hold down anyone here. I’ll try to get rid of the ghosts in here and get the medics cooking what mince we have left, and if there’s any reception outside I’ll call Bran, and Fisher for more food and clothing.”

“Ghosts?”

“Oh yeah. Mostly faded and confused.”

“Right.”

He nodded and went with Charles and Joel, calling to Gwyn ap Lugh, but before I could follow I heard Anna mention me.

“… want to get you all out and clothed as soon as we can, but there are some hard things too, and Mercy’s better at that than I am. It’s nothing you don’t know, but we have to face it up front. Mercy?”

I went to the Alpha’s cage. The water she’d drunk and the half-pound of mince she’d already eaten raw despite being in human form had given her back some colour.

“I’m sorry, we can’t get you clothing or break you out immediately, and I don’t know your name.”

“Ramona Velasquez.”

“Thank you. I don’t know what you were told about becoming a wolf, Ms Velazquez, but when it’s properly done the first concern afterwards is being sure the human is in charge of the wolf, and not the other way round. Is there anyone in your — I won’t say pack, because you’re not, by wolf definitions, so let’s say group — anyone in your group who is not in control of their wolf?”

“Not now.” She gestured to one of the cages with a dead half-changed wolf. “Tyron, Luke, and Estelle never got control, and when they started changing during the ruckus three days back Travers shot them.”

“Michael Travers was the wolf who changed you all?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s dead too, inside the entrance.”

“Good.”

There was venom in the word and I held up a hand. “No argument here. The ones in wolf form have full control?”

“They change only when they want, except at full moon. When we seemed to have been abandoned to starve they wanted to change, and I let them. They don’t have the energy to change back, but food’ll fix it.”

“And wolf rage, in either form? We do not want to get someone back to visit their family and have them lose it with wolf strength.”

“Yeah. We want reunions, but going back to how things were before Cantrip stole your lives won’t work. You are all wolves, predators and pack animals. You are moonbound. We can get you back to a good life, but not the same life.”

“OK, I get that, too. Anna said the Feds are coming in?”

“Yeah. FBI.”

“I’m not, but some of them are illegals.”

“They have wolf protection regardless. Can’t promise what the Feds will do, but we won’t stand for deportations and I’ll try to head anything except naturalisation papers off at the pass.”

“That would be good.” She looked at me curiously. “How come you’re in charge? Travers was furious I was what he called dominant and the others mostly what he called submissive. Said female wolves took status only from their mates.”

“Usually, not always. You’re an exception. And while I’m no wolf — my furry form is coyote — as Adam’s mate I have Alpha status. I’m not in charge, though, just taking point too much this week. It’s complicated. Getting back to business, I’m guessing you and maybe Travers helped these folks gain control of their wolves?”

“Me, mostly. Every time he made a new wolf that survived and found it was another submissive, he got mad. I did what I could.”

“And how did you control your own wolf?”

She shrugged. “Stared it down. No-one tells me what to do if I can help it.”

“Good for you. Not many manage that. This may sound weird, but how do you understand or perceive your relationship to this group?”

I didn’t expect her edgy smile.

“Maternal, mostly. I miss my kids, and they’re mostly not much older. And while there wasn’t a hell of a lot I could do, I’ve protected them when I could. Preskylovitch did whatever the hell he wanted, but I could back down Travers and most of the others. And though everyone here has seen some shit, I’ve seen more than most. Nothing like this, though.”

“OK. You’ve done superbly under hideous conditions. You are all in effect a pack, and one answer might be for you to become one properly. But any which way, I think we need to try to keep you together, for a while at least, and have families come to you. You cool with that?”

She thought about it, and nodded. “I guess. Even when I dreamed of getting out of this hole I knew my old life was gone. And you people have already made me feel better than I have since those Cantrip shits snatched me off the street in Cheyenne.”

“Alright. I have to go make some calls, if I can.”

“There’s reception outside if you go beyond the overhang fifty yards east. They used to grumble about it when it was raining.”

“You’re welcome. And don’t worry about strange noises or smells. We’ll be melting some metal to get into a locked room, and it was a couple of trolls who tore out the main doors.”
“Trolls? Fuck. And you’re a coyote? What’s the big … dog-thing?”

“Joel’s a tibicena, and in our pack. Has another dog form, too. Long story. Oh, and one thing. I’m going to say this with power because it matters a great deal. OK?” Everyone was listening anyway, but they listened harder. “Do not mention the vampire captives, or the fact that vampires exist, in the hearing of any human, especially any Federal employee. Not one word. They know about the Fae and wolves, they don’t know, we hope, about vamps. The captives are gone, and they must stay that way. This is for your own safety, from vamps, who do not want themselves outed, and from Feds, because if they think you’re a source of data about a new, to them, type of preternatural, they will want to hang on to you hard and squeeze you for every drop. You can be open about most everything else. Just leave all vamps out of it.”

“Hear you, Mercy.” Ramona frowned. “Travers said a lot of stuff about a top wolf. Someone or something called the Marrok. That wasn’t public last time I was.”

“My Da.” Samuel had drifted up behind me. “Some humans know, and more will. I doubt you’ll need to worry about that, though not mentioning him unless directly asked about him would be wise. Go call him and Fisher, Mercy, and I’ll get someone cooking. Hob in that kitchen is gas.”

“OK. One thing first.”

I stood on the plate, amid the miasma of ghosts, and did my best to assure them they would be properly buried and avenged before asking them to move on. Some went for the asking, others responded to a push, but a few remained, hungry for certainty, and I gave them slow nods.

“I will do all I can.”

Then I went, ignoring the looks with David at my side, seeing that the fae already had all but two of their captives freed, with Zee cutting out the next lock, and that down the tunnel Joel was already pouring heat into the steel door, Gwyn ap Lugh watching with Adam and Charles. It felt like a much more focused use of his magic than he’d managed before, and even before I reached them he dropped and pulled back a few steps before launching himself back at the door and smashing it open. A glowing fragment of what had been the bolt fell to the floor, and ap Lugh sent some magic at it and the door frame that chilled them before nodding to Joel and stepping inside, followed by Charles. I stopped by Adam and peered in.

“Jackpot.”

“Oh yeah.”

The space had a bed, and personal items, all squared off, but it also had both a desk with a laptop and papers, and a long table with a row of a dozen iMacs wired together. Charles looked up at me.

“Mercy, is there reception outside?”

“So I’m told.”

“Good. Tell Da, please. Gwyn ap Lugh, it would be easiest to remove them all, and the desk, and examine them at leisure. Might Þorgerðr and Irpa take them, and leave them in the clearing amid roses for us to collect? Unless you would rather make your deletions first?”

Ap Lugh looked down for a moment. “You have better skills with them, Charles Cornick, so yes. The trolls can also break your wolves out, if you want — that chamber is big enough, and silver no problem for them.”
“That would be good. If you will ask them, Adam and I will start unjacking cables.”

“Very well.”

So it was ap Lugh who walked beside me back towards the entrance, David dropping back, and I stopped at the kitchen area.

“One moment, if you will. What were they feeding anyone with?”

Cupboards held pans and utensils, but there wasn’t even a coffee jar by the kettle, and though there was a fridge-freezer big enough to have held food for forty for a few days, it was empty. So was a deep alcove cut in the rock, unrefrigerated but chill, but there were roof hooks and I could smell the meat that had been there.

“They took all the food when they left, as well as stripping the dorm.” I thought about it. “Didn’t have it in them to kill the captives right out, or deal with the bodies, but hoped they’d all starve to death before they were found.”

“I agree.” Ap Lugh’s face showed distaste, and he walked to the edge of the carnage, looking carefully. “These human dead look as if they were fit and worked out. It may be Travers took out the easy killers.”

I joined him, seeing what he meant. “That’s a thought. Can the trolls get round this without disturbing it?”

“They can hop over. Five here. Preskylovitch makes six. How many fled?”

“There were eleven beds in that dormitory, so six maximum. Are your rescuees alright?”

“No. But they will live. We need to get them Underhill also, but Nemane will see to that as soon as they’re all free. I will stay at least until the FBI arrives.”

I was surprised, but it wasn’t my problem. Yet. “As you will, Gwyn ap Lugh. Adam and I can deal with them if you’d rather, and I’m about to call Fisher. We need food and clothing.”

“I will stay. I would know how many dead are down that shaft.”

“Yeah. That is not going to be good. I’ll be warning Fisher about the forensics job they’ll be facing.”

“Yes.” His gaze was intent, and there was magic in it but no harm. “The rose cloak has moulded itself to you faster than I would have expected before this week. With wolves and avatars, use it to travel via Underhill as you will, taking no step aside.”

“OK, that’s useful. Underhill doesn’t mind?”

“Not in the least, Mercedes. It likes you.”

“Huh. Medicine Wolf said it thought Underhill had been pleased I called on its justice.”

“It is correct. And we are reminded of why our ancient law says we must honour those outsiders Underhill chooses.” He sighed. “Mercedes, I know you will not want it, but it is getting hard to deny that you are owed a debt by all fae.”

He was right about what I didn’t want, and time was passing. “No, I’m not, Gwyn ap Lugh. Underhill is balancing all. Wolves and fae both owe Raven and his kind, though, for finding this
place.”

“Yes. You are sure?”

“I am, but I will add that your co-operation and aid with the hydro-engineering project would be welcome. I told the President that if he and you can work something out, a joint human and multiple preternatural effort would generate lots of good PR.”

“So I gathered. And if, yes, as that would also suit us.”

“Good. I’m glad. And now I want some air that doesn’t smell of death so much.”
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Bran listened to my terse account in silence, though I knew he was as surprised and relieved as I was about both the number of submissives and what Ramona Velasquez had managed to do. When I added my unlimited permission to travel via Underhill, though, I heard him sit up.

<Has ap Lugh admitted the debt fae owe you?>

“Tried to, Bran, but I headed him off at the pass. He’s staying to meet the Feebs as well, because he wants to know how many dead are in the shaft. Plan is for the trolls to drop off the records Underhill for us to collect, while Nemane gets the freed fae out of here. And I need to call Fisher for food and clothes, soonest.”

<Yes. Where are those wolves going to go?>

“We don’t have the beds. Aspen Creek, dispersed among the pack as hosts, under your direct examination and instruction? Longer term, they’d be a very odd pack with a female Alpha and that many submissives, Bran — so odd Adam might be willing to let them share the Tri-Cities and hunt with us, and I’ll ask him — but I think they need you and a lot of kindness for a while.”

<Aspen Creek is not a kind place, Mercy.>

“It isn’t it, Bran? Anna and I disagree, however you might have to give Leah an order or two. Anyway, splitting them up now isn’t on, so if not Aspen Creek, which has always been the place for offbeat wolves, where? Just don’t go too Marrok on them — what Ramona’s done is weird, and not how things should be, but she’s an Alpha after your own heart, all the same, even if she is female. I think it’ll be OK if you let it be. And you’ll have the medical wolves. And Medicine Wolf as soon as I can talk to it, or it senses the cloak in use to reach you. Which — forgive me, Bran — might be a very good thing for you as well. Did anyone tell you Asil — Asil, kill me now Asil, the mad Moor — has started an Aficionados de Mercy club? Says he likes my style. God only knows what you’ll be inspired to do when it reads you and gives you some glass against your older memories.”

There was silence for a moment.

<Asil started a fanclub.> Bran laughed richly, and his voice eased. <Wonders never cease, and you help them along, Mercy. Alright. Bring those poor wolves here, in front of the meeting barn, and make sure Fisher brings them some proper winter clothing — we don’t have that much spare to hand. Bless you.>

He rang off and I stared at the phone for a moment before flipping back to contacts to dial Fisher.

“Sure could have done with you forty years back, Mercy, when I had to convince the Marrok I was in control of my wolf and would stay that way as a loner.”

David’s voice was a little wondering beneath its flatness, and I looked up at him.

“Bran thought quite hard about just killing me when Mom dumped me on him, David, but once he decided not to I was family. What he has to be to you and every Alpha is not what he has to be to
me."

I’d already dialled Fisher and held up a hand as she answered.

<Ms Hauptman?>

“SA Fisher. Mission accomplished. Nine fae and twenty-six wolves rescued. Three things in order of priority. One, let the AED and SAC Vance know we’ve secured this place, and that it and the captives had been abandoned, so SWAT can stand down. Two, scramble that meat chopper, please, with at least a hundred pounds, and add twenty-six sets of clothing that will work for winter, all small to mid-sizes. Go unisex. Army gear and boots would be good. We can pay but we need it now — they’re all naked, and when Cantrip’s torturers fled they cleared out all food. But three, you will need major forensics — there are one wolf and four human bodies just inside, all mangled, and three wolf bodies in cages, all shot with silver sometime Tuesday night. Also a couple of rooms that have been stripped but may have trace evidence of who the dead perpetrators and the six, at most, who are in the wind might be. There is also a mineshaft that stinks of rot and was breathing ghosts, so the casualties were dumped there — meaning forensic speleologists, if they exist and you have them, and, though magic might be available to help, lifting gear for a deep shaft.”

<Got it. Hang on.>

I heard her make other calls — one to Vance saying he should call out everyone forensic he had, a terse order to send the meat chopper, and politely phrased instructions posing as requests to DC about logistics.

<Clothing will take a bit longer, Ms Hauptman, but I’ll call the AED and whoever next. Anything else?>

I didn’t much like it, but there was. “Appreciated, SA Fisher. And yeah. Allowing for mental trauma and starvation, the twenty-six wolves are in better shape than anyone expected, so the medics can stand down too, but it’s for what seem some pretty weird reasons. This is cutting corners, but they’ve formed a pack of sorts among themselves, under a woman who’s a strong Alpha. Name of Ramona Velasquez, kidnapped from Cheyenne. So two more things. One is that they’re not coming to us any more, and they’ll be off-radar for a while, until we know what’s best for them, and is possible, and two is that Ms Velasquez says some of them are illegals. For several reasons, very fast naturalisation papers would be good, and we’d count that as a favour.”

<No need, Ms Hauptman. AED wondered about that one, and though we can’t give orders about that the pump’s been primed. Their being off-radar is more of a problem, though — if we don’t have primary statements from the victims we’ll be weakened legally.>

“I can do outline statements, unless something else happens, but follow-ups will have to wait.”

<We can live with that.> I heard her exhale heavily. <Twenty-six surviving wolves, and nine fae. Dear Christ. How many dead?>

“Beyond the eight I don’t know, but with at least twenty-nine successful forced Changes, and from the number of ghosts I saw, two hundred plus human corpses will not surprise me. And however many fae. Air in there is very dry, allowing for the captives’ breath, and rot’s inhibited, but that shaft’s deep and the smell is still strong.” My mind clicked and I chose words carefully. “This isn’t urgent, but Cantrip had some major resources somewhere. Customised iron and silver cages, and steel doorways — serious fabrication for the outer ones, and they had good seals too. Pass that on to whoever’s looking at Heuter’s financials?”
“Fifteen feet high and thirty across, in two leaves. No idea of the weight but high-grade steel four and some inches thick.”

“Trolls. And magic. SAC Vance can inspect what’s left all he wants.”

“For the second time in five minutes someone rang off on me, and I glared at my phone while David smothered a laugh.

“She’s not wrong, Mercy. I didn’t mind this morning at all, but this has my kick. Rescuing anyone alive is as good as it gets against the worst the world has to offer.”

“I don’t disagree, David, but philosophy isn’t helping just now.”

The trolls were gone from the entrance, and as we could see one coming back down the tunnel with the desk in its hands we waited. Ap Lugh’s two knights looked at me with what I thought was curiosity but didn’t say anything. I could smell mince being cooked. The troll hopped clean over the carnage, landing with a thud I felt through my feet, and stopped when it got outside, looking down at me.

“Irpa’s about to bust your friends out, and we found the selkie skins Preskylovitch stole. I’m taking this Underhill to the Garden of Manannán’s Death.”
Trust the fae to call it something like that.

“Good to know. I am gladdened by your help, Þorgerðr.”

I didn’t think I’d got the voicing right — and what kind of language has separate letters for voiced and unvoiced *th* anyway? — but she didn’t seem to mind.

“Gwyn ap Lugh commands it, and you are the first Elf-friend in a long while. Besides, I didn’t like Manannán and pulling those doors open was fun.”

Still holding the desk Þorgerðr said something incomprehensible and walked through an archway as it opened, vanishing. I decided I needed to think better of trolls, and headed back up the tunnel, stopping only to grab a pile of clean sheets stacked in the utility area, thank George and Mary Jo, dealing with mince, and glance in at Charles and Adam, piling iMacs and rolls of cable into a sack made from knotted blankets. Nemane, ap Lugh’s other knights, and the released fae were gone, the cages all having had their locks cut out, but Zee was standing with ap Lugh, Samuel and the other wolves, and David and I joined them.

Irpa took up a lot of space, and the captive wolves were all as far back in their cages as they could get, but what she was doing was oddly delicate. Cage by cage, she simply gripped the silver bars above and below the iron locks, squeezed hard for a moment, flattening the silver, and then twisted each lock a few times before tapping them with one gloved finger, sending each to the floor inside the cage with a clunk. She was also nudging each door open, mindful of wolves and silver, and my opinion of trolls went up still further. And she was avoiding the steel plate in the floor, so we had to shuffle round to let her get to the third row of cages. I counted the sheets, finding twelve.

“Wolf strength needed, please. If each of these is torn in half, we have covering for twenty-four, and I’ll go find one more though it won’t be clean. Ramona, if those in wolf form can change, that would be good. FBI will be here in about thirty. And I’ve had reassurances about the illegals — sounds like fast-track naturalisation will be one compensation offered, if it’s still wanted.”

“Quick work. Thanks. I don’t know if they’ve had enough food to change, though.”

“More is on its way. Proper clothing, too.” I spoke over the sounds of cotton being ripped. “We had no idea of your numbers until we got here. It’s up to them, but with unknown FBI agents coming in, human would be best. And while we’ll get you out of here as soon as we can, to a wolf sanctuary, the Feebs will need basic statements so they can get their investigation rolling. I’ve told them more will have to wait.”

“This one at least will need help to change, Mercy.” Asil was crouched by an open door, crooning softly to the wary wolf within. “She is hiding deep within her wolf. Adam or Charles might be able. I do not have the touch.”

Samuel joined him for a moment, and nodded. “Charles, I think. But though they’ll be exhausted the others should be able to change on what food they’ve already had, Ms Velasquez. An Alpha can force it, but persuasion would be better.”

“I hear you.” Velasquez wrapped a half-sheet round herself and came slowly out of her cage. “Being free again’s gonna take some getting used to. I’ll try with the others if you can get your Charles to help Carla. The fear’s been bad for her and she’s grieving for Estelle too — they were close.”

I went closer to Carla’s cage, widening my vision, and saw the ghost tangled into the wolf’s fur, like ivy on a wall. Or maybe mould on bread. Asil and Samuel let me through with wary looks,
and from the cage door, pulling on Adam, I used one hand to project Alpha command to the wolf while the other summoned the ghost, promising justice and demanding retreat at the same time. It wasn’t keen, and the wolf whined discontent before I prevailed and the ghost slipped sideways to somewhere else. I spent a moment soothing the wolf, and left the cage to face Velasquez.

“I also see ghosts, and Estelle’s was clinging to Carla. I’ve … moved it on. The grief should be less paralysing.”

Velasquez’s eyes were narrowed and she gave me a look, but also saw Carla easing more upright and shaking herself, and she nodded.

“I don’t see squat, Mercy, but Carla’s looking better, so I’ll take what you say on trust.”

I thanked her, but there were distractions. Irpa had opened the last cage, and all the wolves were helping captives. I hated the thought, but they were going to have to stay in the chamber for a while as well, because there wasn’t anywhere else to go that was warm and wouldn’t mess up forensics. And ap Lugh and Irpa were approaching me.

“Irpa will take the computers and return Underhill, Mercedes.”

I gave Irpa a slight bow. “I and the wolves are gladdened by your aid, Irpa. You have done good deeds this night.”

“Makes a change from eating toll dodgers who can’t dodge trolls.” Her grin was something to behold. “And you’re interesting as well as polite. I’ll put the sack on the desk.”

She rolled off down the tunnel, having to stoop slightly, and I saw her pick up the bundle Charles offered with one hand.

“I don’t know much about trolls, Gwyn ap Lugh. Is the sunlight thing true?”

“No. No fae is harmed by any kind of light, however some prefer to be nocturnal. Why?”

“I was thinking they’d be pretty useful on a construction site, if we could get them some clothes.”

Ap Lugh laughed softly. “Those two, maybe. Most trolls are … less amenable, and cruder. Do you ever stop thinking, Mercedes?”

“Do you? And can you make it Mercy, when formal’s not needed? Mercedes makes me think of my Mom when she’s mad at me.”

“If you like, though I cannot reciprocate.”

I wondered why, but the fae have always been finicky about names. Zee was unusual that way, and had once told me the Iron Kissed tended to be less formal. He wasn’t being that way now, though.

“Do you wish me to stay also, Gwyn ap Lugh?”

“No, Dark Smith. Return to Hanford, or go as you will. Your aid is appreciated.”

“In spades, Zee.”

His face softened a little. “I am glad to help with this, Mercy, as with Hanford. Being able to drop my glamour for a while also dispels the radiation itch. And I will come by when I can to have a longer look at your cloak.”
“Any time. I was hoping to ask your advice about a sheath for Carnwennan, too.”

He gave ap Lugh a sideways look. “She had one once.”

Ap Lugh sighed. “So she does still, Dark Smith. I’ll put it on the desk, Mercy. Or someone will.”

“That’d be good.”

Zee said farewell and headed down the tunnel, passing Charles and Adam with a nod each returned. Adam had a couple of blankets in one hand that he passed to Asil for the freed, and as he turned to me his expression was quizzical.

“You said tall bronzed warrior but I hadn’t quite imagined rightly.”

“Yeah. I’ve always found it funny his glamour is maximally unglamorous. I think he does too. But there’s business, for Charles, probably — a wolf called Carla needs help to change. Velasquez says she’s been very fearful and grieves for one of the dead, and Asil says she’s hiding deep in her wolf. I pulled on you to keep the wolf quiet while I got a ghost off it.”

Charles’s face was impassive, though I knew he loathed this place as much as I did.

“I will see. But I have something first, Gwyn ap Lugh. Preskylovitch did payroll here, and kept paper accounts.” He handed ap Lugh a folded sheet of paper. “The names, home addresses, and bank details of those who worked here, but I do not know which are the dead. One very interesting name.”

“Ah.” Ap Lugh took it, looked at it for a moment, and nodded. “Yes. I will make a call. How soon will the humans have this?”

“Not soon, from us, but there may be other ID on the bodies or in the dormitory. And whatever the freed know.”

“Not until dawn will do, Charles Cornick.”

He stalked off down the tunnel, and I felt more satisfaction than anything else. No-one who’d helped run this place deserved anything but death, and if it had to be of their minds only, too bad. Velasquez had got seven of the eight wolves started on changing, and a few minutes later, when George brought in two pans of mince cooked sufficiently to be more palatable to human mouths, I told him to keep most of it for them while Charles commandeered some for Carla. Entering her cage he knelt and pushed it slowly towards the crouching wolf while Adam and Asil stood poised to intervene if necessary. Anna was pushing zen, as well. I was watching carefully, and Velasquez came to stand beside me.

“Can you tell me what they’re doing?”

“Only in principle. If it was Adam I’d see and feel his Alpha magic more clearly, but though Charles is my adoptive brother we’re not pack. What it comes down to, though, is that he’s using dominance, as gently as possible, to make Carla’s wolf eat. Good, she’s doing it. It means she’s accepting his protection, in some measure, and then he should be able to push the wolf down and let the human through. Or pull her through, if necessary. Most Alphas could only do it for a pack member, but Charles is older and has a lot of unusual experience, and Anna being able to zen Carla is helping.”

“OK. Someone said they’re mated?”
“Yup. And married.” I explained that difference. “There’s a whole lot of wolf stuff you all need to know, and should have been told. That’ll happen at the sanctuary we’ll take you to — in Montana, up in the Cabinets. And I should warn you both that it’s another place not to mention to anyone who doesn’t know about it already, and that the travel will be magical and weird. And very fast. You’ll all need to be holding onto the cloak, and not letting go.”

I got a sideways look.

“Everything about you is magical and weird.”

“Weirder, then.”

I told her in outline, adding another warning about not mentioning Underhill openly just yet.

“OK. No vamps, no Underhill, nothing to ID the sanctuary, and no Marrok if we can help it. List’s getting longer.”

“Un huh. Part of life as a preternatural, I’m afraid. But you’ll be meeting Bran, the Marrok. His pack is taking you in for now, so he can meet you and offer the help his power makes possible. Asil, Charles, and Anna are members, so they’ll be around. And I’m hoping Medicine Wolf will be there soon after you are as well. Anyone told you about it yet?”

“The … manitou? Big thing that ate Preskylovitch, anyway.”

“That’s the one.”

“Spanish wolf — Asil, yeah? — said it could do miracles for wolves.”

“Pretty much. And humans. Asil’s Moorish rather than Spanish, by the way. But we’ve only known Medicine Wolf existed since Monday, and we’re still discovering what it can do, so the surprise is still strong. It’s magic, though, not divine intervention.”

“OK.” She shrugged. “For some value of OK that escapes me. He said some other stuff I … Carla’s changing.”

We watched in silence for a moment before I turned away.

“I give changes privacy, if I can.”

“Huh. We don’t expect that. Shit, I’m even finding it weird not to be naked.”

I digested that, shivering a little, and spoke as softly as I could. “Besides the forced Change, is there rape trauma?”

She nodded. “Yeah, women only. Travers and Preskylovitch, usually, before the savaging, and Baston with the Anglos. Happened before we were Changed, though, and I think it’s receded. Has for me. One thing the wolf helped with.”

I swallowed rage that wouldn’t help just now. “Nothing after?”

“Leers, man-talk. But Preskylovitch wouldn’t lie with what he called beasts, and the others were scared of him. And us.”

“Figures. Did you see the failed Changes?”

“No. Heard them, though. Saw the corpses dumped down the shaft.”
Which might well be worse. “How many?”

“I lost count. Lots and lots.”

“What success rate did Travers have?”

“Fuck knows. One in eight or ten, maybe.”

“Hell. Alright. Tell the FBI everything you can bear to about those, with the rape trauma make sure Bran knows, and talk to Anna, if you need someone, or call me. We’ve both been there, and Bran has my number. And call him, fast, if anyone is causing one of your women a problem. Shouldn’t happen, but there are other fragile wolves at the sanctuary and a submissive female might make them feel … over-protective, say. Plus Bran’s present mate, Leah, is a bitch as often as she can get away with it. Remember that though she can pull on his authority, you’re not in her pack. As Marrok he has the right of command over all wolves, and the power, but she doesn’t.”

“I hear you. And I’ll add some thanks. I didn’t think we’d be making it out of here alive, and every one of your people says you’ve been driving a search for us. Say you took out Cantrip, too, after Preskylovitch tried snatching you.”

“Helped expose them. A lot of people who hated them have been involved. Including the FBI. President brought the hammer down when their investigation turned up evidence Cantrip’s been paying for assassinations of known or suspected preternaturals, but the announcement hasn’t been made yet. Later today, probably. Lots of prosecutions for murder in the works you’ll be able to watch play out.”

“And the ones who ran from here?”

“Do you have names?”

“Oh yeah. And descriptions.”

“Let the FBI have them, when they ask. But know that we have their names too, from Preskylovitch’s payroll records, and while we can’t just kill them, given how things are, the Fae will be visiting each and every one as soon as they can find them. There will be … disabling punishment.”

“Good. Carla’s almost done. Excuse me.”

I gave it another moment before turning back. Carla was a slight, quite dark-skinned Hispanic, from her face no more than teenage. Most freed looked younger than Bran would allow anyone to attempt the Change, and I wondered why Velasquez had been picked, then if it might be that for whatever reason Travers had had better survival rates with younger victims. Adam and Asil ducked out of the cage to let Velasquez in, and though newly changed wolves didn’t usually like being touched for a while, Carla went straight into her arms with a sound I never want to hear again. The other freed reacted, wanting in, but there was no room in the cage and Velasquez just stood with Carla in her arms and manoeuvred her through the door so they could all wrap around the pair, touching what they could reach. Adam came across to me, and I could feel the rage he was holding down very tightly.

“To do this to kids, Mercy.”

“I know, love. But look at them. That’s a pack, bondless as it may be.”

“Yeah. You sense anything magically?”
“No. It’s human bonding, shaped by wolf needs. You think they could work as a bonded pack under a female Alpha?”

Adam thought about it. “Probably. Mix is way screwy, but they don’t care about that. There’ll be interest in the submissives, though. You know how helpful they are to a pack.”

“Oh yeah. But these people get what they want, not what Tom, Dick, or Harry Alpha wants. Given that make-up, though, could you share the Tri-Cities with them? Told Bran I’d ask. Aspen Creek’s necessary now, but they can’t stay there.”

“Huh. Maybe. I have to respect Velasquez, and she’s no threat to me.” He gave me a sudden grin. “And you’ve been pretty good training for coping with a female Alpha. You think they’ll stay together?”

I thumped his shoulder gently. “Falpha, schmalfa. I think they’ll have to, love, for a while. And I wondered about the Tri-Cities not just because it’s us, and I bet you feel the same responsibility I do, however unreasonably, but because they’re owed a lot of compensation, and one place the Federal Government has housing to spare is Richland. Gonna have some vacancies, too, unless they come up with some other project for the Hanford Site, and turnover even then.”

“True. More good thinking, Mercy. Either as a pack or this … gang they are now, in one place would be easier for me than scattered. And I want to know more about them individually, but so long as the problems are … more personal than social I could live with a Richland Pack.”

“You’d be good for Velasquez, too, love. Bran for the Rules, and you for proper sergeant’s care. Though if Medicine Wolf does to Bran what it’s done to Asil …”

Adam laughed, earning looks all round he didn’t care about at all. “Aficionados de Mercy, you mean? Hate to tell you, but I’m in. Hold it.”

The last was because one of ap Lugh’s knights was striding up the tunnel, and the chamber fell silent as he stopped in front of me.

“Mercedes Elf-friend, Daughter of Coyote, Prince Gwyn ap Lugh bids me tell you a child of Hawk informs him that four human vehicles that came north on 220 and south-west on 410 have turned onto the track that leads to this place. The first will be here in ten mortal minutes.”

The high formality didn’t help persuade me that he or any of the knights were people in any sense I’d understand, but this one was being useful, and I prefer being polite even if I haven’t been introduced.

“I am gladdened by your telling me so, knight of Prince Gwyn ap Lugh. Please tell him that Adam and Mercy Hauptman will join him outside in five mortal minutes.”

“I will do so, Mercedes Elf-friend, Daughter of Coyote.”

He strode back off down the tunnel, and Adam and I exchanged a long look before I surveyed the watching wolves.

“I know, but I think he’s part of a royal guard that does nothing else. Gwyn ap Lugh is the Prince of the Gray Lords, and if you saw him behead Les Heuter, that was one of the faceless mounted guys who accompanied him. But don’t judge other fae by that standard — most are autonomous beings. Formal politeness is always good talking to any fae, though — helps keep things straight.”

Velasquez let out a breath. “No offence, Mercy, but he’s no weirder than you are. Less interesting
“No offence taken, Ramona, but you all have a steep learning curve to follow. You are all now preternaturals, and that means you need knowledge of preternaturals, out and otherwise. I’m guessing you’ve been told over and over that you are monsters, and it is not true. Preskylovitch was a monster. Travers was a monster. You are not just because you can turn wolf. But you can become monsters, if you’re not careful. And because you’ve survived one lot of monsters doesn’t mean you can’t run into another lot. And you heard the … knight. FBI coming in. Brace yourselves to deal, everyone, and older wolves, please help the freed be as clear as they can be on what they mustn’t say. Charles, Anna, the Feebs should know of you, so your presence outside might be good.”

“If you want.” Charles hesitated. “How long are you expecting to remain here, Mercy?”

“No longer than we have to, but it’s gonna be a while. We need the clothing and the Feebs need outline statements. Dawn, at least, I’d think.”

“Then we need to be able to use the other rooms.”

“Yeah. I heard Fisher tell Vance to scramble any forensics that weren’t already moving. I’ll push him on it.”

“That would be good.” Adam rolled his shoulders. “Mercy, you still have that body armour on?”

“Yeah.”

And it was just as uncomfortable as I’d thought, but even so I’d as soon not find out if I was right that the rose cloak made it redundant.

“And I’ve got mine. So let’s go see who’s arriving.”
IT wound up with eight of us waiting, Anna, David, and me with ap Lugh and his two silent knights a little way back, Adam and Charles in front. We were about eighty yards from the entrance, where the track dropped from the sill of the ridge formation, so we could see the last few miles of the approach. The headlights were coming at a clip, given the terrain, and where we stood was twenty or thirty feet higher than the plateau level, so it wasn’t until the frontrunner was about sixty yards away that it hit the last slope and its headlights picked us up. It slewed to a halt, twisting a little before the driver got the lights back on us, and the others drew up behind it. Five helmeted SWAT agents climbed out of the first, and a tall, suited figure from the second. They climbed warily towards us and Adam called out.

“SWAT can stand down. The site is secure. We need to talk to SAC Vance before you drive any further.”

The suit replied. “Mr Hauptman?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m SAC Vance.” He looked past Adam, eyes flicking over Anna and me and widening when he saw ap Lugh. “Uh, I’m told you have nine freed fae, twenty-six freed wolves, and eight bodies. Is that right?”

“As far as it goes, SAC. No-one knows how many bodies are down the mineshaft. And the freed fae have already been evacuated. Prince Gwyn ap Lugh remains here to speak to you of them. But until food and clothing gets here we have a problem in logistics, among other things. It will be easier to explain if you and your top forensics tech come and see. Bring your SWAT boss if you want, but there is no present danger and you do not need the silver rounds I can smell. Nor do the freed wolves, who have been caged in silver, need any more of it in there.”

Vance grimaced but nodded. “AED Westfield warned me you’d ask us to pack lead only. Only the SWAT guys have silver. Chuck?”

One of the SWAT guys shifted forward a step, and he knew enough about wolves to keep his eyes down though I saw him register the flash bangs and taser on Adam’s belt with surprised approval.

“SA Chuck Greening, Mr Hauptman. I was a Ranger before I married and went civilian. You say the site’s secure. Has the wider area been checked at all?”

He got points for knowing Adam’s army status too.

“Yes. Nothing we can see, hear, smell, or detect magically, SA, and I have scouts up.”

“Up? The AED said something about hawks?”

“Yeah.” Adam spread his arms, summoning with fingers before rotating them, and after a moment the avatars circled in to land, one on each forearm. “Fred and Hank, if you see anything tell SA
Greening, there. Used to be a Ranger. They’re both Marine vets, SA, but if they have to report anything they’ll be naked Native Americans, so they’ll keep their backs to you while they speak. They’ll stay up until you’re reinforced.”

He launched them skyward again, and dropped his arms. Greening shook his head a fraction.

“OK. Been some places I could have done with friends like that. Do you want me to come in with you, Todd?”

“No. But send Jake up, will you?”

“Sure. Two with me and two up to the ridgeline, people.”

Two SWAT guys went up, two down with Greening, and Vance looked at Adam before dropping his eyes.

“Jake Torgerson’s my chief forensics tech, Mr Hauptman, though since your wife’s call about the situation more support has been scrambled from Denver and Salt Lake City. They’re using choppers but it’ll be a while all the same.”

“Right. Come listen while we wait for your tech.”

Adam led Vance to us, introducing Charles, Anna, David, and me, the cloak and Manannán’s Bane getting a long stare, and then ap Lugh. Vance’s heartrate kicked up, but the fae’s voice was neutral.

“SAC Vance. As you have been told, the nine fae who were held captive here have been removed into our care — three selkies, an oakman, a dryad, two brownies, and two pixies. I have remained to discover how many lie dead in that shaft, and am willing to assist as I can while I am here.” I heard a dryness enter his voice. “I am aware that a warrant for my arrest for the killing of Les Heuter was issued in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. If that is an issue, I can simply leave now and learn what I need from the wolves later.”

“I have been instructed to ignore that warrant, sir, and am glad to do so. I have a daughter, too.”

“Very well.”

“Can we obtain statements from those victims, sir?”

“The oakman will not be speaking to anyone for a long time, I suspect, nor the dryad, but the others, yes, if they are willing. You will need to send someone to Walla Walla. And as things stand that is some one, SAC Vance. Tell Ms Hauptman when he or she is coming, and she can tell me.”

“Thank you, sir. I will. Or the AED will. He’s due in a half-hour or so. Army Air Force jet will put him down on 410.”

I wasn’t sure why I had become ap Lugh’s designated secretary, even if not many people had his cell number, but I was impressed Westfield had been able to get what had to be a trainer STOVL fighter as a taxi. Torgerson arrived, looking spooked, which a brisk round of introductions didn’t help, and we walked back to the entrance, Adam pointing out tyre tracks the overhang had protected.

“Close to they got erased when we opened the doors, but we’ve kept away from them here. You can get someone started on casting now, if you want.”

“Ah. Right.”
Torgerson pulled out a two-way, giving instructions. Vance was staring at the doors and the footprints Þorgerðr and Irpa had left when they hauled them open. He swallowed, and glanced at me.

“Fisher said you said trolls got you in?”

“I did, and they did, of their kindness and with Gwyn ap Lugh’s let. They’re gone now.” I looked at Torgerson. “They won’t have left finger or palm prints, but some of the Cantrip guys might have, and we haven’t touched the doors since we opened them. But what you both need to see first is a little way inside, and not good. We went round and the trolls went over, so it hasn’t been disturbed. And I video’d it as we found it.”

“Alright. Show us.”

Vance and Torgerson both whitened when they saw the bodies, but they’d seen bad death before. Without instructions Torgerson went forward, pulling on thin plastic gloves, and stooped to feel flesh.

“Rigor’s been and gone, Todd. And decay’s started, despite the conditions. This happened at least two or three days back.”

“Tuesday night, by my nose, Mr Torgerson. Our best guess is that when news of MacLandis’s death hit, the wolf lost it. He’s Michael Travers, a loner we believed dead — visual ID by Charles and another wolf here, who’d both met him, and confirmation from the freed. Also that Preskylovitch was in command here. No ID on the humans he killed or those who took him down and are in the wind.” It wasn’t a lie, quite. “One problem is you need to clear this space before you can get anything in that isn’t in single file, and though I know it goes against SOP getting them bagged in something airtight real soon would be a blessing — not least for the freed, who are stuck in the room they were caged in until we can clothe them.”

“I hear you, Ms Hauptman. Jake?”

Torgerson stood and shrugged. “Doesn’t seem a reach to say the wolf killed the others, and someone shot it six or seven times with a heavy calibre.”

“Magnum, at least, and firing silver, Mr Torgerson. I can smell it.” I pointed with Manannán’s Bane. “And eight times. Five bullets went clean through and are by the wall there. Three are under him, one heart and two head.”

“OK.” He stared at me. “The idea of scent evidence just got a lot more interesting, Ms Hauptman. You know anything about what order anyone died in?”

“Not from scent. Too mixed up.”

“Given that Travers was losing it badly enough to start changing, the instinctive kill would be throat.” Adam gestured. “If you can tell which overlies which in the arterial sprays, there and there, you’ll have an answer. The savaging came after.”

“Huh. Alright. If we do a full VR record, Todd, I’ll sign off on needing to get them bagged and moved soonest. What else is there?”

“Plenty, but you’re going to have to prioritise and write some off.”

“ Plenty, but you’re going to have to prioritise and write some off.”

“Huh. Hang on a moment, and I’ll get the VR team moving.”
It came a little close to an imperative for Adam’s liking, but techs were techs and the orders Torgerson gave when he was outside again and had two-way contact were sharp and clear. Once he came back we skirted the carnage, and stopped by the kitchen.

“This we’ve already compromised, cooking meat we packed in, because the freed hadn’t been fed since Tuesday and food was urgent.” Vance nodded. “Took clean sheets as coverings from the utility area too, but there wasn’t much more than that and the pots — whoever ran from here took all the food and who knows what else. And clearing this whole space for use would mean we can get the freed out of the chamber they were held in, and somewhere that smells less to eat. Or will, when the bodies are gone.”

Torgerson looked round, and then stepped into the kitchen, looking carefully at surfaces. “These have been wiped down, Todd.”

“Not by us.”

“Right. Can’t be done properly fast, but if it’s just biomaterial and prints for ID, we can dust and vacuum. Any reason we’d need to determine anything that happened in this space?”

Vance shrugged. “Not unless a witness statement pops something recent enough to warrant it.”

“We can ask the freed.”

“OK.”

We went on, and Vance stared at the cage that had held vamps.

“Why would they have two bars missing like that?”

“Who knows? We didn’t stop for empty cages. Next up is Preskylovitch’s room and a dorm.”

That pulled him forward, and he looked at the melted door and the largely stripped room beyond.

“Door’s down to us, SAC.” Adam’s voice wouldn’t sound off to humans but I could hear the careful misdirection that managed not to be a lie. “Couldn’t leave whatever might be behind it unsecured and we did a basic search of the room. Clothing, shoes, and guns in the closet, and that’s a chem toilet. Three more in the dorm. Cages had chamber-pots, emptied into a chem treatment tank. Can’t call it urgent, but getting a tanker and enough hose to pump it out would help with the smell.”

“Right. This looks like it’s been cleared out, too. And the dorm.”

“There’s more in the lab, and you are going to need to know what happened in there.”

It pulled them on to the fourth space, and Vance looked at the cage.

“Yeah, we are.”

“Cage smells of blood.”

“No surprise.”

“The metal-working bench might be where Preskylovitch made the gun he shot me with.” Adam shrugged. “I only gave it a quick look, but there’s most of what he’d have needed. Westfield has the lab reports on the gun, and it’s still in Kennewick PD hands, far as I know.”
“OK. That’s helpful. This needs the fullest treatment, Jake, but it’s the lowest priority. And we need statements before we can know what we have to be most careful about.”

“I’ll tape the doorway as soon as we get started.”

At the entrance to the space where the fae had been held ap Lugh took over, voice flat. “The fae captives were in these. We have removed nothing but them. All the locks we cut out remain where they fell.”

“Right. Also full treatment, Jake.”

“OK. How did you cut the metal like that?”

Ap Lugh looked at Torgerson hard, and Vance stepped up.

“Mind your manners, Jake. He’s asking, sir, in case there’s oxyacetylene or other residue he’ll need to look for.”

“So I imagined, SAC Vance, but manners maketh man, and he would do well to remember it. The answer to your question, Chief Forensic Technician Jake Torgerson, is that the Dark Smith of Drondheim used a blade that will cut anything.”

There had been a shiver of power in Gwyn ap Lugh’s naming of Torgerson, and he looked down.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean any disrespect, sir. I just think of my job first.”

“That is well enough, but after Boston I will accept nothing less than courtesy from any human.”

It was an odd moment. A part of me wanted to offer ap Lugh comfort, because it was pain that was making him prickly, but it couldn’t be done, or not by anyone but another Gray Lord, so I looked at Torgerson instead.

“Some free advice, Chief Tech. When you speak to any fae, and especially any Gray Lord, be very polite and very precise. Do not give orders, or omit honorifics, or offer thanks. As with wolves, you know not to stare but look down, so with fae you must mind their protocols. And more simply, remember we have already been here for an hour, working in this stench to free our own. We should take the last few steps.”

So we did, David and ap Lugh’s knights staying by the entry to the chamber, and both Feebs went still with shock, while every wolf rose.

“The properly clothed came with Adam, SAC. Everyone else is newly freed. People, meet Special Agent in Charge Todd Vance, and Chief Forensic Technician Jake Torgerson, out of Cheyenne. Ms Velasquez?”

She came forward, not caring or not noticing that her sheet had slipped off one breast. I caught her eye and flicked a look, and she frowned and hauled the sheet up.

“Damn thing won’t stay put.”

“Clothes are coming. SAC Vance, this is Ramona Velasquez, kidnapped in Cheyenne. She is the most dominant wolf among the freed, their de facto Alpha, who has helped keep them alive, so she knows best who is and isn’t in any shape to give you a statement in the next few hours. She can also tell you about the three people Travers shot dead in their cages, on Tuesday night. We have not moved the bodies. And no residue in here either, Chief Tech — given our problems with silver,
a troll kindly popped the locks out for us.”

“Ah, right. Ms Velasquez.” Vance held out a hand she took with an ironic shrug. “Sounds as if very serious congratulations and thanks are in order. Is there anything you or any, ah, freed needs urgently besides food and clothing? Medical attention?”

“No. But we want out of here. Mercy, can we go stand outside? Even if it’s cold, it’d be better than staying in here.”

I didn’t disagree. “Don’t see why not, Ramona. But give it thirty or so and you’ll be able to sit in the utility area, unless any of you know of anything that happened there that means serious forensics are needed.”

“Kitchen? They never let us near that. Here and that fucking lab to be shot and stabbed and poisoned, nowhere else.” She frowned. “They watched screen there or played cards. Had a fight or two Preskylovitch stopped fast. Three or four worked out. Most of them smoked, but only tobacco inside. Preskylovitch didn’t like them using mota, but a couple did, outside, when he was gone. Mercy, back inside in thirty is OK, but right now there’s more than one who needs out.”

Adam and I looked at one another, exchanging images, and he nodded. “Alright, Ms Velasquez. It’s not warm out there, and though no wolf will die of cold you’re gonna feel it while you’re still hungry. We can lend jackets, but we are twelve to your twenty-six. If your people will let mine hold them, though, we can supply body-warmth.”

Joel turned and went human with his back to us. “I can go hot tibicena, Adam, and try to radiate.”

“That would be good, Joel, thanks.”

“Will do.”

Joel reverted to his cool tibicena, and from his body language I knew he wanted out too. Adam saw it as well, and turned to Vance.

“SAC, we’ve done what we can for forensics, but the welfare of the freed comes first, and SOP’s no more use here than it would have been Tuesday. If you get your people doing all they can as fast as they can, we’ll look after the freed until you’re able to get someone taking statements. But that has to happen fast too. They need out of here, and we will not wait beyond dawn, whatever you or Westfield want.”

Westfield had said you didn’t get to be SAC of anywhere large unless you had some flexibility, and Vance took a moment to think it through, that Adam respected. Then he nodded.

“Yes, I can go with that, Mr Hauptman. Any prosecutions arising from this are going to turn on a lot more evidence than anyone will find here, and the victims come first, always.” He thought some more. “You’ll be leaving the same way you came, whatever it is?”

“Yeah.”

“Then we can’t stop you anyway, even if we wanted to. I’ll take statements myself, with my second, SA Jill Kefliotas. What we haven’t talked about is that shaft. Under the hatch there?”

“Yes. We haven’t opened it, but it’s deep and it stinks of death.”

“I’m told the main shaft here goes down about sixteen hundred feet, and I can smell the death myself.” Vance’s shoulders slumped a little. “We’ve sent for some of the equipment we’ll need,
but if the shaft’s open the whole way and they just tossed bodies down there, it’s going to be a very slow job.”

“I might be able to assist with … reconnaissance, SAC Vance.” Ap Lugh’s voice was unexpected. “But this chamber would need to be cleared of people.”

“Oh, that’s helpful, sir. I’ll take the offer under advisement, but than—”

“What you mean, SAC, is that you are glad to hear Prince Gwyn ap Lugh’s offer of aid. As a rule, the fae do not offer thanks, or apologies, nor expect to receive them, because to say such things creates obligations and debts it is wiser to avoid incurring. Gwyn ap Lugh, is there anything SAC Vance needs to know about the means of the aid you offer, that he may tell his superiors who have the power of decision?”

Ap Lugh looked at me for a moment with what I thought was a certain appreciation, and dropped me what might have been a half-wink with the eye away from Vance.

“Only this, Mercedes, that I will call to me fae at home in rock, who can explore what lies below sooner than technology will allow.”

Vance had recovered, but he was sweating. “I am glad of your correction, Ms Hauptman.”

He wasn’t the only one surprised by my short laugh. “You don’t have to worry about thanking me, SAC, and there’s no need. Just don’t thank full-blood fae directly, however it goes against the grain. And Ms Velasquez is rightly impatient, so let’s get moving, people. You heard Adam — give the freed what clothing you can, and if they’ll let you hold them, what body heat. Freed, don’t step aside from the tunnel — the Feds need what evidence they can glean from the rooms.”

I’d been aware for a while that Adam was restricting our bond, and I knew it when his spiking rage came through, turning in anxious bafflement.

“Adam, love—”

His arm came round me. “Not on you, love. Here.” His gaze swung to Vance, sending him back a step. “You document everything about that shaft, SAC Vance, because there are scores of dead down there. Mostly humans who didn’t survive the Change. And some who did but couldn’t control their wolves. Cantrip was using a demented wolf to try to build a pack of its own, and has killed scores, probably hundreds of humans in the process. Allowing for scale, this is an American Auschwitz, and its reality has to be clear.”

Adam was breathing hard, and his control was creaking.

“Smell’s getting to your wolf, Adam. Get back outside with Anna for a bit?”

“Yes.”

He managed some gratitude through our bond, but I knew the whole week was catching up with him, and something about the freed — their ages, the miracle Velasquez had managed, even, given his morality, the way they found nudity normative — had broken through the manitou glass. Rage with pent-up force behind it was hard for any wolf to control, and though Anna was having to exert a lot of control on her own behalf she put a hand gently on his forearm, fingers touching the back of his hand, and after a moment he sighed.

“Thanks, Anna. Let’s get moving. Single file, please, and be aware we’ll be passing Travers and other bodies, just past the kitchen area.”
At a flick of Vance’s hand Torgerson took off to get his forensics people moving, and Adam followed, leading the file. Our wolves were interspersed with the freed, and I thought fresh air would be no bad thing for them either — Rashid was a lot paler than he had been coming in, and Samuel had more yellow in his eyes than he should have had. David stuck with me, because Adam hadn’t changed his orders. Velasquez was waiting to go last, and Vance slipped a dictaphone from his pocket.

“Can you give me the basics on these dead wolves, Ms Velasquez? And may I record you?”

“Sure. Dead are Tyron, Luke, and Estelle.” She pointed with each name. “Tyron … Grantly, I think. Grabbed in Ogden, seven or eight months back. Mixed race, about twenty. Black and blue when he was human. Luke never did tell me his full name, and Luke was an Anglicisation — Lucas, maybe, or Luciano. Grabbed in Denver, five months ago. Hispanic but mestizo, with some native blood somewhere. Teenage. Black and brown. He wouldn’t confirm it, but Preskylovitch called him an illegal, and I’d bet he was. I’d guess Guatemala, but I don’t know. Estelle Thomas. Grabbed in Laramie four months ago. African American, black and brown, also a teen. Mom’s a teacher, father split when she was a kid.” She shook her head sadly. “They were all dominants, not submissives, though weaker than me, and none of them could control their wolves. Until Tyron, Preskylovitch was killing any new wolf who didn’t have control inside a month, but Travers was creating so few dominants they let them live so they could investigate further.”

It was a precise imitation of Preskylovitch, down to the sadistic excitement under the cloak of disciplined research, and I swallowed.

“That’s all extremely helpful. Thank you. And Tuesday?”

“We didn’t know what the hell was happening except they were all freaking out and saying Preskylovitch was dead. I haven’t seen it since I was brought to this place, but the way the TV’s set back means unless it’s on loud you can’t quite make it out in here, and voices only in snatches, so all I can tell you is they were glued to the screen all day, arguing a lot. I was trying to hold it together for everyone, but sometime in the night — moon was still up — Travers came in here, already close to losing it. Did a lot of ranting about Preskylovitch having blown it, and cost him everything, and about wolf rules being unfair. He triggered Tyron’s, Luke’s, and Estelle’s changes, ordered them to stop, then ordered me to stop them. I couldn’t, and he flipped and shot them all before I could stop him. Magnum, silver, head. I used everything I had to make him leave, and he stomped off down the tunnel, shouting. A bit later there was a lot of screaming and blood being spilt, and then a lot of shooting. Eight shots, two guns I think. Then noise as they cleared out, stripping rooms down, but no-one even looked in here. Left maybe three hours later, about dawn. Generator shut down a while later and we waited in darkness until tonight.”

My admiration for Velasquez was rising all the time, and so was Vance’s. Even ap Lugh was showing some respect. A year or more being tortured as a prisoner. More than sixty hours in the dark, with hope dwindling, if they’d had any in the first place, and she’d held twenty-five wolves as well as herself together.

“Thank you again, Ms Velasquez.”

“Sure. Can I get some air, now?”

She didn’t wait for an answer but took off down the tunnel at a clip, sheet flapping, and I let out a breath.

“Wasn’t for her, SAC, I think we’d have found only corpses here. And I’m sorry about Adam — you’ll understand he’s had a rough week, especially for an Alpha, but it’s not just that. We don’t
understand what happened here — the percentage of submissives makes no sense, and most are teens, which is also screwy, because those under twenty-five are not allowed to try the Change, for good reason. With the threats to Jesse, that’s what’s burning him up. He needed to bite something and you were handy.”

“No apology needed, Ms Hauptman. And what he said was true.”

“Yeah. One reason we want data on the dead down there is to try to figure out what the hell they were doing to succeed in Changing people so young and getting submissives. There’ll be limits to what we’ll say about this, but you need to know some of it because it explains some of how Travers was behaving. Best we figure is he’d convinced Cantrip he could be an Alpha for them, which was a lie, so they set about building him a pack. But submissives weren’t what he wanted, and every failure left him that bit more insane. Plus getting a female Alpha would have freaked him sideways — think a female pope or president and multiply instinctive machismo and chauvinism by old wolf. Gwyn ap Lugh, is there anything you can say about what Cantrip wanted from fae captives?”

Ap Lugh shrugged. “They could capture only weak earth and sea fae, and seem to have been testing endurance. Touching them with iron to see how long blisters lasted. Other metals. Burning. Starvation. They also asked many questions about glamour, wanting both to penetrate it and learn to generate it. All have been here more than two years, the oakman nearly three, and they have been completely ignored for the last two months. Since Guayota, maybe.”

Vance nodded heavily. “I can’t say I’m glad to hear you, sir, but I hope you know what I mean. What will we need to do in here to allow your, um, fellows to do their thing?”

“Move that metal cover.”

Vance stared, then looked down. “That’s going to take a while, sir.”

I went to look at it, and made a guess at the weight. “Maybe not, SAC. Gwyn ap Lugh, there are bolts at each corner and in the middle of each side. If you can erode the rock around them so we can get them out, wolves can probably shift it.”

He came to stand beside me, frowning as he looked, and after a moment erosion began, chewing down beside the edge of the plate and beginning to undercut it. The few remaining ghosts were interested and agitated, but weren’t interfering. I went to stand by Vance, who was staring but managing to keep his mouth shut, and kept my tone conversational.

“You realise your experience here is going to leave you in some demand, SAC? The presence and power of Gwyn ap Lugh makes this exceptional, but the principles of forensic and SAR cooperation with wolves will not be so different. There is a lot human technology is best at. Magic won’t make an iPhone or a good gun. But there are also things magic or wolf strength can do faster than technology. Had this option not been available, by Gwyn ap Lugh’s grace, a wolf with a hammer and chisel could cut down to those bolts and shear them faster than you could get heavier equipment in, though not as fast as this, and with nothing holding it and room for five or six wolves to push it’d take a lot more weight than that to stay put.”

Ap Lugh had flicked me an ironic glance or two during that, but Vance was interested and back in control.

“Huh. Wolf strength is not something I’m clear on, Ms Hauptman. I know it’s high, but I hadn’t realised that high. That cover must weight three or four tons.”
“About that. But it doesn’t need lifting, just shoving. Adam can press three or four times his weight without a problem. We have to get weights customised. Excuse me a minute.”

Ap Lugh was on the third side, and I went to where he’d started, giving the bolt a hard backheel to crack any rust before reaching down to test it. I may not have wolf strength but I do have mechanic’s fingers, and with nothing to hold it below the plate itself I got it moving and twisted it up and out. On the next one I stopped as soon as I had it moving, and asked Vance to go on twisting while I moved on. David joined him, and in a few minutes we had them all out. Ap Lugh had stood aside when he’d finished using magic, and I gave him a nod.

“That was very helpful.”

“For me too, Mercy. I do not have your husband’s wolf rage, but I have my own, and such controlled use of power to destroy some rock was … soothing.”

“Un huh. I get that.” I could have done with biting something myself. “Do you want me to get wolves in here now to shift the plate?”

“Soon, but not immediately. I saw how they needed the fresh air. And let the humans clear those corpses at the entry.”

“OK. When the food arrives we’ll be busy for a bit, but we’ll make this the next priority. And I wouldn’t mind some air myself.”

Loosening the plate had let more smell leak out and ap Lugh was nodding when the cloak wafted out some roses, offering me another block against it. I thanked it, and he gave me a look. I shrugged.

“Manners maketh woman, too. Let’s get out of this place.”
Torgerson might have been a tech head in manners but he knew his job as a head tech. A plastic-suited man was vacuuming under sofa cushions in the recreation area, and a matching woman was dusting for prints in odd corners of the kitchen. She looked up.

“Some partials and a couple of good thumb prints from the inner edge of the fridge, sir, and the Chief’s got IDs on the bodies from one of the freed.”

Vance acknowledged her, and we stopped at the carnage. Lights had been set up and four techs, including Torgerson, were using cameras from every angle. He didn’t look up but his voice was crisp.

“Todd, Ms Velasquez says this is Preskylovitch’s snatch team plus one torturer. Snatchers were Aaron Gill, Tadeusz Bobrowicz, and Ian McMillan. All vets, she reckoned, and old pals of Preskylovitch. Torturer was George Baston. Rapist too. Not a vet as such, but he was with a contractor in Iraq. We’ll be done with the VR in about five, and I’ll get them bagged. Don’t have anything to clean up the blood on hand, though.”

I exchanged a look with Gwyn ap Lugh.

“We can take care of that, SAC. And sounds like Preskylovitch drew on people he knew from his time in Iraq. AED Westfield has his file, and that’s where he learned torture and rape. Army wouldn’t let him at foreigners any more, so he found a domestic supply.”

Vance winced, but nodded. “Sounds that way. AED’ll have to deal with it — army black ops stuff is always tricky.”

“They do not get a security pass on this one, SAC. We’ll make it public if you don’t.”

“That won’t be my call, Ms Hauptman, but I hear you.”

“All I can ask. One thing, though, Chief Tech — when you shift these bodies, collect the dead wolves too? They need to be gone, but be aware we’ll want them for proper funerals as soon as you can release them.”

“Noted.”

We filed past the gore one more time, and with the glare of the tripod lights out of my eyes I could see what people were doing. Chill air or no they were all outside, standing in a wide, open circle, and Adam had had wolves collect brush and deadwood from the scrub on the ridge. They were just about done piling it into a bonfire, but it was all still thoroughly wet, and Vance blinked.

“Fire’s a good idea but that stuff will be hard to light. Do you want some gas from the generator as an accelerant?”

“Won’t be necessary, SAC. Watch.”

Joel padded up to the pile, going magmatic, and a few long exhaled breaths had steam rising in
thick clouds, before he stretched one paw into the middle and loosed a pulse of heat that had it burning in a second. Still gleaming lava colours, he backed off fifteen or twenty feet and sat, radiating. I heard several of the freed thank him as they moved forward, forming a loose figure-of-eight round the two heat sources. Most of our wolves were holding jacketless freed gently from behind — Charles had Carla, with Anna holding her hand — but George and Mary Jo went for more wood, and the medics were circulating, talking softly.

Vance went over to a woman watching with wide eyes — SA Kefliotas, I assumed — and ap Lugh gave me a sidelong look.

“Joel Arocha’s control is improving fast.”

“Isn’t it? I think the cloak and Manannán’s Bane are helping the integration. I don’t suppose there’s a user’s manual for the cloak I could borrow?”

“Fortunately not.” His slight smile faded and he spoke softly. “I did not know about Preskylovitch and Iraq.”

“Westfield didn’t get the file until … Thursday, I think. Marine sniper, black ops, then blacker ops. Army let him go after Abu Ghraib, and didn’t keep tabs. Did a few hits on preternaturals for Cantrip and they signed him up. We’re exerting some pressure on the army through private channels, but I’m not sure how Adam will want to play it now.”

“Ah. If I can be of use, ask. And if we learn anything from those who fled I will let you know.”

“That would be good.” I cocked my head. “Chopper’s coming in. And a jet, which must be Westfield. Make that two choppers.”

We could both hear Torgerson’s orders to start bagging body parts, and by unspoken mutual agreement went to join the circles of freed, collecting Vance and — he introduced us — Kefliotas. Velasquez was sitting by Charles and Carla, Charles’ jacket draped round her shoulders, writing in a notebook I recognised as also his. Vance took Kefliotas to meet her, and when he was done she flipped back a couple of pages, tore one out, and handed it to him.

“That’s who’s here, in the order we were snatched. Gloria and Hec have been here longest, except the fae, then me and Maria.” She pointed to two freed sitting together, then a third. “I’m working on a list of the Changes who didn’t make it, though I have only what I overheard, and it will not be complete.”

“Everything will help, Ms Velasquez. And thank you for this.”

“His idea.” She tipped her head towards Charles. “Said a cumulative picture would mean you could get this done faster, so we can leave here.”

“Then thank you, Mr Smith. We’ll get started.” He looked up. “Sounds like support’s starting to arrive, so I may have to deal, but I’ll stick with this as best I can.”

“AED’s jet’s coming in too, SAC, so he can deal.”

“Right. Let’s get started, Jill.”

Ap Lugh and I, trailed by silent knights, went with David to sit beside Adam, who had given his jacket to a freed but wasn’t holding anyone, so I got him to hold me. The contact soothed us both, and I brought him up to date on shoving the plate aside, Preskylovitch using his Iraq connections, and ap Lugh’s offer.
“The private stuff’s still good, Adam, but Rumsfeld’s rabid babies coming home to roost is something the public ought to know about.”

David snorted. “Now there’s a well-mixed metaphor. Not wrong, though. And Mama Cantrip gathering them in.”

We fell silent as a chopper passed slowly overhead from the south-west and began to descend beyond the line of SUVs parked on the track. As its noise muted the second chopper could be heard more clearly, coming from the south-east, and the jet’s noise was swelling too. Adam stood and called Fred and Hank in, and Simon got their clothes out of his pack. A few minutes later SA Greening came jogging up and Vance joined him before coming across.

“Got your meat, Mr Hauptman. Where do you want it?”

“Here.” Adam pulled me up. “Wolves can haul it.”

“Pans’ll work on the fire, love, if you build a flat section. I can get more cooking inside. Do you still want David on me all the time?”

“No, we’re past that. Sorry, Corp, I should have said.”

“No problem, Sarge. I’ll come carry.”

Adam gave some orders, and when Warren and I got back from the mine kitchen toting a variety of pots and pans with some long spoons and spatulas to stir with, and what oven cloths and forks we could find, Joel had a long extension of the fire bedding down nicely. By the time Adam, David, and Asil came back, each with a heavy sack of assorted cubed meats hastily bagged, we could just tip bags in and hear the meat start to sear and sizzle. There were plenty of hands willing to stir and grab some cubes as soon as they were hot, never mind cooked, and I would have gone to work in the mine kitchen but Samuel and Artie volunteered, so I sat and watched, listening to the second chopper setting down and the jet noise peaking and dying away as it landed out on 410, and after a moment took off again, heading back west. Meat was disappearing fast, and I heard Rashid reassuring Vance and Kefliotas that while she was right it would be a very bad idea for starving humans, werewolf stomachs would cope, as wolf stomachs did with long fasting and glutting in winter. He and others were also giving the freed a lot of the information they would have known if they’d been licitly Changed, and explaining the ways packs hunted. Usually joining a hunt was one of the first things a newly Changed wolf did, not only for the joy of it but to deepen the new partnership, and I wondered how the freed’s distorted and perverted experiences would affect them as hunters. It was one more aspect of the evil Cantrip had wrought.

The second chopper had been one of the scrambled forensics teams, and with an influx of hands taking direction from Torgerson bagging of body parts, then bodies, accelerated, while suited-up techs started dusting the outer door and others disappeared inside. They’d all done some staring at us, which we ignored, but when the long relay of bags ended ap Lugh and I stood.

“Will you move that plate as soon as I have finished?”

Adam had heard. “We will, Gwyn ap Lugh.”

Dominance was not the same as physical strength in human form, and though Adam, David, and Charles were up there both ways, the others Adam tapped were Warren and Simon, with George as back up. With food, and all the freed around it as it cooked, tibicena heat wasn’t needed, and Joel had reverted to his cool form, so I asked him to come to try to get some air circulating. By the time we reached the entrance ap Lugh, flanked by knights, had politely asked Torgerson to tell his techs
to move their lights and stand aside, and they were huddled by one wall of the parking area, staring as the show started. With the doors and in the chamber ap Lugh hadn’t done anything except look, but here he made a gesture, drawing a line with a pointing finger, and on the further side of the gore a churning wall of water maybe six inches high appeared. The rock beneath my feet vibrated with the force it was applying, and as it moved forward over congealed blood it became a grim dark scarlet, flecked with black and foaming pink at the top. It wasn’t moving fast, and the exposed rock left behind was scoured clean, gleaming in the overheads’ glare. About three-quarters of it was done when I heard footsteps, and turned to see Westfield pausing to look at the bent doors, face still. His gaze shifted and he raised an eyebrow.

“Magical marines indeed. You have some impressive resources, Ms Hauptman.”

“The fae do, AED. Come see another of them while you can. It’s nearly finished.”

He came to stand beside me and Joel, offering a polite greeting and receiving a tibicena nod.

“We asked Vance to clear bodies as soon as he could, and his chief tech signed off on it after making a VR record. They’ve all been ID’d, by the way — Ramona Velasquez — and it looks like the four humans were all in Iraq, so we’re going to have to talk about that soon. This now is because you could only go further in single file on that side, plus reducing the smell any way we can. Gwyn ap Lugh is willing because he doesn’t like it any more than we do, and wants to get on with checking the main shaft.”

“OK, that all makes sense. Thank you, Ms Hauptman. And though you must be feeling as sick as you are angry, my sincere congratulations. Leslie was right that any day you free thirty-five people is a good day.”

“I know, AED, and Velasquez pulled off some miracles to keep her wolves sane, but this place is an abattoir. Adam called it an American Auschwitz, allowing for scale, but I find myself thinking of that army major who said they had to destroy Bến Tre in order to save it, except backward. All that Cantrip hate for wolves, yet they were making them by dozens and sacrificing humans by the hundred to do it. You’re going to need psychiatric as well as forensic analysis.”

“Yes, we are. Cantrip were building a pack of their own?”

“I think they thought they were, but Travers was probably lying to them. What they actually did was accumulate wholly uninstructed wolves who have formed a gang under a female Alpha who doesn’t know how to create pack bonds. Besides the numbers and her gender, that’s why they’re not coming to Kennewick but going to the Marrok — he can best teach Velasquez what she needs to know. Vance and his second are taking preliminary statements now, out there round the fire, so we can evacuate them no later than dawn.”

“And thank you again. I spoke to Vance briefly, and I’m told the freed fae will be available at Walla Walla also.”

“So Gwyn ap Lugh said. Also that the oakman and dryad won’t be speaking to anyone for a while, though, and I can believe it. Knew an oakman once, and they’re not much for speaking anyway.”

Ap Lugh’s wall of water finished its work, and I led Westfield aside as the fae rotated it through ninety degrees and ushered it towards the entrance. I thought he’d just wash it onto the earth, but he steered it to one of the trolls’ deep footprints and fed it in, churning and frothing as it sank away, before making another slight gesture that had earth from a few inches around hopping into the hole until it was filled. A couple of the watching techs actually clapped until Torgerson hushed them, and ap Lugh gave them a look before inclining his head slightly and heading for us, knights in tow.
I turned to Joel.

“Try heating the air just inside the entrance, Joel? With the control you’re getting now, if you think about wanting the air heated your magic should just get on with it, though warming the rock would be good too, and extend the effect.”

Joel gave me another of his doubtful looks, but went to try anyway. Standing in the centre of the entrance, about five feet inside, he went magmatic and I heard humans draw sharp breaths. I watched until I could see controlled heat spreading through the rock from his paws and air beginning to shimmer over his back, and turned to ap Lugh.

“Gwyn ap Lugh, that was very satisfying. If you can encourage air to move, that would also be good.”

“I can and will, Mercy.”

A faint breeze was already beginning to whisper past my cheek, and I nodded. “Excellent. And this is FBI Associate Executive Director Grant Westfield, out of DC, who has dealt fairly and well with us since he was sent to Kennewick on Tuesday. AED, meet Gwyn ap Lugh, Prince of the Gray Lords. His knights answer to him alone, and as we have not been vouchsafed their names it will not be rude to ignore them.”

“Prince Gwyn ap Lugh.” Westfield gave a slight bow, and I gave him lots of points. “Sir, the President asked me, if I should meet you here, to tell you the apology will be made late today, with the announcement that Cantrip will be abolished as its substance. And while I understand the human way of speaking thanks is not appropriate, please know that he, and all of us, are glad of the aid you have allowed at Hanford and given here, and hope there can be progress in human–fae relations.”

Ap Lugh considered him for a moment, and to my surprise offered a hand Westfield took.

“Grant Westfield. I think better of the FBI than of most humans, and have heard well of you from more than Mercedes, whose words have weight. I cannot say I accept the apology until I have heard it, but I will take it in the spirit in which I hear it offered, and according to the substance it is seen to have. And if it is acceptable, and the President comes to meet Medicine Wolf, I and other Gray Lords will meet him.”

“I will tell him so, sir, soon after dawn in DC. I understand you have offered aid of some kind in discovering what horror lies in the main shaft of this mine?”

“I have. And I would be about it, Mercy.”

I heard him shift register, and knew Westfield would get nothing more, for now at least. So did Adam, and we set off once more up the tunnel, into a strengthening breeze that was beginning to have smells of the ridge above mixed with the layers of death and chemically treated sewage. It wasn’t a lot better, but at least it was headed in the right direction. I gave Samuel a wave as we passed the kitchen. There were techs working in most of the spaces, and I gave Westfield a minimal commentary as we came to things, not least so he wouldn’t have much chance to ask questions I didn’t want to have to refuse to answer. His eyes were narrowed, looking at the vamp cages, Preskylovitch’s room with its melted door, which I cheerfully ascribed to Joel, and the torture lab, but they went wide when he saw the rows of silver cages and smelt what was coming from under the metal plate and the chemical sewage tank beyond.

“Dear God.”
“That, yes.” I saw the half-changed bodies had been removed, and there was no sign of the ghosts. “And the humans must have grown as used to the stink as the captives. It’s gonna get worse, just, as well.”

Adam had been thinking about the problem the plate represented, and as we didn’t want any wolves falling into the shaft he’d opted to try feet first. He, with David, Charles, Warren, and Simon, sat in a row on the east side of the plate, setting heels against its rim, and shuffling forward until their legs were cocked at the best angle. Arms were extended behind them, the roughness of the rock giving their hands some purchase, and I grabbed the nearest busted-out lock and used it to give the plate a few good whacks to break any seal with the rock. Then Adam gave a count, legs straightened hard, and the plate slid maybe fifteen feet west, exposing a bit more than half of an opening about twelve feet square, and more rot filled the air. Adam stood and the others rose with him.

“We should be able to drag it from the other side now.”

Westfield, ap Lugh, and I were standing back out of the way, and the wolves walked around, instinctively giving the opening the widest berth they could. Getting a grip on the far side proved awkward, but Simon had a steel Marine E-Tool and managed to get the blade under the plate sufficiently to lever it, and once they had hands under it some driving steps back had the whole shaft opening exposed. The worst of the foetor that had built up under the plate was dissipating in the breeze Joel was creating, but the hole was still giving up a lot of heat. Vance had said it went down sixteen hundred feet, so the geothermal gradient would add more than twenty degrees, but rot gave off heat too, and I wondered grimly what that was adding.

Ap Lugh nodded. “That is helpful, Adam Hauptman. Those who will come are shy, so I must ask your wolves and AED Westfield to clear the chamber, though you may watch from the entrance.”

“Of course.”

I turned to go with Adam but ap Lugh stopped me.

“You might stay, if you will, Mercy. The cloak will reassure them.”

Adam shrugged, and I stayed, more in curiosity than anything else. It took only a snap of ap Lugh’s fingers for an archway to appear, but it was nearly a minute before a face flickered into view for a second, and most of another before a small figure slipped through, looking around anxiously. Four more followed — each about two-and-a-half feet tall, rather gray-skinned, and wearing ragged trousers with shirts and jerkins, but all barefoot. Ap Lugh asked something in what I’m pretty sure was archaic Welsh, and let the archway close before crouching to let the figures huddle around him, looking up at his face and shooting occasional glances at me as he spoke. After a moment he switched to English without looking round.

“Mercy, would you approach? These are coblynau, and their senior would speak with you, if you will.”

I did, crouching beside him, and small faces looked at me more openly. You could say they were ugly and not be wrong, but I didn’t find them so myself — the features were not in human proportion, and the teeth snaggly, but their eyes were gentle and sad, and the one who shifted to stand in front of me reached out to touch the cloak with reverence. It gusted roses, and the coblyn gave a squeak and looked up. Its voice was strongly accented as well as soft, and I had to listen hard.

“In the English you would call me Huw of the Coal.”
“The gift of your name gladdens me, Huw of the Coal. I am Mercedes Hauptman, and by the choice of Underhill and the word of Prince Gwyn ap Lugh named Elf-friend. My friends call me Mercy.”

“You slew Manannán mac Lír.”

There was no room for equivocation here. “Yes, I did, Huw of the Coal. He sought my life.”

“His water was never kind to rock, and he hated us for loving it.”

“He hated many beings, so many beings learned to hate him. Friendship and mutual aid are better, to my eyes, and your gift of them here also gladden me.”

“You would be friend to a coblyn?”

“If I am an Elf-friend, Huw of the Coal, I am already a friend to coblynau, and will be so unless any should offer harm to me or mine.”

I can’t say Huw’s smile was dazzling — he really did need to see a dentist — but it was sweet, and he nodded shyly before becoming a little brisker.

“The Prince says many dead have been thrown in here, and he would have us count them as we can. He said also you have a camera small enough for me to bear. Would you have us record what we see?”

“I would, Huw of the Coal.”

I reached the camera out, and hesitated. “I think this is aluminium, so it should not harm you.”

“It is.”

I showed him the simple controls, and he nodded, slipping the camera into a pocket somewhere under his jerkin.

“Huw of the Coal, we believe many who lie below had failed the Change into werewolves, so the bodies would have been … badly damaged even before they landed. It will be … gruesome down there. And though I have banished most of the ghosts, some may remain. To know what is there is important, but you should not seek to endure what you cannot.”

A small gray hand brushed mine. “Do not fear for us, Mercedes Elf-friend. We fear no ghosts, and we know what rock and burning gas can do. Mines have always seen hard deaths.”

He gave me a little bow to which I returned a nod, and looked at ap Lugh, speaking Welsh. The Gray Lord nodded, speaking briefly, and the coblynau went to stand a few feet from the shaft before sinking rapidly into the rock and disappearing. I blinked, and ap Lugh gave a half-smile.

“Nothing dead troubles the coblynau, Mercy — only most of the living. Huw said it would take them an hour or so to descend and return, and who knows how long at the bottom, doing what they must, so we have a wait ahead. Preferably not in here.”

“No argument with that.”

The wolves were silent as we started back down the tunnel, Simon and George giving me sideways looks. There were still more techs about, and I realised another chopper must have come in so I stopped by the lab, where several new faces were filming.
“Not my place to give any of you orders, but all that noise means the main shaft is now uncovered. Goes down sixteen hundred feet, so it might be an idea to get some warning tape across the entrance.”

“Might, yeah. I’ll see it done, ma’am, and thanks.”

“No problem. But make sure nothing gets thrown or knocked down there, hey? Fae working for us at the bottom to find out how bad it is.”

“Right. I’ll tape it now and make sure everyone knows.”

“That would be good.”

The others had waited, and Westfield gave me a nod. “Haven’t seen you miss a trick yet, Ms Hauptman. May I ask about coblynau?”

“Nothing I can tell you, AED — you’ve just seen my entire experience of them. Gwyn ap Lugh?”

“You may ask, Grant Westfield, but I may choose not to answer.”

“Of course, sir. I’m just seeking to understand what I’m seeing, and as the senior agent present might be deemed to be responsible for.”

Ap Lugh shrugged slightly. “The coblynau are my responsibility, not yours, Grant Westfield. But I will say they are what you might know as goblins or kobolds — spirits of worked rock. Like most of their kind they will repay kindness with kindness and neglect or persecution with escalating trouble. But though they have great endurance, they do not have great physical strength, so if it is as bad as it smells, down there, there will be little they can do besides provide the recording.”

“I understand, sir. It will take some time to bring in equipment that would reach down that far safely, or allow anyone to descend, so I am glad of their speed and your aid in this.”

Ap Lugh only nodded, and as we reached the parking area Westfield halted and took a breath.

“But I am remiss, sir. SA Leslie Fisher asked me, should I meet you, to convey her greetings and best wishes, and ask if you would in turn convey them to your daughter.”

“Ah.” Even in the short sound I could hear ap Lugh’s pain, but his voice stayed level. “Leslie Fisher is a human of whom I think very well, and I am glad to hear from her. Lizzie will be, also. Leslie is working with you?”

“I requisitioned her from Nevada on Tuesday, sir, because she has good experiences working with wolves and fae.”

“You grow in my estimation, Grant Westfield.”

Ap Lugh lapsed into silence, and one thing I’d come to like about Westfield was that he knew when to cut his losses. Then again, that meant his attention switched back to me as we headed towards the fire.

“Anything I need to know about ghosts, Ms Hauptman?”

“Not really, AED. If you don’t see them they won’t bother you.”

“Alright. And if we do see them?”
“Call me.”

“OK.” He gave me a speculative look. “It’s interesting that those who fled cleared out so much stuff but left living witnesses.”

I felt the crackle of wolf attention, and took a breath. “We thought the humans Travers killed were probably the hard men, and Ramona agreed, so maybe they didn’t have anyone left with the ice to kill thirty-five beings in cages. They just did what they could to cover their tracks, and went. Took all the food, though, as well as leaving everyone locked in, and no-one made an anonymous call, so I’d call that attempted murder.”

“One for the lawyers, certainly. I’m wondering if they also took whatever was in those empty cages with bars missing. And if they did, what or who we should still be looking for.”

“Couldn’t say, AED, but Ramona didn’t mention the sound of anyone living being removed. And those cages look too clean to have been used.”

“Maybe. Forgive me, Ms Hauptman, but while it’s clear you and other preternaturals are concealing things, there’s a lot of argument about whether that’s just your own businesses, respectively, or the business of someone we humans don’t know about and need to.”

I thought about it, briefly. Such questions did not constitute hard evidence of vamps, and rather suggested that the FBI as yet had none, however they suspected, rightly, that more forces than they knew of were in play. And I did like Stefan, while Wulfe had offered me more than I’d expected.

“I’m afraid the answer to that, AED, is ‘no comment’, and all I can add is that we don’t conceal what we don’t need to conceal. In any case, you have enough to deal with just now, don’t you think?”

Westfield sighed. “And to spare. But be aware the pressure on me is increasing sharply. The power you have shown in beating us both in finding this place and getting here has spooked DC badly. And a lot of people wanted data from here for more than one reason.”

“All bad, AED, however various. But who knows what might turn up when the fugitives are found? Right now there’s something else.”

I introduced him to Velasquez, and they sized one another up while I sat between Adam and Gwyn ap Lugh on a log Joel had dried out.

“AED, with ideal conditions and a skilled wolf, less than half of those who attempt the Change survive. Ramona thinks Travers managed maybe one in eight or ten. And I couldn’t count the ghosts, so there really are two hundred plus bodies down there. How soon will you be making that scale public?”

“Rapidly, Ms Hauptman. Though I have to say I suspect it will take some considerable while to obtain an accurate count.” He rubbed his eyes. “I’m no expert on taphonomics, but the best advice I have is that the heat down there, with impact damage, will mean advanced decomposition despite the lack of animals and insects. When I finished that conversation the consultant asked me not to tap him for the work.”

“I bet. And we’re adding oxygen.” I turned. “Gwyn ap Lugh, I have read old tales where a dismembered body is magically reassembled. I realise that was usually for resurrection, but is there any magic that could just bring together the corpse? Because doing it by manual collection and DNA analysis will take months, if not years.”
Ap Lugh looked thoughtful. “There may be, Mercy. That would be Nemane’s domain, but I can ask. Assume yes, and how would this work?”

“AED, how long to install a motor hoist that’ll get down there and bring in two or three hundred coffins?”

“Um ... a day or so for the hoist. Military has coffins. But there are safety considerations, so longer before the hoist is running.”

“When it is, empties down and full ones up, as fast as the hoist’ll go. Shaft’s about twelve feet square, so six coffins to a layer, and as many layers as the motor will take per trip — two at least, maybe three or four. You’d still be able to use DNA analysis to confirm the magic had got it right, AED, and it would cut right down on the time your people have to spend down there.”

“Yes, it would. If this is possible, Prince Gwyn ap Lugh, we would be very glad.”

Ap Lugh inclined his head slightly. “Nemane is busy with our freed, but I will not delay in asking her.” He considered me. “It seems fitting to recall an old magic, long disused. It follows the pattern of Medicine Wolf and the justice you invoked, with the cloak and name you gained in doing so.”

“Everything old is new again?”

“Not everything, but yes. The world turns. Might I speak with Manannán’s Bane?”

The question surprised me, though I doubted refusal was possible even if it had been wise. Manannán’s Bane certainly didn’t mind and I handed it to ap Lugh, who laid it across his lap and fell silent, hands drifting up and down its length. Westfield was talking to Velasquez, and it looked as if Vance and Kefliotas were about half-done taking initial statements. Meat was still being cooked and eaten, but the urgency had gone out of it and all the freed were looking significantly better, gauntness filling out and colour returning. I told Joel he could dress, and spread the cloak for a moment to give him privacy, then sat by Adam, happy to lean against him silently until Warren came across with one of the freed.

“Boss, this is Hector Martinez. He’s been here eighteen months, and has an idea about the submissives.”

Martinez was small and wiry, one of the older-looking freed — later twenties, maybe, and heavily bearded. He sat cross-legged, looking down, and gave a slight shrug.

“It is only an idea, but we heard Travers and Preskylovitch argue about it often enough, and I thought they had it back to front. They had to reduce the age and size of their victims because Travers could not inflict much damage before he lost it and killed, so they needed the slighter and frailer, where less damage done more quickly could still be enough. They skewed away from Anglos because of white supremacism — the ones they did grab offended Preskylovitch somehow — and tended to think that was why they got submissives. ‘Niggers and spics and cunts who know their place’, Travers called it. But they skewed to women, so they could indulge rape, and Preskylovitch skewed to known or suspected illegals because their disappearances would make less of a pattern. I’m illegal myself. And so what they got was people who endure rather than fight. When you’re illegal you don’t make a fuss, you don’t want to attract attention. You back down, say nothing, move along. A lot of women do that too, especially if you’re a non-Anglo facing Anglo men with guns and worse. So I think, if you survived Travers, you didn’t become a dominant, but a submissive. He always talked about the need to fight for life, to become a strong wolf, but what he induced was the need to endure.”
For the first time he glanced up for a second.

“I noticed that those who survived the Change made less noise when they were savaged, and I
don’t think that’s because their injuries or pain were less. I remember trying not to scream my own
pain because I thought it would make Travers’s wolf worse.”

“That’s sharp, Mr Martinez.” Adam was still very angry, and though Martinez’s story was fuel for
rage the interest of what he’d said was a sort of distraction. “However weirdly, Travers was saying
something I get because with licit attempts at the Change we badly want everyone to survive, so
we skew to what we usually call strong-willed as well as fit and in good physical shape. And we
get maybe one submissive in fifty. I’ll be talking to him myself but you should tell all that to the
Marrok.”

“Yes.” Charles had been listening. “I find that quite persuasive, Mr Martinez. I had wondered if the
ages and physical stature were because Travers needed the necessary damage to be … more easily
done. An old wolf who has become insane usually has problems doing anything within a limit. But
I had not managed any explanation of the number of submissives. It is beyond ironic, but we may
have learned something important here, however foul the means.”

Martinez looked a query at me, and with Velasquez and a wary but fascinated Westfield joining us
we spent a while talking about why packs value submissives, and the choices the freed had about
staying together or joining packs that would welcome them. I also put the point about
compensation and housing in Richland to Westfield, who noted it with an appreciative look and
observed in a neutral voice that there would be an advantage to the FBI as investigators if the freed
were in one place for a while. Velasquez had very mixed feelings about becoming an Alpha with
formal responsibility for all the freed, and she and Martinez argued softly for a while about what
would be best until Greening came jogging up from the cluster of parked vehicles.

“SA Fisher asks if you’ll call, AED. She can’t get you here.”

Westfield was gone for about ten minutes, and when he returned he had a glint in his eye.

“Some very interesting news, Prince Gwyn ap Lugh, Mr Hauptman, everyone. This mine was
operated by a private company called Trona Holdings, and they still own it. It’s a shell, and so are
their owners for several stages, but DC’s tracked it back to an offshore holding company wholly
owned by Senator Heuter. A second arrest warrant’s been issued, and will be executed at dawn. It’s
not legal proof that he had personal knowledge of the murders and other crimes committed here,
and I imagine he’ll try to blame his dead brother and son, but it gives us lots of places to look for
more, and politically he’ll be dead in the water.”

Charles was pleased but intent. “How did you get the ownership of the offshore holding company,
AED?”

“Heuter used Mossack Fonseca.”

For the first time in a while I felt like grinning. “Maybe there really is some cosmic justice. Has
any Federal Senator ever been convicted of murder or accessory to murder?”

“No. Four unreversed convictions for financial crime. And don’t hold your breath, Ms Hauptman,
but the chances are definitely rising.”

Ap Lugh also had a glint in his eye, and I wondered what kind of file he might have on Senator
Heuter. The acquittal and killing of Les Heuter had neutered any attempt to force his father out of
office, despite having three members of his family who’d been responsible for sixty-two murders,
but several hundred more bodies on a property he owned ought to be too much even for the Senate to ignore. I was wondering if I should ask ap Lugh when he suddenly offered me Manannán’s Bane back, and stood.

“The coblynau are returning.”
It was a much smaller party that returned to the chamber — besides ap Lugh and Westfield, there were only Adam, Charles, and me. The rock Joel had heated was still warm, and the breeze continued, but that was strengthening the smell of sewage in the tunnel as well as bringing fresher air in from the ventilation shafts. As we passed through Adam fielded a question from Torgerson about what Zee had disconnected from the generator and why, and the chief tech blinked.

“OK. But you’ve no objection if we bring the ring main back online?”

“None at all.”

We went on, and Westfield again looked hard at the cages with missing bars, but said nothing. He did however pause briefly at the door to Preskylovitch’s room, to observe it was odd the fleeing had both taken furniture and locked it behind them, but I only shrugged — though I hoped Charles could deal with what was awaiting us in the Garden of Manannán’s Death fast, because it was going to be a lot easier if we gave the Feds everything we could a lot sooner than later. Catching Adam’s eye I knew he shared the thought, but it still had to wait.

The tech I’d spoken to had been as good as his word, and the way into the chamber was blocked by two lines of crime-scene tape, with an improvised notice warning of the shaft and fae working in it. We ducked through, moving carefully to the end furthest from the shaft, and Westfield joined me in pushing cage doors closed to give the wolves more room. When Adam thanked him, he nodded.

“You’re welcome. I’ve never seen it but I’m assured silver burn is very real for wolves.”

“You could say. Stings like hell and blisters. Nettles on steroids. And though it’s hardly a volatile there’s enough in the air in here that I am quite concerned by how much the freed have taken in. And that’s with the breeze clearing some.” Adam glanced at me. “One of the things that was making me antsy earlier, I think. But the freed I’ve talked to don’t have as keen a sense of smell as I’d expect, and I don’t think that’s just from having learned to block the stink in here.”

Charles frowned. “That is true, Adam. Artie’s done some ENT work, and I’ll ask him to examine them, but I don’t think we have anything on this kind of prolonged exposure to airborne silver.”

“And the tranq could have sensitised them.” I was frowning too, inhibited by Westfield’s presence. “Charles, you said Travers was reported drowned four years ago?”

“Four and a half.”

“Reported by?”

Westfield was very sharp, and I let Charles field it.

“The wolf then tasked to keep track of lone wolves, AED, who has since died. And yes, we will be looking hard at the relevant records.”

Even for this I couldn’t wish Gerry Wallace still alive, but there were way too many connections for comfort, from Travers and Cantrip having the silver-loaded tranq Gerry had developed to the
fundamental structure of snatching humans to Change and keeping them caged while building a private pack. Gerry and the Alpha involved, Leo, had done it for complicated individual reasons of their own, but I couldn’t help wondering if Travers had been involved and slipped away under the radar, or there’d been a Cantrip connection we’d missed completely.

“Whatever you feel able to let us have would be good, Mr Smith. And I know this is a touchy subject, but you said Travers was an ‘old wolf’, and implied a kind of … senility, I suppose, in his behaviour.”

“Yes.” Charles’s voice was guarded. “You are aware of the stats on wolf longevity, but among those who make it to greater age a form of madness can set in. It is complex, but you might say Travers was making human decisions with the morality of his wolf.”

“Or the morality of an earlier time?”

“In some measure, perhaps.”

Westfield blew out a breath. “Forgive the direct question, but how old was he?”

Charles looked at Westfield hard for a second, but then shrugged. “I do not know exactly, AED, but at least a century older than me and I am several times your age. We know the fact of centenarian wolves with seemingly eternal youth will come out sooner than later, and we will deal when we must, but Travers is not the right occasion.”

“No, I see that. And I understand your caution, but you’re saying that Travers was, what, three hundred plus?”

“Yes. And though I am not comfortable saying this, there is a relevance beyond senility because Travers came to this continent before Da, and was one of the first wolves here. As I understand it, he enjoyed his freedom here, and did not appreciate discovering Da was way more dominant and had strict views on what was acceptable behaviour by wolves and humans. The profound loss of control represented by this place must be recent, but it was fuelled by old resentments. And Travers fought for the CSA, so his racism was also longstanding.”

Westfield’s eyebrows rose and he shook his head. “Huh. Adjusting to that kind of bio is not so easy.”

“And that’s just wolves, AED.” I tipped my head. “Gwyn ap Lugh is as old as the hills.”

Ap Lugh half-smiled. “Not quite, Mercy, but as old as the lakes in the hills. And Medicine Wolf is considerably older than many mountains. Did Travers fight in other wars, Charles Smith?”

“Revolutionary I don’t know, but Indian Wars certainly, and the Texan ones.”

“And more recently?”

“Not that I’m aware of, Gwyn ap Lugh. He was never out as a wolf, and passing in the army became much harder. And I know of no Iraq connection before the one evident here.”

“Well enough. I have been wondering about the timeline. Fae prisoners first, starting three years ago, but intensifying creation of wolves from about eighteen months ago. It may be my own concerns intruding, but that suggests the exposure of the Heuters as serial killers was a trigger.”

“Or failure of their plan to control the Columbia Basin pack.” Adam’s voice was getting growly again. “But it might just have been recruiting Travers. We don’t know when he and Preskylovitch
met, and he might have faked his death because he knew he was losing control.”

“He would have been killed?”

“Probably, AED.” Adam shrugged. “But it depends. Old wolves who are worried about losing it can be helped. Once they’ve lost it, though …”

“Senile dementia’s a fair equivalent, AED. Now add wolf strength, and uncontrolled changes.” Charles’s face was bleak with memory. “We do not practice euthanasia without compelling reason, as this place testifies in extremis.”

“I didn’t suppose you did, Mr Smith, but it’s another problem with separate but equal justice. Out of interest, is Mr Harris older than the thirty-four we have for him officially?”

“No. And he’s only been a wolf for eight years. Here we go.”

Adam’s eyes were on the floor by the shaft where a gray hand had appeared, pulling and then pushing a coblyn into view, and others followed in close succession as ap Lugh moved towards them. My nose caught more death and rot, and I saw there were bits of dried blood under their toe- and finger-nails, while their clothes had acquired blots and smears. There was an exchange in Welsh, then ap Lugh switched.

“Huw, please tell Mercedes what you have seen that all may hear.”

I went forward and knelt. Huw looked up at me mournfully.

“It is as you thought, Mercedes Elf-friend, and though the space at the bottom is as large as this chamber, the bodies fill it. The oldest are little but shattered bone, but we counted as many skulls as we could see. There are two-hundred-and-eleven, but there will be more inside the main pile we could not see.”

He took my camera from his inside pocket, and offered it. It smelt too but I took it, swallowing, tapped buttons and stared at the playback for a few dreadful seconds. Freezing it I turned it silently for ap Lugh to see, and then passed it to Adam. I’m not going to describe it, but anything you can imagine about more than two hundred bodies, many eviscerated, dropping in extended sequence down the same sixteen hundred feet of twelve-foot-square shaft will not match the reality. Charles and Westfield were looking over Adam’s shoulders.

“Your help is of great value, Huw of the Coal, and all coblynau here. I regret the task was so vile.”

“We are glad to be of use, Mercedes Elf-friend.”

There was some more Welsh before ap Lugh opened an archway and they vanished through it in with evident relief, but the archway stayed open, the fae staring into it, and after a moment Nemane stepped through, eyebrows raised.

“Adam Hauptman, please show Nemane those images.”

She was the Carrion Crow, a goddess of battlefields and a third of the Morrigan, however that worked, and her face showed no expression at all as she considered the still, then let the video play for a moment.

“Well, that’s the biggest quarry I’ve seen in a while. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Two-hundred-and-eleven and counting spells of physical re-assembly, if you will.” That did
produce a blink from Nemane. “The humans will take months or years if they have to do it manually. Such a delay will not suit us, and our aid in this will earn goodwill we can use.”

“You ask much, Gwyn ap Lugh.”

“No more than I must, Nemane.”

Black eyes rested on me. “Our coyote girl’s idea, I suppose. Do you have any idea how boring a job that would be? And reassembled into what?”

I shrugged, though I didn’t feel indifferent. “I had thought coffins, but for most of those a box will do, and that will mean far more can be lowered or raised with each trip of the hoist.”

“What hoist?”

“The one AED Westfield will have installed by sometime tomorrow. Is there any way they can be identified magically as well?”

“Maybe. But it is even more boring.”

“And helpful.”

Pointing out that what she merely said she would find dull would be grossly traumatic for almost anyone else would not move Nemane, but earning goodwill might.

“Assuming I want to be helpful. This co-operation business is all very well, but I prefer being left alone.”

Or might not, but not even Gray Lords get all their druthers, and I had some growing suspicions about this unexpected interlude. I kept my voice very neutral.

“Except when you want charges dropped, artefacts or elphames found, Edythe’s premonitions investigated, oathbreach punished, or a go-between and host for negotiations that might get you left alone more often and with less effort.”

Nemane’s eyes looked more like a crow’s than ever, beady and wholly without emotions a human would recognise. “I can hope. Coyotes.” Her voice was more exasperated than angry. “Manannán was right that you are very irritating, even if what he did was unforgivably stupid. Because you ask it, Gwyn ap Lugh, and for no other reason.” She rattled a number at Westfield. “Call me when everything is set, and make sure you have decent light down there. Crows are neither nocturnal nor cave dwellers. Are you going to be here much longer?”

The last was to ap Lugh, who shrugged. “I will return soon.”

I didn’t think Nemane was best pleased by that either, but she merely nodded and vanished back through the arch which closed with a slight snap behind her. Ap Lugh checked that Westfield had the number correct — he did — and gave me another half-smile.

“That was well said, Mercedes. And Nemane will be politer when she returns, Grant Westfield. She merely thinks that Mercedes … does not need encouraging.”

“And I think I prefer trolls. And fresh air.”

No-one had any argument with the last part of that, but walking down the tunnel Adam fell in beside ap Lugh and they exchanged looks before ap Lugh sighed a little.
“No, there is no true threat of which I am aware, Adam Hauptman, however we may be … taken aback by your mate’s actions and changing status. And Nemane truly faces a major effort, however she sees the necessity as clearly as anyone. Assemblage is a complex spell, and repeating it so often a significant task.”

“Fair enough, Gwyn ap Lugh, but you will understand threats to Mercy are not appreciated.”

“That wasn’t a threat, Adam, just grumbling. I don’t suppose she likes being underground any more than we do. She’ll do it, which is all that matters, and if we can get IDs as well I couldn’t care less if she’s a bit abrupt.”

The kitchen area was deserted, though welcome smells lingered in the air, and once we were outside again Adam drew a deep breath.

“Alright, love, but I agree with you about trolls. Is there anything left except the remaining interviews and the clothing?”

“I don’t think so, though …” I followed a thought. “Gwyn ap Lugh, would whatever names of those dead Ms Velasquez or the others remember make the assemblage easier?”

“Yes. To command by name is quicker than ordering what was once a whole to be so again.”

“Then we should maximise that list for the AED.”

“That would be good. The clothing should be here soon, and I need to get the heavy machinery moving.” Westfield looked at me. “I’m also getting a clearer sense of what Mr and Ms Smith meant about your taking risks and recalibrating for Mercy. My sincere thanks.”

“You’re welcome, AED, but there really wasn’t a threat today. I’ve seen Nemane think hard about killing me, and that wasn’t it. More importantly, will two-hundred-and-fourteen, or forty-nine, be public before the President speaks later today?”

“I would think he’ll announce it himself as a part of that speech. Prince Gwyn ap Lugh, how much should we say about the aid given by the coblynau and to be given by Nemane?”

“Name them thus and state how they give aid, but barely. The coblynau would not appreciate being described.”

“Noted, sir. Mr Hauptman, if I might have the camera I’ll get the video copied.”

Adam checked the memory in case there was anything else on there — there wasn’t, because I don’t leave anything I don’t want others to see lying around — then ran the earlier footage to make sure I hadn’t caught anything I shouldn’t. Westfield watched him with irony in his eyes, but accepted the camera politely and headed for the cars. I caught Charles’s eye and spoke softly.

“Charles, did Travers ever live in Chicago?”

“No, though he knew Leo and Isabelle. But I looked very hard at what they had done, Mercy, and his name was not in it. Gerry is the more likely connection, and though the suicide looked solid, with a cremation report, I guess now Gerry used a threat of reporting Travers’s weakening control to recruit him, and the suicide cover was the payoff.”

“Or insurance against what did happen.” Adam frowned. “And none of it connects him with Preskylovitch.”
“I had a thought about that, love. If you’re a hitman looking for possible preternaturals, a lone wolf who’s losing it might come to your attention. Plus, Travers was hiding from all other wolves. And if you’re Preskylovitch, looking for a new security blanket from Cantrip, and realise he’s a completely lone wolf, vulnerable to blackmail, you might pass that up rather than taking him out — especially if you discovered some of what he knew, like the tranq and build-a-private-pack idea. We need hard dates, but suppose this place had been up and running for a couple of years, and they hadn’t much to show for the money and effort except however many corpses and prisoners they didn’t know what to do with. Then the Heuters get stopped, and the Senator turns the screw, wanting a bigger bang for his bucks, so they start scrambling. Nothing they can do about the Fae after Boston, but ramping up here, getting Dim Future organised, and Bennet’s operation could all be responses.”

“Maybe.” Adam waggled a hand. “You’re right about dates. And Charles, I’m sorry to push you on it but we need that data purging as fast as can be, so we can get what’s left to Westfield. In tranches, if necessary — I don’t want it to become an issue over days.”

Charles didn’t disagree, but he’d need help and I volunteered Ben. He shook his head.

“It’s alright, Mercy. Colin and Anna will be helping, and Da’s already called in other help with the right skills. I’ll prioritise clearing stuff we can pass on — the payroll data and the like can go to Westfield as soon as it’s copied, and there’s plenty of it. You saw Preskylovitch’s room, and he kept his paperwork in army order too. Gwyn ap Lugh, is anytime after dawn still alright for letting the Feds know the names of the fugitives?”

“It should be, Charles Cornick, but I will check. And unless you have further need of me, I will return Underhill now, and meet you in the Garden of Manannán’s death when you go to Aspen Creek. You will find it awkward to hold Mercy’s cloak as well as the desk, but if your father will allow it one of the trolls can bring it through.” He paused, and came to some decision. “How great the effect will be I cannot say, but given what we have found here and the volume of that data, if you will allow me to come myself I can also offer some time dilation. And by then I will have news of the fugitives.”

Charles looked a little frozen, but I couldn’t stop a welcome smile.

“That would be good, Gwyn ap Lugh. Charles will need to check but I don’t think Bran will mind. With wolves from four packs, twenty-six traumatised newbies, and Medicine Wolf in town, how much more can a polite troll and a well-meaning Gray Lord add? Especially as they’ll be carrying things we badly want and are offering even more help than allowing us to travel Underhill.”

“Yes. I meant no offence, Gwyn ap Lugh. It’s just …”

“Trolls?”

“More the Path of Mercy.”

“You named it, big brother. Can’t complain when others take it too. Feeling short of some trousers?”

I got a glare, which didn’t bother me at all, especially as I also saw a flicker on Adam’s face and felt his amusement — as welcome as my own.

“I doubt Da will be laughing, Mercy, and Leah will be furious.”

“Bran understands practical solutions, Charles, and unless I’m mistaken ‘news of the fugitives’
might well mean the contents of their heads. Do you have them Underhill already, Gwyn ap Lugh?

“Oh yes. And there we can use Underhill’s time to the full. Dawn is the deadline for returning them mindless to the places from which they were taken. How did you know, Mercy?”

He sounded genuinely curious, and I could see neither Adam nor Charles had made the same deductions I had.

“You had full names, Gwyn ap Lugh, and every desire. Finding them would take one spell. And one night Overhill can be a hundred years Underhill. As soon as you said dawn was late enough to tell humans I assumed that meant you’d be done and dusted by then.” I looked at my watch. “And dawn is not so far off. Do you want me to call before we come through?”

“If you would. Farewell for now, Mercedes Elf-friend, and all here.”

Ap Lugh’s knights followed him into an archway and the night eased as fae power departed. I hadn’t quite realised how thick it had been in the air, and my own neck-roll was nothing to those of Adam and Charles.

“Huh. Sorry, guys — the cloak and Manannán’s Bane must mask some of that.”

Charles shook out his hands too. “I was wondering, little sister. You have been flying again, when it was all I could do to walk. Ap Lugh is very angry.”

“Yeah, he is, but not with us. Nor was Nemane — for my money that was all a put-up job. You heard her — the biggest quarry I’ve seen in a while is not something a goddess of the battlefield finds boring. And because you ask it, Gwyn ap Lugh, and for no other reason was going out of her way to insist we bear no debt for her aid. Besides, ap Lugh wouldn’t have gone for it so fast if it didn’t serve fae ends. Making it a chore undertaken as a duty relieves any obligation on them for accepting a … I won’t say pleasure, though Nemane might, but a release, however you cut it. And ap Lugh is so relieved a way forward is emerging he’d swallow a lot if he had to, which he doesn’t. Plus he’s enjoying his new powers — I’ll bet you a serious meal that capacity of erosion is one of the things he got from Manannán. It’s what seas do, not mountain lakes.”

Adam’s arm came round me hard, and I looked my surprise.

“I said on … Monday that you were scarily good at this, Mercy, and you still are. I hadn’t thought about any of that, and it all rings true.”

“You’ve had distractions, love.”

“And you haven’t? You’ve known your Da longer, Charles, but seems to me she’s right he won’t object once he understands.”

“I don’t disagree, Adam.” Charles still looked pensive. “But Leah won’t, and if she did she wouldn’t care. What worries me is how much trouble she could make for the freed.”

“Tell Bran if he’ll stand back I’ll deal with Leah if I have to. She can draw on him all she likes so long as he doesn’t intervene. And can that look, Charles — she bounced right off me when I was five, and if she decides to mix it now, never mind trousers, I’ll knock her entire pant-suit into the middle of next week.”

Charles didn’t like his stepmother any more than I did, or the power pantsuits she favoured, and a faint smile glimmered onto his face.
“Well, that will be entertaining. And for Da — Leah has not been helpful this week, from all I gather.”

“Surprise. Go call him?”

He went, and Adam and I headed across to the fire. The confirmed minimum number left everyone quiet, and while Vance and Kefliotas were finishing up their last interviews, and Adam and Velasquez set about maximising her list of the dead, I sat with Fred and Hank, thanking them for their help and telling them what I could to pass on to Gordon. I also explained to the borrowed medics that we’d be heading for Aspen Creek and arranged with Warren for anything they’d left in Kennewick to be forwarded. Charles came back, conveying Bran’s multiple if less than amused agreements, and talked to Artie about the need for ENT checks on the effects of long-term, low-level exposure to airborne silver. Gathering basic data on how often who had been tranq’d or shot with silver was taking us into the false dawn, with some beautiful red streaking from the eastern horizon, when I heard another chopper coming in just as Westfield came trudging back. As Adam joined me I scooted along our log to give him some room.

“Thank you.” He sat and handed me the camera. “That chopper’s the clothing at last. Prince ap Lugh?”

“Gone, AED. Do you need a message passing?”

“If you would. The President and DC are very badly shaken by the numbers, and the rest of what’s happened, but it will all go into his speech. He expresses his sincere gladness at the assistance rendered.”

Westfield’s voice was very dry, and I managed a half-smile.

“I’ll pass it on in the appropriate manner, AED.”

“Thank you. And in other news, the hoist’s already on the move — Leslie’s getting very good at telling her superiors what they have to do as matters of urgency — and a pump truck with extra hose is on the road from Rawlins. But so are PBS from Cheyenne and others — the scrambled choppers blipped their radar. We’ve told them to wait while we arrange access to a major crime scene. Anything you don’t want shown?”

I exchanged a look with Adam. “Images of the freed. Otherwise I’d ask you to show pretty much everything, AED, and as soon as possible — recorded today, even if you have to delay any broadcast. The whole ghastly place, so everyone can see what Cantrip means in practice.”

“And the evidence of preternatural power?”

“We’re not asking you to hide any of that, AED. Ravens found it for us, trolls got us in, and as many kinds of magic as necessary were used to free thirty-five living victims of Cantrip in the shortest possible time. If you could be very clear that the five dead perpetrators were found dead, having killed one another, not killed by us, that would be helpful.”

“Not a problem, Ms Hauptman. Travers?”

I waited while the chopper set down and the whumping roar declined into a fading whine.

“Is a fact. The known perpetrators are one wolf and, to date, eleven humans. All so far ID’d are Anglo. The known victims are nine fae, all alive, twenty-nine wolves, of whom three are dead, and two-hundred-and-eleven plus presumed humans, all dead, and if the proportions among the freed hold with the dead, mostly young women of colour. Rape was routine before forced Changes.
Scent and other evidence, including testimony of the freed, indicates this was Preskylovitch’s base and where he would have brought Jesse and me had Medicine Wolf not stopped him. And by a really odd coincidence, the property belongs to Senator Heuter, who is being asked a lot more questions.”

“All of that, certainly. Building a pack?”

I left that to Charles.

“That experimentation was the primary purpose should be stressed, I think, AED, but the secondary aim need not be concealed. Nor its profound failure. And there is a bitter paradox in Cantrip killing so many humans in trying to make wolves whom they presumably intended to serve their agenda of eradicating the preternatural.”

“Yes. Ms Hauptman called it Bến Tre backwards. To destroy it they had to save it. Except they didn’t save anything, even themselves.” No-one had anything to say to that, and Westfield shifted tack. “What is happening about contacting the families of the freed?”

“Nothing yet, but it will. Phone calls in the first place, later this morning I expect. The Marrok has to be sure they are all in control of their wolves, and there are other issues, AED. None were wolves when they disappeared, so the families have no experience of dealing with a wolf while the illegals’ families may also be illegal, and though we’ll do all we can, we can’t have scores of humans wandering about in a hidden wolf sanctuary where the freed are not the only … patients. One answer might be individual meetings with kin at other locations, but it also depends what the freed want to do. Providing they are in full control we won’t hold anyone against their will.”

“Do you think they will become a proper pack?”

“I think that will be the line of least resistance, and if so they will come to the Tri-Cities. I was serious about that housing.”

“Yes. That might suit everyone, for the next while, anyway. How soon will you be back in Kennewick?”

“Not too long, I hope, but a few hours, probably. I want a shower and bed, but we’ll need to see to the freed, and report to the Marrok.” I could see soldiers approaching, arms filled with winter gear. “You’ve done very well by us, AED, so I’ll add that the answers to the first three questions you sensibly haven’t asked are yes. Clothes are here.”
Chapter Forty-Two

It took a while to get everyone kitted out, but Fisher had done us proud. There were fifty sets of Marines’ winter gear, with fifty pairs of boots, to choose among, and one of the soldiers was an experienced Command Sergeant-Major who could size people, jacket to boots, at a glance. When he was done and the freed were busy dressing, Adam and I thanked him for his efforts.

“You’re welcome. Never had a midnight call-out from the Feebs before.” He hesitated. “These really are people Cantrip kidnapped to experiment on?”

“They are.”

“Fuckers. Sorry, but they’re kids, mostly.”

“Yeah, that’s more or less what we said, CSM.” That Adam wasn’t irritated by the obscenity said much about his feelings and tiredness. “The currently known death toll is two-hundred-and-fourteen.”

“What?”

“You heard right. Bodies tossed down the mineshaft. Most of those will be kids too, probably.”

“Christ above.”

“Yeah. So if anyone thinks Cantrip deserves any sympathy …”

“Right.” Adam got a sidelong look. “Papers say you were a Ranger in Vietnam?”

“Yes. So was David Christiansen there. The Native Americans are both Marine vets, and two of the wolves with me are serving. But I tell you, CSM, the killers were mostly vets, like Preskylovitich, and from what we know all were black ops in Iraq. Some questions to be asked.”

“Oh yeah, and not before time. I was Afghanistan, which wasn’t good and got worse, but Iraq was a full-bore clusterfuck from the get-go.”

“And then some, from all I know. But I need to get these people out of here. Mercy, go make the calls?”

I did, receiving a dry acknowledgement from Bran, though he was pleased about the clothing and the quality of human assistance we were getting, and a bland one from ap Lugh. By way of farewell I thanked Greening and Torgerson, who was working some chunk of forensic kit in one of their SUV’s that seemed to be a mobile lab, and when I got back found Adam doing as much for Vance and Westfield, who had Ramona’s list.

“Everyone’s set, Mercy. How are you going to work the relays?”

“I’m not, I hope.”

Despite the looks, I held up Manannán’s Bane and explained to it and the cloak what I needed, asking the cloak to expand sufficiently that thirty-seven people could get at least one hand on its
hem. I can’t say I felt it get any bigger but there was some rustling and rose scent, and from the
muffled exclamations as Adam guided people into position it had done as asked, and I told it how
glad I was. Once Adam was back at my other side, with a grip himself, I raised my voice.

“Remember, people, once you pass under the arch it’s three steps, then three more when I tell you,
and don’t let go. Everyone ready?”

No-one said they weren’t, so I asked the cloak once again to open the way to the place of its
making. As the archway formed I heard human exclamations I ignored, and we went through. Ap
Lugh was waiting, carrying two fat paper bags, with Irpa, and the clearing had once again enlarged
sufficiently for me to walk on until Charles called softly that everyone was through. I expressed my
happiness at their courtesy to cloak, Manannán’s Bane, and Underhill, seeing Irpa’s amusement.

“Gwyn ap Lugh, while I remember, I am asked to tell you that the President will speak of what has
been found in his apology, and expresses his sincere gladness at the aid the Fae have given in this.”

“Noted, Mercy.” He handed me a sheath I knew was very old and had magic of its own besides.
“Carnwennan’s. Give the directions.”

I tucked Carnwennan into the sheath, and both into my pocket, and did, specifying the space before
the converted pole barn used for pack and village meetings. Irpa casually hoisted the desk and the
bundle of Macs on it, and with a repeated warning not to let go of the cloak, and that we’d be
arriving in snow, we went through a second arch.

Aspen Creek was not a place that changed fast, despite the turnover in resident wolves, and almost
everything about it remained deeply familiar to me from childhood, including the six or seven
inches of snow underfoot. But I hadn’t often seen quite so many of its wolves and humans
assembled, and they certainly hadn’t seen anything like the show they were getting. To be fair,
where the wolves were concerned the stares at me were brief, as emerging freed and other wolves
claimed their attention, but the humans were more fixated — at least until Irpa and ap Lugh came
through, and shock hit them all. There were glances at Bran, standing to one side, and when he
didn’t move a frozen silence broken by a muffled thump as Irpa set the desk down. Adam let go of
the cloak and rolled his head.

“Alright, freed with me, please, Ramona leading.”

He took them to Bran and introduced Velasquez, naming her as de facto Alpha, and she introduced
them. Charles was riding herd on the rest of our party, and once they’d let go of the cloak, which
contracted warmly about me, I dropped back to stand by ap Lugh and Irpa.

“I regret the delay, Gwyn ap Lugh, Irpa, but with so many new wolves coming in at once the
protocol matters. No slight is intended.”

“Nor is any taken, Mercy. Bran Cornick properly looks first to his own in need.”

It took a while because Bran was looking every freed hard in the eye, and the crowd had time to
think about what they were seeing. I could see the ages and builds of the freed registering in wolf
scowls, but also uneasy glances at me and the fae, and the understanding that not all of those with
Charles were wolves. Sage, whom I’d always liked, gave me an admiring grin, and Colin a silent
whistle and a thumbs-up, but Leah had a look that would have soured milk, and she had some
cronies standing with her, equally unhappy — all female wolves who’d made my childhood a lot
harder than it needed to be. I thought about what I might want magically, and felt ap Lugh stir.

“There is a problem?”
There might be, Gwyn ap Lugh, but if there is I’ll take care of it. Leah Cornick is … not always helpful, shall we say, and it can be awkward for Bran to slap her down. Do you have that news of the fugitives?

“Yes. No true surprises, but much of interest. Will you pass a copy to Westfield or should I have one delivered anonymously?”

“Mmm. I don’t think I should, but I’m not sure about anonymity. It’s not as if their punishment could be anything but magic. When will the, um, ex-fugitives be found?”

“Whenever. None now knows any more than they did the day they were born, so they aren’t going anywhere on their own. One is at his home in Bismarck, the others in motels between Las Vegas and Little Rock where they had holed up. And we removed further computers and papers from their house, rooms, and SUV’s, which are in the sack with the others.” He shrugged. “I can’t guarantee we found everything there might be to find, but we took all we could discover.”

“Good. Does anything they said need redacting?”

“Not so far as we are concerned, and we did not ask them about experimental results, only what they had done. Edythe did ask what they wanted vampires for, and how they got them, but she didn’t include the answers in the written copy. I’ll tell you when we have leisure.”

“OK. Good to know. Then unless you think we need a chance to read it first, get it to Westfield any way you like, though I don’t know how long he’ll be in Wyoming. Or Leslie Fisher, maybe — she’s still in Kennewick. And maybe tell the Feebs where they all are?”

I had no pity at all for torturers who had thought they could get away with what they had done, but felt a frisson of fear at the power the fae had. Justice, magical or otherwise, is rightly a fearful thing.

“Very well. Leslie is an idea.” He stiffened, and I felt it too. “Something comes.”

“Medicine Wolf.”

Even as I spoke it appeared by some trees to my left, and as heads began to turn I raised my hand in a wave that was also an invitation to approach.

“Sorry to interrupt, Bran, but don’t mind Medicine Wolf, anyone. It’s here to help with the freed.”

Greetings to all here. I will wait for you to complete your ceremony. Medicine Wolf ignored the ripple of shock as they heard it, and padded over to me, exchanging interested looks with Irpa. Mercy. Zee said you had achieved what you hoped.

“We did, thank you. Reading me again would be the quickest way for a full report, but let me first introduce to you Irpa, a troll, and Gwyn ap Lugh, Prince of the Gray Lords, who have aided us, of their graces. Gwyn ap Lugh, Irpa, this is Medicine Wolf, an avatar of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin.”

It made for a pretty interesting spectacle, and with Irpa I was reminded that Medicine Wolf had said it missed the megafauna. With Gwyn ap Lugh, though, there was a subtle exchange that I thought amounted to mutual confirmation that the other had great big heaps of magic. I was also watching the wider scene in the corner of my eye, seeing Bran still going with the freed, but even wolves’ attention was distracted, flicking between each naming and the Manitou. That didn’t stop when I met Medicine Wolf’s gaze to let it read me, and felt it register how ghastly the mine had been, how astonishingly well Ramona Velasquez had done, but though it offered me some more
glass as it finished, I declined.

“I have a use for some of that rage, Medicine Wolf.”

As you will, Mercy. Its voice widened to include the fae, though I wasn’t sure how I knew. This kind of practical magical co-operation is interesting and useful. I have enjoyed talking to Zee and Tad, and I believe I would enjoy talking with you also, Gwyn ap Lugh, and with Irpa.

“As I with you, Medicine Wolf. You are aware of our intent to observe any meeting between you and the human President, in Kennewick?”

Certainly. It may be we can speak there, to agree how we will live and let live. But should you need to speak to me, as the prince of your kind, ask Underhill to extend its magic briefly to the naith of the Columbia and Snake, where this form woke, and I will come to Walla Walla as soon thereafter as I may.

“With pleasure, Medicine Wolf. Should you need me, Bran Cornick and Mercy both have my number. And know we are very glad you were willing to heed Mercy that morning.”

I was happy to do so, but do not let another so threaten Mercy, Gwyn ap Lugh.

Its attention swung away, because Bran was finishing up, and after speaking briefly to Ramona and Adam turned to the crowd. His voice was flat, but I could hear the anger in it, and so could they.

“There are other guests to greet, but those who will be staying here for a while come first. Look well, my wolves, and your kin. Twenty-six victims of Cantrip, all Changed without consent or information, and imprisoned and tortured for up to eighteen months with no aid but their fellow victims. All but five are under the age of twenty and nineteen are submissives. And every one has control of his or her wolf. Every one.”

There was relief as well as anger in Bran’s voice, and I shared it. Out-of-control freed had been a grim prospect.

“They deserve our respect as they need our aid and kindness, and though the situation is abnormal I accept Ramona Velasquez as their Alpha, at least pro tem. You will all accept and treat her as such. We and all wolves also owe our warmest thanks to Mercy, for calling on the Elder Spirits to find Cantrip’s prison and with the aid of the fae breaking the captives out and bringing them here. And we owe her very much more than thanks for all she has done since Tuesday, both in public and more privately. Nominated hosts for the freed come forward, please.”

The needless praise was bait for Leah, who being an idiot more than half the time took it with a snap despite the presence of Medicine Wolf.

“Before we get to a female Alpha, Bran, perhaps your precious Mercy could explain why she’s dumping her perverse problems on us. And hobnobbing with a troll and Gray Lord she has brought to Aspen Creek.”

Bran’s voice stayed very flat. “Do you wish to do so, Mercy?”

“With your permission, Bran.”

He waved a hand, and Leah snorted.

“A bit late for that, Mercy, when you’ve brought not only wolves from four other packs but five non-wolves into my territory.”
Wrong. The Marrok’s territory, Leah, not yours, and he knew who was coming. But there are two answers to your question — one reasonable and one unreasonable. The reasonable one is that everyone Adam and I have brought here was a necessary part of the rescue of twenty-six imprisoned wolves and nine imprisoned fae, as well as three imprisoned vamps we managed to keep secret from the Feds. Joel is pack, and his tibicena magic was essential, the wolves from other packs are on loan as medics or because they have army training, Fred and Hank are avatars of Hawk and served as our scouts, and with her sister Irpa not only tore open steel doors even wolf strength could not have bent but carried Preskylovitch’s desk, with all his papers and the computers Cantrip had in their hellhole, so we can purge them before the Feds see them. Think about that one for a moment. Medicine Wolf is here to help the freed. And then there is Gwyn ap Lugh, who has used his magic and command of other fae to assist us in many ways, revealing the dead in the mineshaft — who number two-hundred-and-eleven and counting, by the way — and who comes here now because, one, he brings the full confessions and final testaments of the Cantrip perpetrators who fled, and two, he can bend time for us, meaning the data can be purged more quickly and the Feds appeased by its swifter return. Think about that one too. And on top of all that, Leah, there are the twenty-six freed, the miraculously sane and in control freed, who have been through a hell neither you nor I can begin to imagine, though I have seen it, and smelt it, all night long — and despite knowing all of that you feel it is more important right now to snipe at me than to be of any use to your Alpha and the pack for whom you should share responsibility. I’m oddly reminded of Paul Harris.”

Leah was scarlet with anger, and if the numbers has brought looks of horror and dismay, those last lines induced widespread winces because they were flatly true. While I’d been speaking with all that careful reason, though, I’d opened my bonds to Adam and Joel wide, drawing from Adam as much of his spitting anger as I could hold, draining it from him despite his worry at what I was doing and storing it in a space I was imagining, and from Joel I took whatever manitou magic was available. I’d also opened myself as far as I could to the cloak and Manannán’s Bane, inviting their participation. Now I pushed into that space in my mind and magic all the fear, rage, and loathing I’d been holding down since the trolls had cracked open the doors and that stink had hit me, my revulsion at all it represented, and I thought about Coyote’s oversize coyote, and Medicine Wolf’s speed, and the snap of Thunderbird’s beak, and the Alpha’s roar of unbearable pain that Adam had given on Tuesday night. Leah’s mouth was just opening, and I cut across her.

“And then, Leah, there is the unreasonable answer.”

I let the magic go, and got more or less what I’d wanted. The coyote that flashed across the space between us and snapped its jaws shut maybe an inch in front of Leah’s face before vanishing was a great deal larger and faster than any werewolf, and if it didn’t quite knock her out of her pantsuit it did send her leaping a good ten feet to land flat on her back in the snow, and bowled over her cronies as well. What I hadn’t anticipated was its appearance, fur the colour of dried blood with skulls from the mine knotted into a clattering, dreadlocked ruff more like a werewolf’s, or that it would be visible to everyone. And audible, in a howling roar of enraged loathing and disgust no real coyote had ever produced that left wolf ears ringing, made snow fall from trees far around, and echoed across the whole bowl of the mountains while the sweet smell of roses thickened the early morning air. And tangible, because Adam’s and my emotions dissipated in a wave even humans felt, faces twisting with its impact. I blew out a breath and gave a long coyote shake, letting the tinges of magic out while the cloak rustled.

“Mrs Marrok or no, Leah, if you do anything to harm or hinder the freed, that coyote will be closing its jaws about six inches further forward. End of story. And apologies for the overload, everyone, but you’ll understand why, after the week we’ve had, and the night, Adam and I are feeling a mite unreasonable. Bran, you were saying?”
He shook himself, wolf fashion, and rolled his shoulders. “I was? Please don’t do that again, Mercy. Half the game within five miles probably just died of fright.”

*Not quite, Bran Cornick. I have soothed the beasts who heard, and moved some from the path of an avalanche the echoes started on what you call Sheepherder Mountain.*

Bran blinked. “Oh. Well, that’s alright, then, but I’d still prefer you didn’t do it again, Mercy, whatever it was exactly. Does anyone have any objection to either Mercy’s reasonable or unreasonable answers?”

Bran let the silence stretch a little, until Asil broke it with a true laugh and everyone stared. He came over and offered me a slight bow and Medicine Wolf a deeper one.

“Ah, *mi princesa*, I shall just have to owe you that week on kitchen parade. Such style. And such beautiful roses — perhaps your cloak would enjoy my hothouses.” He turned. “And so you all see why there are now the *Aficionados de Mercy*, for we must relearn who and what she is. As to what has happened to me, why, I met Medicine Wolf, and am in better shape than I have been for centuries. Try it for yourselves. Bran, I will be at home if you need me, and any of the freed are welcome if they would like to be somewhere hot and sweet-smelling for a while. As I would like, now.” He swept them a third bow. “*Adios, compadres.*”

Bran looked after his retreating form and shook his head. “Now that’s going to take some getting used to. And once again, nominated hosts, please.”

There was a snap in his voice, and people started forward fast, some I recognised and some I didn’t. With nods to Irpa, Charles, Samuel, Warren and George picked up the desk and carried it off to the pole barn, followed by Anna and Samuel shepherding the medical wolves. Leah and her cronies had dusted themselves off and were walking stiffly away, and I could see Sage and Ramona headed towards me, but Adam was by my side already, an odd note in his voice.

“Did I know you could do that, Mercy? You didn’t just share my rage, you’ve pulled a chunk right out and … I don’t know, blew it away.”

“Seemed like a good idea, love. Neither of us need the burden of that much rage, however justified, and relying on manitou glass isn’t on. I didn’t know it would work, but I’m glad it did.”

“It was interesting.” Irpa’s voice was reflective. “And loud. I’ve never seen glamour used quite like that.”

“*Glamour?*”

“Indeed so, Mercy. Glamour gave the sending its visibility and … décor. The cloak has glamour, as does Manannán’s Bane, and I would guess they tuned some of the power you gained from him to … enhance your purpose. Though the sound was not glamouried, Irpa — that was wolf and coyote magic expressing anguished rage.” Ap Lugh gave me a little nod. “You really are integrating things well.”

I’d have to think about that one for a while, but Sage and Ramona were hovering, and I turned. “Let me make some introductions. Ramona Velasquez, Sage Carhardt, Sage, Ramona. Sage is good people, Ramona, and one to turn to at need. Sage, there’s rape trauma for all the women as well as the forced Changes and everything else. And these fae are Irpa and Gwyn ap Lugh.”

I did the formalities, and Sage offered a quick double curtsey with her usual style, earning a nod from ap Lugh and a grin from Irpa.
“And Medicine Wolf, this is Sage Carhardt and Ramona Velasquez. Ramona’s strength saved many lives. Ramona, meet Medicine Wolf, who ate Preskylovitch for us.”

Medicine Wolf whuffed amusement. *Greetings, Sage Carhardt and to you, Ramona Velasquez. I understand why you are pleased I ate that human, though I had other reasons at the time. I am here to help you and the others who have been freed, as I helped Asil. If you will allow me to read you, I will know better how I may help those for whom you are their Alpha, however unbonded.*

Ramona looked at me, and I nodded.

“Go ahead, Ramona. It’s far and away the best thing you can do for yourself and them right now. Be willing, and meet Medicine Wolf’s eyes. It’s like Anna’s zen, no pain and lots of gain.”

She swallowed, and did it. I pulled a fold of the cloak closer to my nose so I wouldn’t smell her secrets, or Preskylovitch, and caught Sage’s eye, speaking softly.

“You should do it too, Sage, but not right now. And for the love of God, before Medicine Wolf leaves make sure it reads Bran. Think Asil, and talk to Charles and Anna.”

“Will do, Mercy. And count me among your *aficionados* — that was a lot more entertainment than I’ve seen in a while, despite the emotional whip. Hmm. Cloak’s just as gorgeous as it looked on TV. But all I was really going to say was that Leah and her harpies have been stewing all week as you’ve hit everything thrown at you clean out of the park. The Path of Mercy irritated them even more than Charlie looking so good on screen, the *Time* cover had them howling, and we were quite worried when we heard what would be happening this morning, so serious thanks as well as *woot!* And *Mrs Marrok* is priceless.”

Sage was the only person who ever called him Charlie, and I gave her a tired grin, seeing Samuel, Warren, and George returning from the pole barn.

“Not a problem, Sage. Old resentments on both sides mixed up in there.”

“I imagine.”

Medicine Wolf released Ramona, and she gave a long, slow sigh with her eyes closed.

“*Virgen de los Lobos*, but that is wonderful.” She breathed twice, deeply, while I tried not to think about what the Catholics would make of Our Lady of the Wolves, and her eyes snapped open again. “Thank you from my soul, Medicine Wolf. You are balm.”

*It is insulation only, Ramona Velasquez. But it will give you time to come to terms with what has been done to you, and the freedom that has been returned to you. Mercy is right that you have shown impressive strength, and cared well for those made victims with you, but that very caring has meant burying rather than processing your own feelings. That will be a harder labour for you as their Alpha than for them, and I will assist you again as I can, when you feel the need.*

“Thank you, and I get that, but just now I don’t care. Breathing no longer hurts.”

“Huh. Ramona, some of that might be silver in your lungs starting to loosen. And cleaner air.”

Bran had come across, and his eyebrows rose. “Silver in lungs, Mercy?”

Adam answered him with a quick explanation of how much silver there had been in the chamber’s air, and a thought clicked.
“If it proves a real problem, Bran, talk to Zee. He and Tad can get silver out of a body, as I and too many of the pack know. Hurts a lot, but it works, and you feel a lot better afterwards.”

“I remember.” His gaze shifted. “I will be one more moment, Gwyn ap Lugh, and am glad of your patience. Yours too, Irpa — it’s been a while. Medicine Wolf. Thank you for coming, I think we are due a long talk.”

*I agree, Bran Cornick, but there is no need for haste. I will stay here today to help the freed, so we have time. Deal with the fae as you must.*

“Thank you, that is very helpful.” Bran shifted again. “Gwyn ap Lugh, we are beyond gladness, I think, and I give you simple thanks, admitting no obligation, for all you and yours have done this past night for me and mine. Mercy said you bear the full confessions and last testaments of those who were fugitive?”

“I do, Bran Cornick. And I reciprocate those thanks, on the same terms, for the fae we rescued, and for all you and yours have done.” Ap Lugh gave one of his bags to Bran and the other to Adam. “The confessions. Of the fugitives, the cook was another former soldier, and confirms that those Preskylovitch recruited were comrades from the black war in Iraq. Four of the five who thought of themselves as scientists had also been involved in what they called psyops there. And the last was Elias Heuter, the Senator’s second cousin, who spoke openly of the war his cousin wages against the preternatural, and whose phone has records of multiple calls to DC numbers. If you have no objection, it will go to Leslie Fisher now with a further copy of these statements. The minds of all the guilty were rendered as they were at birth, and will never again progress beyond infancy.”

“So.” Bran closed his eyes for a moment. “No objection, but I would be glad of a copy of all data on that phone.”

Ap Lugh took a flash drive from his pocket, tossing it, and Bran’s eyes snapped open as he plucked it from the air.

“All on there, Bran Cornick, with images of the materials in fugitives’ possession that we have added to the sack on the desk. As I told Mercy, I cannot guarantee we found everything, but we did all we could. And we have redacted anything mentioning vampires, although what Cantrip wanted and how they obtained those captives is an interesting tale for our leisure. Also, did anyone tell you that Wulfe the Sorcerer acknowledged Mercy’s aid to his kind, promising her protection of which the Master of the Night and all vampires would know? He named himself the oldest living wizard vampire.”

Bran’s face was a study, but smoothed. “You take it She of Livorno is dead, then?”

“She was older than Wulfe, beyond doubt.”

“So. We may hope at least. And protection from Wulfe.” Bran shook his head gently. “Mercy, is there anyone who hasn’t promised you protection this week? Don’t answer, please.”

I found I hadn’t dissipated all my temper. “Stuff the rhetorical questions, Bran, right up She of Livorno for all I care. Thomas Hao told me flatly that if Wulfe were his, he’d kill him, so how far Wulfe’s word goes is anyone’s guess. Adam and I were already on guard for ever, and none of this week’s crap changes the core of that, however the promises of care are welcome. And none of it matters much, anyway, next to what was in that hellhole of a mine. Westfield says the President will blow the lid off with his apology later today, capping the pink rallies with the abolition of Cantrip as known mass-murderers. What are you and Gwyn ap Lugh going to say when he does?”
After a long moment, Bran sighed. “Wanting to ground you was always singularly redundant, Mercy. And I do not yet know. Gwyn ap Lugh, are you open to a joint statement, on behalf of the joint victims?”

“I am, Bran Cornick. And Mercedes is not wrong, however sharply spoken. You and I are old and think of the old, but we might agree Medicine Wolf is as new as it is old, and Coyote as fresh in Mercedes as he has ever been. Our old patience has won much, over the seasons, but her new impatience has achieved in four days much that we could not in many years. I came here also so that momentum should not be lost.”

“What more would you have done, Gwyn ap Lugh?”

“Besides assisting you to purge that data more swiftly, by Overhill time, I have two suggestions, Bran Cornick. I have a file on Senator Heuter that I will copy to Leslie Fisher, and I wondered if you might also, in whatever way you choose, let her have anything interesting from your file on him.”

“That I can do, certainly.”

“Good. The second is more complicated, but Mercedes is right that we will need to answer the President’s apology, and swiftly. Assuming it is acceptable — and I will not be looking for small faults — I am minded to announce that we have moved our dwelling Underhill, and are willing to seek a new agreement with humans. I ask you to consider allowing your title to be known in your response, to make it crystal clear that there is a werewolf authority higher than any one pack. Like Underhill, the Marrok has become a more open secret, and the unity of wolves would be underlined. I thought we might usefully recognise one another. And in both cases, the attractiveness of negotiation would be heightened.”

Bran thought about it, and gave a brief nod. “There is wisdom in that, Gwyn ap Lugh. It has been a week for outing, and the title alone I can allow.”

“I am glad. Do you, Mercedes, or Adam have any objection to my using Ms Taylor and KEPR to achieve maximal publicity? Or to your son giving your own response? I know Charles Cornick will be needed here, but if you and he, and Adam and Mercedes, are willing I could bring him Underhill to Kennewick, with as swift a return.”

Adam and I exchanged resigned looks, while Bran was thinking some more.

“You want this to happen tonight, Gwyn ap Lugh?”

“If possible, Mercy. You have yet to see news today, but the indications are that the marches in San Francisco and DC will both be very large. And as their principal demand is the abolition of Cantrip, they are going to be the most rapidly successful demonstrations there have ever been, achieving their end before the crowds disperse. The President’s announcements and apology will create a curious mood, at once horrified and euphoric, and I do not see that any delay will serve wolves or fae, while seizing that mood with offers of goodwill and negotiation in good faith will raise the pressure to answer in kind and with equal despatch.”

I wanted uninterrupted hours, not the promise of a camera in the house yet again, but ap Lugh had more than one point. Adam too had been struck by the imagination of the mood that might be induced in the marching crowds, and shrugged.

“We don’t mind if Bran has no objection, Gwyn ap Lugh, though I wonder about formulating so important a response as quickly as you propose. Wait and re-read before posting?”
“There is that, Adam Hauptman, but I shall ask Leslie Fisher to pass on a request for an advance
draft of the President’s script — an hour at least before he begins, that we may respond properly
yet with speed. I believe he will take the point, even if they are still tinkering with the wording.
And if there is anything truly unacceptable he will have the opportunity to change it.”

“And be reassured if there isn’t, yes. That sounds more workable, Gwyn ap Lugh.”

Bran had been listening intently. “Very well. Charles will not be happy and will need Anna, but I
agree this should happen, with the caveat that if we do not see that draft we will need time to test
our own words.”

“I am glad.” Ap Lugh took an envelope from a pocket and gave it to me. “The request for a draft,
Mercy, to give to Leslie Fisher. And I will have the copy of the fugitives’ confessions, with their
phones and my file, delivered a short while after your own return home, so perhaps you might warn
your security of an impending archway.”

It would mean I could get my head down the sooner, so I nodded. “Will do, Gwyn ap Lugh.” I
shook my head sadly as Adam grinned. “And if I’m starting to rhyme I need to be home and
asleep.”
Chapter Forty-Three

It was a smaller group returning than had left, with only the pack members, Samuel, David, the Seattle wolves, and Fred and Hank. Irpa walked beside us Underhill but made a swift farewell, dropping me a wink I didn’t understand, and we went straight on, emerging into the hall to find a reception committee waiting. Jesse was bouncing between Raven and Darryl, with Auriele and David’s other men in array, but sobered as she saw our faces.

“Hey Dad, Mom. We were just eating and Raven felt you coming. You look bushed.”

“Hey Jesse.” Adam hugged her. “Yeah, it’s been a long night. We probably smell of bad things too, because Cantrip’s hellhole stank.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Some, yeah, under the roses, but you got them all out safe?”

“All who were alive, Jesse. And food sounds good, but there are a couple of things we need to do first.”

“I’ll go find Fisher, love, and you get eating. Darryl, would you warn whoever’s on patrol that someone or something will be turning up shortly with a delivery, please.”

“Sure, Mercy. Turning up by, um, archway?”

“So I’m told. Whoever it is will be wanting Fisher.”

“I don’t mind doing it, Darryl.” Warren shrugged. “And I’d like to see whatever’s going to happen. It’s been a really strange night, mostly awful but with a lot of wonder mixed in, and I think it’s rolling right on.”

“Probably right. There’s a lot of magic about, somewhere.” Raven looked pensive, nose wrinkling. “What have you been up to besides rescuing people, She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars? I know I said scent’s not my best thing, but if that’s not snow and trolls I’m an owl.”

“Aspen Creek, and two trolls, Raven. Some goblins too. But it has to wait a bit.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about it, but the net result was that Darryl whipped food back into the oven to keep warm while I went upstairs to put the cloak on its wooden hanger, with some formal thanks, and then everybody except Joel, who’d headed home, followed me outside. Adam held them back just outside the door, summoning the wolves on patrol, and I went across to the MCC, feeling my legs protest my still being upright. A tired-looking Fisher answered my knock, and beamed.

“Ms Hauptman, you’re back. The AED was just asking if you were. Congratulations on a wonderful result, however ghastly the casualties.”

“Thanks, SA Fisher, though it still isn’t feeling quite like that. Westfield need something?”

“Not exactly. He said to tell you and Mr Hauptman that the warrant for Senator Heuter’s arrest has been executed, and proof of his ownership of the mine and of what happened there has sent him
from indignant protest to frightened silence while his counsel splutters.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

“And he said to say to you, I quote, Without expectation of a reply, One, did you get the data? Two, do you have the fugitives? And three, will we get either anytime soon?”

“Ah. Tell him, You might think that. I couldn’t possibly comment. Then, our sincere thanks for organising the meat and clothing, and the CSM — lifesavers all. If there’s a bill, pass it along and I’ll see it’s paid. And” — I took out the envelope and gave it to her — “that’s a request from Gwyn ap Lugh, who returns Leslie Fisher’s warm regards, for an advance copy of the President’s speech, so he can respond promptly. He’s proposing to talk to KEPR here right after the President finishes.”

Fisher stared at me for a second. “This is so above my pay grade. I’ll call the AED at once.”

“Less than you think, but that would be good, and I’m told there’s something else incoming for you shortly. Even if you’re on a scrambled call I’d answer any knock as fast as you can get to the door. If you have any down time in the next hour, come on up and I’ll tell you what I can. After that I’ll be asleep for not long enough.”

“I bet. Alright, thanks, sounds interesting, and I’ll get to it.”

I was half way back towards the crowd outside the door when magic tingled and swelled. I swivelled, continuing to walk backward as an archway much larger than I’d expected glittered into existence, and when Irpa came though I stopped as my hand rose to my mouth. She was carrying a couple of box files in one hand, and was still barefoot, though her toe- and fingernails were now painted a humongous red, but she was also clothed, and how — one of Chanel’s little black dresses in troll dimensions, that managed to be considerably more suggestive than her half-nudity had ever been. One giant pentacep or whatever also featured a tattoo of my coyote sending, blood-fur, skulls, and all, and it was animated, giving me a lolling grin. To top it off, Irpa’s hair was done in a bouffant style, and glittered with gems as she gave me another wink. It was all glamour, but it rocked, and the Feebs who were spilling out of their trailer stood and gaped while I could hear the barrage of camera-clicks from beyond the gate. The archway vanished.

“Hey Mercy. I’m looking for a Leslie Fisher?”

I pointed with the stick, thinking that besides valorising trolls I needed to rethink the fae being humourless, and that my well-meant remark to Gwyn ap Lugh had offered a challenge I hadn’t anticipated.

“In there, Irpa. She’s expecting someone, but not you. And certainly not Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany’s with a revisionist tattoo.”

I got one of those troll grins. “I was hoping more Katherine Hepburn in The Philadelphia Story, but I’ll take Audrey any day. And you know where the tattoo’s from, though” — she wagged a troll finger mildly — “someone’s been watching Predator way more than anyone should.”

She turned the tat towards me, and the coyote shook its head, skulls whirling. I shook my own, grinning.

“Only twice, actually, but yeah, the skull dreads stuck in my mind.”

“Not unreasonably. Oh, and Þorgeðr agrees that showing off some muscle on construction sites sounds fun, by the way, so we’re in if the Prince agrees. If you need any heavy lifting in the
meantime, ask away.”

“Good to know, Irpa. Fisher’s probably on a scrambled call to the top, incidentally, as I only just delivered Gwyn ap Lugh’s letter, so you’ll need to knock and give her a moment.”

“Right.”

She took a couple of paces, stooped, and gave the MCC door a gentle — for trolls — tap that rocked the whole vehicle, and after a long moment it opened. Fisher had a phone in one hand, and a harried look that was smoothed away by shock as her eyes and phone tracked upwards.

<Holy God!>

I recognised the voice from her phone, and so did Irpa, who grinned.

“Nope, Mr President, just a troll with some style. Special Agent Leslie Fisher? Delivery for you.” Irpa leaned in and set the box files down by Fisher’s feet. “Top one has the very full confessions and present whereabouts of the six humans who fled Cantrip’s abattoir — who are all still alive, after a fashion, though by rights they shouldn’t be. We have no further interest in what you do with them.” I saw Fisher’s frown despite her shock. “Second has two things. One is their phones, unlocked and tagged by name, and as one of those names is Elias Heuter, with call records full of DC numbers, you should have some fun with it. And to help you along, the other is paper and digital copies of our file on Senator Heuter, in case we have anything you’ve missed — which we just might, one way and another. Enjoy.”

“Ah, right, th— I am glad, er, I’m sorry I don’t know your name.”

“Irpa, and you’re welc—, SA Fisher.”

I swallowed a laugh.

<SA Fisher?>

Fisher’s gaze flicked to her phone, and back to Irpa. “Excuse me a minute, if you will, Irpa.” She put the phone tightly to her ear, muffling the speaker. “Sir? … Yes, sir. Irpa, the President asks if ‘no further interest in what we do with them’ means Fae justice has been fully served.”

“Try barely acceptably served, given that killing those humans properly is contra-indicated for larger reasons than justice.”

Trolls just kept going up in my estimation.

“Did you hear that, sir? … Hang on.” Fisher bent and flicked open the boxes, riffling through the fat stacks of paper, and pointed her phone at them for a few seconds. “Hundreds of pages in each box, sir, as well as the six phones and a flash drive. … Looks like it, sir. … I have no idea, sir — shall I ask? … Ah, Irpa, the President is wondering how such full confessions could have been obtained and transcribed so rapidly.”

“Our time is not as yours, SA Fisher, and we slowed it down some.”

“You slowed time. Right. Did you— … Yes, sir, I do — if they can bend distance, or space, why not time? … Yes she is, sir. Right.” Fisher’s eyes were on me, and she raised her phone. “Ms Hauptman, the President asks if he might speak with you.”

I sighed as Adam came to join me, heading back towards Fisher. “Of course.” I took the phone,
noting the camera had been turned off and holding it a little from my ear so Adam and Irpa would be able to hear. “Mr President, what can I do for you today?”

<Quite a lot, I hope, Ms Hauptman. First, my serious thanks for all you and your people did to find that place and get the survivors out. And, though my gut’s still churning, for that video of the mineshaft — it’s silenced a lot of people already.>

“I imagine, sir. Can’t exactly say you’re welcome, but …”

<Yes. Westfield said your first comparison was Bến Tre?>

“It was, sir, yes. That mine smelt of everything bad in there — corpses, silver, fear, half-processed sewage, and more corpses — but it was more than that. It stank of madness. Eleven humans who either genuinely hated the preternatural or just didn’t care what they tortured so long as they got their kicks, and a senile wolf, living in the reek of their raped captives’ fear and pain and shit, seizing and murdering more victims pretty much every week and dumping corpses where they had to go on smelling their rot — and for what? An unworkable plan they hadn’t begun to think through to create their own pet pack. I was thinking about them saying they wanted to save humanity while murdering humans by the score, and that psychotic destroy-to-save line about Bến Tre.>

<It is. Mindwiping?>

“That would cover it, sir.”

<‘No further interest’ is recognition we won’t be able to prosecute because they can’t plead?>

“I would think so, yes. Sir.”

<OK. It doesn’t help, but I can see why ap Lugh would … not trust us to convict, even if he is sneaking it through ahead of … whatever.>

My eyes met Adam’s, and he waggled a hand.

“Some of that, sir. But there is what those men knew, and now don’t. You might also consider that most preternatural justice is immediate. We don’t do long waits on death row, any more than humans do for rabid dogs. And ten of the eleven human staff of Cantrip’s abattoir had been de facto state-trained and -licensed all-American torturers since Iraq. You could say the Fae have spared you their very embarrassing trials — which, sir, does not mean you do not need to find out exactly what the hell the army thinks it’s doing manufacturing such men and then letting them go without supervision or even tabs being kept.”

There was a pause, heavy with thought. <There’s that, yes, Ms Hauptman. Alright. Can you explain this slowing time thing?>

“Explain, no. Confirm, yes. Think of the old stories, sir — one night there, a century here, or vice
versa. However hard it may be to get your head around, they gave themselves as much time as they
needed, and nothing in those confessions will be other than true.”

<Huh. OK.> His voice became brisker. <And this request for a draft is straight up?>

“So far as I know, sir. One motive is for both sides to be sure what is to be said will be mutually
acceptable, and a second is to enable swifter responses.”

<Responses saying what, if you know?>

I glanced at Irpa, who shrugged, no more help than Adam had been.

“Again, sir, so far as I know, a joint acceptance of the apology as a clearing of the slate, with a Fae
assertion of … dimensional independence plus agreement to talk, and a wolf statement that the
Marrok recognises Fae independence and hopes for, maybe urges, an acceptance of their offer as an
honourable way forward.”

<And why so fast?>

“Momentum. When the log-jam breaks, it breaks.”

<You could say.> Another breath. <Alright, Ms Hauptman. I’m not going to go to bat for torturers
who were kidnapping and murdering citizens, no matter what their rationale or what’s been done to
them as Fae justice. So we’re on for this afternoon. Rallies are building already, and wolf speakers
are due at about 3 p.m., yes?>

I looked at Adam, who nodded. “So far as I know, sir.”

<And will last?>

“No idea. But at least one wolf speaking is … not very comfortable with a gay rally, so I’d think
shorter and sweeter than not.”

<OK. So I’ll be aiming to go live pretty much as soon as they finish, before anyone disperses. And
this joint response will follow directly?>

“That is my understanding, sir.”

<Broadcast from your house in Kennewick?>

“Yes.”

<Then here’s the question, Ms Hauptman. Will you get KEPR in and hooked up sooner, so you can
come on the big screens and announce me, as you did Glen Sawyer the other day?>

Taken aback, I looked at Adam again, seeing his own surprise and then calculation as he sent me
an image of the President preening in my wake. Stifling a snort, I thought about it, and reluctantly
conceded he wasn’t wrong — at the least, my endorsement was being courted. Irpa just looked
interested, head tilted as she listened, and I was interested myself to note that the problem wasn’t
making yet another appearance on national TV — the novelty and fear of the spotlight had worn
off, and it was the ramifications that bothered me, not the fact of it.

“In principle, yes, sir, but I’ll need to see the text of what I’m endorsing.”

<Fair enough. And thank you.> I heard his relief, and there was a pause. When he spoke again
there was doubt in his voice. <Westfield said there was a fae offer to reassemble and name the
“There is, sir, yes. Momentum again — pure forensics might take a year or more, where magic will take a day or two, and the only delay will be the hoist. And forensics might never find names, especially for the illegals.” I glanced at Irpa, wondering how much I was comfortable saying, and received a surprisingly bland look for a troll dolled up in Chanel. “But Nemane, the Gray Lord who’ll be doing the reassembling, has made it clear she acts only because Gwyn ap Lugh asked it, so there will be no debt owing for her help. And as the Gray Lords always have at least three motives for anything they do, I would guess they see forensics as a way forward, much as wolves do, and so seize the chance of a very helpful demonstration that science can easily confirm as accurate.” I met Irpa’s gaze a little harder. “Nemane is also well aware that doing it will affect her less than it would any human who had to go down there. You saw it on the video. But she is the Carrion Crow, a goddess of the battlefield, and at first sight she called what’s at the bottom of that shaft a quarry — the heaped spoil of a hunt.”

To my amusement Irpa gave me a thoughtful thumbs-up as I heard a murmured obscenity.

“Not really, sir. Crows are not squeamish. Just be glad of it.”

<Huh. You do have some unusual perspectives, Ms Hauptman. Is there anything else I should know?>

I bit back several answers, and made my tired brain think about it. “I don’t believe so, sir, though things are unfolding quite fast.”

<Tell me. Hanford said Medicine Wolf went somewhere else, though the filtration’s ongoing.>

“It’s helping with the freed wolves, sir. It’ll be back.”

<OK. Then thanks again, Ms Hauptman, and please hand me back to SA Fisher.>

“Of course. Oh, and I’ll add our thanks for the FBI’s coordination of help in Wyoming. AED Westfield and SA Fisher did good. SAC Vance, too. Until this afternoon, then, Mr President.”

It never hurts to put in a good word where you can. I handed the phone back to a wide-eyed Fisher and looked up at Irpa.

“Can you relay all that or should I call Gwyn ap Lugh?”

“Can and will, Mercy. You should get some sleep before what sounds like an interesting afternoon.”

“Oh yeah. But breakfast first. You want some before you go?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Irpa gave me a wink on the side away from the gaping Feds. “Got some toll dodgers marinating on ice to curry later. And I should be getting along.”

I managed not to snort, and just nodded. “Right. But meet Raven, Jesse, and David Christiansen’s men before you go? If you’re going to be around some, which seems likely, it would be helpful.”

“Alright.”

What any of David’s guys made of Irpa I wasn’t sure, though all were properly respectful, and Raven, eyeing her with wary interest, was told of the Fae’s gladness at his help in finding the prison, offering a nod. Darryl was cool, and Auriele a little freaked, but it was Jesse I’d really
wanted Irpa to meet, for reasons I felt more than understood, though Jesse’s surprised pleasure and the laughter in her eyes as she offered the troll a compliment on her hair were reasons enough.

“Glad you like it. Your pink’s good, too — have to try some other colours myself sometime.”

“Jesse seriously knows her dye, Irpa. Put it together with your glamour and you could have some fun.”

“That’d be cool. Can I ask what’s with the Predator—coyote tattoo? I wish ink ones could move like that.”

“Yeah, glamour’s more fun than needles. And you could say it’s a little bow to Mercy for getting rid of Manannán the other morning, though you’ll have to ask her or your dad about the form — I’m not sure I got all the subtleties, I just liked the hair-do.” She flexed muscle and skulls swung, some metamorphosing into roses, and I wondered if she was a Deadhead. “Ruff-do. Gotta go, but I expect I’ll be seeing you around.”

Irpa offered Jesse what you’d have to call a low five, both of them amused by the contrast of their hands, and summoned an archway. Once she’d disappeared into it I shook my head to clear it and spoke loudly enough for the Feebs to hear.

“Show’s over for now. Breakfast.”

Adam put an arm round me as we headed in, and I leaned my head on his shoulder for a few steps.

“Do you really not mind introducing the man? He’s got some nerve asking.”

“President ought to have some nerve, love. And it’s not what I had in mind for this afternoon at all, but unless he slips something toxic in there — and why he would he at this stage, given everything? — I can’t see any harm and I can see some benefits, besides the IOU to bank.”

“Yeah. For my money, though, his benefit’s bigger — he’s rounding on Cantrip to distance himself from his responsibility for them.”

“I know, but if he wants us on his side, he’s gotta be on our side, and no cherry-picking. Plus, executive orders.”

“All of that.” Adam dropped a kiss on my head and let me go. “I’ll let Bran know. Food and sleep, supercoyote.”

“Don’t you start.”

Food helped considerably, though my digestion also had to cope with the many copies of Time that Jesse had somehow wrangled the KPD into delivering. The cover was split, as Fisher had said, and they’d gone for golden-eyed and bloody Tuesday me next to the most mischievous look I’d managed for Andrea, tongue lolling. They’d also gone for a caption. that had me shaking my head, though something like it was inevitable — ’Might E. Coyote!’ Everyone else thought it was funny, even Adam when he returned from calling Bran, but I couldn’t summon the energy, though I did flick through the article, heavy with more photos but also giving the magazine’s strongest endorsement of pretty much everything I’d done before their print deadline. It was welcome enough, but a distraction just then, and after we’d skimmed over the grim facts of Wyoming, I let an amused Samuel and Warren tell Jesse about scaring Leah out of her pantsuit. Samuel didn’t dislike his nominal stepmother quite as much as Charles, but she was one reason he didn’t live in Aspen Creek and he hadn’t minded seeing her jump at all. But he had something else to say too, eyes bright on me.
“Mercy, you used that howl to … what, cathect some of your and Adam’s rage from the mine, yes?”

“Un huh.” I swallowed bacon. “Tried to, Samuel, and it seems to have worked some.”

“For me, too, Mercy. It’s taken me a while to figure out because I’ve never come across anything like it, but your magic spoke for me somehow, and knowing the pain and rage had been expressed for all to hear was and remains an ease.”

The wolves who’d been there agreed, and with the other alphas gone George had his tongue back.

“That mine’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen, and the mountain air was a wonderful relief but I was still, I dunno, gagging inside. But you blew it away into the snow, Mercy.” He rotated his neck, joints popping. “No idea how you did it, but thanks. Gotta say the travelling weirded me out, though. How shtum do we need to be about that, Adam?”

Adam shrugged. “Keep it sealed today, George, but once ap Lugh’s spoken this afternoon I’d think you can talk about the place, but not the Fae we met. Did you see anything except roses?”

“No.”

“Then all you can do is attest it exists and sure isn’t much like Kansas. But be very vague about the cloak, please, everyone — cat’s pretty much out of the bag anyway, but I don’t want to give anyone ideas about Mercy being able to provide swift transport.”

“For sure. Stress that it is not open to any human without explicit permission from a Gray Lord. But I’m more taken with what my magic did — I meant the spell for Adam’s and my relief, as well as shutting Leah up, but I didn’t think about it affecting anyone else.” I looked at Manannán’s Bane where I’d propped it beside me. “If that was you and the cloak, thanks. I think. Fred, Hank, did you get any of this effect?”

“Don’t think so, Mercy.” Hank shrugged. “But we were never in the mine, so though I felt bad for those wolves and fae you rescued, and angry with whoever did it to them, I wasn’t needing to scream. It felt like Spirit magic, though, even if I’ve never seen any used like that.”

He was looking at Raven, who shrugged.

“How should I know when I wasn’t there, child of Hawk? And She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars smells of all sorts of magic to me. If it worked, does it matter?”

“I’d rather know what I was doing, Raven.”

“Wouldn’t we all?” He grinned. “Whatever it is seems to be working, so don’t worry about it. Coyote wouldn’t. Anyway, it’s good you rescued those people, and I’ll tell the others to catch TV this afternoon.”

“You’re off?”

Raven nodded. “Things to do, people to see. Thanks for the bedroll and all the good food.”

“Thank you for finding the place. And pass our thanks on to all whose kinds helped?”

“Not a problem.”

He gave polite nods all round, ruffled Jesse’s hair with a smile, and went out through the back.
Adam and I talked to Darryl and Auriele briefly, running through stuff that needed doing, from calling Taylor and the scheduled wolf speakers to warning pack and KPD guys on the gate.

“Will do, Adam. Pack’ll have questions.”

“Yeah.” Adam rubbed his eyes. “Leave the Fae out of it. And vamps. Least said, soonest mended. But no problem with wolves, quick or dead — Bran’s recognised Velasquez as their Alpha, by the way, at least pro tem, and though nothing been’s decided it may be they come here, either as a pack or some association of lone wolves. The whole thing is screwy — female Alpha, nineteen of twenty-five wolves submissive, and eighteen female, including three of the dominants — but if that’s what they decide they want, that’s what they’ll get. Think we can cope?”

Darryl was blinking, but Warren grinned.

“Sure thing, Boss. We’ve had some practice at screwy. Velasquez is good, Darryl, Auriele, and without her there wouldn’t have been any quick, only even more dead.”

“OK.” Darryl frowned. “Did anyone say how many dead there were?”

“Two-hundred-and-fourteen and counting. Most of them young women of colour, probably.”

There was silence round the table as those who hadn’t known took it in, and I reached to take Jesse’s hand.

“I know, Jesse. It’s why we’re kinda flat, despite what has to be counted a successful rescue. And we have to get some sleep while we can. Mary Jo, too, and Auriele’s gonna be busy for a while, so do you want someone to give Andrea a call and see if she can come over? Or someone else?”

Jesse did want, I thought, but wasn’t willing to be a burden, and Warren caught my eye.

“I’m aiming to stay, Mercy, though I’m catching some sleep too, so Kyle’ll be over soon to watch the rallies. He’ll want company while I’m snoring.”

“That’s good, thanks. But Jesse, ex-kiddo status doesn’t mean toughing things out alone. You want to call someone, you go ahead. And that goes for everyone who was in Wyoming, too — if it’s getting to you, say so. No shame in it, and it certainly got to me.”

It all felt a little unsatisfactory, but sleep was becoming imperative, and I trudged upstairs beside Adam wondering about Sage’s remark about hitting everything thrown at me, and if the string of knuckleballs life was pitching would ever stop.
Chapter Forty-Four

Darryl woke us a little past lunchtime, apologetic but insistent and bearing coffee Adam gulped and I accepted with a grimace. Three-and-some hours was not enough sleep, but a scalding shower and clean hair helped, and I felt more or less functional as I followed Adam downstairs, once more in a blouse and skirt. Jesse, Warren, and Kyle were stacking the dishwasher, having eaten steak and chips, but for us a pair of Darryl’s magnificent Spanish omelettes nicely split the difference between a second breakfast and lunch, and while we were both chomping through them he brought us up to speed.

“Day shift’s on without problems, Adam, and I made all the calls. Fisher brought up a draft of the President’s speech a couple of hours back, and I sent the Marrok scans. It’s on your desk, but I’ll get it, just. The Marrok showed it to ap Lugh, and told me to pass on to Fisher their general approval with some suggestions they sent back, which I did. The time thing seems to be working well, and the data purging has made substantial progress. I didn’t ask what they were finding, but from the Marrok’s tone it’s as grim as you’d expect. I did ask about the freed, and he said they were taking advantage of slow time to catch up on sleep and what’s been happening all week. Those with contactable family have spoken to them. And Fisher asked to see Mercy a half-hour or so before I woke you. She didn’t seem an entirely happy camper, but I told her she had to wait a while. Taylor’s due about two to set up, and KEPR are in touch with the people running the screens at the rallies. I told Jenny about Wyoming, and what Mercy would be doing, and she and Andrea are heading in for two as well. Otherwise, the main thing’s the rallies, and Kyle’s been tracking those.”

Kyle, Warren, and Jesse had all taken seats while Darryl was speaking, and as he rose and went to get the draft Kyle took over.

“Not telling the organisers what’s about to happen has been hard, but they’re happy people anyway because the weather’s being kind and turnouts are enormous. A million plus in DC, and double that in San Francisco, both still growing. Extra screens are being put up as fast as possible with help from the covering media, which is everyone, and so far there’s been no trouble of any kind — mood’s energetic, with lots of chanting —K-K-Kantrip for the Can seems to be the main choice — and a strong purpose, but festival goodwill too.” Kyle grinned. “Some interesting synergies as well — banners saying Fair Treatment for Fae and Fairies and Furry Fae Fairies are Citizens Too.”

Adam closed his eyes, but Jesse was grinning and so was I.

“The one I really liked was Others have Mothers Too. And there’s a new hashtag trending -- #OtheringKills.” Jesse waggled a hand. “But #SheCalledThunderbird! is still up there.”

“Good to know, Jesse.”

My voice was dry, and Adam gave an unrepentant Jesse a sidelong look as Kyle resumed.

“It’s not just a Pink showing — African Americans and Hispanics have turned out in real numbers, and there are official NAACP and Black Caucus representatives marching in DC. Some liberal Jewish and Muslim groups too. And Wiccans. Native Americans also, mostly in California. And a lot of Mercy and the Manitou tees and sweats, with a strong Clean Up the Basin presence but again...
more West than East, though the green showing is good in both — limited commercial distribution
as yet rather than different sentiments, I’d think. Commentary has mostly been positive and
impressed, with the same analysis Mercy laid out on Tuesday about K-K-Kantrip becoming the
embodiment of straight white bigotry, but a few blips. Fox can’t stifle their homophobia, and the
Bible Belters aren’t so happy, though some at least do seem to get the point.”

With food in my system my brain had started working, and I held up a hand. “Which point, Kyle?
Cantrip have to go, or the Path of Mercy?”

“More the first than the second, but it depends. There’s a limit to how much religious thinking I
can take, Mercy, but there are people tracking it and the last summary I saw said acceptance of
Medicine Wolf as a Higher Power of some kind, sent to warn about Stewardship over Dominion,
was tipping a significant number of Fundamentalist ministers towards acceptance that co-operation
with the preternatural wasn’t automatically damnable, however caution would always be needed.
And some Southern Baptist bigwig said we need to remember that God is the biggest preternatural,
not Lucifer.”

“OK. That’s interesting. Viewing figures?”

“Up and down — people have things to do on a Saturday — but the trend’s strongly up and
averaging twenty-some million last I saw. To judge from the advertising prices, though, both the
media and their customers think it’ll peak a lot higher.”

“Right.” I thought about it some, and gave up as Darryl returned, papers in hand. “Kyle, has
anyone told you about Gwyn ap Lugh’s analysis of probable mood once the President’s done
speaking?”

“No. What did he say?”

“That today’s going to see the most rapidly successful rallies in history, with the abolition of
Cantrip announced before they break up. At the same time, everyone is going to learn about the
worst … what? Mass murder by Federal agents, certainly, and blot on the national conscience
since at least McVeigh, and maybe Vietnam and Watergate. Plus a Presidential apology for the
Heuter verdict. Then ap Lugh is on, reiterating and detailing Fae independence with an offer of
diplomatic negotiations, and Charles endorsing it and pushing the new wolf policies. So, questions
— what will the mood be like? And when I get to talk to everyone just before the President, what
do I need to say, or not say?”

“Huh. Good questions, Mercy. Mass euphoria laced with shame and shock will be interesting.”
Kyle shook his head sadly. “I had to sit down hard when Warren told me two-hundred-and-
fourteen dead and counting, and the conditions are as shocking as the numbers. Do we know how
much detail the President will be giving?”

“Quite a lot.” Darryl handed Adam the draft. “Both verbal and footage the FBI have allowed of the
cages and the top of the shaft.”

Reading with Adam I held up a hand, not raising my eyes. “Hold it a minute while we read this,
please, Kyle.”

All in all I found myself quite impressed with the speech. He was starting with the discoveries in
Wyoming, crediting Raven as well as wolves and Fae for finding it and passing details to the FBI,
and giving terse descriptions over the footage before moving into a scathing condemnation of
Cantrip, confirming a policy of maximal prosecution, with news of a bipartisan agreement that it
would be abolished and a Federal Bureau of Preternatural Affairs established, explicitly to seek co-
operation on the lines established by the Path of Mercy. Slightly to my surprise the presidential boot then went hard into Senator Heuter, confirming his concealed ownership of the mine and that his re-arrest was not about his suspected financial crimes, heinous as those might yet prove, but on suspicion of being an accomplice, before and after the fact, in not less than two-hundred-and-forty-nine counts of kidnapping, illegal imprisonment, and torture, with not less than two-hundred-and-fourteen counts of murder in the first degree.

Heuter was then used as the bridge to Boston, the acquittal the President could neither reverse nor respect, and the situation that had arisen when Gwyn ap Lugh reacted to its implications for all Fae and other preternaturals. There was some careful wording about the separation of executive and judicial powers, but also a flat statement that in the Heuter case a judicial verdict had precipitated a crisis that it was an executive responsibility to resolve, and an only slightly more nuanced observation that while the week’s revelations about Cantrip, culminating in all those bodies on a Heuter property, could no more reverse the Boston verdict than he could, the extent of Cantrip’s complicity in those other sixty-two torture-murders and sixty-three kidnappings was one strand of the ongoing investigations. Another carefully worded section, where both Bran’s slightly loopy hand and a gorgeous cursive that had to be ap Lugh’s had made some emendations, admitted that human technology and Fae magic were in a stalemate, and (with a deep breath, notated) that in the light of recent events, including the appearance of the Great Manitou and Elder Spirits, he felt national security urgently required a resolution.

Then he noted that during the week the Fae had made several gestures of goodwill, most critically at Hanford and in assisting the rescue at the mine, where they had not distinguished between fae, wolf, and — the great majority — human victims of Cantrip. He was therefore prepared to take two steps beyond the abolition and prosecution of Cantrip — one an apology to those directly offended and insulted by the Boston verdict, itemised as Charles had laid out with a plain statement of regret, and a less plain statement of personal shame, and the other an invitation to Gwyn ap Lugh, Prince of the Gray Lords, to meet him without preconditions on either side to find a way forward for all inhabitants and citizens of the United States. In conclusion, he would be travelling to the Tri-Cities to meet Medicine Wolf as soon as it could be arranged, a meeting Adam and I would host, and very much hoped that while he was here there could be substantive dialogue not only with the Great Manitou about its needs and wants, but also with wolves about the Paths of Assertion and Mercy, with the Elder Spirits, and with the Fae.

As Adam and I finished each page I’d been handing them off to Kyle, who had Warren, Jesse, and Auriele reading over his shoulders. I passed him the last one, and raised eyebrows at Adam, receiving a slight shrug.

“Like the man himself, straighter than I’d expected. I don’t much like saying it, but he’s rising to the occasion. That goes further than it might have done.”

“Yeah, it does. Which I think means I introduce him fast and straight.” I chewed on it a little. “Just — hi, people, thanks for turning out today, it’s seriously appreciated, but listen up hard, now. We found Cantrip’s prison, it was as godawful as anything can be, and you need to listen to the President very carefully.”

Kyle was nodding. “I agree, Mercy, but you’re going to be the … emotional pivot. Will you be wearing the cloak?”

“No. It’s a gift, not a right.” Adam gave me a look I returned. “And it would implicitly claim Fae endorsement, which I don’t have for this.”

Adam was still looking, but Kyle nodded.
“OK. But when you come on there’ll be a big reaction, Mercy. You’ll have to ride it out. And with ‘hi, people, thanks’ you should put in words for the Pink organisers, the notable diversity, being calm and sane about the manitou, and Hanford as the ongoing emblem of what preternatural co-operation can do. Some sort of joke might be good, too. Then go more serious and brisk, and tell them about the prison and the President.”

“Sounds like a novel.”

Auriele’s voice was a mutter but she wasn’t wrong and I found any humour cheering.

“It does, yeah. And I’ve had it to here with being the nation’s emotional pivot. But that seems like good advice to me. Adam?”

“Yeah. I know you don’t want to be on for long, but Kyle’s right that you don’t want to give everyone emotional whiplash, just sober them up. And the rest was good. Maybe ask Andrea too.”

“Un huh. Jesse?”

“I dunno, Mom, but there are a lot of kids marching, and you said the victims were mostly young. I know it’s a cliché, but you’re trying to clean the world up for us and you could say that. Or just a shout-out to the ones there.”

“I can do that. So it’s organisers, diversity, kiddos, Medicine Wolf and Hanford, then the prison and the President.” I grabbed the shopping-list pad and jotted them down. “Anyone thinks of anything else, tell me or add it on here. Darryl, do you know what Fisher wanted? Or why she was unhappy?”

“No, but I’d guess the … former fugitives. She didn’t much like what she heard you say to the President.” He scowled. “Can’t say I’m that keen myself, Mercy. Death’s cleaner.”

“Maybe. But murder charges wouldn’t be, and I don’t think what the Fae did is unjust, however scary. I understand if it’s squicked her, though — it did me when ap Lugh first told me, though I was expecting it.” I brightened. “Or maybe she thought Irpa was serious about currying toll dodgers.”

“Wasn’t she?”

Jesse sounded earnest, and I gave her a long look. After a moment she cracked and grinned.

“I had no idea trolls were that cool.”

“Me either, but ap Lugh says Irpa and Þorgeðr, her sister, are … superior trolls, I guess. I liked them both, but they’re still fae, Jesse — usual rules and don’t ever dodge a bridge toll.”

“Right. I wish I could do glamour tattoos, though.”

“Whereas I thank God for small mercies, as well as the real Mercy.”

I left Jesse and Adam arguing tattoo permissions to everyone’s amusement, and went out to the Feeb’s MCC. It was the mindwiping that was upsetting Fisher, but I shrugged.

“Would you rather they were dead, SA? Law says we shouldn’t do that, and there’s no point our suppressing the torture data if Dr Black Ops or whoever could just ask the men who amassed it. Anyway, it was a Fae decision, and I couldn’t have stopped them if I’d wanted to. Plus I have to say that after seeing and smelling that mine, I’m not repining any for the men who ran it.”
“They are completely mindless, Ms Hauptman. It’s not just a memory wipe — scans say their cortices have been wholly demyelinised. They don’t know anything, including why they’re being punished.”

“Not so, SA. In so far as I understand it, they don’t know that they’ve been punished. Nor will they have the nightmares they deserve. And I meant what I said about the magical threat environment for anyone who declares war on the preternatural. A Gray Lord can do most anything he or she thinks of, SA, and believe me, it could have been a great deal worse.”

“Still sits wrong, Ms Hauptman. I believe in trials.”

“Prefer justice myself, SA. And they won’t be doing it again. I’m sorry it bothers you so much, but from the Fae’s perspective, and wolves’, it achieves suppression, punishment, and deterrence without asking you or the AED to overlook murder. Is he as upset as you?”

“Not really.” Fisher sighed. “And it’s not only that, Ms Hauptman. Have you read the confessions?”

“No.”

“I spent a chunk of the morning scanning and sending them, reading as I went. Very detailed, except where they’re not, and completely emotionless. No remorse, no anger, no hate — it could be machines talking about other machines.”

“Ah.” I considered. “I’d put that down to the Fae too, not the perpetrators. A … decanting, rather than a confession, if that helps.”

“Maybe. Gwyn ap Lugh isn’t emotionless.”

“Not about his daughter. And he thinks well of you, as he is coming to think well of Westfield. But Gray Lords do not have the same set of emotions as humans, SA, and they can be very remote.”

“Yes, I’ve seen that.” Fisher shrugged. “I’ll get over it. And I shouldn’t be complaining to you anyway.”

“Not a problem, SA. Fae justice scares me too, for all I don’t disapprove in this instance. I’ve been pulled a lot closer than I like to the Gray Lords this week, and it’s politically necessary, so I’ll suck it up. But Elf-friend or no, I’ll still be avoiding Gray Lords whenever I can.”

She blinked. “Elf-friend?”

“So I’m told. Seems to be one reason the coblynau were willing to help, though I doubt they had much choice. Was there anything else?”

“Several things. The President’s serious about coming out here as soon as he can, meaning in the next day or three, so the Secret Service have an advance team in the air already. They’ll need to talk to Mr Hauptman.”

“I bet. I’ll pass it on.”

“Thank you. He also asks if he understood correctly that wolves will be confirming the existence and title of the Marrok.”

“That’s a yes. It’s leaking anyway, and it asserts werewolf solidarity and command. But only the title — the Marrok doesn’t need any more on his plate than he has already.”
“Right. And the AED asked if the freed had spoken to their families — we’d like to start interviews about the abductions as soon as we can.”

“Also a yes, with the caveat where families are contactable. I don’t have details, but I’d guess some of the illegals’ families don’t have contact numbers. Or they’re out of touch anyway. Hang on.”

I took out my phone, dialled, let it ring twice, hung up and waited, Fisher giving me a look. After a moment, it rang.

<Mercy?>

“I’m with Fisher. Is there any reason the FBI shouldn’t start contacting any of the freed’s families they can find?”

<No. Five are orphans without close kin> — Bran rattled off names — <and the others have all spoken to a parent or sibling. Or children, in Velasquez’s case. You were right that I’d like her, Mercy. And about Medicine Wolf.>

“It read you?”

<It did. My wolf is a lot happier than it has been for a very long while. And, rather to my surprise, quite taken with your coyote sending.>

Meaning his wolf didn’t mind my scaring Leah’s wolf, which I filed away to think about.

“So was Irpa. Did anyone tell you about her glamour tattoo?”

<Samuel did, and about your effective catharsis. We really do need to have a conversation about magic.>

“As soon as we can. How’s the other thing coming?”

<Six days in and counting fast. Ap Lugh is being very helpful. Maybe another two or three hours, Overhill time. Back to Wyoming, or to you?>

“Pass. SA, supposing we were to trip over some more evidence somewhere, would you want it forwarded to Wyoming or here?”

“What sort of evidence?”

“Oh, computers, say, or payroll data. Stuff.”

Fisher’s eyebrows rose. “Huh. AED was right. Not here — so I’d say Wyoming and we’ll take it to Quantico, but I’ll check.”

“OK.” I spoke into the phone again. “And could you tell Gwyn ap Lugh and Medicine Wolf that the President’s advance team will be here sometime this evening, so he is serious about being here soon?”

Bran laughed, an easier sound than I’d heard in a while. <Certainly. Those Secret Service agents will be tying themselves in knots.>

“I know, but they’ll have to suck it up. Does ap Lugh want to send a representative or advance team?”

<I’ll ask, in courtesy, but I doubt it. You can talk to him about it this evening, in any case.>
“So I can.”

<Are you alright with the President’s request, Mercy?>

“Yeah. Just tired. And it’s a decent speech.”

<Yes, it is. You have done a great thing this week.>

Bran hung up on me for the second time that day, but I just shook my head and stashed the phone. He meant it, but it was beside the point. I gave Fisher the data about the freed orphans and the rest and she noted the names.

“OK, thanks, Ms Hauptman, that’s very helpful.” She cocked her head. “So you do have all the computers there weren’t in Wyoming or the fugitives’ locations and vehicles.”

“No comment, SA. I’m just feeling hopeful stuff might turn up.”

“Anytime soon?”

“Soon is a relative word. If we did find anything, we’d need to look through it ourselves first. Might take days, but day is a relative word, too, when Gray Lords are involved. And some days can feel like a week.”

“So I’m discovering, Ms Hauptman. For what it’s worth, my sense is that the efficiency of … let’s say joint preternatural operations has both frightened and impressed DC.”

“So the AED said. Is he still under the wrong sort of pressure?”

“No comment.”

“Fair enough. Would public thanks to him for his handling of things here and in Wyoming help or compound it?”

She thought about it, and shrugged. “I’m not sure. Thanks from whom?”

“Me, today on TV, or Charles later.”

“You would help. Charles, I’m less sure — official wolf thanks should be OK, but the disappointed will be upset, no matter what.”

“Their problem, SA. There is no valid reason for wanting torture data, period. And KEPR will be arriving soon, with Jenny and Andrea, so I need to get back. What’s the programme from your point-of-view?”

“I’ll come up when the wolf speeches start, if I may, but the President will be watching from that point, so he’ll know when you come on. Are you going to say much?”

“As little as I can, but some thanks are owed to the Pink organisers, and the marchers themselves.”

“OK. No statements, though?”

“Nothing much I haven’t said already except we found the prison, it stank, and now listen hard to the man.”

“Right.” Fisher shook her head. “I don’t know how you’re coping with all this, Ms Hauptman.”
“Same way you coped with Irpa this morning, SA. Our strength is as the strength of ten, because our hearts are pure.”

“Sure they are. You might have warned me about Irpa.”

“Didn’t know it’d be her, SA. And I don’t know if it was ap Lugh making a point, Irpa wanting to show off her glamour, or both showing me I was wrong to think humour wasn’t the Fae’s strongest suit. Either way, you coped better than the President, and Irpa nabbed his trousers.”

I left her smiling, which was an improvement, but I also sent Bran a message asking him to warn ap Lugh that Fisher was distressed by summary justice, and at the risk of teaching Charles to suck eggs suggested making very sure there were no prints or genetic evidence on anything returned to the Feebs. I’d had enough of hostages to fortune, or any other kind, and one thing I did understand about the Federal Government was that it was so far from monolithic it had what amounted to built-in schizophrenia and was entirely capable of self-harm as well as simple idiocy. Then I brought everyone up to date, and wondered if I had time for some therapeutic baking before the fun started again.
I had a first batch of brownies in the oven and was contemplating a second when I was forestalled by an unexpected but very welcome interruption — a call to Adam from the Sacramento Alpha, Bill Davis, about a possible press secretary. Mary Oliver was a wolf’s widow, with two half-grown kids, and before becoming a full-time mother she’d done media work. Bereavement had paralysed her for a while, but coming through the worst of her grief she’d decided she wanted a move as well as needing a paycheck. I talked to her on the teleconferencing suite, liking what I heard, as Adam did, and we were both happy to accommodate her biggest issue, childcare and the flexibility to deal with it. Then we got down to practicalities about the problem I was facing, its likely intensity and duration, and how she would handle any of it.

“It’s a lot more high-powered than anything I’ve ever done, Ms Hauptman, but what you want is clear enough — a few specific interviews you’re happy to do, like the National Geographic and Ms Ligatt, and otherwise syndicated interviews at reasonably regular intervals but with strict parameters on matters you will not address. Some controlled access to family and friends who are willing. And very tight protection of your daughter, which I understand entirely.”

So far as I was concerned reasonably regular intervals could mean once a decade, but I nodded.

“Yeah, that covers it. And absolute confidentiality about matters I won’t address. I sincerely hope it’s going to ease, Ms Oliver, but right now I’m up to my neck in Gray Lords, Elder Spirits, Marrokery, the President, Feebs, and who knows what else. Are you cool with being in the middle of all that, and with fae, the manitou, and probably vamps?”

“Vampires? I’ve never knowingly met one. But fae, yes — my husband knew a few before they withdrew. And Medicine Wolf certainly — I’ve been watching with fascination all week, and, frankly, the chance to be involved with what it’s doing, even peripherally, was a real attraction when Bill came by to tell me about your husband’s request. I’m a longstanding member of the Sierra Club, and with the success of the Elwha restoration project we’re all for Clean Up the Basin and re-engineering the Columbia–Snake hydrosystem too.”

“OK, that’s good. And your kids? We’re hoping there’s no remaining serious threat, and we have serious security, but there will always be the haters and the fruitcakes, and your kids will have to know the protocols for wolves and fae at least.”

“They know them now, Ms Hauptman, and we have to have security here. My husband was out, and we always told Josh and Sara as much as we could. If there are protocols for the manitou and Elder Spirits we’ll be happy to learn them.”

I was satisfied with her, at least for a trial, and Adam was willing to guarantee an alternative job if it didn’t work out for some reason. Best of all, she was good to start phone-answering duties immediately, and as Jenny and Andrea had arrived while we were talking I called them in. Andrea promised to send lists and other details, numbers and addresses were exchanged, I offered Bill warm thanks he shrugged off, saying he was glad to help a pack widow, and we all ended the call feeling pleased.

“Thank you, Mercy.” Jenny was openly relieved. “That eases the pressure a good deal. But I gather
you’ve been very busy, again. From the top, please.”

With a sigh I complied, giving her a flat recitation of events overnight and ending by handing her the presidential draft. She’d already had highlights from Darryl, but he hadn’t known the number of the dead, and hadn’t told her about the data we’d seized or what the Fae deemed justice. She and Andrea both lost some colour listening, and slowly regained it as they read the draft.

“God above. Alright. I understand the need, Mercy, Adam, and you had warned me, but even leaving the Fae and whatever they’ve done out of it, there is undoubtedly obstruction and evidence tampering. I doubt anything given back to the Feds will be admissible given the chain of custody, and those confessions will be subject to serious challenge.”

“Yeah, I know, Jenny. The Marrok and Gray Lords accepted that as a consequence of suppressing the torture data. But one, we can put the confessions into the public domain whatever any court says, two, the Feds are going to swallow it — President wouldn’t want me introducing him otherwise — and three, the only prosecutions that still matter are Heuter and other Cantrip agents, and there’s plenty of evidence seized elsewhere, as well as physical evidence from Wyoming. And some of what they’re getting will be checkable when they know where to look — payroll transfers and the like. They also have statements by the freed.”

“Yes. Still.”

“I don’t think there’s a problem.” Andrea gave me a discreet thumbs-up Jenny couldn’t see. “The stuff was gone from the mine before the FBI got there, and if the Fae are returning it …?”

“I’d think. Irpa, probably.”

“The troll? Cool.” Jenny rolled her eyes. “Anyway, if there are no fingerprints or whatever, who’s to say wolves had anything to do with anything? I can’t see any prosecutor wanting to charge Mercy unless there was a rock-solid case and compelling public interest.”

“True. And you’re right about the President. You talked to him about the Fae’s justice?”

“He asked after Irpa mentioned it this morning, and I told him with a lot of ‘so far as I know’s. He didn’t much like it, but he’s not going to defend torture-murderers. I also pointed out he was thereby spared their trials, which would have been a monumental embarrassment.”

“Yes, they would.” Jenny looked more thoughtful. “What do you intend to tell the world today?”

Next to the careful pages of the President’s speech my shopping-list jotting looked pathetic, but I’d added the thanks to Westfield and Fisher, so it had all I needed to say, as Jenny agreed.

“The thanks are fair enough, Mercy, though I’m not sure Westfield will bless you, but otherwise keep it minimal. It’s probably a silly question, but you realise you’re throwing the President a political lifeline he badly needs?”

Distantly I heard Taylor’s voice, and Darryl telling her where to set up.

“Un huh. That’s a bit strong, but yeah, I’m approving maximally prosecuting Cantrip and offering negotiations to the Fae. And as Gwyn ap Lugh and Charles will be on after him, it will be clear there’s been private communication about it all. But if the Man screwed up before, he’s trying to put it right, and he’s still got nearly two years in office. The aim has to be the Fae treaty, and then to get this new Bureau for Preternatural Affairs and the major projects up and running sufficiently hard by the next election that whoever succeeds him cannot stop them. So while he wants to be the man who cleaned it up, and is acting, not merely saying, he has wolf support for those specific
policies. And as a lame duck he’d be no use to us or anyone else.”

“Silly question covered it.”

Adam smiled. “Mercy’s still ahead of the curve, Jenny. There’s another matter, though.” He told her about Velasquez and the possibility of the freed coming to the Tri-Cities. “Are you willing to represent them? There will be a lot of work involved.”

“God, yes. And yes, of course — I’d be proud to do so. But I’ll need to expand my offices, so if this is really going to happen I need confirmation as soon as possible so I can make the right hires.”

“We won’t push Velasquez.” Much. I knew Bran would do whatever he thought best for the whole group, and wolves more generally. “But I think she’ll bow to what the other freed want, which is her, and that will mean coming here. And Bran said they’ve all been using the slow time, so subjectively they’ll feel they’ve already been in Aspen Creek for six or seven days, and for my money that’s practical in many ways, including getting them out of there and available to the FBI as soon as he can.”

“Huh. Any special reason?”

Adam smiled again. “A visiting Alpha is reason enough, Jenny. Bran can tolerate would-be or ex-Alphas within his own pack, but a long-term visiting Alpha is a bigger problem whatever the sex — which really doesn’t help. And nineteen submissives will be sending his dominants into a state, wanting to find something to protect them from.”

“But it’s not a problem for you?”

“Not so much. Pack here is getting used to weird, and there won’t be anything like the proximity — Aspen Creek is small, but I can tell myself Richland is another city. I’m also thinking that the citizens and PDs here will be able to deal better than most places, and those people are going to need all the help they can get. Wolves or no, they’re mostly kids, and however they’re holding up amazingly, they’re all traumatised. And I was human a lot more recently than Bran. I expect Velasquez and I will do some growling from time to time, but if I didn’t think we could cope I wouldn’t allow it.”

“Alright.” Jenny blew out a breath. “Do you really not think of yourself as human, Adam?”

“It fades, Jenny. I was human for twenty-some years, and I’ve been wolf forty-some. I don’t know how old Bran was when he was Changed, but he’s been wolf for many, many times as long. It starts as human plus, but the gap grows.”

“Huh. Is wolf policy on speaking about ages about to change?”

“It’s up in the air. The immediate problem is Travers, because the truth is that he’d lost it with senility. Charles told Westfield he doesn’t know how old Travers was, exactly, but he came to this continent in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Three or four hundred years shouldn’t be enough for the kind of problem he had — Bran, Samuel, and Asil are much older — but as a lone wolf Travers never had pack, and because he’d faked his death no-one was watching him. I’m telling you and Andrea because we need to think about how to answer questions there will be.”

“Yes, we do. Knowing Travers’s actual age would be good.”

“Not if it was in four figures, Jenny, which it could have been. And Charles really doesn’t know — no immigration checks before 1776.” A thought struck me. “Unless he was a transported felon. From what I know records are sparse, but we could have suspicions.”
“Wouldn’t full moon have given him away? Or got him away?”

“Point, Andrea, but he might have wanted to move — Charles said he liked lawless freedom, and fighting in Indian Wars — and if it was when transporting was contracted out to merchants all sorts of private arrangements were possible. Even with crown jailers, come to that.”

Andrea gave me an admiring smile. “For pure speculation that’s a good line, Mercy. Travers fought Indians?”

“And Mexicans, and for the CSA. Now there might be some records of that. Adam, if I get Charles to give us any name variations he or Bran or Samuel know of, ask Ben to find out if there’s anything online? I’m thinking Ligatt will ask about him, even if no-one does in the meanwhile. And maybe I should admit to him up front today — we found the prison, run by eleven insane humans and one senile wolf they’d suborned?”

Adam nodded sharply. “I think so, but I’ll talk to Bran. Go check on Taylor? And where the rallies are at?”

I understood why even now he didn’t want Jenny or Andrea listening to that conversation, so we left him to it. Jesse had rescued the brownies from the oven, so I forgave her and David for depleting them, and went to invite Taylor, Dilman, and Hersch to join us in depleting them some more. We were using the den room, as a place people had already seen me, and Taylor looked up from adjusting an LED light that raised the illumination a lot without glaring.

“Hey, Mercy. Congratulations on the Time cover, which is a blast. What’s up?”

“Hi, Caroline, and thanks, though I’m too tired to care much just now. What do you know?”

“That you’re addressing the rallies, and we’re selling it to just about everyone on earth, but not about what or for how long.”

“Only a few minutes, I hope, though I’m expecting to have to wait out some crowd reaction. Mostly I’m introducing the President, then you’re going to hand off to the White House. When he’s done, though, it’ll be back here for statements by Gwyn ap Lugh and Charles, also live to the big screens.” They all stared at me. “I know. We found Cantrip’s prison, and it was bad, but you’ll have to wait for details. Meantime, chocolate and brownies while we watch the wolf speakers?”

“We’re going to meet a Gray Lord?”

I waggled a hand. “You’re going to film one, Al. Ap Lugh is usually polite, but I doubt you’ll get more than a bare acknowledgement, and certainly no thanks. And he’ll probably have some of his knights, who are weird even by fae standards, and say nothing they don’t have to. But if you are scrupulously polite and professional, you will have his respect, which is worth having, believe me.”

They followed me to the kitchen, and though I’d had more than enough of talking about the mine I did answer Caroline’s question about any rescuees, and said a little about the wolf freed. I also asked her to have KEPR put together a short clip for me, and she made a call. With the chocolate and brownies distributed, though, I settled back to enjoy my own and absorb the TV images. Coverage was switching between the National Mall, where everything was focused towards the Lincoln Memorial, and Golden Gate Park, where the crowd was filling all the more open spaces in a giant patchwork. There were people all along Ocean Beach too, and more big screens than I could count, showing interviews with marchers in both locations conducted by roving teams. There was a lot of pink, including some kind of fake fur I supposed was meant to be a ruff, and Kyle
hadn’t been wrong about strange synergies, but there was also a lot of dignity and clear purpose. Of course the preternatural was complicated, but what Cantrip had done to Adam, Jesse, and me was wrong — and a government agency that decided it had a license to kill citizens of one minority was a threat to everyone. The USA was meant to be the land of the free and the home of the brave, and it was high time it got back to being it. I heard my own name and saw my Tuesday-morning face far too often, but both were persistently associated with Medicine Wolf, which pleased me better, and there was a reverence for the manitou that was more pronounced in the West — mostly for seismic reasons, I thought, but also Native American, Gaian, and some lingering Haight-Ashbury appreciation of the strange.

After a while there was a shift to studio commentary, saying the speeches would be starting soon, with some talking-head discussion of the day. The scale of the turnouts was surprising them, and no-one could remember any single agency being the target of such a substantial and diverse protest, fuelling speculation about whether Cantrip could survive. There was also an update on Senator Heuter’s re-arrest, with protests from his lawyers and one of his righter-wing colleagues about unwarranted and unconstitutional harassment. I saw Caroline note the look David and I exchanged, but questions were cut off when coverage went back to the stage in Golden Gate Park, and the doorbell announced Fisher. We switched to the den, for the space and big screen, Adam joined us, with David’s men, and the serious business got under way.

There was some flannel from the mayors of each city, but things sharpened with a passionate prayer for love and tolerance, and a clear, cold recap of the week’s events underlining that the point wasn’t just demanding Cantrip face justice but ensuring that someone sane and sensible had responsibility for preternatural contact and affairs. Then the first Alpha was on, and I braced myself, because Hank Dawson was from Houston, dressed southern cowboy, and save for looking a little young could have played the badass sheriff in any movie that needed one. He was big and beefy, and remembering the way he’d looked at me as a child in Aspen Creek I hadn’t quite believed Bran’s assurance that he’d do this well. Kyle’s eyebrows were also up, but Dawson came to the mikes carrying a Mercy and the Manitou tote bag, solemnly removed his white stetson, and exchanged it for a seriously pink one from the bag, earning a snort from Warren and a laugh from many. The crowds had fallen silent when they’d seen him, but started cheering, and he locked them in by saying straight out in his exaggerated drawl that while there was a whole heap of things they’d never see eye to eye on, no sir, that didn’t matter today because there was one thing they did, and organised state bigotry had to go, no matter who it was aimed at. He also pulled in African Americans by saying he’d once heard Ralph Abernathy speak on the need for civil rights, and had agreed without believing the change could be made — until he’d seen it happen. And he switched to some pretty idiomatic Spanish for a sentence or three that damned Cantrip and brought more cheers. He was just winding up when my newest ringtone sounded.

“Gwyn ap Lugh?”

<Mercedes. I am bringing Charles and Anna Cornick through in a moment. May we come directly to your hall?>

“Yes, of course. Knights?”

<Just the two.>

“We’ll be waiting.”

Adam came with me, and after a second’s thought I held out a hand to Jesse as well.

“As a resident, you’re one of his hosts, Jesse, and the way things are going it’s worth underlining that he’s your guest as well as ours. No thanks, remember.”
She was nervy but didn’t object, and Adam put her between us. Fisher didn’t exactly follow, but stood in the doorway, keeping one eye on the screen. It was only a few seconds before an archway opened and they came through, Charles and Anna with tired eyes, though Charles was back in best buckskin, and ap Lugh’s knights as blank-faced as ever.

“Prince Gwyn ap Lugh, knights, be welcome in our house as guests of the Columbia Basin Pack.”

“We are glad to be so, Adam Hauptman, Mercedes Elf-friend.”

“As we are glad to host you. Our daughter, Jesse.”

She gave him a little bob. “Prince Gwyn ap Lugh.”

“Jesse Hauptman.” He offered her a hand she took without letting her surprise show too much. “It is a pleasure to meet you. The courage you showed on Tuesday morning impresses all who see it.”

Jesse flushed a little, but she was pleased. “I am glad you think so. I just did what Mom said.”

“With commendable self-possession. My daughter Elizabeth asked me to convey her respects.”

“Oh. That’s good of her. And mine to her, please, sir.”

“Of course.”

With a glance at Adam, he turned and went to Fisher, hands outstretched and knights trailing. She took the hands for a moment.

“Gwyn ap Lugh.”

“Leslie Fisher. It is good to see you. Lizzie sends her fond regards, and is doing well, though her sleep is still troubled. And I am sorry our justice has distressed you but we could see no alternative short of killing, and they could not be permitted to speak of what they had done, and learned in the doing.”

“I do understand, sir, however I cannot approve. And I am very happy to hear Lizzie’s made good progress. Her last letter was more cheerful and I had hoped she was healing more fully.”

Though we were all tracking the conversation I’d turned to Charles and Anna, cocking one eyebrow.

“You look bushed.”

“More unsettled, Mercy. Brother Wolf does not find it reasonable that seven days should pass in seven hours, however useful it may be. And I do not disagree.”

“Me either.” Anna spoke very softly. “It’s been very odd. But the job’s all but done. We’ve decided to put purged data on new drives, reinforced by your suggestion, and that’s underway. Some papers to finish checking, but delivery to Wyoming will be this evening.”

“OK. Good work. And from that noise we’d better get back to hear José Urillo.”

Returning to the den I made necessary introductions briefly, mostly with slight human bows and polite fae nods exchanged, though Andrea’s eyes were as wide as for Medicine Wolf. Kyle and Jenny were both a little spooked, and so were Caroline, Vince, and Al, but more by the trailing knights than ap Lugh, though his power could be felt in the air, and once he was seated with them standing behind him we settled back to listen. The El Paso pack had the only Hispanic Alpha, but
for this he didn’t mind contributing to a slightly exaggerated impression of wolf diversity, and though I didn’t know him well I’d always been happy with this choice of Bran’s. When he wanted to Urillo could do macho with the best of them, but he’d been one of the most positive Alphas about the changes Adam had made in recognising female dominance separately from ranking by mate, and had an easy manner. He also opted to open in Spanish, rousing Hispanics among the crowd, and when he switched to English kept a slightly heavier accent than usual to deliver a stark message — that racial, homophobic, and anti-preternatural bigotry were at once the same thing and mutually reinforcing. As a human, and before he was out as a wolf, he had seen the contempt of Anglos for a swarthy hispanophone, and observed *machismo* contempt for *maricones*, and as a wolf and then an Alpha he had seen that compounded in the eyes of Cantrip agents by their contempt for an animal. It was true, but he was also setting up the revelation of the racial stats about the victims in the mine, and he pointed to the overrepresentation of African Americans and Hispanics in both Les Heuter’s victims and the twenty-four subcontracted murders announced yesterday. He warned that the same biases would be seen as more of Cantrip’s crimes were exposed, underlined their blatant prejudices in hiring and that they had been allowed to skate on it, and called for sustained pressure to ensure that a successor agency was as multicultural as the preternaturals with whom it was engaged.

It was another good speech that went home, and there was no break as he asked the crowds to listen now to his brother wolf from Boston, and coverage cut to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. I’d never met Isaac Owens, but I’d heard a lot from Charles and Anna — the former finding it hard not to resent the fact that Anna had been kidnapped on Isaac’s watch, the latter more forgiving, and both in agreement that he was doing a fair job for so young an Alpha. As an African American he completed our racial trio, and was acutely aware he was standing where Martin Luther King had delivered his ‘I have a dream’ speech — and as an unmistakeable Bostonian he hit some other buttons that he addressed directly, speaking to the strange conversations he’d been having all week as his fellow Olde Towner’s were forced to confront the hateful prejudice shown by the Heuter jury and by MacLandis.

We didn’t know how long he’d speak for, so we were ready to go. Al had set up the camera beside the screen, so I could see it with a glance when he was focused on me, and Caroline had fitted me with a lapel mike. Everyone else had shifted sideways, taking sofas with them, so they could watch from safely out of shot. Feeling my tiredness despite the adrenaline, some of me was impatient to get on with it, but I found what Owens was saying compelling because he’d turned openly to the religious sources of bigotry — not only the clannish Catholicism of many on that jury and MacLandis, but equally the congregationalist fervour of small Protestant churches like Bradley’s, and the kinds of statement too many evangelical radio hosts though it alright to broadcast. Raised a Baptist, he had every respect for faith, and observed that a significant majority of US wolves were Christians because a significant majority of US citizens were Christians. But people of faith needed to be very careful about whom they chose to believe their particular faith excoriated, and to heed the advice about hating the sin but loving the sinner. Nor was it anything but urgent — we already knew full well that words of hate prompted deeds of hate, that bigotry would escalate from verbal assault to physical assault and worse when it could.

“Every woman knows it, every Latinx knows it, and God knows that all my Brethren and Sistren know it. Wolves know it too, and this week you have all seen why we know it. Back on Tuesday, when our mornings were interrupted by that astonishing scene in Kennewick, Mercy Hauptman told us we needed to think about the decision K-K-Kantrip had made — and not just what they’d decided to do, but how fast they’d decided it. Medicine Wolf showed up at the State Park on Monday, and the Hauptmans were talking to a whole alphabet soup of agencies until late that evening. But by the small hours of Tuesday K-K-Kantrip had opted to perjure themselves to the Special Security Court to facilitate a shooting and a double kidnapping with every intention of rape
and worse. And I have been thinking about that all week. Why were they so desperate, when there was no real emergency? Sure, there was the manitou, but it was already talking to the Hauptmans and had shown restraint. And there weren’t any hostages in danger, or anything like that. There was the garbage MacLandis put out, trying to tie the River Devil to Guayota, but could anyone at K-K-Kantrip actually have believed that when they were editing the files themselves? They certainly knew they couldn’t make the case with the actual files, or why falsify them? No, the only emergency was that K-K-Kantrip couldn’t do the job they were supposed to do — they couldn’t even think about communicating with the manitou, so they opted to try to seize the one person whom they knew could. But even that doesn’t explain the ready threat to Miss Hauptman, and only one thing does — which is that they’d done it before. You can make some decisions on the fly, but a string of linked decisions to forge, perjure, assault, kidnap, and threaten a minor with rape to coerce her parents? If you do that, as quickly and confidently as that psychopath Preskylovitch did, and from all accounts I’ve heard or read his superiors at K-K-Kantrip too, then it’s default behaviour. You’re confident because you’ve practiced, because for you kidnap, rape, and torture are SOP, tried and trusted tools. That was the conclusion I came to, and nothing since has made me change my mind. But it’s no longer speculation, it’s fact, and though you weren’t expecting this, you need to listen really carefully now, because Mercy Hauptman has some news for us. Some of it’s very good, and some of it’s heartbreaking, so please, give her your closest attention.”

He’d surprised people, but not Al, who gave me a thumbs-up, and it was only a few seconds before I saw myself appear on the big screen, looking almost as tired as I felt, and the crowds erupted.
Chapter Forty-Six

Being cheered by several million people is less fun than you might think. To avoid feedback we’d had the TV volume low, and the wall of sound that came from the speakers was enough to have wolves rocking back, and cost me some effort not to flinch. Perhaps if I’d been in DC myself I’d have had a clearer sense of why they’d cheer at the mere sight of me, when it seemed I’d hardly been off their screens all week, and despite what Kyle had said I hadn’t anticipated so fierce a response. It seemed absurd, but however much they’d been watching me all week, they hadn’t had any chance to reply, and now they let me know very clearly that they liked what they’d been seeing and hearing. The Pink presence didn’t inhibit a sense that wolf-whistling was appropriate, despite my being a coyote, and there was a shrilling descant amid the cheering and shouting that grated — not that I’d ever had the looks or figure to attract much wolf-whistling before. But I also recognised power when I was offered it, for very many politicians besides the President would be watching, and this racket was confirmation of the poll numbers Anna and Andrea had been giving me all week, so I let it run for a full minute before raising both hands, palms out, and slowly bringing them down. It wasn’t quite as good as a volume slider, but it worked gratifyingly well.

“Thank you all — that was quite a reception, and a nice surprise in a week that’s had a lot of nasty ones. Isaac Owens is right that I have news, good and bad, but before I sober you all with it let me say some things that need to be said. We all owe thanks to the organisers in San Francisco and DC — they’ve done an astonishing job at very high speed, and it is warmly appreciated.”

I let some proper applause rise and fade while the big screen cut briefly from me to figures in each city who gave quick waves.

“And I have to say that they, and all of you, have my special thanks because what’s happening today reflects exactly what I’ve been trying to say since Monday night — that with tolerance and co-operation our diversity is a great strength, not the problem K-K-Kantrip want to make it. I am human and coyote, Anglo and Blackfeet, wife and mate, mother and business owner. You are young and old, gay and straight, black, brown, red, and white, human and preternatural, and we have come together because we know two things absolutely — that we are stronger together, and that a threat to any group because it can be labelled other is a threat to all of us. E Pluribus Unum, the motto says, many peoples become one people, and there are no qualifications on that pluribus. Every one of us counts. Every one of us matters. And together we can insist on change, and make it happen.”

This cheering had the right rhythm too, and I let it swell a moment before holding up hands more forcefully.

“I also want to give an extra shout out to the youngsters who are marching today, and adults who have helped them be here. Back on Tuesday, when I was still so angry my eyes were golden, one of my pack told me that what had grabbed your and everyone’s attention wasn’t just Medicine Wolf, or my blood-soaked rage, but that I had come across as more angry about the threats to my daughter and husband than those to me. I’ve been thinking about that, because she was right about how I was feeling. The personal threat made me scared mad, and seeing Adam get shot made me vengeful mad, but the threat to Jesse took me somewhere else. If there had been a button I could press to drop every last K-K-Kantrip agent dead, even the ones I’ve met who are halfway sane and
sensible, then on Tuesday I’d have broken my thumb on it in a heartbeat. It’s not right, and it never will be, but it’s true all the same. Isaac Owens talked a lot of sense about the speed of their decision, and I also meant the nature of their decision — that innocence counts for nothing, rape and murder mean nothing, if destroying or using them get you somewhere, and you can label your victims ‘other’.

This time my brief pause was filled with silence.

“I’ve come to think that’s the big challenge Jesse’s generation has to face. There was a generation that fought racism, and then generations that fought sexism and homophobia, so you could say that now we need to fight bigotry against the preternatural. But I think we need to go behind symptoms to causes, and ask why so many people, so many Americans, seem to need an other, some or any other, to blame and fear and hate and persecute. Why does our melting pot breed xenophobes, and not just fear of the other but a willingness to think pre-emptive violence is justified? This isn’t comfortable, but there’s a thought that comes to me sometimes hearing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’, when it says the rockets’ red glare and those bombs bursting in air Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there — which is why they couldn’t see it anyway? From what I know half that battle was in daylight, and at night there’s moonlight and starlight as well as fire-and lamplight. The actual star-spangled banner wasn’t even raised up the flagpole until dawn. And any wolves or avatars could have seen a flag however dark it was. File under poetic license, sure, but it’s not just that, people — it’s a diagnosis. The anthem tells us being attacked is a way to know we’re still here, and I think we’ve got hooked on it, so much that we invent enemies because we need them. I don’t think that’s what Francis Scott Key meant to say at all, but I’ll ask all of you, and especially all of the children, to think about why so many Americans seem to find having enemies a feelgood factor.”

The thought was lodged, I hoped, and I pressed straight on.

“My own feelgood factor isn’t enemies, it’s friends, and co-operation. And there have been some very good things this week, as well as a lot of bad ones — the Elder Spirits, especially. I was scared spitless coming out as a coyote girl, but it’s been such a relief.” That got some cheers. “And the single best thing is Hanford, with what Medicine Wolf and Zee and Tad Adelbertsmiter are managing to do. Thanking fae is not a good idea, but I do note that the Gray Lords have permitted that aid, and I am very glad they did so. And I tell you all, utterly seriously, that we have lucked out with Medicine Wolf. I have met two manitous, and after Guayota I’d have said I’d be delighted never to meet another. But I am so glad of Medicine Wolf, and it is the manitou’s power that is driving everything. So while I’m happy to see myself decorating so many of your chests, it’s Medicine Wolf you need to take into your hearts. I need to tell you what else has been happening, but first let’s hear it for our very biggest friend, Medicine Wolf.”

KEPR slid onto the screen the clip I’d asked for, a series of images of the manitou — behind me on Tuesday morning, howling acceptance of the Elder Spirits’ request, looming over Zee at Hanford, thrusting its head through the door for me to lean on, and trotting away from the press conference over the Columbia — and all the way through the crowds cheered and shouted themselves hoarse. When I was back on screen I tried the volume slider, which worked again if more slowly.

“Remember the good things, people, because you need to brace yourselves now. You know Adam and I have been dealing with the FBI all week, co-operating with their investigation, and I have to say they’ve been very helpful and unfailingly courteous. AED Westfield and SA Fisher are the kind of Federal agents we need, and as horrified by what they’ve been finding as we all are. They have also been working flat out, with the aid of Elder Spirits, to find the prison Preskylovitch implied K-K-Kantrip were running. And last night we found it.”
Any silence can be impressive, but the profound silence of a crowd of millions has a palpable force.

“It’s an old trona mine in southern Wyoming, miles from anywhere, and besides Preskylovitch, who was in charge of the site, the staff seems to have been ten psychotic humans and a senile wolf they had somehow suborned. And it was and is a hellhole worse than anything I have ever seen. The good news is that we — meaning a joint wolf, avatar, and fae team, with heavy support from the Gray Lords, FBI, and others — rescued thirty-five beings, nine fae and twenty-six wolves, all now receiving the help and care they desperately needed. The bad news is that the dead outnumbered the living by more than eight to one, and counting. Yeah, you heard right — that mine was a reeking abattoir, and K-K-Kantrip have perpetrated what has to be the biggest massacre of unarmed people by Federal Agents since the Indian Wars. Which is why, people, you need to give your attention right now to the President. He has heard what we are all saying, loud and clear, and he has a response. Mr President, sir.”

It took a few seconds before Al gave me a thumbs-up and straightened, and the big screen image shifted smoothly to the Oval Office. I’d been careful not to step on any of the man’s lines, and there was some juice in the brief thanks he offered me, not only for introducing him. Then he got back to the script we’d seen, and feeling my energy drain as I relaxed I went to sit in Adam’s embrace.

“You nailed it again, Mercy.”

“We can hope, Kyle.”

“More than hope. That was really well done. You’re a very good public speaker.”

“Yes, she is.” Ap Lugh tipped his head to me slightly. “Strikingly so. Perhaps you would introduce me also, Mercy, when the human is done?”

“If you want.” I was too tired to argue, despite his wording. “Besides notably friendly and restrained, are you being anything other than Gwyn ap Lugh, once and again Prince of the Gray Lords?”

“No.”

He gave me a look in which amusement flickered, but the President had finished crediting Raven for helping to find the mine and footage from Wyoming started. I hadn’t understood from the draft how long it would take, but there was a complete walk through the mine tunnel, from twisted doors to uncapped shaft and its surrounding ranks of empty cages, with brief comments in the flattest voice I’d ever heard from the Man. The techs had carried on working everywhere else, with occasional glances at the camera, but the chamber was clear and the camera panned before settling on the shaft for a long moment and the number of dead so far known was given, with a brief statement of gladness for the aid of the coblynau and Nemane. Then the Oval Office returned, and with it a denunciation of Cantrip in a voice turned as passionate as it had been flat. The coverage was splicing in shots of the listening crowds, very silent and still — until a policy of maximal prosecution was confirmed, starting a swelling murmur that with the news of its abolition became a deafening roar. The Man had to let it run, and I looked round, catching Caroline’s glance from a white face.

“You were there?”

“All night, Caroline — I wasn’t imagining that it stank. Gwyn ap Lugh provided some very fast magical travel, as well as the trolls who ripped open those doors and the coblynau who did the preliminary bodycount.”
“Dear God.” She swallowed. “Do you know how many more there might be?”

“Anything up to lots. The coblynau were just counting skulls they could see.”

Darryl returned from the kitchen with a tray of steaming mugs, both hot chocolate and coffee. I took a chocolate with a grateful smile, amused by ap Lugh following suit, and took the opportunity to shift to sit by a very quiet Jesse, slinging an arm around her.

“How many?”

“Alright, ex-kiddo?”

“Just taking it in, Mom. It’s been hard to keep up with the scale, this week.”

“Now there’s an understatement. Monday morning I was worrying about a dangerous gearbox, Wednesday North Korea called Medicine Wolf a Green Jackal, and today I introduced the President. Say what?”

It won me a grin, weaker than I’d have liked but still, and Darryl circulated with the remaining brownies. Ap Lugh’s knights looked blank at the offer, but the others disappeared the food fast enough as we watched the crowd finally fall silent again under the President’s patient gaze. Then he set about destroying not just Senator Heuter but the kind of white, might, and right politics he and Cantrip stood for, and the punch of who owned the mine drew a noise almost like a wolf’s bay from the crowds. But the segue to Boston restored a deepening silence, the careful footwork around powers of executive and judiciary introduced a singing tension, and the apology itself had an extraordinary effect. Intent on the Man I didn’t see where it started, but as they heard the frank regret and admission of personal shame, the crowds knelt, briefly, in a great spreading ripple like a Mexican Wave in reverse — an acknowledgement of political courage but also of their own shame at so perverse a verdict, redolent of old Southern acquittals of those guilty of lynchings. Anyone could see the Man was shaken by it, but he rose to the moment by simply bowing his head in silence. Ap Lugh stood.

“He will be as swift as he can be after that. We should be ready, Charles Cornick.”

I dragged myself upright and stood where I had before, ap Lugh and Charles just out of shot to one side. And ap Lugh was almost right — when he began to speak again the President was brisk and clear in extending invitations, or rather, inviting himself and others to Kennewick. But he had some additions to the draft — a formal thanks to the marchers for demanding what was right, and a young paean to Adam and me for all we’d done, and for agreeing to host whatever talks might be possible, before saying that he understood there was an immediate preternatural response, and would they all please listen now carefully to a further broadcast from the Tri-Cities. His image blanked, and I saw myself return to the big screens as Al again gave me a thumbs-up. After what they’d just heard I wasn’t expecting more cheering, and it would not have been respectful to the dead, but great crowds have their own cunning. At first the chant was just Mercy! Mercy! over and over, but somewhere in DC it morphed into Mercy Killed Cantrip and San Francisco picked it up in a hurry. I held up my hands, but the slider was much slower to work this time, and I was tired enough that after a moment I lost patience and put some Alpha oomph in my voice.

“Oy!”

Fisher had said my command to Bradley had carried a punch even over the phone, and with the kind of amplification I had in both venues this one did break the chant enough for me to start.

“It’s very kind of you all, but not alone I didn’t. Your turning out today was important, and a lot of
people have helped to kill Cantrip. Without Medicine Wolf, nothing, and without the FBI, none of the hard evidence of systematic abduction and murder that’s driven the bipartisan consensus and the President’s decision. And while I can’t say Cantrip doesn’t matter any more, because there’s a lot we all still need to understand about how the disaster and national shame represented by that hellhole of a mine happened, it does not matter right now. What does matter is its successor agency, and the future of human relations with the preternatural — especially the standoff with the Fae the President is seeking to resolve. The apology he made, and you all acknowledged and seconded, is a critical step that opens a way forward, but it cannot undo what was done in Boston, and no Gray Lord can be forsworn. Remember what was said in Boston, that the Fae would treat with us as one hostile nation treats with another, until it seemed good to them to do otherwise. And please listen carefully now to the one who said it, the sometime Alastair Beauclaire, once and again Gwyn ap Lugh, Prince of the Gray Lords.”

We swapped places, ap Lugh’s knights silently flanking him, and the silence I’d left deepened. Ap Lugh hadn’t dropped his glamour but the remoteness of his age and nature were more apparent than usual, and his voice was power.

“I am glad to be introduced by Mercedes Hauptman, Daughter of Coyote, named Elf-friend for her deeds this week, and she speaks truth. In Boston I proclaimed the independence of the Fae, and we remain sovereign unto ourselves, now and always. But since that day two important matters have changed. Among ourselves, ere now, though we withdrew to the lands granted us we ceased to dwell there, for we have reopened and reclaimed Underhill, our land and dominion of old, which is of earth but of no human nation and no human space or human time. The Reservations are merely the places we have positioned doors. And this week, among humans, driven by Mercedes, there has been a new understanding and repudiation of the purblind bigotry embodied in Cantrip and expressed by the Boston jury, culminating in the Presidential apology you have just heard. As the father of Elizabeth Beauclaire, Lesley Heuter’s last victim, and for the kin of the fae and half-fae he slew, I accept the President’s apology, recognising the maximal prosecution and abolition of Cantrip as its substance, and on behalf of the Gray Lords I say that we are willing to meet him, without preconditions, to speak of how the Fae and the United States may jointly seek to become less mutually hostile nations. We also gladly agree to Adam Hauptman, Alpha of the Columbia Basin Pack, and his wife and mate, Mercedes Elf-friend, as the hosts of that meeting. And we commend the new dual policy of the Werewolves, the Paths of Assertion and of Mercy, as well as the Path of the Manitou, with which we are willing to assist as we can. What will be possible and right for us I cannot yet say, but we will negotiate in good faith and we will seek equivalents of those paths that humans and Fae may tread together through the seasons.”

As he’d been speaking the silence had slowly broken, with swelling murmurs of surprise at Underhill and relief at the prompt acceptance of the President’s apology and invitation. The reciprocal promise of good faith brought a louder burst of noise with some cheering, but ap Lugh simply held up a hand and the silence returned.

“I respect your approval, and all you have helped bring about with your massed power today. But I have two warnings also. The first is that in dealing with those who attack us, we will not rely upon human law and justice but apply our own. Of the twelve beings who ran that mine, six were dead before we found it — Preskylovitch by Medicine Wolf, and five from infighting among themselves. The other six fled, and we have already found and punished them, delivering full transcripts of their confessions to the FBI and permanently destroying their minds. Take heed, those who hate — we will accept no unprovoked harm intentionally done to any of us. The second warning is that Mercedes is right that no full-blooded fae can be forsworn. We cannot break our oaths. And like the Elder Spirits we too know how poor the record of the Federal Government is in matters of treaty and faith. We are willing to seek a new compact with your nation, a new reciprocal oath of mutual tolerance and respect, even of mutual aid or defence, and what we swear
to do, we do. Always. It is why we are so careful with our words, and neither expect nor offer
thanks between individuals, for to us such thanks are admissions of debt and obligation. And while
we understand the Federal Government cannot be responsible for every citizen’s actions, we hold
it responsible for its own actions. If a new compact between it and the Fae is sworn, and duly
ratified, we will consider it final and binding, not subject to any partisan change of administration,
nor to legislative emendation. Our word is our bond, and so must your word be. I am glad to have
had your attention, and make way now for Charles Smith, who responds for werewolves.”

That had sobered the crowds, but there were still shouts of approval as places were exchanged.
Charles had his warrior look on, but his eyes were even more tired than mine and the shouts died
away.

“I speak today for all werewolves in North America, representing the Marrok, Alpha of Alphas and
the highest werewolf authority. You know my mate and I assisted in the rescue of Elizabeth
Beauclaire and capture of Les Heuter, and the memory of what happened is a bitter one. And I was
with my brother Adam, and sister Mercy, and Gwyn ap Lugh, at that mine last night, rescuing
those who could be rescued and discovering how many could not. It was a place of the vilest
madness, and we welcome prosecutions of former Cantrip agents as simple justice, the abolition of
that bloodsoaked agency as a necessary step. We recognise the independence of the Fae, with the
sovereignty of their realm Underhill, and like them accept the President’s apology, made on behalf
of all Americans, for the implications of that Boston verdict. We also warmly commend his
invitation to the Gray Lords, and the Gray Lords’ acceptance. The Marrok thanks the Columbia
Basin Pack for hosting talks, and acknowledges the debt all wolves owe that pack, especially
Adam and Mercy, for their actions and conduct all week.”

That renewed the shouting and Charles let it run for a moment before holding up a hand.

“We have one request of all parties to these talks, human, Fae, and manitou, seconding the
president — that the Elder Spirits also be invited. We believe the First People and their animal
kinds should be represented, and that their presence will help all. And I have one thought to offer
you all as this long and strange day ends. We know sorrow for the dead, horror at their number, and
shame at the manner of their deaths, as well as unspeakable rage. And we know the bitter
satisfaction of Cantrip’s fall, with the warmth of hope for a better future, safer and kinder for all.
But for me, and all who saw today’s dawn outside that mine, after a night breathing its stink of
madness, today has, like Tuesday, been a day that began with discoveries of murder and mayhem,
yet has ended with pledges of honour and a sense of wonder. And as even Medicine Wolf, who
lived before the Cascade Mountains began to rise, agrees, such days are vanishingly rare. For there
to be two such within a week is a deep astonishment. And so, amid the roil of conflicting emotions,
we know that we stand at a time of great decisions and great consequences, and that today we have
again, together as kinds and all kinds together, done something right. So like Mercy on Tuesday
night, let us pray we can get up tomorrow and do it some more. Thank you for listening, and may
you all find safe paths home.”

Al didn’t need telling that was it and I saw him end transmission, but on the big screen, rather than
vanishing, Charles’s face froze and faded out, to be replaced by the image of me and Medicine
Wolf touching heads. The light was fading in DC, and the screen stood out against the shadow of
the Lincoln Memorial, the many colours of roses vibrant in the dusk. Ap Lugh gave me a look with
a surprising amount of amusement in it, speaking in a relaxed voice.

“You could have worn the cloak if you wished, Mercy. Bran Cornick said you would not do so
because you would not claim a Fae endorsement you felt you did not have.”

“More or less, Gwyn ap Lugh. But it’s a power I like and respect, so I will not use it needlessly.”
“Rose cloaks usually like being shown off, you know. They are beautiful as well as potent, and know it. You should certainly wear it as co-host of these negotiations.” I gave him a look, and he raised a hand, smiling. “Allay your suspicions. It will do nothing you do not want it to do, and none other can control or command its magic. I advise you to wear it not because it will give me or any fae advantage, but because it will give you advantage, not only over fae. To us, it and Manannán’s Bane declare you chosen of Underhill, and to others it asserts that you stand between wolves and Fae, as between wolves and humans, humans and manitou.”

As I had just told pretty much everybody, Gray Lords cannot lie — at least, not without catastrophic consequences. How senior a Gray Lord Dana had been I wasn’t sure but Manannán had been up there, and in the long run, whatever anyone had planned and whatever the means, it wasn’t any kind of coincidence that both had died very swiftly after choosing to lie. Ap Lugh had spoken very plainly by any fae standard, astonishingly so for a Gray Lord, and he was fully aware of the humans who had heard, including Fisher and the KEPR crew. I was thinking hard, but nodded.

“All right. I am glad to hear it, Gwyn ap Lugh. Before you leave, may I without obligation ask you for some more enlightenment?”

“Of course.”

I tipped my head, and started to rise but Kyle’s voice stopped me.

“One more blast coming up.”

I looked back at the screen and my heart thumped as an instantly recognisable figure climbed the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and stood before the microphone. The Boss didn’t have a backing band, or even a guitar, and before the crowds could work up a noise he went straight into ‘We Shall Overcome’, articulating more clearly than he sometimes managed, and the world stilled — not least because it wasn’t “We shall overcome some day” but “We have overcome today”. And more verses than the first were changed — we still had to wait to be free and not afraid, but we did walk hand in hand today, and were not alone. By the second chorus the crowds had it nailed, and the alternation of a single voice with a chorus of three million did something very strange and electric to my heart and head. It wasn’t like the compulsion of the Elder Spirits’ dance but it was a compulsion all the same, and I was on my feet, singing, by the second line of the first chorus. I didn’t know Jesse knew the song but she was with me, and to Adam, Jenny, and David and his men, as well as to Fisher, the Civil Rights’ anthem was a deep and living memory. What ap Lugh’s knights made of it I have no idea, but in the final chorus he joined us, in a gorgeous baritone infused with power triumphant, that for my money went out in some fashion over the speakers both in DC and San Francisco. I can’t tell you how, but to my ears the Boss’s voice became purer for a moment, its declaration of a truth heightened beyond even his resources — we had overcome, and Cantrip were forever dead and damned. The echoes slowly died away, and the Boss gave that crooked, charming smile.

“Thank you, everyone. That was very special.” He rolled his head and took a breath. “In some ways it’s a tacky note, but needful — if I license that with all profits — every last cent — to Clean Up the Basin, are you all good with it?”

They were, and said so at length, until it turned out the Boss had slider control better than mine, if not quite up to Gwyn ap Lugh’s.

“Thanks, again. Then all that remains is for me to say, on behalf of the organisers, East and West, a big thank you for coming, and to echo Charles Smith in saying travel safely now.” He laughed. “And didn’t he look fine? I’ve always liked that buckskin look, but a white Jersey boy can’t carry
it. Maybe when I grow up. Good night to you all, and despite everything it is a good night.”

Many in the crowds wanted to go on vocalising for a while, but the families and older marchers started to leave, and after a moment I caught Anna’s deeply amused eye.

“Toss you for who gets to give him the tees at Christmas?”

“What tees?”

Charles sounded utterly suspicious, and Anna grinned.

“The Boss Wants to Look Like Me When He Grows Up tees. And no need, Mercy — he ought to have lots. You do black, I’ll do colours.”

“Deal.”

“Hey!”

“Too late, big brother. At least you’ll only be decorating your own chest.”

Jesse’s laugh silenced Charles’s protests and I rose, stretching tired muscles and digging into dwindling stamina. The KEPR team were packing up and I thanked them, apologising to Caroline that she’d been called out when only the camera was needed, and promising to let her know when the President would be arriving once I knew myself. She stared.

“You’ll let us cover that?”

“Outside, yeah. Why not? And there’ll be closing announcements. Probably nothing in the middle, but who knows? Oh, that might mean the Secret Service advance team will be in touch. Which reminds me — Gwyn ap Lugh, do you want to send in an advance team yourself? Or put Irpa and Þorgeðr, or whoever, on the gate for the duration?”

“Neither, Mercy, though I appreciate being asked. With a full riding of Gray Lords, though, my knights will all be present, and some will take guard outside.”

“A faerie rade?”

“So we intend. And Ms Taylor is welcome to film it.” He gave Adam a dry smile. “I did promise you would see us coming.”

“So you did.” Adam returned the smile. “Sounds interesting. And no offence to you or your knights, Gwyn ap Lugh, but what are their criteria for who can rightfully ask admission? Will they co-ordinate with my people and the Secret Service? We need to be on the same page.”

“No offence taken, Adam Hauptman, but I do not anticipate difficulties. The concern of my knights will be largely with any magical threat. You and the humans should ignore them unless they give you warning of anything.”

Adam nodded, and I frowned.

“Will they need food while they are here? And come to that, do Gray Lords have any dietary requirements? Or particular requests it wouldn’t be illegal to meet?”

Ap Lugh’s smile was wider. “No to the first and second, Mercy. As to the third, to share food is an ancient ritual for us, as for humans, but we will be happy to abide your cooking. Or Benny’s.”
“Right.” I looked at Fisher. “Will the Secret Service cover that sort of thing too? I wouldn’t want to feed the man something he hates.”

“I have no idea, Ms Hauptman, but I’ll ask.”

“Please do.”

KEPR were done, and after farewells, politely acknowledged by ap Lugh, Darryl showed them out. Fisher lingered, speaking quietly to ap Lugh about her husband and daughter, and his, but when I offered her food she declined.

“Thanks for the offer, but I imagine you have calls to make, and I certainly do.” Her eyes rested on me. “I’m not sure that what you said really counts as nothing much you hadn’t said already, Ms Hauptman, but it was a privilege to hear it.”

“I’ll second that.” Andrea had got over the fact of a Gray Lord’s presence and was back to bouncy. “We should do a tee with Medicine Wolf and the legend I do not need enemies to know who I am. I’d never thought about the flag at Fort McHenry like that, Mercy.” She laughed. “And that song was wonderful. Do you want to call the Boss yourself, or should I put it on Ms Oliver’s to-do list?”

I stared at her. “Well, there’s a question.”
Chapter Forty-Seven

Charles and Anna didn’t need to get back to Aspen Creek urgently, and ap Lugh didn’t seem in any hurry either, but Jenny and Andrea both had evening commitments and headed out — Jenny happily, Andrea with considerable reluctance. Eyeing me, Adam said Benny’s was fine for food, but despite dragging muscles I thought cooking was what I needed and we wound up adjourning to the kitchen — minus ap Lugh’s knights, whom he dismissed by archway. The meat packed out to Wyoming had dented the Yoke’s delivery, and I hadn’t defrosted any of the bigger joints, so I went for pasta again which meant grating more frozen mozzarella. Adam and Charles were talking to Bran, but the others settled round the table and Anna distributed beer, allowing Jesse one after a glance at me.

I listened to the conversation as I grated and moved on to cubing a wonderfully spicy salami from the Euro-Market on West Clearwater. David’s men were wary of ap Lugh, if intensely curious, and Kyle was as quietly watchful as Warren, but Jesse was taking her chances and ap Lugh was, for whatever reasons of his own, willing to answer her. She started from what he’d said about the fae being very literal with words, asking for examples of humans getting it wrong, and he gave her a smile.

“There are many such in the stories, Jesse Hauptman, however they are embroidered by humans. Take Tam Lin — the tithe to hell is nonsense, an early Christian overlay, but it is true he was enthralled, not because he fell from his horse, but because after he fell he asked for and accepted fae healing, acknowledging a debt without limits, and the queen whose subject had aided him chose his service as a lover in perpetuity to settle it. The healing was by Orfino’s Bane.” He shook his head, glancing at me. “It was always going to end badly, but that one was never a very wise queen. And he wasn’t reclaimed by the human girl as swiftly as the ballad has it, but lived some centuries Underhill before meeting her. We are from a time before writing, when a word of honour was all, and we abide by that, even if the word is spoken unwittingly, for all speech should be true.”

I could see Jesse chewing on that, but she followed up on Underhill with a careful caveat of asking only for what she as a human might properly be told. “Though I have to say I’m very curious, sir. Mom hasn’t said anything much at all, so all I know is that there are a lot of roses.”

“There are now, yes, in the Garden of Manannán’s Death. And there have been before, for Underhill has always liked roses. But it is not a place I can explain or describe, Jesse Hauptman, for it is to space as I and all fae are to time.”

“Huh.” She knew better than to ask for an explanation of that. “Will it always be closed to humans now?”

“Not necessarily. Under present circumstances it is wiser, but they are changing. And you would be safe enough if you came with Mercy.”

I spoke without turning. “The day after Adam lets you get a face tat, ex-kiddo. It’s not a tourist destination, however I may have a visa.” I finished slicing sweet peppers and added them to the mix. “And no offence, Gwyn ap Lugh, but it’s also full of things that eat children.”
“None taken, Mercy. The worst are under wards of cold iron and strong magic, and will stay that way. And you might safely ask Underhill for a rose from its garden for your step-daughter. Such a gift would not fade or close in her lifetime. It would not mind you gifting Ms Lafferty, either.”

This time I did half-turn, though I kept stirring. “That might be useful. So might a way of proving to the President that Underhill really isn’t in the US. If he’s willing, would you consider taking him — or letting me take him — to the shores of that ocean?”

His eyebrows rose. “Maybe. But that is a considerable if, Mercy.”

And a considerable maybe, I thought. “I know, Gwyn ap Lugh. It’s just that if he can say he’s seen it himself and knows it is elsewhere, or elsewhen, he’ll be in a stronger position. Anyway, when I asked earlier, I was wondering if you could help me understand what I did with that sending this morning. Besides dealing with Leah I meant to siphon off some of Adam’s and my rage, because it was unbearable and dangerous, but I did not consciously intend the glamour, and have since discovered that I also, Samuel Cornick’s word, cathected rage from him and every wolf of my pack who was present. So one reason I’m wary of wearing the cloak is because I don’t understand and can’t predict what the effects of its … amplifications of my magic will be.”

He nodded to Adam and Charles as they came quietly in.

“That I understand, Mercy, but I do not believe you need be concerned. You made that sending as a release, however it served other purposes also, and it acted as one for those of your pack. Amplified is correct, for your intent was not altered. The power you gained from Manannán is yours, as surely as that which you took from Guayota, and that sending was no fae thing, however the cloak lent it some glamour.” He shrugged. “If the power were still fae, you would be able to use glamour yourself. How you have changed it I am not sure I understand at all, but that you have is certain.”

“Huh. Well, that’s good to know, I suppose. Magic’s always behaved oddly around me, so it’s not a complete surprise, however weird.”

David stirred. “Gwyn ap Lugh, I do not perceive magic well. May I ask one who does how the magical power Mercy has gained interacts with the political power she has created for herself, and for other preternaturals?”

“You may, David Christiansen, and it is a very interesting question, with no simple answer. They are powers of wholly different kinds, but as you already know the power taken from Guayota played a critical part in engaging the curiosity of Medicine Wolf, and the power gained Underhill, by right and by gift, has enabled much that boosts the political power. I can add that because Mercedes is intending politically, her magical power is seeking to follow that intent. You would know better than I, but to me it seemed that her sending this morning had an effect on the Marrok’s pack that one might well call political.”

David nodded, looking thoughtful.

“And she used a little power to cut short that chant, the magic riding the transmission to the big screens and their speakers, and back to individual screens also, to judge from the one here. I have known magic do such a thing before now, but not often, nor on such a scale.” This shrug was more delicate, a ripple of his shoulders. “The effect was needed for her intent, so the magic achieved it. All who listened felt it, and that will boost the public perception of Mercedes.”

I was back to stirring, and not so happy — I couldn’t deny I’d meant to stop the chant, but I hadn’t really thought about what doing so on air implied. Adam felt my unease and came to stand beside
me, resting a hand on my shoulder.

“I don’t see any problem, love, and nor did Bran, though he was also struck by your ability. I felt your irritation, but I also noticed that you didn’t use a command, or pull on me at all — you just nudged them a little. And there’s bound to be feedback — your political power rests on what you are and what you have done, and both involve your magic.”

“That is true, Adam Hauptman, yet there is something new here also. So far as humans are concerned, the political power I and Bran Cornick have rests on our identities as fae and werewolf, as does your power and David Christiansen’s. But none of us have ever acted politically in public in the sustained way Mercedes has this week, walking beside Medicine Wolf and Coyote, nor with such wide effect across all kinds. She offers a very interesting example.”

I turned to stare at him. “So long as you mean role model, Gwyn ap Lugh, and not the other sort.”

He laughed, a rich and joyful sound. “I do, Mercy, however it may be that a model combining the powers of avatars, werewolves, manitous, and fae is in its nature inimitable.”

“There’s only one Mercy.” Adam’s hand squeezed my shoulder. “But I think Raven was right that you shouldn’t worry about it. You’ve been very sure-footed, and overthinking it won’t help.”

“Easier said than done, love.”

But I was feeling happier. My furry self worked more by instinct than conscious thought, anyway, and it wasn’t as if I could fault anything cloak or Manannán’s Bane had done, or disliked any of the results. Becoming a not-so-minor-league magic user was unsettling, but as with the influx of money better to go up in the world than come down, even if it did mean there was farther to fall. The sauce was nearly done, so I totted up numbers, set water to boil, and fetched tagliatelle from the pantry.

“Bran have anything else to say?”

“He did, Gwyn ap Lugh, the data transfer is complete, and the papers purged, so the Marrok asked me to ask you to let Irpa know. There’s a set for you. And Preskylovitch kept a list of victims, including the failed changes, which should go to Nemane.”

“Of course, Adam Hauptman. Nemane will tell Irpa promptly, and be glad of that list.” Ap Lugh took out his phone and sent a message, before cocking his head. “How many names were on it?”

“Three-hundred-and-forty-one, including the twenty-six freed. Eleven were marked as half-fae.”

Adam’s voice was as flat as ap Lugh’s gaze, and we all thought about those three-hundred-and-fifteen dead, but no-one wanted to dwell on it further and Adam shrugged very slightly. “Wolves will attend any memorial service, and if you need anything from us regarding those eleven, Gwyn ap Lugh, just ask. But for now at least the dead are Nemane’s and Westfield’s business. Our file on Senator Heuter has been sent to SA Fisher. And you were right about Velasquez, Mercy — she’s agreed to become a proper Alpha, and they’ll be made pack tomorrow. We’re invited if we can make it.”

Adam looked a query at ap Lugh, who nodded.

“With all but vampires and humans Mercedes can use the cloak as she will.”

I made myself focus. “Out of interest, what would happen if anyone else put it on?”

“That would depend, Mercy. It would not harm your mate or step-daughter, and might grant a
request from them. If the wearer was a thief, though, or in any way hostile to you or yours, I would not expect him or her to survive. Roses have thorns as well as petals.”

I stared at him. “Huh. Not a good way to go, but I’m glad to know it has defences of its own. What time tomorrow, Adam?”

“Noon. I assumed you’d want to go to church.”

“Rightly. Though one of us should give Reverend Jackson a call so she knows we’re coming, and about David.”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, but in the morning — no point telegraphing anything before we have to.”

“Un huh. And I can’t say I much feel like going back to Aspen Creek, but we probably should.”

“Yeah. Velasquez is hoping we will, I gather.”

“I bet.” Water was boiling and I dumped the pasta in as David’s men set about laying the table. “How are the freed doing?”

“Improved with sleep, food, and Medicine Wolf, and blown away by seeing footage from Tuesday and Wednesday — especially Preskylovitch getting eaten. And barfed. It’s a very popular Manitou. But we probably will need to ask Zee about getting silver out, and with the slow time and sleep they’ve also relaxed enough that nightmares are starting.”

“No surprise there.”

“No. They will be coming here as soon as the Feebs sort housing, so I called Clay Willis and he’ll talk to some PTSD counsellors he knows and see if any of them are willing to take them on as a group.”

“Let’s hope. Gwyn ap Lugh, how are the fae freed?”

“Also recovering, Mercy. The selkies are back at sea, the earth fae in gardens of their choosing. Underhill is aiding them as it can.” He gave a wry smile. “They also approved of Medicine Wolf’s diet, and understand the part you played in their rescue, so in the way of their kinds the brownies and pixies wish to repay kindness with kindness. It will be a while before they are well enough to return Overhill, but when they are, if you are willing to put out food and milk for them, you would find many chores completed overnight.”

I was back to staring, though I still had one eye on the sauce I was stirring. “What sort of chores?”

“Whatever needs doing outside that can be done manually, Mercy. Cutting grass, weeding, tending your kitchen garden — which would flourish in their care.”

“Huh. Maybe. Meals don’t seem enough payment for that. And they’d need to meet the wolves on patrol, so there weren’t any … mishaps.”

“For you they might even do that, but no four-legged wolf will find a brownie or pixie that does not wish to be found. They are well used to avoiding foxes and dogs. Even coyotes.”

“Double huh. Adam?”

“I’m with you on the pay scale, love, and we’ll need to talk to them about that. But service offered in gratitude is not a thing to dismiss, and if the safety’s good I don’t mind fae gardeners. Draw
“Fair dealing, Adam Hauptman, as they understand it. Money and the things it buys are of little interest to them.” His eyes were distant with memory. “Once upon a time, the farmers who loved them best would allow them dwellings on the land they cared for — tunnels close by a spring — and invite them to the greater feasts, when family gathered.”

“That we can do.” I frowned, thinking. “And a small creek draining the irrigation canal runs through that corner lot. If we are buying it.”

“I put in a low offer… yesterday, to gauge reaction.” Adam shook his head. “My sense of the week is seriously messed up.”

“One more reason to go to church tomorrow. But that sounds good. I was sorry to have to pass on it before.”

“You are buying more land?”

“If we can, Gwyn ap Lugh. Mercy’s land and mine are contiguous, but there’s a corner chunk that would extend our river frontage.” Adam demonstrated with his hands. “Owner died last year and the new one doesn’t want it but the asking price was high. I’d like it for security, as well as the creek, and Mercy thinks land is more fun than money.”

That widened the discussion for a moment, but it swung back to the parcel of hunting tract we’d heard was on the market, and the increased need for it with a new Richland pack imminent. I didn’t really think Federal compensation to the freed would stretch to buying them land to hunt on, but was happy to ask Westfield, if only to goose him. But new packs that needed it usually did get some help from the Marrok, and though he gave me a look Charles agreed to relay the question.

The pasta was done, and Jesse helped me mozzarella it and serve. I thought I’d done a pretty good job, with the help of the excellent salami, and the others seemed to agree. Even ap Lugh offered a genuine compliment, and Connor gave a little sigh.

“Between your cooking and Benny’s miracle pies we’re going to be spoiled for mission food, Gramps.”

“Yeah, we are.” David grinned. “Most jobs mean trail rations or whatever we can get. This one has superior perks, and I don’t just mean the food. Sarge, Mercy, if we’re asked for a rescue I’d have a very hard time saying ‘no’, but short of that we’ll stay as long as you want. How you’re doing it remains a mystery to me, but what’s happening here matters as much as anything I’ve ever seen. The boys agree. And Miss Hauptman deserves the space she needs.”

Adam and I both raised glasses to that, our looks communicating our gratitude while Jesse looked down, Gwyn ap Lugh looked enigmatic, and Kyle looked thoughtful.

“Thanks for all of that, Corp.” Adam’s hand held mine hard. “I know you can’t be permanent bodyguards, but I’d be glad of suggestions for who could. Much as Mercy and Jesse dislike it, I can’t see the need going away anytime soon.”

David nodded. “I can give you some reliable names, Sarge. KPD were saying the kooks have begun to show up, and some religious types.”

“Supporting Bradley?”
“There might be a few, but more wanting to see Medicine Wolf — some here, some out at Hanford. Governor’s got a National Guard unit holding the perimeter out there.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. You can’t blame people for being curious, but trespassing on a lethal radiation hazard is about as dim as it gets, all the same.

“I did warn Medicine Wolf about people wanting to ask religious questions, but I don’t think they’ll much care for the answers.” I repeated its line about being an eyewitness to evolution, and ap Lugh laughed. “That was my reaction also, Gwyn ap Lugh, but it might be a complication we could do without.”

“Maybe, but it is an honest complication, Mercy, and while I mean no offence to you or any believer here, I shall not regret anything that gives the Christians of cold iron a headache.”

I couldn’t argue with that and didn’t want to anyway, but some lively discussion between Jesse and Anna about the effects of a Medicine Wolf show-and-tell were interrupted by the doorbell, and an increasingly zonked-looking Fisher.

“You look all in, SA.”

“Getting that way, Ms Hauptman, and I’m off-shift soon.” Her gaze flickered to ap Lugh. “But besides Irpa having just delivered a desk full of papers and a set of flash drives to Wyoming, for which the AED is very glad indeed, despite the confirmation of more dead and all the other complications, the President asks if you’ll take a call.”

I exchanged a look with Adam, and sighed. “If it’s soon, SA. I need sleep. In your MCC?”

“I can just give him your number, Ms Hauptman.”

She’d glanced at ap Lugh again, and it would be a lot easier if he could just listen in, but the idea of the man calling me direct was disconcerting, despite everything, and I swallowed some unreasonable irritation.

“Go ahead, SA, and I’ll worry about what ringtone to assign him.”

She gave me a look while others grinned, but took out her phone and tapped a little.

“As I understand it, Ms Hauptman, Mr Hauptman, it’s timing he’s concerned about. And the Secret Service advance team will be here very shortly, I’m afraid.”

Adam grunted. “I’ll see them briefly, SA, but they do not get to keep Mercy or me up for very long. Are they packing silver?”

“I believe so, sir, though I have told them they won’t be allowed to bring it past the perimeter. They weren’t happy.”

“They can go whistle, SA. Tell them the only point of silver is to kill. Accurate lead stops a wolf just fine, and without fatality.”

“I’ll try, sir, but I don’t have the AED’s authority and they’re very used to having everyone jump for them.”

“Their problem, SA. And we all breathed in enough silver last night that I really don’t want to have to smell any more for a good long time.”
David sat forward. “I’ve had dealings a time or two, SA. Do you know which squad?”

“Agent Maretti’s in command of the advance team, Mr Christiansen.”

“Huh. Never met him, Sarge, but I’ve heard good things. You want me to talk to him? Once I can walk him through the existing set-up he’ll be easier, but he won’t be happy about the number of guns in the house — not unreasonably, from his point of view.”

“Also his problem, Corp. He protects the man. The more likely threats are to me and mine.”

“Point, Sarge.”

“Tell him to recalibrate for campaigning, David, because that’s what the man’s doing.” I shrugged. “Or for meeting foreign … potentates, I suppose, who have their own security. He must be used to that. Does he know anything about magic, SA?”

“No that I know, Ms Hauptman.”

“Then he’s out of his depth anyway, and de facto relying on us to deal with any magical threat — which we, or the fae, or the Elder Spirits, or Medicine Wolf, will, if we have to, though it is now very unlikely.” Something would have to be seriously unhinged to take on that alliance, but then again we’d been dealing with the seriously unhinged all week, and more couldn’t quite be ruled out. “If he’s inclined to a testosterone match, tell him he’d do a lot better boning up on how to address one of Gwyn ap Lugh’s knights politely and clearly enough to get an answer rather than a very old sword through the neck.”

Ap Lugh gave me a smile. “They would not do that without true need, Mercy, but the point is well made. Leslie Fisher, you might tell this agent that while I and any other Gray Lords are guests of Adam Hauptman and Mercedes Elf-friend their property will be very strongly defended. Should you desire it, Adam Hauptman, we could discuss making some of those defences permanent. There would be no obligation of any kind, for it would not suit us at all if you or your mate were to suffer harm.”

Adam blinked. “Your words make me glad, Gwyn ap Lugh, and I would be happy to have that conversation after I have slept.”

Ap Lugh raised his glass in acknowledgement as my phone sounded, using its default, unknown-caller classic ringtone. Silence fell as I hauled it out of my pocket, flicked on the speaker, and held it away from my ear. Charles had his own out so Bran would be listening too.

“Mercy Hauptman.”

<Ms Hauptman.> The man’s voice was rougher than it had been when he had to speak in public. <Thank you — that was some introduction you gave me, and Gwyn ap Lugh. A lot of food for thought.>

“You’re welcome, Mr President. And the crowd told you you nailed it yourself with the personal part of the apology.”

<Yeah, they did, didn’t they? It was the darnedest thing. The analysts tell me it started simultaneously here and in San Francisco, not one following the other, and the emotional whip was fierce, even by my standards. You’ve hit a real gusher.>

He’d been in oil, so while it wasn’t my kind of metaphor I knew what he meant. I also thought the list of the dead hadn’t yet reached him, and that I wasn’t going to broach it.
“Surely, Mr President. But I hope it doesn’t come as any kind of news that people who suffer bigotry resent it, and that there’s plenty of bigotry about in the good old US of A.”

<No, it doesn’t, Ms Hauptman. But that resentment has not been lined up and put in harness like this for half-a-century, at least. And as I’m going to be putting all my weight behind it while I’m in office and Congress is still wondering which end is up, I thought I’d try to do my bit now to keep up the momentum.>

“Un huh. Meaning, sir?”

He laughed. <You’re something else, Ms Hauptman. Not many people talk to me straight. Meaning that I have an even more ridiculously busy schedule than ever, and will be tied up on the Hill for a week at least from Wednesday, with the Cantrip and new bureau bill, so I’m thinking I’ll fly west tomorrow, arriving maybe mid-afternoon. Is that workable for you? And if you know, or can ask, for the Fae, the Marrok, and the Elder Spirits?>

My eyes met Gwyn ap Lugh’s, who was very still for a second before he nodded, and then Charles’s as I heard Bran say “Yes, if we can travel by Underhill. Medicine Wolf says it is no problem”. Gwyn ap Lugh had already said — twice now — that with non-humans it was my call, so I nodded to Charles who murmured a ‘yes’.

“Alright, Mr President. I am going to church in the morning, and Adam and I then have some business with the freed wolves, but we can be back here by three or so. The Marrok can also be here then, and the Fae, and Medicine Wolf. I can’t speak for the Elder Spirits, but I will pass the word along with an open invitation.”

<Ah. Thank you, Ms Hauptman. That was quicker than I expected.>

“I have open lines to the Marrok, who is with Medicine Wolf, and to Gwyn ap Lugh, sir, and you’re on speaker. We wanted the momentum so we’re happy with yours.” Which not every human would be. “But does that momentum mean your advance security team, and duty detail tomorrow, are going to be even more frazzled than they are already?”

<Probably, Ms Hauptman. Are they causing a problem?>

“Not here quite yet, Mr President, but SA Fisher saw fit to warn us that Agent Maretti was, for example, very unhappy to be asked not to pack silver. And as we gather he has no magic nor much if any understanding of it, while there will be more powerful magical protections and defences in place than King Kong could shake a stick at, it would be good if someone was in touch who can tell him to go with the practical and never mind SOP that just won’t work. Using silver as an example, we’ll allow lead, but we’ll no more admit a bunch of nervy agents packing silver into the presence of the Marrok than they’d let someone wild-eyed and carrying an unsheathed flensing knife into yours. Period. Bottom line, sir, is that you, and they, will be in the presence of beings of immense and innate magical power — beings who, like you, Mr President, have the power to destroy the world, but who would not need technology to do so. And those beings, whether fae or wolf or elder spirit or manitou, have their own rules and necessities. They are all co-operating, and all who come will do so with goodwill. But your agents and guards cannot control or neutralise them, and any attempt to put official feet down, or assume command authority, will not be helpful. Or tolerated.”

There was a brief silence and a presidential sigh. <Fair enough, Ms Hauptman. I get that, mostly, and I’ll do what I can. But you do realise I pretty much do what I’m told by those guys?>

“They can be stacked three deep around you, Mr President, and packing all the lead they want.
They just can’t pack silver, and they can’t try to give orders to Alpha werewolves or Gray Lords without, at the very least, incurring ill will while gaining nothing.” It was my turn to sigh. “We’ll do Preternatural Courtesy 101 for them, Mr President, but they have to listen and seriously take it to heart. And here’s a hypothetical that might … bring some clarity to that discussion. As things stand, humans are not allowed Underhill. Also period. But, if Gwyn ap Lugh were to tell me that Adam and I could take you there, you alone, and briefly, with some wolf and fae security, so you know beyond all doubt that Underhill is not in the US, would you want me to make that offer?”

There was a longer silence in which Adam gave me a thumbs-up, Charles and Anna smiles, and Gwyn ap Lugh a slightly quizzical look. I raised an eyebrow back, but before he could say anything the President answered.

“I’d like to say yes, Ms Hauptman, and I find that I’d trust your word about safety. But all alone is a problem. I’ll be bringing Glen Sawyer — any chance he could be included?”

I looked at ap Lugh, who shrugged.

“If we allow one, Mercedes, two is not a problem. But the Garden of Manannán’s Death and the shore only, with no step aside, and Edythe and Irpa to make sure of it.”

“Fine by me, Gwyn ap Lugh. Did you hear, sir? You and Secretary Sawyer, with a troll and a Gray Lord riding herd.”

“A troll and a Gray Lord.” The man’s laugh had an edge. “You do make life interesting, Ms Hauptman. But you’re right that that will concentrate Secret Service minds in a hurry. I’ll tell you tomorrow if I won the argument, unless you need to know sooner?”

“No, sir, though an hour or two’s notice for the fae would be good — by the time you touch down, say. If I’m still tied up, SA Fisher can take and pass on a message.”

“Fair enough. What would the timing look like?”

I thought it through. “Can you be here — this house — by 3.30 Pacific, sir?”

“Ye-es. Given the time zones, just about.”

“Alright. The Marrok will probably be here already, and if it happens the trip Underhill need not take long at all in Overhill time, so if I said 4.30 to Medicine Wolf and the Elder Spirits, and 5 to Gwyn ap Lugh, you’d be able to meet them individually, and they you, before we all sit down out back with some of Benny’s miracle pies. Secretary Sawyer said you sensibly like pepperoni and pineapple?”

The Man laughed more easily. “I do, yes. And that sounds workable, Ms Hauptman, as well as efficient and thoughtful. Thank you. And I’ll give SA Fisher a call about what to say to Agent Maretti.”

“She’s here now if you want, Mr President.”

He did, and we exchanged farewells before I passed my phone to a wide-eyed Fisher and we heard the Man tell her to tell Maretti to call the Director of the Secret Service as soon as he arrived. Then he rang off, and Fisher gave me back the phone.

“If I get that message, Ms Hauptman, how and to whom do I pass it on?”

“Call me, Leslie Fisher, and I will tell Irpa and Edythe.” Ap Lugh took out his phone, and after a
second Fisher’s rang once. “Use that number.”

“Right. Th— I am glad, Gwyn ap Lugh. And once again, Ms Hauptman, way to go. I think Maretti’s just at the gate, so I’ll go meet him.”

She went, David with her, and Charles passed me his phone.

<Mercy.> Bran’s voice was unexpectedly warm. <That was again well done. Do you think Coyote heard?>

“Probably, but I’ll call Jim Alvin. And thanks for the vote of confidence, but I’m just playing it as straight as I can.”

<For a coyote value of straight, maybe. Tell Charles I sang along with the Boss, will you?>

And he rang off on me yet again, while Charles and Anna laughed, and every other wolf, even Adam, went slightly cross-eyed for a moment. I gave Charles his phone, and shook my head.

“Medicine Wolf, remember, people. For the first time ever Bran’s got something other than his own pure will between himself and whatever it was that comes down to us as the story of Grendel. And he never was much of a fan of the Boss, more fool him, so be thankful as well as surprised, hey? Gwyn ap Lugh, is there any chance that Irpa might join SA Fisher and David Christiansen in doing what I called Preternatural Courtesy 101? She concentrates human minds pretty well too.”

Ap Lugh smiled. “She’s rather taken with you, Mercy, and not only on Manannán’s account, so I imagine she would be willing. I’ll ask.” He rose, smiling. “And I second Bran Cornick, as I too sang along with the Boss. There are moments when I have to admire humans, however there are centuries when it is hard to remember that. Unless I hear from you or Adam Hauptman otherwise, expect the rade to become visible tomorrow at 5, post-meridian, by this Overhill time zone. We will come from the north.”

Walla Walla was south-west of the Tri-Cities, but most fae in the New World were from places north of most of the US, so that made sense in so far as anything fae did, and after asking if Charles and Anna wanted to return to Aspen Creek — they didn’t — and some pleasantries ap Lugh snapped his fingers and left by arch. The sense of power departing was much weaker than it had been this morning, and I looked at Adam and Charles.

“He’s lost a lot of anger too, or buried it deep. Did my … cathecting benefit him too, I wonder?”

“Huh. Good question, love. You seem to have been using whatever you got from Manannán, so maybe. There’s the apology, though. That must have scratched a very severe itch, some at least.”

“And he has won much that he sought, little sister.” Charles’s eyes were bright. “I too second Da, and I have always liked ‘Born in the USA’, in its true intent. But you should go sleep. You will be very busy again tomorrow, Adam, and, however oddly, Anna and I have had what amounts to six nights’ good sleep since this morning, as you and Mercy have not. If you are willing, we will help Fisher and David deal with Maretti and whomever, and see David gets some downtime also. And Jesse.”

Adam was too tired to object much, and saw the logic anyway, so after I’d called Jim and left a message we went, and I’m not sure I’ve ever gone to sleep faster or slept more like a log.
WE both woke feeling a lot better, and for once the developments to catch up on were pretty much all good. The Sunday papers and TV news all approved strongly of yesterday’s events, openly calling the abolition of Cantrip good riddance to bad rubbish and celebrating the people power that had clinched it. The mine-prison was an infinitely grimmer topic but the quality of commentary was high, with deep shock and shame prominent, and what I’d said about the ‘Star Spangled Banner’ was widely remarked and analysed, as were the presidential apology, the crowd’s reaction, and the Boss’s stunning performance. Underhill was there too, with some sillier pieces but also several whose authors had done superior research, picking their old stories well. Oddest of all was the reaction to fae justice, where proper concern about abrogation of due process and unhappiness that the rule of law could not be served were more than tempered by what I’d meant when I’d said to the man that a sentence of radical ignorance fitted a crime of obscene knowledge. Preternatural power in finding, reaching, and evacuating the mine also commanded editorial inches and screentime, and there was some very interesting discussion of ways the Paths of Assertion and Mercy might combine, with intense speculation about the freed and what they might now do.

The only downside was that Agent Maretti still wasn’t a very happy Secret Service camper, but he’d both received some strongly worded orders and had David as well as Irpa make impressions, so he was sucking it up. To be fair he’d also seen that the side of Adam’s security arrangements he understood was first-rate, and there seemed to have been some demonstrations of werewolf speed and strength, in both forms, that allowed him to recognise their presence as protection rather than threat. It turned out Caroline and her crew had been urgently vetted earlier in the week, when Sawyer came, so he was alright with that, and if the whole thing was still giving him hives he had understood it really wasn’t his call. He’d also had at least the basics of wolf courtesy driven home, so he didn’t annoy Adam too much.

Sunday morning meant pack breakfast, and after the week we’d had most of those who weren’t already here on guard duty turned up. I grilled and fried a small mountain of Canadian bacon and British sausages from the Euro-market, as well as baking a batch of brownies that would find good homes, while Darryl pitched in with pancakes, and Mary Jo had picked up a crate of freshly baked rolls and croissants. When everyone was nearing repletion and conversation was beginning to pick up, Adam stood and assuaged the curiosity roused by the Secret Service presence at the gate by telling them what would be happening and who all was coming. Strung together it sounded as improbable as it was — 3, Marrok, 3.30, President and Secretary of the Interior, 4.30, Medicine Wolf and maybe Elder Spirits, 5, faerie rade, from the north — but he segued straight into what arrangements he wanted, which was pretty much everyone present while the man was, with those not given specific other duties forming a perimeter to make very sure that nothing came through the woods or out of the Columbia. I added some of those specific duties, about what needed doing out back while we were at Aspen Creek before Adam took them all to meet Maretti, then made some necessary calls.

I didn’t give Caroline much detail but I did let her know that KEPR would want to be present by 3 pm, geared up for some VIP visitors, that Medicine Wolf would be back, and that there’d be some seriously magical things to see starting at 5 for which they might want a second camera at the gate
for another angle. And no, there would be no problem at all selling it to everyone. Then I had the rather harder task of calling Reverend Jackson.

I used to go to a small congregationalist church that had suited me well enough. Bryan, my foster father in Aspen Creek, had been a Baptist of sorts, but in my 20s I’d preferred a smaller and more flexible organisation, and while Pastor Ogden had been alive it had been fine, but his replacement, though not as bad as a visiting preacher I’d once heard there, was not a man who had much tolerance of the preternatural, or anything else, and I’d drifted away. After some experimentation I’d settled on the local Episcopalians, not for the liturgy or prayerbook particularly, though I quite liked both, but because one thing they really didn’t do was sanction hate. Ordained non-celibate gays were a problem for some, but that was about ordination and even those who were underlyingly homophobic weren’t after persecution, only straight clergy. Reverend Jackson herself was pretty whitebread as well as safely married to a nice man, and I’d given her big points for the way she’d dealt with Adam — whose own faith had been burnt out in Vietnam, but who came with me sometimes because he knew it mattered to me, and found the Episcopalians as soothingly inoffensive as I did myself. He hadn’t said so, but she had realised he came for me, not for worship — he didn’t take communion — and had welcomed him gently all the same, controlling her fear, and I’d gathered from here and there that she had also had some rather sharper words for one or two congregants who’d been less than happy to know they had a werewolf among them. So I felt strongly that I owed her a heads-up, and despite some butterflies — because I did care what my fellow worshippers thought of what they’d seen this week — I called her at home and discovered I’d been worrying about the wrong things.

She actually apologised for not having called on Tuesday to offer pastoral care, and she had been talking to her flock quite intensively as the week had unfolded. Episcopalians might be polite and averse to the kind of fundamentalist fervour so many American Christians liked, but they were Americans and plenty owned weapons they used, so neither killing Tim nor any would-be kidnapper was a problem. Being a coyote girl was a poser, but coyotes weren’t as frightening as fae and werewolves, so people were taking that under advisement, and though Bostock’s ‘pagan dance’ might have been, my words to her had nixed that as a problem too. And if everyone, including Reverend Jackson, was still coming to terms with yesterday’s rolling revelations, I’d been on the right side of them no matter how you cut it. She had also seen clearly that if I came as usual today I would of necessity have David and his men as guards, and wouldn’t be able to stop the media pack from following — which did not make her happy, but could be coped with.

<But the thing is, Ms Hauptman, that if you hadn’t called me this morning I would have called you, because I cannot fail to address the week’s events in my sermon.> She laughed a little shakily. <It’s been rewritten a dozen times since Tuesday, and I’m still trying to think things through as much as anyone. It’s been a very raw and humbling week, and the Lord alone knows how you’ve coped, but I still can’t not go there. It’s in no way minatory, and I have nothing but admiration for what you’ve done, but when you told that Fox woman all Christians would need more than the bible to understand Medicine Wolf you did rather throw down a gauntlet.>

As I’d pretty much intended to do so, if not with Episcopalians in mind, I couldn’t deny it or apologise, and said so. I also trusted her assurance that she wasn’t looking to criticise, and we got on to the media pack and gauntlets that congregants — especially minor ones — shouldn’t have to run. When we were done I checked with David, and then used the two-way to ask the KPD sergeant at the gate both to let the media know we’d be heading to Holy Eucharist and to request a sufficient police presence outside the church that they’d behave themselves. Then I talked to Jesse, who was agnostically closer to Adam than to me but wanted to come — partly, I thought, for something normal to do and partly just wanting company. I was fine with that, but not with putting her on screen or newspaper front pages, so I called up the church on Googlemaps, showed David the layout, and called Reverend Jackson back to let her know the plan.
I also fielded a call from an efficient Chief Rodgers, sitting with a spooked Mayor of Kennewick, who’d been briefed by the Secret Service and were wondering if I could add anything. I thought Rodgers was being professional while the mayor seemed more miffed that he wasn’t getting a presidential photo-op, and though I wasn’t impressed I’d rather he was happy so I suggested he talk to his counterparts and meet the man at Tri-Cities Airport. To Rodgers I gave an outline of the schedule, and suggested it might be an idea to warn the controllers at the airport that there would be some airborne traffic from 5 that I doubted would show up on radar. What happened if a passenger jet collided with a faerie rade I had no idea and didn’t want to find out, so I also headed out to the Feebs’ MCC to say as much to Fisher, who blinked.

“Sounds like another good call, Ms Hauptman. How long should they keep the skies clear?”

“No, not a clue, SA, but from what I know a full rade is one of the few occasions when the fae want to be seen, so I’m guessing there’ll be some showboating. Then again, it’d be rude to keep us waiting too long, and it’ll be obvious enough when it’s over because they’ll have landed. Or beamed down, or whatever.”

“Right.” Fisher rubbed her eyes. “Not enough sleep. Oh, and the AED will be back early afternoon. The hoist is onsite but besides the logistics of getting it set up there’s some forensics still to be done first. He thinks they’ll have it sorted by tomorrow.”

“OK.” I frowned. “What are the specs for the hoist? Single drum, I imagine, but what’s the weight?”

“I don’t know, Ms Hauptman. Does it matter?”

“I was thinking wolves might be able to carry it in faster than technology. By all means get on with it, but the offer’s there.”

“Thanks. I’ll tell the AED — he’s intending to be back there when, ah, Nemane is due.”

“I bet.”

“Yeah. And the President now has a summary of the data Irpa delivered.” She gave me a long look. “Are you really going to take him Underhill?”

“I don’t know yet, SA, but if he’s game, then yes. Ligatt was right about seeing and believing, and a lot of this afternoon and evening is really about that. While I can’t say much about Underhill or anything fae, believe me, when you’re there you know it’s not a human space, right down to the bone. We figure it’ll be easier for the man and his trousers if he has that certainty. And though there are a lot of things there you don’t ever want to meet, with Irpa and Edythe looking after us we’ll be safe enough.”

“Who is Edythe? Other than a Gray Lord.”

“I’ve never known, SA. She looks like an eight- or nine-year-old girl and I’ve never seen her without her yo-yo, but she’s something alright. Irish. A fae once told me she’s a prophet, and they wish they’d listened harder when she said a missionary called Patrick was going to be big trouble.” Fisher’s eyebrows went up and I grinned. “I know. Tried to peek past her glamour once, and got nowhere fast.”

“You see through glamour?”

“Nope. But as a coyote side-benefit I can sometimes smell what’s behind it, and if you can get one sense through others may follow. Usually a bad idea, but my nose does what it does. And now I’m
going to follow it to church.”

Adam was driving us in one of the hybrid SUVs, with David’s Hummers fore and aft, and the KPD had laid on a patrol car to siren media aside when they had to. The church is on West 10th, so we went from East Finley to East Chemical Drive, and turned by the Kennewick Arboretum. With the media having had advance notice only the suspicious were tailing us, and the KPD had held them back from the church lot, though several crews had turned in to the Riverview Heights Cemetery, just east of the church, and had cameras running from among the gravestones, which seemed tasteless. Reverend Jenkins had reserved three spaces for us, but before parking we stopped right by the doors and a trio of guards shielded Jesse from view and followed her as she scampered in. When Adam and I got out, with the other trio flanking us, there was a blaze of camera flashes and a lot of shouted questions, and I smiled an apology at some elderly congregants who had also just arrived.

“I’m so sorry for the nuisance, Mrs Wright, Mr Wright, but they seem to think they need to follow us everywhere.”

“Of course they do, dear.” She must have been eighty if she was a day, but she patted my arm gently in comfort. “We’ve been glued to our TV all week, so it would be hypocritical of us to blame them. You’ve been wonderfully brave. And you made the cover of Time — you must be so proud. It’s good to see you well again too, Mr Hauptman, after what those horrible Cantrip people did to you.”

She patted Adam’s arm too, not usually a good idea but he was amused and a little charmed, and gravely covered her hand with his own.

“Thank you, Mrs Wright. I can’t say it’s been anything other than a very rough week, but it has been getting better and we have got some real good out of it, I believe.”

“Indeed. The Good Lord’s been with us.”

I wasn’t sure he’d been any more hands-on than usual, but I appreciated the sentiment and despite David’s mild professional disapproval we kept to the Wrights’ pace, offering supportive arms for the steps up to the door. A cynical part of my mind thought it was good PR, but it was also soothingly mundane, a simple courtesy and respect to elders that Charles would approve. Inside, we let them go on while I introduced David and his men to Reverend Jackson, and she then showed Vinnie and Travis to the two side entrances. Lincoln and John-Julian stayed at the main door, scanning and nodding politely to those entering, while David and Connor flanked us in the rearmost pew.

Episcopalians being a pretty polite lot, we received greetings, enquiries, and good wishes from many entering, if often a little warily, and no-one said anything about it being gauche to bring bodyguards to church. A three-year-old in her mother’s arms asked if I was the lady from the TV, and was the big wolf with me, and I assured her I was and it wasn’t.

“It’s called Medicine Wolf, because it’s good at helping people — like a Native American medicine man, a doctor. Right now it’s helping the land get better, out at Hanford.”

That got some smiles as well as odder looks, but people entering kept everyone moving, and by the time the service started the church was distinctly fuller than usual. The ritual was comforting, and if I wasn’t altogether convinced by the hymns — ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ and ‘God Moves in a Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform’ — Reverend Jackson’s sermon turned out to be pretty good. After assuring everyone that she’d warned me I was providing her text for the week, she quoted me, accurately, and set about thinking it through. Some Christians did force the
fae into a religious schema, as what were usually called Middle Spirits, fallen but very minor angels cast out from heaven but not bad enough for hell, but it was a long time since any such view had been endorsed within the Anglican communion, and certainly Medicine Wolf and the Elder Spirits posed some very hard questions to orthodox theology, so I hadn’t been wrong. But then again, though neither Testament explained them, the New did tell us how to live and Christ’s guidance was never irrelevant or inadequate, however challenging to apply. That led on to vengeance, self-defence, turning the other cheek, the rule of law with what I’d said yesterday about my Tuesday urge to destroy Cantrip, the wrongness of failing to discriminate, a nation needing enemies to know what it was, and what she called the corruption of faith by bigotry, evident in MacLandis and Bradley alike. The whole was gently put but quite tough-minded, and if there were no unexpected insights there was an ordered calm and a deep commitment to facing and thinking about challenges before making decisions that I could appreciate even if I tended to instinct. She ended by considering the great gifts of what Zee, Tad, and Medicine Wolf were doing at Hanford, and the Cascadia earthquake plan, wryly agreeing that the fundamentalists who’d started calling Medicine Wolf a godsend had a point to chew on, seconding the President’s thanks whatever the theological headache, and asking that all pray for the freed in their recovery, so I was left feeling relieved and more grateful than not.

At the request of the senior KPD sergeant on scene Adam and I fielded a few questions from the media while Connor and John-Julian got Jesse into the SUV. Yes, we’d really been to divine service — d’oh! — and yes it had been fine, a welcome return to routine as well as a comfort and blessing. No, we didn’t have anything else to announce just yet, but yes, some things might be happening later, and watch this space — which they already were. Yes, I’d seen the Time cover, and yes of course I was pleased they’d chosen to honour me, and coyotes generally, but I didn’t think Wile E. was a good comparison though it wasn’t any kind of priority. The only interesting thing was an editor from the Christian Science Monitor who asked me why I’d moved from a congregationalist to an Episcopalian church, listened hard to my careful answer about tolerance and preferring a congregation bound by Christian love to one bound by human hatred, expressed approval, and with a deep breath asked if there was any way it would be possible to interview Medicine Wolf. I took a deep breath of my own.

“I expect so. It has said it is willing to answer most questions but as it has probably been alive and aware for at least seven or eight million years, and maybe a lot longer, there will be a lot of fundamentalists who will not like some of its answers. It’s going to be busy at Hanford and elsewhere for some while, so you have time, but you need to think carefully about those who are preset to disbelieve in geological time. But if you give me a card, I’ll pass the request along when I can and let you know the answer.”

The Fox-guy who’d asked if we’d really attended the service complained that I was playing favourites and I gave him a look that had his voice trailing off.

“You might consider, sir, that your question was deeply inane while his was sincere and sensible. And you might also remember that I’m currently suing your colleague Ms Bostock and your station for recklessly broadcasting malicious slanders everyone knew to be slanders as they were uttered, and for which you have made no apology of any kind. So why exactly do you think I should offer you any favours?”

He blinked. “We have the same rights as everyone.”

“Sure you do. And the same responsibilities, however you persistently ignore them. But I tell you what, Fox-guy — if your station renames itself Coyote News for the next year, logo and all, and guarantees during that time to broadcast, in full and at least five times during peak hours, any statement my not-exactly father or any other Elder Spirit makes, I’ll make you pay only half the
sum I’ll be awarded in damages when we get to court.”

Adam had a hard time not snorting laughter, and a lot of people were grinning as I spun on my heel and we headed back to the waiting convoy of Hummers, SUV, and KPD escort. Reverend Jackson had been listening with many of the congregation, gathered by the door, and I thanked her for her sermon, suggesting she invite the *Christian Science Monitor* man in and share it with him, and added that I’d meant my warning to him because Medicine Wolf had called itself an eyewitness to evolution. After a moment she grinned at me, and shook her head.

“I’ll do that, Ms Hauptman, though I rather think I didn’t persuade you about the virtue of turning the other cheek.”

“Not so much, I’m afraid, Reverend. I believe in judgement as well as redemption. But I’ll add that when I warned Medicine Wolf there would be religious questions, it said it didn’t in the least mind telling people it was not created in 4004 BCE, and that for such clever animals humans had some truly silly ideas. And in all seriousness, given that asking it the same thing over and over is not a good idea, a syndicated interview that all denominations could accept as the text to argue about would be good. You have my number, and perhaps you and the *CSM* guy might put in a call to Spokane and see if the Bishop could broker something the Vatican, Salt Lake City, and others would sign up for — each denomination to get two questions, say, and eliminate any duplication.”

“That’s … a really interesting idea, Ms Hauptman. And I did hear what you said about your previous church and the … fervour that came after Pastor Ogden’s death. I knew him a little, and we always got on personally, if not theologically.”

“Figures, Reverend. He was a humble man. The new guy really isn’t. But Adam and I have to go, I’m afraid. We have business with the freed wolves from yesterday.”

“Ah, yes. Please tell them of our prayers.”

Thoughts curled in my head. “Of course, Reverend. I appreciated those, because they went through hell, and came out ferociously sane, in every sense.” She blinked. “Thing is, they’ll almost certainly wind up coming here, to Richland, probably, and although I’d think most as Hispanics will have a Catholic mindset all their faiths have taken some hard knocks.” I let my address widen. “I know you will be willing to see any who need to talk to a priest, but I was wondering if everyone would be … well, cool with welcoming them among us, if they wanted. Frankly, they need all the help they can get, and though I’m not at all clear yet on what will be best, Adam and I would be glad of options. Anyone prepared to say ‘no way’ right now?”

No-one was, and I nodded thanks.

“Appreciated, everyone. Reverend, I’ll keep you posted.”

When we were in the SUV and pulling away Adam gave me a wide grin.

“And Mercy strikes again. Good one, love. Ones.”

Jesse sat up in the back seat. “What did Mom do this time?”

Adam told her about Coyote News, and she gave a warm and very welcome laugh.

“More cool, Mom. Gramps must be laughing himself sick.”

“Not quite, Graught, but it was pretty good.”
Coyote had appeared on the seat beside Jesse, and she yelped surprise, only Adam’s view in the mirror allowing him to control his own reaction. I turned with a scold but Jesse beat me to it.

“You all but gave me a heart-attack, Gramps. Get a manifestation ringtone next time, please — someone must have done a song called ‘Coyote’.”

“The Band”, Adam and I said in unison, and after a beat he added “And The Velvet Underground.”

“That was ‘Coyotes’”, said Coyote, grinning. “I do keep track. And Jesse, I trust my not-exactly-son-in-law enough to think he won’t crash his nice shiny car just because I turn up in the back seat and make you squeak. Anyway, rather-exactly daughter, why does everyone else get a separate half-hour slot while we’re lumped in with Medicine Wolf?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Because unlike the Marrok, Gwyn ap Lugh, and Medicine Wolf you weren’t there to say yes straight away, and because I may be taking the Man and the Secretary of the Interior Underhill for a few moments, so they know it’s real. Besides, you and Medicine Wolf have already done your negotiations, so you’re lined up.”

“Hmm. You’d really take the president Underhill? What happens if he gets eaten by something?”

I gave him a look. “Anything that wants to try has to get through me and Adam, Yo-Yo Edythe, and Irpa, so if that happens it won’t be my problem.”

Coyote grinned. “Good answer. Edythe’s something else, and Irpa’s a heap of fun. I must find out how she does those tattoos.”

“Glamour. And do you know what else? There’s no Edythe in any Gaelic or Celtic mythology I can find.”

“No good asking me, increasingly-daughter. Old and Irish is as much as I know, though I’d add predator. Too many teeth of all sorts for anything else.” He looked thoughtful. “Something earthy, I think, like Ériu, maybe, but all those Irish triplets are too confusing.”

I didn’t disagree but filed the thought away. And he was right about predator, as the Faerie Queen who’d kidnapped me had found out. “So you’ll all be turning up when Medicine Wolf does?”

“Most of us, anyway. Salmon and Otter are happy about the re-engineering. So are my pesky sisters, who send you regards.”

“Hey!” Jesse prodded him. “Why are they always pesky?”

“They’re sisters. It’s in the job description.”

“Huh. And that reminds me — you’re all essence of your animals, right?”

“Of course.”

“So how come all of you are men?”

“We’re not, Graught. We’re Elder Spirits. We take male forms because they’re bigger and usually the defenders.”

“So any of you could take a female human form, if you wanted?”

He peered at her suspiciously. “We could, sure. Why would we want to?”
Jesse stared at him and shook her head. “I’ll spare you the lecture on providing role models and boosting justice. How about spooking Anglos and other bigots sideways? And I don’t mean Pocahontas — more Lozen or Tashenamani. Or Buffalo Calf Road Woman — I’d think you’d approve of her.”

Coyote’s eyebrows had risen. “Someone’s done her homework, but Black Coyote was no relation, just named after a glimpse of me he once had. Still, spooking Anglos and bigots is always good.” He waggled eyebrows at me. “And I suppose you’re in favour?”

“Oh yeah. And there’s another angle, for today anyway. Adam excepted, sometimes, wolves are hopelessly macho, and the humans will be mostly male too, but the Fae aren’t and their rade won’t be. If it’s all the Gray Lords, that means Nemane, Edythe, and Baba Yaga at least, and who knows who else. So who do you want to line up with? And for my money, more balance would be better all round.”

“Points, points. And I do make a lovely warrior girl when the mood takes me.” Jesse and I both gave him looks and he grinned. “I can’t help being so very handsome. I’ll talk to the others about it. I believe you get a Coyote Point, Graught. Maybe you can trade it with your da for a tattoo. How do you cope with all these women, son-in-law?”

“Happily.” Adam was caught between Alpha instincts, indignation, and pride in Jesse, but the result was some amusement as well as a very little resignation. “You should try treating your sisters better. You might find them less pesky.”

“I’ve tried it. I always forget.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I’m actually here on Wolf’s behalf. I know he was his usual testy self that time, but he’s not so bad, really, and he’s concerned about those freed of yours, or rather, about their wolves. They’re becoming a pack today, yes?”

“Un huh. We’re headed there by cloak sooner than later.” But I could see where this was going. “Adam?”

Adam drove in silence for a moment. “I have mixed feelings, Coyote. My wolf liked him before he hit on Mercy, and Bran and I have both wondered about helping the wolves as well as the people. Can Wolf help them without getting into a dominance match with their female Alpha or the Marrok? True help could be very welcome but we really don’t need any incidents today.”

Coyote shrugged. “His concern is genuine, and he thinks the pack-bonding ceremony would enable him to help more. Thunderbird and I both told him he’d have to make nice, but he doesn’t always listen.”

“Mmm. Aspen Creek’s not our decision, but ask Bran, please, Mercy.”

I hauled out my phone, thinking that I was really not going to like this month’s bill.

<Mercy?>

“Coyote has a question, Bran. Wolf thinks he could maybe help the freed’s wolves, and wants to come to the ceremony. Coyote thinks he would probably behave, but there’s no guarantee. I’ll put him on.”

I did, and Bran asked what sort of help Wolf had in mind.

“It’s hard to put in Anglo words, but in Salish I’d say qs tmłəqʷ“ščúʔu. Wolf is worried that their basic instincts will have been warped and thinks he could give them a healthier set. I think he has a
point, and probably could, but I can’t predict any outcome — new territory for everyone. As to behaving himself, I doubt he’d want to rile you, especially today, but he is Wolf and as crazy as all you Alphas, present company excepted, of course.”

Bran laughed. <Of course. And as it happens I agree that the wolves need some help as well as the people, and have been giving them some. So as I still have Medicine Wolf’s peace, and it will be here, yes, he can come but tell him I want both of us to talk with Medicine Wolf and Ramona Velasquez first about what he intends to do. How will he deal with a female Alpha?>

“He doesn’t approve, because he’s a stick-in-the-mud, but he knows it’s the hand they were dealt and he’s as impressed as you with what she managed to do. Seeing her become an Alpha for real might be good for him. Who knows? But he’ll have no problem talking to Medicine Wolf about it, or heeding any advice it has.”

<So I should hope. Adam, Mercy, when will you be coming through?>

The KPD car had pulled aside and we were just turning into the drive as I glanced at the dashboard clock.

“Are you doing lunch?”

<There’ll be food afterwards, yes.>

“About half-an-hour, then. I need to talk to the cloak and touch base with the Feebs — AED’s due back, and I asked them to make sure there wasn’t anything flying into or out of Pasco when the rade comes through.”

<That would seem wise, Mercy. Good catch.>

“I thought so. Oh, and did you hear about Coyote News?”

<Oh yes. Even Leah thought that was pretty funny.>

And he rang off on me again, leaving me to wonder what message exactly he’d intended. I doubted Leah felt forgiving, but she might have decided to cut her losses, and in the meantime there was David’s surprise as Coyote climbed out with us. I grinned at him.

“I know, but he does that sort of thing. And he’s being helpful.”

“I’m always helpful. It’s just that people are sometimes slow to realise it.”

“Right. Do you ever believe yourself?”

“Always.” Coyote grinned. “But if you’re getting lunch there, do you have some cookies here? I’ve never been sure where you get it, because coyotes aren’t noted for baking, and Margi can’t cook for toffee, but you do a mean brownie.”

“Grandma cooked. Joe didn’t have time to find out things like that.” I gave him a look he understood. “And I bet your sisters do. Gordon thinks more than one thing went sideways.”

“He’s probably right. But if there are brownies, why are we still out here?”

Adam laughed. “Good question. Take him in, love, and I’ll talk to Fisher. I owe her some thanks for getting Maretti squelched.”

That was true enough, so I headed in to the kitchen, Jesse, Coyote, and David and his men trailing.
Darryl and Auriele were there with Warren, Charles, and Anna, and Darryl had chocolate and coffee waiting so I pulled out the brownie tin and watched the level fall precipitously.

“Aren’t you going to call Wolf?”

Coyote spoke round a mouthful of brownie. “Already did. I don’t need a phone to do that. He’ll be there before you are.”

The wolves all looked at me, and when I explained Warren nodded.

“That sounds better than not, Mercy. I understand he can be trouble, but there’s been some speculation about how the wolves are doing.”

“I bet. But remember they’ve had Bran’s and Anna’s help, in slow time, as well as Medicine Wolf’s, and that’s a lot of power, one way and another. Are you coming with us, Charles?”

“With Wolf due in Aspen Creek you could not keep me away, Mercy.” He was looking serious until his face cracked into a wide grin. “And Jenny called, laughing, to say she had no idea about the legality of your offer to the Fox guy, but if you were serious she thinks it should go in writing both to Fox and the state court that’ll have first jurisdiction.”

“Completely serious”, I told him. “Why no-one remembers foxes are tricksters too is beyond me, but coyotes dig deeper. And I need to go talk to the cloak.”
I spent a few minutes telling the cloak and Manannán’s Bane about what we’d definitely be doing soon and might be doing later, and changed into jeans, adding upper layers to cope with Aspen Creek. One advantage was a belt, and Carnwennan’s sheath had a belt-loop, though I wasn’t at all sure it had had one yesterday. It was happy to be worn, though, and it felt completely right to have it there. Interestingly, when I put on the cloak and practiced a draw the cloak flipped itself neatly aside, and with Carnwennan in my hand another thought occurred that I asked it to ponder. I also told the cloak what Gwyn ap Lugh had said about asking for roses Underhill, and asked it if it could check that was OK. It gusted roses, and when I picked up Manannán’s Bane and headed downstairs the cloak pinned itself back on my shoulder so it wasn’t too warm. Adam was just heading up to change himself, and gave me a long look.

“It’s holding itself like that?”

“Yeah. And when it’s not, it gets out of the way if I go for Carnwennan.”

“Good to know, love.” His voice dropped to a growl. “I want to see you in buckskin and that feather, soon.”

“Maybe. Watch your hormones if any of the Elder Spirits do turn up as female warriors.”

He laughed, kissed me, and went on up, and I found Coyote and Jesse still in the kitchen and nearly out of brownies, though some of that was down to Warren, Charles, and Anna — they’d also be coming with us, meaning a late lunch, so I didn’t mind, and even broke out the stash of gingerbread. Handing Coyote a slice I remembered something else.

“Do you really have a marid in need of occupation, near-as-nick-it Da?”

His eyebrows rose. “Reading British crime novels?”

“Nope. Just talking to Ben.”

“Ah. Well, you don’t exactly have a marid, most-nearly daughter. Not for long, anyway. But I do know where one is, and it’s not doing anything useful. Did you have a suggestion?”

“Oh yeah.” I told him about Preskylovitch’s team being Rumsfeld’s rabid babies coming home to roost. “So there is a man who deserves some cruel and unusual punishment. And Cheney, come to that. I’d say there was a pretty straight line from what those two were responsible for, or utterly irresponsible about, and what happened in that mine, but there’s nothing wolf or fae justice can do about it. Wiki doesn’t tell me much about what marids do or don’t, except refuse orders, but I’d think it was pretty funny and just if, say, every time Rumsfeld opened his mouth to speak his trousers caught fire. No raking it in from the lecture circuit for him. Or if every journey he made involved at least two punctures. And every single time he looks in a mirror he should see every death he’s responsible for.” I was warming to the theme. “Ghouls are djinni too, aren’t they? Maybe the marid could get some involved.”

Coyote looked pleased and thoughtful. “For trousers on fire you’d want an afrit, I think, but maybe marids can do fire as well. Punctures might be beneath them, though it’s a lovely thought. And
mirrors are easy enough. Sustained persecution is a bit too like a curse for comfort, but I do agree it’d be warranted in his case.” He beamed at me. “You’ve always been good at bloodless vengeance — that’s your mother shining through — but you’re learning to scale it up very nicely. And I’ll need a new hobby or two when all this excitement dies down.”

The wolves and Jesse were all giving me looks, and I shrugged.

“I don’t think very many people deserve constantly aflame trousers, but Rumsfeld is one of them. Call it a prayer for those of his victims we’re about to go see, as well as those no-one will see again. And for you and me and Adam, Jesse, because Preskylovitch didn’t get that way by chance. Some monsters are born monsters, but humans who are monsters mostly got made by someone.”

“I wasn’t objecting, Mom, just remembering that your vengeance is legend. And that makes sense of the whole week, because it has to have been the single worst week the bigots have ever had.”

My heart was very full. “That’s a nice thought, ex-kiddo. If you’re going to do something, do it thoroughly. Loose ends are usually bad news.” I made my voice brisker. “Warren, I’ll have to check with Jenny about legalities, but would you ask Kyle if he thinks a tee with furry me, or my furry pretty-much Da, and the slogan Coyotes beat foxes paws down would work?”

We were laughing as Adam came in and my phone rang with ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’. Silence fell, and I hauled it out, mentally cursing.

“Mr President?”

<Ms Hauptman. Do you have a moment?>

“One or two, sir, but not a lot more.”

<OK. I’ve been having that argument with the Director of the Secret Service, who climbed aboard Air Force One so he could go on having it, and he’s just reached a position only you and Mr Hauptman can answer. I’ll put him on, if I may.>

“Go ahead, sir, but tell him he’ll be on speaker.”

From his phrasing I already suspected what it would be, and my eyes met Adam’s, then Jesse’s, as I flicked the speaker on. The voice was a strong and not unpleasant tenor.

<Ms Hauptman, I will be plain. You have proposed taking the President, without his legally mandated protection, to what you insist is foreign territory, and what is by all accounts a dangerous place. I believe I understand why, and the kinds of surety you have sought to offer, and I find that after this week I do trust your intents. But. Lots and lots of buts. Yet I have the President arguing passionately for national necessity. So where does my duty lie? Item, every man and woman I have protecting the President will die to keep him safe. It’s what they are there for. And item, the one person I know you will die to keep safe is your stepdaughter, Miss Hauptman. So, if it is safe enough for him to accompany you Underhill, it must also be safe enough for Miss Hauptman. Swear to me that she will be with you and him at all times, and I’ll agree he can go.>

Some of me was as furiously opposed as some of Adam, and yet we both heard the sincerity. Adam was torn between personal rage and professional understanding, and Gwyn ap Lugh’s words floated in my mind as I sought balance.

“Incomplete logic, Mr Director. Fae permission is needed as well as Adam’s and mine. And Jesse’s — which is your real mistake, because granting it as safe as houses for her, which it probably would be, given the occasion, you have still chosen without asking her to use our daughter, still a
minor, as leverage, and believe me, sir, your similarity to Cantrip will not be forgotten any time soon. Some free advice — do not personally set foot in the basin. And get someone to fly you someplace out of it as soon as the President and his team have disembarked. That we understand your logic and its true leverage, all too well, does not mean that we forgive your child abuse, now or ever. Now hold, please, and I’ll try to sort out the ghastly mess you just made.”

I set the phone down, very gently, swallowing rage as the cloak gusted me a calming whiff of roses, and looked at Adam. “Is there any point in my going further, love?”

He rolled his head, popping joints, and came forward so he would be clearly audible over the phone. “I will want more wolves with us, and Zee, if that’s possible, but I won’t forbid Jesse, if she’s willing. I can understand the Director’s logic, however I despise it as much as you. But he should think very clearly about what he’s just done, and that he would no more dream of asking a Russian or Chinese leader proposing a particular visit to do this than fly round the moon. Security does not target or use spouses or children, because if you do your own are made fair game. Yet he has done this to wolves with a sense of triumph in his logic. I smell K-K-Kantrip lite, and I will not forget.”

I swallowed, because Adam meant every word and a stone would have heard the threat in his voice, and turned to Jesse.

“Ex-kiddo, are you willing? I genuinely believe it will be safe, for you as for the President, but one thing the Director didn’t think about is that the risk factors are not the same. So far as I know, there is nothing fae or otherwise that makes a habit of eating US presidents, except vainglory, maybe, but there certainly are things Underhill that like eating human children, and not all of them are behind wards of cold iron and strong magic. The extra security is because you will intrinsically be at greater risk, though the word of Gwyn ap Lugh, if extended to you, will hold equally good.”

Jesse swallowed too, but nodded. “I trust him, Mom. And I knew Cantrip putting the idea of me as a lever out there would have fallout, though I didn’t expect it from the good guys. My bad.”

“Make that very-ex-kiddo, Jesse.” I thought for a moment, then picked up my phone and went into its conferencing facility, calling Gwyn ap Lugh and Bran without cutting off the Man. When they were both online, I explained the demand, with Adam’s and Jesse’s positions, keeping my voice as level as I could, and added that their answers would go to Air Force One as well.

“Gwyn ap Lugh, will Jesse’s presence be permitted? And can Zee be included?”

<Yes, and yes, Mercedes. Underhill will welcome Jesse, as it does you, and I doubt the Dark Smith will refuse. But I do not much care for a demand of one not yet of age. That is the same thinking as Cantrip.>

“So Adam’s already told the Director, Gwyn ap Lugh. But I’m managing to file it under ‘first time’ and ‘human idiocy’, mostly. Marrok?”

<I will try to do likewise, Mercy, though I too will not forget. Adam, whom will you be adding?>

“David, Warren, and Charles, if you agree.”

<Alright. Mercy, anything else?>

“Only that I was just discussing with my increasingly-exactly father who really deserves some serious persecution, and the Director’s name has joined the list. There is the Path of Assertion as well as the Path of Mercy, so if I ever set eyes on him in person, I swear to God I will ask Joel to
set his trousers on fire. And I’ll be asking Raven’s children in DC to target him every single time
he’s outdoors. Gwyn ap Lugh, I’ll call you when we’re about to come through with the humans.”

<Well enough, Mercedes.>

He rang off, and so did Bran.

“So there you go, Mr Director. You have my word that Jesse will accompany the President
Underhill.”

<Right.> There was something in his voice. <I did not know about things that targeted children
specifically.>

“Then you haven’t read the stories carefully enough, Mr Director. And it makes no odds, because
when you got as far as ‘I could use the minor’, you should have stopped dead but you didn’t even
notice. Your bad. Put the President back on, please.”

<Ms Hauptman?>

He sounded very wary, sensibly enough, and I made my voice warmer. “Just to say not your bad,
Mr President, this time. Nor humans’ in general, though the Director’s done the Federal
Government’s reputation in preternatural quarters no favours. And you really need to have a go at
the way your people are thinking, and add some top-down to our bottom-up insistence that blanket
claims of national security are not a warrant to mess with anyone’s children.”

There was a silence, and when he spoke he sounded tired. <Yes I do, Ms Hauptman. Conversations
with you and your husband are very salutary, I’m finding. My apologies, and my thanks. I’ll see
you at 3.30.>

He cut the connection, Adam carefully put an arm round Jesse, hugging her, and Coyote grinned at
me.

“What is it with you and setting clothes on fire, remarkably-daughter? Maybe you really should be
called Hey, Where Did My Trousers Go, though I think it’d pall after a while. But the massed
guano’s good, and I’ve passed the word to Raven, who thought it was funny though he doesn’t
want to push them into poisoning his children. The Director will need a lot of umbrellas, though.”

“Really, Gramps? Raven will do it?”

“Why not, Graught? It’s a good punishment for some bad as well as very sloppy thinking. And
Raven’s children like doing things, as mine do. Besides, being used to search has them all wide
awake just now, so a side project is good, and letting the guilty who for whatever reason can’t be
eaten or prosecuted know they aren’t forgotten seems to be in demand.”

“I wasn’t objecting. Legendary vengeance, remember?”

“My thanks to Raven, please.” Coyote nodded, still grinning. “Everything good with the Feebs,
Adam?”

“Yes. Westfield’s due around 2, they’ve spoken to Air Traffic Control, and Fisher says as soon as
Nemane’s done her stuff Heuter will be charged with three-hundred-and-fifteen counts of
conspiracy to murder and accessory before and after, plus three-hundred-and-forty-one of
conspiracy to kidnap, ditto. Conspiracy to rape charges will follow when they have more from the
freed. They let him know that, with some of Huw’s footage. He fainted, and a couple of his
lawyers have resigned.”
“Ahh. Good.” And it was. I’d also been thinking about this one. “Tell them to get Wyoming to file charges too?”

Wyoming had the death penalty on its books, and though it also had the smallest death-row population of any state that did that was because it’s very underpopulated for its size.

Adam nodded. “Already did, love, and they’d thought of that too. So had Wyoming, which is not at all happy either about either having had that site in its territory or the number of its citizens who died there. State police and social services are concerned about the freed too, and respectfully request access as soon as possible.”

I shrugged. “Sounds right. Where are we with Richland housing?”

“They’re on it. I said the same — as soon as the freed are here, Wyoming can come and be politely concerned alongside the Feebs. Oh, and they don’t need us to shift that hoist — they’ve got bogeys. The delay is full forensics on the chamber, because they’ll need to dismantle the cages before they can install it, but they’ve flown in even more techs.”

“Seems fair enough.” I checked the time. “We should go.”

In some measure I was becoming used to the three-steps routine with others holding on to the cloak, but there was no getting used to Underhill, and the Garden of Manannán’s Death had changed again. The clearing was now grassed, as close-cropped and even as the finest lawns, and amid the still riotous roses there were arbours with wooden benches, their legs twined with tiny climbing vines sporting small white flowers. Whether it was for us later or because fae had started picnicking there I had no idea, but I took the time to tell Underhill of my gladness, and explain where we were going now and when we’d be back, and with whom, before taking us through to Aspen Creek. There was still plenty of snow on the ground, and the cloak wrapped around me warmly.

“Brother Wolf thinks Underhill is a useful shortcut.” Charles shook himself while Anna grinned at him. “I still find it very disconcerting. Even space should be somewhere.”

I grinned too, and after we’d greeted Medicine Wolf, lying cheerfully in the snow beside the pole barn, and were headed for the door I told him what it had said about the difficulties of talking to Underhill when it was all here and Underhill was all somewhere else. Then again, I didn’t find it any odder than being able to summon clothes as you change form, and said so, drawing a look and being told as we entered the barn that one was spirit magic, and quite normal, while the other wasn’t. Bran quirked an eyebrow but we’d fallen silent anyway, because while the barn wasn’t any tenser than I’d expected, there was an edge in the atmosphere I could easily trace to Wolf, standing stiffly in one of his ultra-smart suits beside Bran and ignoring the intense curiosity of all wolves present. He had conceded to the snow a proper pair of boots, though also high-end from their look. I gave him a deep nod, as did Adam, Charles, Anna, and Warren.

“With you in a moment, Bran, Wolf.”

Then I crossed to where Ramona was staring at me, surrounded by the other freed, all deeply uncertain and bracing themselves for what was going to happen.

“Hey, Ramona, everyone. How are you?”

Her grip on my hands was hard. “Much better than for a long time, Mercy, though now we are back in realtime the nightmares are a bitch. And we have watched a lot of TV. Madre de Dios but we owe you. We would be starving there yet but for you.”
I gripped back. “I claim no debt, Ramona, and in my book everyone owes you way more than you owe anyone. Has Bran explained why we can’t stay long today? And about Wolf?”

“Oh yes. We all talked to Medicine Wolf, and the plan is for Wolf to take us hunting when we are pack and I have recovered from the burn. You trust him?”

“Within limits, but for this, yes. He has a temper but so do all wolves, and my not-exactly father has actually been very helpful, for him, so the Elder Spirits really are on board. I don’t think any of them are ever worse than their proper kind, but you know his wolf-form is big?”

“Yeah. We saw the footage from Tuesday night.” She looked down, then met my eyes. “You’re one hell of a fighter, luckily for us.”

“When I have to be, Ramona. It’s not usually by choice. There’s a bunch we should talk about as soon as we can — we’ve been trying to think about what you’ll need in Richland, and there’s law enforcement from Wyoming anxious to hear your stories, as well as the Feebs wanting their follow-up — but we need to get on with this now.”

She nodded. “I hear you, Mercy. But let them greet you? The gratitude is a genuine pressure.” For me, too, but I did as she asked, letting the submissives touch as they craved, remembering names more easily than I’d feared, and telling them all they were very welcome. I couldn’t have done less and still liked what I saw in the mirror, and I could foresee having to deal with this side of things some more when they were in Richland, but I hoped time would temper it — and anyway, having a wolfpack feeling grateful to you is a lot better than having one pissed off with you. The cloak wafted roses at them all, and when we were done, which felt longer than the couple of minutes it actually took, I went back to Bran, nodding to Asil and, more guardedly, Leah, who’d joined him.

“Mi princesa.” I got an easy smile, and smiled back. “You continue to delight and entertain.”

“I try, Asil. Leah.”

“Mercy.” She dropped her eyes. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

I blinked. Leah had never apologised to me for anything, but she had sounded sincere, if still irritated.

“Me too, Leah, but it had been a long and grim night.”

She nodded but said nothing more, and I passed over a bland-faced Bran to meet Wolf’s eyes, touched with a hint of amusement.

“Wolf. Thank you for your concern.”

He shrugged. “Werewolves are not my business, but I would not leave this pack unaided when I have the power.”

“I am not surprised. And you thought Adam’s wolf was magnificent, so we agree about that, too.”

“Yes.” He looked at Adam. “I am sorry about before, a little, but I could not ignore a bite.”

Adam gave him a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “You were about to die to help save the world, not that I quite understood that then, so you get a pass. But please don’t do it again. I cannot help being very possessive, and Mercy deserves better than disrespect.”
He gave Adam a nod, and looked at me. “That I can agree with, She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars. You have fixed quite a few things this week.”

“I made a start.”

“You made an end, of Cantrip at least.” He grinned. “No offence, but Anglos and Feds getting savaged is always good by me.”

“Those who deserve it, sure. But we should get on with this, unless there’s anything that still needs doing.”

Bran shook his head. “We can start. My only real concern is the amount of flesh Ramona will have to use. She’s still underweight, though it’s better than it was.”

“Yeah.” I laid a hand on Carnwennan’s hilt, and felt the bone warm. “No guarantee it’ll work, Bran, but I asked Carnwennan about that, and whether it could take the least amount possible to divide twenty-five ways. It’s just warmed to my touch, so I think it’s saying yes. Any reason I shouldn’t lend it to Ramona?”

He raised an eyebrow and held out a hand. I drew Carnwennan and let him take it from me, turning and examining it with more than eyes.

“I cannot see any reason, Mercy. It is full awake, as it was not before, and feels much happier. Zee said he gifted it to you, and that it had made up its own mind, so I think we may trust its loyalty to you.”

“Good. A plate or something might be useful, then — I doubt it’ll want to make more than one cut that hurts Ramona.”

I got some more looks, but there were crocks and mugs on a table against one wall — pack meetings could go on in Aspen Creek — and I grabbed a sideplate before we headed back outside. I had no idea when a pack had last been created from scratch by a wolf not already tied to Bran, but I’d bet it had been a long time and that he’d invented the protocol he wanted. In consequence there were two ceremonies, the first between Bran as the Marrok and Ramona alone, not making her of his pack but giving her the tie he had with Alphas that enabled him to support them directly in need, and including her oath to act as Alpha in all her wolves’ interests and in accordance with his rules. It still meant him carving a nugget of flesh from his arm and feeding it to her, and she went as rigid as steel as the burn hit her. I only got a fraction of what Adam felt enlarging the pack, and that only because of our mate bond, but it was another thing I was happy to leave to wolves. Ramona shook herself.

“Virgen de los Lobos but that hurts. Will they all be that bad?”

Bran also shook himself, as a wolf does. “No. That was a measure of your strength, and it will ease a little with more sharing it. But it is right that taking on an Alpha’s care should burn, and you can feel the rightness.”

“Yes. To both. But I think I have lost my belief in transubstantiation. I did not expect flesh to be so sweet.”

Bran grinned. “That’s the magic, Ramona, not me, but I agree the Catholics are reaching. And now you must use your own flesh, but Mercy has some advice and a loan.”

There was a lot of curiosity in wolf eyes as I went forward and told Ramona about Carnwennan’s willingness to aid her, pitching my voice to carry. She stared at me, and suddenly laughed.
“You offer me King Arthur’s dagger? The one you killed Manannán mac Lír with?”

“Partly. Don’t forget Manannán’s Bane played a big part, and Underhill.”

The stick pulsed warmly in my hand, preening again, and I squeezed the handle.

“I won’t, Mercy, but you really are something else. What should I do?”

I shrugged. “Ask it to cut the least portion of your flesh that will divide twenty-five ways, sufficiently for the pack magic to work, and trust it to guide you. Thanks afterwards would be good too. It’s of fae make, but not fae disposition. King Arthur’s teaching, maybe. I decided on instinct that courtesy was called for and it’s worked so far.”

“Right.” She shook her head. “My world has become a very strange place, but I cannot say it lacks interest.”

She rolled up her sleeve and carefully took Carnwennan from me, saluting it by name and making her request clearly. I was holding the plate beneath her exposed forearm and watching carefully, but when her hand moved it was so fast I couldn’t follow the strokes that left a bloody streak maybe two inches long on her arm and twenty-five small globs of her flesh on the plate. Bran’s eyebrows were high but he said nothing as she gravely thanked Carnwennan and returned it to me, taking the plate. I might have been squicked when I saw the cloak move to fold a petal around the blade and clean it, but it occurred to me that the blood trace probably had a fair bit of magic in it, not to be squandered, and I thanked Carnwennan too as I resheathed it.

There is a strong formality about making someone pack, and Ramona had to speak the words each time, but the new Freed Pack felt no need to stand on ceremony more than necessary, and the only thing that slowed her down was the burn — which as Bran had promised eased a little as it was shared between those already made pack. I also watched Wolf, at first inscrutable but as he felt the pack build and the emotional punch behind Ramona’s declarations of welcome and loyalty looking quite approving. So did Medicine Wolf, eyes glowing, and from the body language of Bran’s wolves — including, it hit me, Leah — I was guessing Medicine Wolf had been doing a lot of reading. I didn’t know who might have been in the pole barn yesterday, in slow time, but I suspected quite a few, giving them time to come to terms with what had happened. Bran’s own calmness must also be making a difference, and I thought a quiet conversation with Anna was in order when I could manage one.

As the last burn faded Ramona shook herself thoroughly, and drew a juddering breath.

“No offence, anyone, but I am very glad that’s over. Pain’s right up there with childbirth, if shorter. And now we get to change and find out what our wolves can do untranquilised and out of a cage. Wolf, sir, you want us to change straight away?”

Wolf glanced at Bran, who nodded, and went forward.

“One thing first, Ramona. Now that you are Alpha and pack, I can give you collectively the knowledge and understanding of a wolf’s free movement, that you were denied by the circumstances of your Change. To do so, I will take my other form, and remain in it while you absorb what you need. As soon as you each find it right, then change.” He gave a half-smile. “The cold will be an incentive to be swift, for you will feel it less as wolves. But remember that though you have all gained weight, you remain undernourished and badly underexercised. You will have to gain full strength and agility in time, so do not be distressed now with any clumsiness. Your bodies will learn when they can run as they should.”
“I get that, sir, and I’ll make sure we remember. But I did have everyone do as much PT as they could in the cages, and full moons we all ran in circles like crazy. Got some silver burns from slipping, but I’m hoping that though we’ll be a bit gaunt yet we won’t be too soft.”

“Ah good. And somehow I am not surprised — you are true Alpha. Now let us start to make the Freed Pack one no other will ever wish to fight.”

Everyone had seen the TV shots but when he went Wolf, less massive that Joel’s tibicena form but on the same scale, I heard some breaths sucked in hard. I was more interested in the magic though, and opened my mate bond to Adam and pack bond to Warren as wide as I could, hoping what I was seeing would get through. To my magical sight the bonds between Ramona and her freed glistened like newborn foals, and Wolf was pouring spirit magic into them through Ramona — magic I saw as wolves running, trotting, hunting, frolicking, scratching, and everything else wolves do, all with a strange grace and purity. It made the back of my head wonder, not for the first time, what Plato would have had to say about Elder Spirits (and the two-natured in general), but mostly I was absorbed in the sheer beauty of it and the sense it gave me of deep rightness, great power used with kindness and generosity to laudable ends. I could hear Adam breathing beside me, and as the vision faded and the underlying throb of magic eased he sighed.

“Thanks, love.” He grinned at me. “Plato?”

I wasn’t surprised that had got through as well. “I know, but really. Elder Spirits ought to be near proof of essence, except it doesn’t really fit at all. Even the Third Man Rule doesn’t help.”

“Only you, love. But my wolf appreciated the show, and thinks he could get back to liking Wolf more than less so long as he keeps his human hands to himself.”

“Good to know. God forfend we should ever face this situation again, but a precedent for his help to werewolves in need is better than not, I think.”

“Me too.” Warren had drifted up beside us. “My thanks as well, Mercy. It was beautiful. But if you’re good with saying ‘God forfend’ I’m not sure what the problem is with ‘death throes’.”


“Gave her some pointers when she asked. Problem?”

“Not at all. She was whacking Coyote about the Elder Spirits all taking male forms, and Buffalo Calf Road Woman being married to Black Coyote came up.”

Warren grinned. “She gets left out of the books too much. Met her once — tough, cool, and sneaky.”

“I bet.” I sent Adam a query, and got a ‘be careful’ back. “No obligation, Warren, but there’s a conversation about this we’d like to have sooner than later.”

“Huh. Witness?”

“Yup. You could have a go at putting her back in the books properly.”

“Yeah. I think I understand the pressure, Mercy, but it’s not so easy. Don’t mind talking to you, though.”
“Right, thanks. Ramona’s changing.”

One by one her new packmates followed her, the cold they felt in naked human form acting much as Wolf had said, and as shaky werewolves stood on four legs and shook themselves he was offering them more little bubbles of spirit magic, less potent but making me think of the discipline of the hunt, the awareness of what was upwind and what down, of sound carrying as well as smell, of bellies low to the ground and gestural communication. The werewolves were gaunt, faces thin and ribs showing, but ropey and corded muscle was showing too and all had not only the rightness of free movement but a shimmer of joy about them — the purity a free animal has and any caged one lacks. They flowed around Ramona and Wolf, who were nose to nose, and after a moment Wolf spun and trotted away, Ramona at his side and the others flanking as Bran’s wolves scrambled aside to let them pass, heading out of town towards the mountain slopes. Bran’s eyes followed them for a moment before he rotated his head and came across.

“Mercy, wolves running and jumping on ribbon bonds was your vision?”

I stared. “Yeah. You got it too?”

“Adam managed to pass it along. Mine was otherwise, but not different. Wolf’s steered clear of me before now, but he’s been genuinely helpful today.”

“Yeah, he has. How long have you known about him?”

“I got here in 1800, Mercy, so from about five minutes after that. We inspected one another at a distance several times, and then nothing until now.”

I recalibrated for post-Medicine-Wolf Bran, feeling Adam’s shock. Bran had not gone in for quick answers to anything about the further past, especially involving his time with Blue Jay Woman.

“World’s changing. First time in a while the Elder Spirits have had any interest in co-operating with the Federal Government about anything, and you carry some clout there.”

“So do you these days, Mercy.” Bran’s voice was very dry. “What might they want, beyond what’s already on the table and the welfare of their own kinds, if you know?”

“I don’t know anything much, Bran, but Coyote did rather pointedly mention Bison still being in a bad way. Land purchases to make a migration corridor maybe, so there’s more than a captive herd managed into quiescence.”

“Ah. That is a happy thought.” He looked at me. “You were, not wrongly, severe with the Director.”

“You bet. I doubt I’ll ever meet him, so the trousers are moot, but Raven’s children in DC will be getting in some target practice. They’ll forget after a few months, but I really don’t mind telling him his thinking sucks. Problem?”

“No really, no.” I knew he was amused. “Shows of magical power are well enough, but the line between productive and counter-productive is a fine one. Have you done anything else I should know about?”

I debated a moment, but whatever my freedoms from Bran, Adam’s were more limited. “Did Asil tell you about Coyote and the marid?”

Bran went very still. “No. What marid?”
“Coyote knows where one is, and says it isn’t doing anything useful. I suggested some serious but strictly bloodless persecution of Rumsfeld and Cheney, as payback for Preskylovitch.”

For a very long moment Bran stared at me, before throwing back his head and laughing. Wolves stared, far more spooked than they would have been by his anger.

“Marids have very little sense of humour, you know. Teaming one with Coyote is probably unwise, but if it happens in Donald Rumsfeld’s back yard I shall watch with some anticipation.” His gaze rested on me again, its weight palpable. “You are inducing a remarkable amount of goodwill, Mercy. Charles told me about your take on Nemane and ap Lugh, and it was very sharp indeed. Beware you do not cut yourself.”

I shrugged. “Happens, juggling chainsaws, but I’m doing my best.”
We got ourselves outside Bran’s late lunch — only burgers and fries, but good meat and plenty of it — and I was glad of a chance to keep quiet and listen. Though calmed by Medicine Wolf, most of Bran’s wolves were still as shocky as wolves get, and as much about me as anything else. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, but decided after a while that it was because they’d supposed they knew me, not that most had made much effort, and having the familiar turn strange was weirder than newly arrived strange. To be fair my coyote sending with its ruff-do was probably on their minds as well, as they had no more idea than I did of what would happen if it did bite someone — a thought I stored to explore at leisure. There was a lot of half-surreptitious staring at the cloak and Manannán’s Bane as well, but when anyone found me staring back I got deep nods and dropped eyes, and the implied respect was soothing. I also managed a quick conversation with a relaxed Asil, whom I’d thought might be coming with us but discovered was staying to look after the Freed Pack once Wolf had to leave for Kennewick.

“Ramona is very good, mi princesa, but she does not know the territory. Wolf will help them make the kill swiftly, and I will make sure they all get back and are safely tucked in.” He shrugged delicately. “And it would be good if they were able to come to you and Adam sooner than later. Bran is very relaxed, for Bran, but having a second true pack here is not such a good idea.”

That was unarguable, but we were pushing all we could, and time was passing so once we were fed we didn’t linger. Medicine Wolf said it would be along at 4.30, probably over the Columbia as it had some business at the naith. I thought it had been amused by the reactions to its walking on water — after all, it was the Columbia — but also that I had no objection to whatever dose of awesome it cared to serve up. Every little helped, probably. Bran had decided, reasonably enough, that a power suit was called for, but not Underhill, so he was toting a garment-bag, which made Anna and me grin at the incongruity but also made me think rather grumpily that I really would have to spend some of my new riches on expanding my wardrobe. The only upside was that it wouldn’t mean ties.

When we’d taken the first three steps I paused briefly amid the roses to tell Underhill once more how glad it made me and to introduce Bran, underlining his importance as the Marrok, and was taken aback by a chime of acknowledgement. He gave me a sidelong look but offered his own gladness for its justice and accepting the Man’s visit, and once we’d taken the next three steps and emerged into the hall he ignored the gathering reception committee, rolled his head, and shook himself.

“Another first, Mercy. At my age it is disconcerting.”

“You’ve never been Underhill before?”

“Not to that bit, nor to speak to. The boundaries were not always so clear, nor were there fixed doors. And it was not here until very recently. In any case, I prefer my own sky.” Bran had always said it was the wild silence and vast space of the Cabinets that had stopped his wandering, even before he’d met Blue Jay Woman. “Have you always been so polite to it?”

“Oh yeah. I think of Underhill as the grand-daddy of all Gray Lords, so politeness seems wise, and to be appreciated. And Gwyn ap Lugh agreed with Medicine Wolf that it liked having its justice
invoked.”

“Did he, now? Interesting. We really must have that talk about magic soon, Mercy.”

“Yeah. But for now we’ve got the Man to deal with.” I checked my watch. “In less than an hour, so I need to shower and change.”

I left Adam running through swift introductions to those of the pack present who hadn’t met Bran in person, and headed upstairs with Jesse. She was more nervous than she cared to admit, as much, it turned out, about the Man and what to wear as about going Underhill. Clothing was bothering me too, because I’d rather have stayed in jeans and proper boots — skirts or dresses would not be helpful if anything happened — but I’d already decided I was just going to have to trust Underhill and suck it up. Jesse reluctantly agreed and went to haul out what she called her girly best, and after too short a shower I chose another blouse and skirt combination, making sure the skirt had belt-loops. They were meant for something more decorative and less functional, but took a slim leather belt happily, and Carnwennan rested easily against my thigh, pleased, I thought, to be reunited with its sheath. I added the gold chain Adam liked, and after some thought Thunderbird’s feather — if I needed magic it couldn’t hurt, and if not it looked good even if it didn’t quite go with the cloak. Flat shoes completed the outfit, as nothing would get me Underhill in heels, and Adam, who’d had an even shorter shower and was changing into yet another power suit, eyed me again. I gave him a grin that didn’t quite cover my own case of nerves.

“Remind me why exactly we’re taking Jesse and the President Underhill before hosting a faery rade?”

He gave me a different look, and held me for a moment while I relaxed into him and breathed him in.

“The manitou happened, then Cantrip happened.”

“Yeah, they did.”

“And then you happened.”

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I? And it all seemed like such a good idea at the time. Well, not Jesse, but …”

“Because it was.” He eased me back to look at me. “Why the sudden worry?”

“Not sure, Adam.” It couldn’t be anything as mundane as meeting the President. “I was getting some strange looks in Aspen Creek.”

“Surprise. They’ll get over it. Just keep on keeping on, Mercy. It’s working. And having done the numbers, I’ve told Benny’s we need pizza for a hundred from eighteen-thirty, so you can cross cooking off your list today.” He grinned. “And we’ll have miracle pies on our side.”

That was true, and his amused account of the poor clerk’s astonishment at the steady increase in our already very large orders centred me a bit. Jesse joined us in a dress I’d given her at Christmas, hitting mid-calf for Adam’s sake but with a scoop neck to allow her some décolletage and in a really nice green that didn’t clash with her hair. She needed no telling that Underhill was not a place to mess about, but I made an effort to describe the Garden of Manannán’s Death, the shoreline I’d once visited, and Yo-Yo Edythe. Her acquaintance with Irpa was already a useful plus, and I wondered how I’d known it might matter. It was not a comfortable thought, and once Adam had run through what security he could — mostly just to stay inside a wolf perimeter within an inch of David — I put the cloak back on, asked it to pin itself back, and reclaimed Manannán’s
Bane before we headed back downstairs.

Adam went with David to do security stuff with the pack, KPD, Feebs, Agent Maretti, and Caroline with her KEPR crew, who had just arrived, while Jesse and I found Charles and Anna in the kitchen with Warren, talking about the Freed Pack. Charles was back in best buckskin, Anna had changed into a dress, and I was oddly comforted to register that they had some nerves too. My own were settling back down, I hoped, but despite the ton of pizza on order I settled them some more by thinking about tomorrow’s meals, shifting some meat from freezer to fridge, and putting in yet another Yoke’s order. When the clerk heard what we’d done with a large chunk of the mid-week delivery, and that we were expecting to have VIPs about for a while, he promised to speak to the owner about a discount, or even a donation, and renewed my sense of ordinary human kindness, which was nice.

Then Jesse flipped the small TV on, and we watched the Man and Glen Sawyer disembark from Air Force One at Tri-Cities Airport. All the Mayors were present to greet them for the cameras, and the Man gave them just enough to keep them happy, but with his motorcade swiftly underway — quite a bit smaller than usual, though they’d flown in one of the usual armoured limos from somewhere, because press were excluded and the KPD with the Feebs were doing route clearance — the KEPR coverage switched to Caroline, waiting just inside the gate. She was using the little I’d given her well, confirming the expected presence of Medicine Wolf to meet the Man, and wondering if any Fae or Elder Spirits would also show, though I was better pleased by her grinning report of my offer to the Fox-guy. Someone was also keeping her up to date on the motorcade’s progress, and when it turned off Chemical Road it was time for us to stop watching TV and head outside to be on it.

As that was not a good idea for Jesse, or Bran, it was Adam and me, with Darryl and Warren for the pack, and Charles and Anna, as known faces. In the hall Bran looked me up and down, from flat shoes to feather, via Carnwennan and Manannán’s Bane, and shook his head, but didn’t say anything, and I just shrugged. You use what you have. Outside, some of the pack on wolf patrol joined us as an honour guard, including Honey and Ben, tails wagging slightly with excitement. The AED was back, looking tired, and I went over to him.

“All well, AED?”

“As it can be, Ms Hauptman. That septic tank’s been emptied, at least, and from what ap Lugh said the list of names should make Nemane’s task easier.” He blew out a breath. “Crow or not, it’s going to be a vile job.”

“Yeah, but it won’t bother her the way it would any human, AED. Promise. And we’re on the last lap here, I hope. Do you know about our conversation with the Director of the Secret Service?”

“I do.” He grimaced. “I am not used to thinking badly of him, but …”

“Oh yes. It was seriously stupid of him.” I thought better of telling him about Raven’s agreement, though I think it would have cheered him up. “But we’re swallowing it, this time. Anything you need now, seeing as we’ll be kinda busy for the next while?”

“No, thank you, Ms Hauptman, though we need formal statements about Wyoming as soon as may be.”

I’d seen that one coming, and nodded. “Of course, but they won’t have what you really want. We went, we saw, and there wasn’t anyone left to conquer. I don’t argue with Gray Lords unless they’re trying to kill me, and no wolf or avatar will say anything about what they might or might not have seen one do.”
“Surprise, Ms Hauptman, but even so.” He lowered his voice. “Out of interest, how long did it take, ah, subjectively, to purge that data?”

“About a week, I’m told, AED.”

“Huh.” He frowned. “Even with shifts on 24/7 that’s impressive speed. And the confessions?”

“No idea at all, AED, and no wish to know either.”

A hovering Agent Maretti was muttering into a throat-mike, and I could see a couple of his team covering the way round to the back, and another who’d have an angle on anything coming in by road, as well as extra Feds of one or another kind. The breeze had picked up a little, tugging lightly at the feather and fluttering petals on the cloak, and I saw Al had the camera on us before he swung it back to the gate as the outriders of the motorcade approached.

Scent searching the presidential party at the gate had seemed gauche, even to Adam, but we all had noses wide as outriders peeled away to head back out and the Secret Service disembarked from yet more black SUVs. They were sticking with GMC too, but at least they were Tahoes, not more Yukons, and I was relieved that they seemed to be being honourable about packing silver, though all of us got some hard stares and one headed over to Adam and me.

“Mr Hauptman, Ms Hauptman. Are you carrying any weapons beyond that dagger?”

Adam shook his head. “No guns, Agent, as requested. And as I smell no silver, my thanks for that.”

“Un huh. So why the dagger, Ms Hauptman?”

“Because if anything happens Underhill, Agent, which no-one is expecting but we don’t like taking chances any more than you, cold iron will be a lot more use than lead. And I rather imagine the President wants to meet Carnwennan and Manannán’s Bane anyway.”

“Yeah, there’s that.” He was too well trained to sigh, and knew enough to drop his gaze. “We have our orders, sir, ma’am, but be aware that we are not happy about them.”

Adam nodded. “We hear you, Agent, but be aware in turn that we are just as unhappy about your Director’s blackmail and abuse of our minor daughter. Also that serious magical protections are already in place, and will be increased as Medicine Wolf, Elder Spirits, and the Fae arrive, so be very careful to distinguish the dangerous from the threatening. Anything else?”

He got a brief and pained look, but there wasn’t, so the doors of the limo were opened to let the Man and Glen Sawyer out. Sawyer seemed to have got over being freaked, mostly, but the Man took a moment to look around, breathing deeply before coming to meet us as we stepped forward. His handshake was firm and dry, his gaze much more penetrating in person than on screen, and maybe my nerves did kick a little, but so did Adam’s.

“Be welcome here as a guest of the Columbia Basin Pack, Mr President, Mr Secretary.”

“Thank you, Mr Hauptman. And Ms Hauptman.” The Man looked me up and down much as Bran had. “You make some picture, but then you have all along. And I’ll repeat my thanks to both of you, in person, for a very strange week that seems to be working out a great deal better than I expected on Tuesday morning.”

“Me either, Mr President, and you’re welcome.”

I named Manannán’s Bane and Carnwennan, making the Man blink, then Adam formally
introduced Charles and Anna, Darryl, Warren, and the pack members on four legs, deliberately using Christian and surnames for all. I thought they probably had some nerves of their own, but Ben gave us a lighter moment by sitting on his haunches and solemnly offering a paw. I saw Sawyer hide a smile, and had to give the Man points for accepting it with only a slight hesitation.

“The British are very polite, Mr President.”

Adam and others had to hide smiles this time, because if there’s one thing Ben usually isn’t it’s any kind of polite, but it eased tensions a bit, and to the relief of the Secret Service we headed back inside for some more introductions. With one of Maretti’s team already on duty in the hall David was flanking Jesse, and Bran was in his best bland nothing-to-see-here mode as well as a natty suit. Adam again made the introductions, including Sawyer when it came to David, and the man racked up some more points by apologising to Jesse on the Director’s behalf. Though her eyes widened a little she kept her cool with a fractional shrug.

“It wasn’t a good call, sir, but I get to see Underhill so he gets half-a-pass.”

“You want to go, Miss Hauptman?”

“I’m curious, sir. Aren’t you? It’s another world, even if it’s attached to this one.”

The Man blinked again. “I think I’m still on apprehensive, Miss Hauptman, but yeah, I suppose it is.” He turned to David. “And for what little it can be worth, I’ll offer you an apology too, Mr Christiansen, for the way you and Mr Hauptman were treated back in the day. Thank you for agreeing to the debriefing as well.”

David nodded, his expression guarded. “I’d given up hope of that one, Mr President, so that’s welcome. And it’s right to set the record straight for the dead, even now.”

“Yes it is, Mr Christiansen, and we’ll do what we can.”

His gaze shifted curiously to Bran, and when Adam made the introduction his eyebrows went up.

“Forgive me, ah, Marrok. I recognise your voice but you are seriously not what I expected.”

Bran nodded. “I was Changed young, and I learned to conceal my nature long ago, Mr President, but so there is no misunderstanding I will, if you wish, let you feel what I am. Your bodyguards should expect to sense a weight of pressure and threat, but it is only by way of demonstration. Yes?”

After a moment the Man agreed, and with every wolf intent on the tense Secret Service guys in case one couldn’t take it Bran let his beast peer out through his eyes. Weight wasn’t an adequate term for the density that suddenly filled the room, but I’d seen — and felt — Bran close to real violence several times and was just as struck by a sense of amusement and peace in his wolf. Then he reverted to bland, the room seemed brighter, the agents slumped slightly with relief, and the Man blew out a breath.

“Well, hell. Can’t say that’s not impressive, Marrok. You need it often?”

“Often enough, Mr President. I have not ruled North American werewolves since 1800, and held them in check, by being nice.”

“Since … no, I’d think not. May I ask how old you are?”

“No.”
“Right.” The Man shook his head. “So. I don’t often get to say this after arriving anywhere, but what’s the schedule?”

Bran gave him a grin. “Mercy’s, for now.”

“We’ll go Underhill first, Mr President, but before we do you and the Secretary need to listen closely to a short briefing. You too, Jesse. There are some Underhill dos and don’ts. I also need to let Gwyn ap Lugh know exactly when we’re coming.”

Sawyer must have told the Man that the kitchen was my comfort zone because he didn’t blink when I led the way there. Several agents accompanied us, eyeing Bran warily, but seemed easier when we were seated around the table with chocolate and brownies Darryl had waiting. I was amused to see he’d been watched by one of Maretti’s squad, who gave assurances that nothing had gone into the chocolate that shouldn’t but couldn’t vouch for the brownies. I made a show of eating one selected at random, and they disappeared fast enough while I started the briefing. It was mostly a list of don’ts, starting with letting go of the cloak anywhere between steps one and three and thanking fae, and extending to not eating, drinking, touching, or collecting anything.

“We are not expecting any attempt to cause trouble, sir, but Underhill’s rules are very ancient indeed, and they are what they are. Pocket a piece of it, even a pebble, and it can cry thief. Say a word of thanks, and it can call in the debt any way it wants. Offer the least rudeness, and it can take umbrage, which when you are in it is really not such a good idea. And I mean no offence, sir, Mr Secretary, but where I am half-Blackfeet and as coyote as I am Christian, you are to it both Anglo Christians of cold iron, so allowing you safe passage there is a greater concession than you might think. Adam?”

“Just one more thing, sir, which is that Mercy wasn’t joking about things that eat children. Jesse is David’s, Warren’s, and Charles’s primary in there, not anyone else.”

“OK.” The Man looked at Sawyer. “Weird, but OK. And we’re being met by the troll Irpa and a Gray Lord called Edythe?”

“And Zee. Mr Adelbertsmiter, though he may have dropped his glamour, in which case he’s seven or so foot of Loan Maclibuin, and should be addressed as Dark Smith. I would imagine he’ll be armed, but what Irpa or Edythe might be carrying besides a yo-yo is anyone’s guess.”

He blinked at the yo-yo but nodded. “Alright. Are we expecting to meet anyone else?”

“Expecting, no, sir, but almost everything about Underhill is unexpected. If we do, please don’t say anything unless directly invited to do so. Either of you. Never forget that Underhill your word is your bond, absolutely.” I glanced at my watch. “And we should go. I shall ask Underhill to minimise the time we’re away, but there’s no point in pushing it.”

Bran gave me a look at that, and the Man nodded again.

“If you say so, Ms Hauptman. Long strange trip’s the least of it, but it’s part of what I came for.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “You’re a Deadhead too?”

He laughed. “Not quite. Doesn’t go down so well in oil or politics, but I’ve always listened, yeah. Any reason you ask besides the line?”

“Irpa’s tattoo had skulls and roses, so I was wondering if she was. Trolls at a jam session have to be something else.”
I enjoyed the general amusement, as well as the pained look on Bran’s face, while I yet again hauled out my phone and hit the speed-dial.

“Coming through in three, Gwyn ap Lugh, if I still may, with the President and the Secretary of the Interior as well as Adam, Jesse, Warren, Charles, and David.”

<You may, Mercedes. Edythe, the Dark Smith, and Irpa will be waiting.>

“I’m glad. Anything else I should know?”

<Perhaps. There are those who feel the debt of rescue.>

“No debt, Gwyn ap Lugh, but I’ll be glad to meet any freed who wish to speak. Oh, and we warned Air Traffic Control at Tri-Cities Airport to keep the sky clear at 5.”

There was a short pause before ap Lugh laughed.

<How thoughtful of you, Mercedes. I will see you then.>

He rang off, and I stashed the phone.

“We’re good to go.” I met Bran’s gaze. “Those freed might be the brownies and pixies, or the selkies. Any advice?”

“Don’t get between a selkie and its skin. And be careful about shaking the hands of strangers, even if they seem to be playing in your heart of gold band.”

I didn’t grudge him my doubletake, nor the man’s laugh. First the Boss, now the Dead, from a wolf who usually thought anything much later than 1800 was a sorry innovation, so the good news was rolling right along. And it was time for three steps to, I devoutly hoped, not heaven but somewhere not unrelated.
Chapter Fifty-One

The Man’s bodyguards looked like frozen rabbits while we assembled in the hall, and the cloak spreading out of its own accord so everyone could get a hand on didn’t help. Even Westfield looked a bit spooked. Their problem. Mine was a churning stomach, but in for a cent, in for a dollar. I held Jesse’s hand, with Adam holding her shoulder as well as the cloak, and very formally asked the cloak to open the way to the place of its making for me, with Jesse, the President and Secretary, Adam, Charles, Warren, and David as expected and acknowledged guests of Underhill and Prince Gwyn ap Lugh. It gusted roses at me as it opened an arch, and with a final warning not to let go and a count of three, we went.

For once the Garden of Manannán’s death hadn’t changed, saving the presence of the reception committee. Zee had dropped his glamour — I remembered what he’d said about dispelling radiation itch — but had on a shirt that looked old and hand-made, and bore only one sword at his waist. Edythe still looked like an eight-year-old girl, though, her yo-yo whipping in a complicated figure-of-eight pattern, and Irpa had stuck to her little black dress, the tattoo shaking its skulls and roses at me cheerfully, though she also had a spiked club of appropriate proportions. All had a watchful but not worried air, and I expressed much gladness to Underhill, asking it if we could return Overhill as close to our time of departure as possible, and to the three fae before briefly mentioning those they and it already knew and very carefully, with full names, introducing Jesse, the Man, and Sawyer, in that order. They were trying hard not to goggle too much, and did at least remember proper protocol, expressing their own gladness, particularly to Underhill and to Zee for the work at Hanford. He shrugged.

“I have no love for most humans, having known too many, but for that there is no debt. Mercy asked me, and I have no love for pollution either.”

Even I wasn’t going to thank Zee while we were both Underhill, but I did take his hands and say how glad I was he’d been able to agree to come when we discovered Jesse was going to have to.

“It is not a problem, liebchen.” He turned to Jesse. “And it should never have been asked of you. Gwyn ap Lugh has told you your courage has been admired, and it is again.”

His glance flickered around David, Warren, and Charles, and settled on Adam.

“She will stay within their perimeter, Adam Hauptman?”

“Unless she wants to be grounded for a century, Dark Smith.”

Zee laughed. “Fairly said. It is not a time or place to disobey, Jesse Hauptman, but know I guard you first, as they do.”

“Zee says do something, you do it at once, ex-kiddo.”

“Oh yeah.”

“It is alright, Jesse Hauptman.” Irpa’s grin was as splendid as ever as she hefted her club. “Troll clubs work on pretty much everything, and I still need you to teach me about hair dye.”
The humour settled my stomach — go figure — and I took a breath.

“So, Mr President, Mr Secretary, this is the Garden of Manannán’s Death — a surprisingly recent name, but an ancient place.” I looked at Edythe, whose yo-yo smacked into her palm. “Did it have a different name before?”

“ Everywhere has many names, Mercedes Elf-friend, Daughter of Coyote.” Her smile was sly. “None of here’s were in English, but one of them might translate from a forerunner of Gaelic as the flowerbed of a god’s destiny, which you should think about.”

“Prophecy’s your department, Edythe, by all accounts. And you have me at a disadvantage in names.”

She smiled again. “I know. It’s much more fun than the other way round. But this name of yours for here will last a while, so do go on.”

However I might sometimes feel that someone should have fed her her yo-yo long ago and it was not my name, I’d meant what I said to the AED about arguing with Gray Lords, and simply nodded.

“Gladly. What matters, Mr President, Mr Secretary, is that this is where Manannán’s power was stripped from him, in accordance with Underhill’s justice, and the roses were a … consequence, though I don’t know why except that I have been told Underhill has always liked them. My cloak was a gift … via them, so you might say it was born here, on Wednesday morning by Overhill time, and when I use it this is where I come. Either the Garden is still discovering what shape it wants to be, or it likes shifting about for its own sake, or Underhill is still trying things out, and the benches with their decorations are still more recent additions, again by Overhill time. But any which way, Mr President, we’re really not in Washington anymore, nor yet Kansas.”

He looked around, and sighed as he met my gaze.

“You have that right, Ms Hauptman. How … can you tell me anything more about what happened on Wednesday morning … ah, Overhill time.”

I thought about it, seeing Edythe cock her head as her yo-yo resumed a complex twirling.

“Not really, sir. I’ve already told you Manannán mac Lir broke some ancient rules. I can add that one of them is that you cannot be brought Underhill against your will and then threatened with power that wouldn’t work Overhill.” Edythe’s yo-yo snapped into her hand again, and she gave me a look, but I’d worked that one out a while back, because if Manannán could have just squished or drowned me Overhill, he would have. What had prevented him I had no idea, but something had. “Doesn’t apply to any of us just now, because we’re here voluntarily. I can also say that Manannán’s Bane earned its name, Carnwennan very kindly came unbidden to my hand, and as Manannán mac Lir was not, despite the clear evidence, expecting a child of Coyote, he forgot to consider that we tend … metaphorically speaking, to change the odds in our own favour.”

Irpa grinned again, and so did Zee.

“Metaphor’s a gray area, Mercy, but I wouldn’t worry about it today.” Irpa’s coyote tattoo lolled its tongue at me, before absently eating a rose that swung in front of its mouth. “And the Garden’s very nice, but doesn’t have much of a view except the roses, even from my height.”

I could take a troll hint, and asked Underhill very politely if it would open a way to the seashore where Manannán mac Lir had first tried to kill me. Zee, Edythe, and Irpa all looked interested
when a stretch of roses lifted itself into an archway high and wide enough that Irpa wouldn’t have
to stoop. Beach and sea were clearly visible through it, waves blowing in from a far horizon, and a
waft of salt air joined the roses. I expressed my gladness to Underhill again, thinking it really was
being very helpful, before turning to the Man and Sawyer, both as wide-eyed as owls.

“That’s …”

“Also not Kansas, Mr President. Come on.”

Adam was with Jesse, inside her perimeter, and Edythe skipped ahead as I led the humans through,
enjoying the feel of sand underfoot and the bracing air. Edythe’s yo-yo had disappeared and she
was clearly alert but didn’t seem worried at all, and Irpa had gone as far as the water’s edge,
dabbling her painted toes, so I let the Man and Sawyer gaze out over the water for a moment before
speaking so Jesse could also hear.

“I imagine you now understand, Mr President, why, when Prince Gwyn ap Lugh allowed me to
speak to you of Underhill, it was this sea I told you about — as best I understand it, of earth, but not
on earth, and surely no mortal place. Even Medicine Wolf says Underhill is all somewhere else,
having only a doorway in the Columbia Basin, though Walla Walla is geographically nearly
central. In recognising the Fae’s independence, you would concede nothing, and relinquish
nothing. And you already know that no human force or technology is of the least use here.”

He was still looking out to the horizon, face wondering, but nodded slowly. “I do, Ms Hauptman.
Westfield relayed your line about shooting earthquakes, and it’s unarguable. You’re also right that
it’ll be easier to say what I can swear personally to know to be true.” He looked at me. “Do you
know what’s beyond the horizon?”

“I have no idea, Mr President. Edythe?”

“Another one, probably. Or the ends of rainbows and pots of gold. It varies.” She had her yo-yo out
again, doing slow sleepers, and gave us a sly glance. “Storms often enough, though without
Manannán perhaps it’ll become less like the Muir Meann.”

I gave her a look but it was Zee who spoke.

“You would call it the Irish Sea, Mercy. He called it the Manx Sea. This one is calmer now he and
his rage are gone, but I do not think it will change much in other ways.”

“Huh. Glad to know it, Zee. And time to head back, Mr President, Mr Secretary. For mortals
lingering here isn’t a good idea.”

“True enough, Mercedes Elf-friend, but wait a little more.” Edythe’s free hand pointed. “The
selkies are coming.”

I realised belatedly that Irpa’s paddle had sent a signal, and knowing where to look I could just see
the seal-heads breaking water. There seemed to be a lot more of them than I’d supposed might
come.

“The freed are among them, Edythe?”

“They are, escorted by their kin.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about what they want?”

“Balance.” She shrugged. “They too have the urge to repay kindness with kindness. The stories of
Selkie aid are rarer than those of stolen skins and web-fingered children, but they exist, and the freed were in no condition to speak to anyone before Nemane brought them here. Gwyn ap Lugh has told them you deny any debt, but they feel what they feel.

So did I, and I stifled alarm that wouldn’t help. The gratitude of wolf freed I could cope with, just about, but what do coyotes know about seals? I found Zee giving me a look I recognised, though without his glamour it was a lot more intense.

“Be careful, Mercy.”

“Here, always, Zee. I know it’s a dangerous thing, but have you any advice about what would be … satisfactory to both sides?”

He also shrugged. “It is you who find balances, liebchen, and now you must find another.”

Being Underhill, I suppressed several urges to scream or mutter, and blew out a breath.

“Can they swim in fresh water as well as salt?”

“If they want.”

The seals were not far out now, and Adam caught my eye. He wasn’t too tense but he wasn’t very happy either, and the strong impression I had was that uncertain underwater security was worse than none. I couldn’t disagree, but it didn’t leave me with much. And some complications I could cut away.

“Mr President, Mr Secretary, this is a matter for me, not for either of you.” Yet, because there was one possibility my poor brain had managed to throw up. “Stay back, please, unless I say otherwise.”

“How big a problem is this, Ms Hauptman?”

“None at all for you, sir. For me, I don’t yet know. Obligations are awkward here. Adam, come with me? You were as involved as I was.”

Taking his hand I received a sense of qualified agreement tinged with worry, and we could both feel fae and wolf eyes boring into our backs as we went down the beach to stand by Irpa, her club resting on the sand. The seals were close enough for me to see that they were the bearded variety, and I remembered the lank whiskers I’d glimpsed on some of the fae captives. About fifty yards out most of them pulled up, while three kept on, and though Adam’s hand tightened on mine I found I wasn’t surprised when a sandbank heaved out of the water just where the waiting seals could belly on to it for a better view. Without looking round I sent Adam an image of the Man goggling like Popeye, and felt him relax even though the three were squirming through the shallows, and onto the beach. They looked healthy enough, but as they rolled onto the backs, and their skins split cleanly down the whole length of their bellies, the human forms that rose from them, naked, showed welted scars and weals that we both remembered. There were two men foremost, and a woman with tension in every line of her body behind, and narrow faces with whiskers peered at us as the breeze gusted a strong smell of fish. For a long moment no-one said anything, and I swallowed a sigh, it being only reasonable that seals be as baffled by coyotes as I was by them.

“Selkies dwelling Underhill, we cannot greet you properly for we do not know your names, but I am Mercedes Hauptman, a Daughter of Coyote lately named Elf-friend, and this is my husband and mate, Adam Hauptman, Alpha of the Columbia Basin Pack. I am told by the Gray Lord Edythe that
you seek balance, but know that I hold no fae in my debt in any degree, and am glad we could help
in aiding you, as we were helped by fae in aiding our own victims of those mortal humans whose
just punishment Prince Gwyn ap Lugh has ensured.”

One narrow face nodded cautiously, whiskers stirring.

“We hear you, Mercedes Elf-friend, and we see your husband and mate. I am Gair, and these are
Amund and Ursilla, of the Selch.”

I nodded. “The gift of your names gladdens us, Gair, Amund, and Ursilla of the Selch.”

There was a pause before Gair spoke again.

“We saw you wearing the gift of Underhill when Gwyn ap Lugh freed us from our torment in that
place, and Nemane told us it was you who told him where we were. She said also that you slew
Manannán mac Lir when he sought your death.”

What they felt about Manannán I had no idea, so I simply nodded again.

“Nemane spoke truly, as always, Gair of the Selch.”

“Gwyn ap Lugh says that those of the earth who were enslaved with us will tend your gardens.”

“He has told me they are willing to do so, and they will be welcome among us, but there is yet no
agreement.” I wanted to sigh and time was passing, somewhere. Adam was also uneasy. “Do you
and your fellows likewise wish for such an agreement, Gair of the Selch?”

His feet shifted and he looked down. “Kindness must be repaid with kindness, Mercedes Elf-
friend. It is our way.”

“I hear you, Gair of the Selch, yet even for Gwyn ap Lugh I will acknowledge no debt between me
and any fae. But tell me, if you will, do you know of Medicine Wolf, and the intent to remove the
dams from the rivers known Overhill as the Columbia, Snake, and Flathead?”

His head came up again, and cocked slightly as the others also looked at us more intently.

“We do not, Mercedes Elf-friend, but we were dwelling Overhill when we were captured, and
know of those rivers and the dams that harm them.”

“Know then that Medicine Wolf is an avatar of the Spirit of the River and its basin, reawakened
after long sleep, and desires the river’s restoration, as Adam and I do. Perhaps you might speak to
Gwyn ap Lugh or Edythe of this. Irpa is also aware of these matters, for if a new agreement is
made between the Gray Lords and the humans of the United States, it may be that co-operation in
this will be one part of the way forward. And in taking away the dams so the rivers may flow
freely again, and the fish return, there will be much work that must be done underwater, awkward
and expensive for humans to do. I know you of the Selch are of salt water, not fresh, yet perhaps
you and your fellows might think on this, for any freely given aid would gladden Adam and me,
and others who aided us in freeing you and those enslaved with you.”

All three of them were looking at me intently, and after a long moment it was Ursilla who nodded.

“We will do so, Mercedes Elf-friend, and speak to Gwyn ap Lugh. Your kindness will not be
forgotten.”

“I am glad to hear it, Ursilla of the Selch, and wish you all joy in restored freedom and health. Fare
That seemed to be enough for with three more nods, and returned farewells, they slid back into their skins — which was just as disconcerting as seeing them climb out — and swam back out towards the sandbar, where a selkie colloquy seemed to be starting. Adam squeezed my hand, and Irpa gave us both one of those troll grins.

“You’re good at this, Mercy. They’ll eat some of those returning fish, though.”

“That will be Salmon’s business, Irpa, if it happens. Let’s go.”

What Edythe thought I had no idea, though her gaze was assessing, but Zee, Charles, Warren, and David, who would have heard every word, looked happier, and Jesse, who wouldn’t, just looked happy to have seen selkies. Adam let go of my hand and gave Jesse an enquiring look.

“Alright, Jesse?”

“I’m fine, Dad. What was that about?”

“We’ll tell you later.”

And Overhill, where words didn’t weight so much. Jesse nodded, wisely saying nothing, and I turned to the Man and Sawyer.

“Mr President, Mr Secretary, I trust the wait was not a burden. We can return Overhill now.”

With a lingering glance at the sea, and the seals, they fell in beside me as I headed back for the arch through which the roses could still be seen.

“It was not a burden at all, Ms Hauptman.”

I saw both of them swallowing curiosity, and gave them points.

“There were things to interest you, Mr Secretary, but we can discuss them Overhill.”

“Of course.”

Edythe was skipping ahead of us, yo-yo twirling, and as she went through the arch I saw it slap into her hand. She seemed to stiffen a little also, before turning to look at me.

“Another would greet you, Mercedes Elf-friend, and you alone. Irpa, Dark Smith, see the mortals and wolves into the Garden and stay with them.”

I knew without looking that Adam was not at all happy, but I couldn’t see much choice, and sent him what reassurance I could. Edythe had sounded wary rather than worried, and the stick was pulsing warmly in my hand while the cloak was rustling with what seemed happiness, so I took a last breath of salt air and walked back into the Garden. Edythe gestured, and I saw one of the benches was occupied by what looked like another young girl, somewhere between Edythe and Jesse in age, and startlingly beautiful. Going a little closer I saw her eyes were all the colours of the roses, understanding bloomed, and I swallowed as she stood and considered me. Simplicity as well as courtesy seemed like very good ideas.

“Greetings, Underhill. Your justice and your welcome make me very glad.”

“Greetings, Mercedes Elf-friend, Daughter of Coyote. You have caused much change to please Gwyn ap Lugh, which pleases me. And Manannán mac Lir angered me, for he forgot my laws, as
you did not."

"They are still in the stories, Underhill."

"As they should be. And as I exist for all, it also pleases me that you care for all. Those of the Selch will accept your offer of balance."

"I am glad of it, and that you tell me so."

I wanted to like her, but she was no more an innocent than Edythe, and her smile was not a child’s.

"You need not worry. I am yet in a giving mood, and the cloak I gave you speaks well of you, as does Manannán’s Bane. Gwyn ap Lugh said there was something you would ask of me, if I were willing to give it."

My brain went into overdrive, because the twisting wording was sliding around the fact that it was ap Lugh who had suggested asking for roses, and in doing so had prompted my thought about bringing the man Underhill. His unexpectedly positive response had left me wondering then what else it was he wanted, and the selkies had seemed to fit that bill in a small way, but this made much more sense. Underhill’s eyes glinted as she watched me think, and I chose my words very carefully.

"Gwyn ap Lugh spoke to me of roses from this Garden, freely given to be taken Overhill where they would not fade while the one to whom they were given lived. He suggested my stepdaughter Jesse would like one, which is true, and also a mortal woman who has aided us in the events that have happened Overhill in recent days. Her name is Andrea Lafferty, she has always spoken well of the fae, and she would respect and treasure such a gift. But if the … magic that keeps a rose from fading can be … adjusted, it occurs to me also that as the President has been allowed here, by your let and Gwyn ap Lugh’s, that he may truly swear his certainty of your existence, and as others will in time hold his office and bear his responsibilities, so it might be wise to give another such gift to the holders of his office, that their certainty might also be aided though they never leave Overhill."

Unexpectedly Underhill laughed and clapped her hands, and though I thought she really was amused by something it was not remotely a comfortable sound.

"Oh you are a clever one. Mortals so rarely remember, and I am glad freely to give the gifts you mention, asking nothing. Your stepdaughter can carry the one for Andrea Lafferty and the President can carry the one for the holders of his office."

Introducing either Jesse or the man was not what I wanted, and Adam wouldn’t like it, but there was no arguing and with Edythe skipping alongside looking cheerful again we went across to where the others stood. I noticed that the archway to the sea had gone, and from the look on Charles’s face wondered if he was feeling Underhill’s presence in a way from which the cloak was shielding me.

"Jesse, Underhill has a gift for you, and one for you to pass on to Andrea. They are given freely, incurring no obligation."

That last was for Adam as much as Jesse, and I tried to send him my thought about what ap Lugh had really wanted. His face stilled and then relaxed a little, and Jesse was looking excited rather than charmed, which eased my own mind.

"Underhill, this is Jesse Hauptman, Adam’s daughter and my stepdaughter. Jesse, this is Underhill."

Jesse’s brain was still working and she dropped a curtsey.
“Uh, Hello, Underhill. I am very glad you allowed me to visit with the let of Prince Gwyn ap Lugh.”

“Hello, Jesse Hauptman. I am glad you came, though the need for you to do so was a human wrong.” Underhill reached to the nearest rose, cupping her hands around it for a minute before it detached itself, glowing more brightly on a length of stem. “Keep it in clean water and it will not fade while you live.”

Jesse took it with a blinding smile. “I am gladder for your gift, Underhill.”

Underhill smiled. “And you heed the warnings of Mercedes, rightly. Do so always.”

The process was repeated with a rose for Andrea, and even with tension still singing in my body I couldn’t stop a smile at the thought of her likely response. Underhill gave me a look, and I turned, marshalling more words.

“Mr President, you need to listen very carefully. Underhill also has a gift for the holders of your office, to commemorate for you and your successors the certainty of belief this visit has brought you. It too is given freely, and incurs no direct obligation, yet if your negotiations with Prince Gwyn ap Lugh and the Gray Lords lead to a new agreement between the Fae and the United States of America it may be that this gift will serve to represent an absolute obligation upon all to whom, as holders of your office, it will in due time Overhill belong.”

The man’s face was still, and he nodded.

“That is clear, Ms Hauptman.” He swallowed, and offered Underhill something between a very deep nod and a shallow bow, Sawyer echoing him. “I am glad you allowed me and Glen Sawyer to come here, Underhill, and I am willing to receive such a gift, with strong hope for, though no certainty of, better relations between the Fae and the United States of America.”

Underhill considered him for a moment and nodded, then crouched to stroke a patch of earth with one finger. Even having seen it before I was fascinated by the eruption of another rose, swarming with tiny blooms in every colour, and even more so when Underhill lifted it free with an earthenware pot already holding the roots. My alarm-bell jangled.

“Does the pot make this gift a fae artefact, Underhill?”

“It does, Mercedes, but the only magic held by the pot is to sustain the roses through the succession of those holding this mortal’s office. You and he have my word on it.”

“I am very glad of it.”

“As you and he should be.” Underhill looked at the Man, holding out the pot, but when he accepted it did not relinquish her grip, and when she spoke again her voice held far more power. “This rose-bush I give to the holders of the Office of the President of the United States of America, that they are assured Underhill is for ever beyond them. It will need to be watered weekly.”

She let it go and stepped back, her voice becoming more whimsical.

“I am not sure I quite believe in the United States of America, though. After all, I have never been there. And if Kansas does exist, you are by all accounts welcome to it.”

I had to stifle a grin and Irpa didn’t bother. I hadn’t meant to challenge the Fae to demonstrate their sense of humour, but the results were proving welcome. Underhill looked up at me.
“You and your companions should return Overhill now, Mercedes Elf-friend. You may use the cloak I gifted you as you will, without limit, and may bring with you wolves and avatars, but none other without the let of Gwyn ap Lugh. In the Garden of Manannán’s Death none shall harm you or any with you, but take no step outside it without my invitation.”

“I hear you, Underhill.”

“Yes, you do. So few are still capable. I will be glad to speak with you sometimes, if you will. Sit on any bench here and I will come. Fare you well Overhill.”

And she was gone, roses stirring in a gust of wind. Not wanting any further delay I spoke only to the fae.

“Edythe, Irpa, Zee, I am glad of your aid in this, and hope to see you all Overhill later. Mr President, Mr Secretary, everyone, hands on the cloak, please.”

Edythe just laughed, yo-yo twirling, but I saw Irpa give me a less than discreet troll’s thumbs-up and Zee offered a smile as everyone shuffled into position. I checked they all had a grip, reminded them not to lose it, asked the cloak to take us back to the hall from which we had departed, gave a count of three, and went, tension draining out of my shoulders. Someone else could take the next president who needed to go Underhill, if it ever happened, and the though threatened a laugh I knew would get out of control. A hall full of agents, Westfield, wolves, and Bran just walking away, who all whirled as we emerged, took care of that, and the senior agent’s voice was sharp with anxiety.

“Is there a problem? What happened?”

My brain worked some more, shaking off Underhill.

“There’s no problem, Agent. How long have we been gone?”

He stared, and flicked a glance at his watch.

“About eight seconds.”

“What?” The Man sounded bemused. “But we were there for … I have no idea. Glen?”

“Half-an-hour at least, sir. Maybe more.”

My amusement returned, and I asked the cloak to tell Underhill that we appreciated its — her, which was a thought to chew on — timing.

“I’ve told you before, Mr President. Underhill is as elsewhen as it is elsewhere.”

“You have that right, Ms Hauptman. It’s else-everything, so far as I can tell.”

“What’s that you’re holding, sir? Give it to me at once.”

My amusement left again, and though I didn’t consciously do it my voice held power.

“No. You must keep it, Mr President.” I faced the Agent. “The rose and its pot are a gift to the holders of his office, not to him personally, Agent, so that no successor need ever seek to visit Underhill again merely to be assured of its existence. Think about that. And by Underhill’s formal word the pot holds no magic but what is needed to sustain the roses. Underhill cannot be forsworn, however devious Fae words may be.” I turned. “Mr President, I did not foresee this, but you will
understand that any Gray Lord has many reasons for choosing any action. Gwyn ap Lugh knows that gift will be all it has been said to be, neither more nor less, but it is also a test. To let the Secret Service x-ray it or whatever as SOP is also to show that you do not trust Underhill’s oath. And if you don’t trust its word, the Fae will care nothing for your word.” Another thought curled into my head. “I’ll also speculate, no more, that such a test serves also in part as a punishment of the Director. His fear is respected, but his abuse of Jesse is not, so as he distrusted, needlessly as is now proven, he must now trust, and there is great need.”

The Man looked down at the roses in his hands, then met my gaze.

“Well, hell. But that’s got some logic to it.”

“Sir, give that thing—”

“No.” My voice echoed in the hall as I swung round again, noticing Bran quirk an eyebrow as the scent of roses thickened and the stick again pulsed warmth in my hand. “Agent, hear me very clearly. Wrest a gift of Underhill from its rightful recipient, and you’re in trouble. Wrest that one from the President now, and you will probably prevent any treaty with the Fae. Your SOP will have consequences amounting to wilful diplomatic sabotage that I’d call treason. And for the love of God start thinking. Those roses do not conceal Russian bugs or exploding cigars, and the Fae don’t need such things anyway. If they wanted to bug the President’s desk they’d need one spell nothing you have would ever even register, and the roses are not it, by Underhill’s word. If they wanted him dead, he would be. Go explain it to your Director, and leave the man alone.”

To my surprise he spun and went, pulling out a phone, and I heard breaths hiss out.

“Damn. You ever want a job, Ms Hauptman, you’ve got one. What kind of power was that?”

Bran laughed softly. “That was many kinds of power, Mr President, but also pure Mercy. And though I am still working it out, she is not wrong. Mercy, Underhill spoke to you directly?”

I didn’t hesitate, and appreciated the unfolding consequences of trust and its demonstration. Very clever Gwyn ap Lugh.

“Underhill manifested, Bran. Looked like a twelve-year-old girl and really, really wasn’t. The roses Jesse has are for her and Andrea, which will be fun. And from their reactions, Edythe, Zee, and Irpa didn’t know she’d show up, though I wouldn’t bet on Gwyn ap Lugh — he and Underhill have been talking. Or something.”

“Probably something. But that makes sense. May I see your gift, Mr President.”

After a glance at me the man held it out, not relinquishing it, and Bran came forward, power again crackling as he looked with a lot more than his eyes.

“Mercy is correct that it is free of malice and harm, and yet also a test, Mr President.” He leant towards the roses Jesse held, her face alight, and breathed them in before looking back at the Man. “I sense magic keenly, and where the gifts Jesse holds will last as long as their recipients live, the artefact you hold is spelled through the pot to the life of your office. For whatever it is worth, I strongly advise you to heed Mercy’s words if you truly want a treaty of any kind with the Fae.”

“Huh. Th—no, I am gl!—hell, no, we’re back. Thank you, Marrok. Holding off the Director’s gonna be fun, but I understand what you’re telling me.” The Man rolled his head, neck popping. “And thank you, Ms Hauptman, Mr Hauptman, Miss Hauptman, gentlemen. That was an education, and then some.” He looked at his watch. “Amazing. Marrok, I need to let the Director
have a swift debrief, but as there’s still most of an hour before Medicine Wolf is due, maybe we could sit down together somewhere in … ten, maybe? Some of the things you’ve told me just got a lot clearer.”

Bran was back to bland.

“Certainly.” He glanced at Charles. “And I would like my own debrief, Mercy, Adam, Jesse, as would Anna. In the kitchen? We could probably all do with some brownies.”
Chapter Fifty-Two

I couldn’t work out what Bran was really after as he listened first to Adam and Jesse, the roses looking beautiful and slowly shifting colours in little vases I’d dug out on the table in front of them, then David and Warren, but I’d bet he already knew all Charles did and was checking for any discrepancy. There weren’t any, but although I’d sensed nothing taking the cloak off and draping it over a chair, with Manannán’s Bane, I’d been right that wearing it I’d had some shielding from Underhill’s direct presence, while everyone else had found the air very much thicker and felt a palpable weight. Wolves’ hearing had also been affected, and they didn’t know what I’d been saying to Underhill until we’d come over to them, so I ran through that and Bran smiled at the news about the selkies.

“That was well done, Mercy, and those construction sites are going to be very interesting. But while Underhill’s goodwill towards you is plainly genuine, I think you should not accept its invitation to talk for some while. It may be temporary but your magical power has grown again, and the cloak’s has also been boosted. You did not quite mean what you said to that Agent to be an order, but it worked as one.”

“I get that, Bran.” And I wasn’t happy about it, but there had been reasons. “His reaction triggered my understanding, and it was urgent. Same with Bradley. But stopping the chant was more a convenience and being tired, and I only nudged. It occurs to me also that Gwyn ap Lugh knew you’d be here when we returned, and intended you to offer the Man that reassurance.”

“All would think so, yes, which is useful of him. But I am not sure you are quite aware of how compelling you were, Mercy. Charles?”

“Da’s right, Mercy. I’d have had a hard time resisting that order, and no human could have done so. At the very least the cloak’s a magical amplifier, and it has a good deal more to amplify than you had on Tuesday — which was itself a good deal more than you had before Guayota. It is good, not bad, but you need to be very careful until you can recalibrate for yourself.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, but then nodded. “Yeah, I know, though when exactly I’m supposed to have the time is beyond me.” A thought struck. “And on Wednesday I was gone for longer than I thought, but today far less, so whatever I was given I’ve had less time to absorb. Maybe that’s why it spilled.”

“Perhaps so.” Bran thought about it. “Yet the spilling may have been as much a part of ap Lugh’s intent as my reassurance of the President.”

“Oh yeah. He’s a clever Gray Lord alright. And I agree with you about keeping out of Underhill for a long while, if I can. Can’t see why I shouldn’t, but there’s always something.”

“And such convenience is a temptation, yes. Resist it, though, please. I will fly back to Aspen Creek — we need to get the Lear Jet back there anyway. And Adam, you may have to make allowance for … unintended commands. Not that you don’t anyway.”

I gave Bran a dirty look as Adam laughed and took my hand.
“Not a problem, Bran. Mercy’s growing dominance has actually made the whole week easier for me. Medicine Wolf’s insulation, too. And I’ve healed faster than I expected on Tuesday. Mercy’s got some of that as well, I think. You have your stamina back, love, which you didn’t on Monday.”

That was certainly true, and I nodded. “I figured that out on … Friday, and some of it’s the cloak, but I think Manannán’s Bane had a hand in it too, using some of my manitou magic against Guayota’s damage. Bran, you thought something like that was going on with the healing of the burns, and it would make sense to me if the stick was into that, in its benevolence, and after Wednesday could do it more strongly.”

“That sounds … oddly likely. And I am relieved for you. But even so, Mercy, I think that having brought all kinds together, opening the way for negotiations, you should now stand back as much as possible. I believe everything will work out, but if it isn’t doing so orders are unlikely to help. And however Adam is wolf and you are Coyote’s daughter, a neutral host will be of more use to all than another delegate.”

“Make that uncomfortably nearly daughter, but yeah, I hear you, Bran. And I’ll be baking a lot anyway, and probably barbecuing between Benny’s deliveries, so standing back shouldn’t be a problem so long as no-one dumps one in my lap.”

Some peace and quiet would be just fine by me, and if things happened smoothly I might even be able to deal with my poor customers’ cars soon enough to save myself another week of rentals, though I doubted it.

“There is that, yes, but still. And I must talk to the President. Adam, Charles, Anna, with me, please.”

“My study?”

“Yes.”

They went, and Jesse shifted chairs to sit beside me, resting her head on my shoulder. I draped an arm round her.

“Alright, ex-kiddo?”

“I’m good, Mom. And I’m glad to have been Underhill, but also happy to be home again. And relieved — I didn’t feel threatened, exactly, but all those stories are clear it isn’t a place for human beings, and they’re right.”

“You bet. But you did well when Underhill spoke to you, and if anything ever drags you there, you shout for her loud and clear.”

“Oh yeah. But I’d rather go to Kansas.”

Warren and David laughed, and Warren reached to ruffle Jesse’s hair.

“I doubt it, Jesse, unless it’s improved a lot since I last passed through. But I know exactly what you mean.” He looked at me. “And count me impressed, again, Mercy. In Underhill is one place I’m very willing to keep it buttoned, never mind to Underhill in very strange person. Yo-Yo Edythe’s bad enough.”

“Quite the pair, aren’t they?”

“Tell me.”
We all looked round as Darryl came in with the Agent I’d told to call the Director, who had his phone out.

“The Director asks to talk to you, Mercy.”

“Surprise.” I held out my hand, and was given the phone. “Mr Director?”

<Ms Hauptman.> He sounded tired. <Three things. First, thank you for bringing the President and Secretary Sawyer back safely. Second, this pot of roses — you swear it’s harmless?>

“Certainly not. No fae artefact is harmless, but some are benign, including this one. And as no future president who looks at it on the desk in the Oval Office should need any convincing that Underhill is entirely real, however weird and elsewhere, it’ll save us both from ever having to repeat this exercise. Its power is to remind, no more.”

<Alright. And the whammy, whatever it was, you put on my agent?>

“Was to stop your SOP for human gifts doing real damage. Fae artefacts do not respond well to people who try to grab them or take them apart, Mr Director. I told the KPD on Monday night that they’ve had more than three years and not done Werewolf 101, and you’ve had far longer but still not done Fae 101. If anything comes of the impending negotiations you’ll be dealing with it, and them, more often, but try to frisk a Gray Lord and you’ll be lucky if you only lose your hands.”

<Noted, Ms Hauptman. Are there any consequences for the agent?>

“No.” I understood looking out for your own. “It was only a stronger version of what I did to Detectives Willis and Riebold on Monday at Sacajawea State Park, to stop them drawing on Medicine Wolf, and to Mrs Bradley on Friday in the school, to stop her spewing threats of hellfire at Jesse.”

<OK. That at least makes sense. And the other … parties are still due at the times you gave?>

“No-one’s told me otherwise.”

<Then thank you for your time, Ms Hauptman.>

He rang off, and I gave the phone back to the agent.

“I suppose a thank you is in order, Ms Hauptman, though I can’t say I quite feel grateful. Do you know what would have happened if I had grabbed that pot?”

“No, but I do know that anyone who tried to take my cloak would be unlikely to survive the attempt, and the President’s rose-bush is the same stock. And further to what I just told the Director, Agent, think about the fact that you knew the President had just returned from Underhill, which is an entirely magical place, and also knew that pretty much everyone present who is not an agent knows a great deal more about magic than you seem to, but you still tried to apply SOP yourself without checking on anything. And as there are soon going to be Elder Spirits, a fifteen-foot dire wolf, and any number of fae sitting out with the President, you need to think about it fast because all of them have a lot more magic than I do, and far thinner skins. You might talk to AED Westfield and SA Fisher, who have adapted very well to the needs this week has thrown up.”

His expression had become more thoughtful, and he gave me a curious look.

“I’ll do that, Ms Hauptman. It’s what you said about Cantrip’s omissions as well as commissions, isn’t it?”
“Probably, if they left you thinking only about how to kill any preternatural threat, not how to deal with it. Think bombs rather than guns — taking out the fuse with steady hands works a lot better than shooting them.”

“Huh. Good analogy. But we really like to have any bombs defused well before POTUS gets there.”

I laughed. “Me too, but that’s harder when it’s the bomb he needs to talk to. It’ll be alright on the night, Agent.”

He gave me a pained look, and when Darryl had escorted him out so did David, though Warren and Jesse were grinning.

“Not their favourite motto, Mercy.”

“Their problem, David. I almost suggested you might consult for them until the new Bureau is up and running.”

“It’s an idea. God knows what crap Cantrip has been feeding them. But I should check on my men.”

Warren went back on guard outside as well, and I grabbed an apron and did my best to replenish the brownie tin in the time I had, getting Jesse to give the mix a stir and warning her she’d need to take them out of the oven with why I needed her to guard them fiercely.

“You can come out back to help me with them, ex-kiddo, unless Adam says different, but the front’s off-limits while Caroline’s filming. And I might need you to stop your adopted grandpa from getting bored if things drag on.”

“Or adopted grandma.”

“I doubt it, though some of them might oblige. And don’t teach him about hair-dye, whatever you do.”

She grinned. “Monopoly, maybe. Or Clue.”

My brain must still have been a bit Underhill-drunk, because it occurred to me that a version of Clue including possible victims like Donald Rumsfeld, on national TV, with combusting trousers or Werewolf Harris, in the woods, with an elk would be considerably more fun than the standard one, but I managed not to say as much to Jesse. I wondered briefly if I now had enough money to get us a seriously customised set for Christmas, and made a mental note to investigate. Jesse surfed for a bit, then flipped the TV on, and I listened to Caroline talk about the ever-growing media pack outside the gate, the temporary but unexplained closure of airspace that had been announced, with flights diverted to Walla Walla and Pendleton, the weight of presidential security, and Zee’s unexplained absence from Hanford, where Tad was still tipping sludge. A brief cut to the studio informed me that Fox had not been amused by my offer, a retired federal judge who was amused believed it perfectly lawful and thought they’d be well-advised to accept it, and Coyote had somehow given KEPR a soundbite stealing my line about Fox being tricksters anyway, adding that he would make a much better logo. It made Jesse laugh but still won the last batch of brownies a more vigorous stir and rapid trip to the oven, with the timer plonked in front of Jesse before I took off the apron.

“Mom?”

“Just taking out the small change, Jesse. Coming out’s mostly been a relief, but having him out
there saying whatever occurs to him to all and sundry still weirds me some. And changing magic probably has me jumpy too. Sorry."

“No problem. Having a gramps is weird for me too, though I still want to meet my graunts. Maybe they’ll give me a name to match yours.”

I gave her a look. “You want to be called Her Hair Causes Trouble?”

She laughed, lightening my heart.

“I could do worse. Add step-not-exactly-grand-daughter of Coyote and it has a ring.”

My own laugh was welcome too. “You could say. Or try The Fae Call Her Brave. How’s the head, ex-kiddo?”

She went thoughtful. “Manitou glass is working, I guess. No flashbacks or nightmares. But I’ve done some thinking about it, and I get what you and Medicine Wolf mean about coming to terms without being, what? Shielded. Insulated.” She hesitated. “Were the scars I could see on the selkies from what Cantrip did to them?”

I took a breath. “I think so, Jesse. Gwyn ap Lugh said Cantrip wanted to know how long blistering from iron lasts. Why do you ask?”

“It was thinking that whatever I have to deal with, it could be a lot worse.”

“Yeah, it could. But someone else having it worse doesn’t mean you didn’t have it bad.”

“No, I get that. But still. It sounds lame, but life goes on, so I’m better off getting on with it.”

“It sounds true, and yes, you are.” I sat opposite her. “But there’s a lasting cost. Adam and I both have nightmares, but we usually have each other when they happen. You don’t have anyone beside you yet. When you do, honesty about it will matter, and until then remember that being an ex-kiddo doesn’t mean you can’t wake us if you need, or just fix yourself chocolate and a sandwich. Asil’s right that good smells help, but so does snack food. Just don’t go walkies, ever, without a guard.”

“Right. Being a kiddo was more fun, in some ways, but I’m not repining. And I wanted … you know you’re the best thing that ever happened to Dad, and to me?”

I blinked away sudden tears, and nodded. “Back atcha, Jesse. I’m sorry I bring so much rough with the smooth.”

“Nah. Bad stuff’s always happened. Dad can just go wolf and eat it, but you’ve taught me how to deal.”

“You knew already, Jesse.” Or she’d have brained Christie long ago. I checked my watch. “Nearly time to head out again. Call Andrea while you’re waiting on the brownies and tell her about the rose?”

“Sure. You don’t want to do it yourself? It’ll be fun.”

“I know, and I’d like to see her get it, but I don’t need more things to do today.”

Bran and the Man were still closeted, but I was feeling antsy, wanting it all to be over. I had no hesitation putting the cloak back on — I trusted it, and if anything bad did happen we’d all need
every boost we could get — and after wrapping three brownies in foil I took Manannán’s Bane, checked the state of things out back, which was good, and went in search of Westfield and Fisher. Caroline and the camera were about thirty yards down the drive, with a Feeb keeping a wary eye on them, Westfield and Fisher were talking outside their MCU, and I saw Al swing the camera as I went towards them.

“Can’t speak for Adam, AED, but once everyone’s here and the pow-wow starts out back, I’m a neutral host, not a delegate, so when the miracle pies are in I could give you that statement you want. Any of the pack who came to Wyoming can be pulled off guard duty to give theirs, as long as you do it one at a time. I haven’t had a chance to speak to the avatars yet, or the Alpha of the Seattle wolves, but it’s on my list somewhere. Anything new at your end?”

“That all sounds good, Ms Hauptman, thanks, and yes, one or two things. Forensics are done, the cages are nearly dismantled, and the hoist should be operational by tomorrow morning. Can you tell Nemane?”

“Sure, but she ought to be here at 5 so you can tell her yourself.”

“Right.” It was a day for people I liked to give me sideways looks. “You continue to impress and bemuse, Ms Hauptman. That was some show in the hall, and I’ve just had the agent you stopped in his tracks asking for my version of what he said you called Fae 101.”

“What did you tell him?”

“We’ll talk properly as soon as we can. But for now I told him what I told Sawyer the other day — that you don’t lie, ever as far as I can tell, but you say only what you really mean, and what you don’t say leaves spaces big enough to hide an army. And you are very right that Cantrip has done us no favours with the Secret Service, which we are going to have to think about hard, though you already have them genuinely asking themselves some questions, for which my congratulations.”

“Un huh. I tell jokes as well, AED.”

“She sings along with the Boss too, sir.”

Fisher was deadpan, and Westfield grinned.

“Doesn’t everyone? But the other thing is that we’ve identified some vacant units in Richland. Best bet so far is off Duportail Street, an adjacent L unit, with four bedrooms, and T unit, with two in each half. I’ll understand if the freed can’t stand more cramping, but if we get some bunks into every bedroom and one of the living spaces they could just about hold twenty-six until something better opens up.”

I thought about it. From what I remembered the Ls were meant for larger families and ran to over 1500 square feet with a fair living room., and the Ts to 500 or so, for one-child families.

“Sounds workable, AED, and the submissives want physical contact so they won’t mind sleeping together, but kingsize futons would be better than bunks. Put a bunch of them in the Ts, give Ramona the L, and open up the living spaces as much as possible. You’ve seen our rooms. Even on two legs wolves tend to sprawl some. And thanks for the fast work. Now they’ve become a proper pack we need to get them out of where they are a lot sooner than later, and I imagine you know we’ve also had the Wyoming authorities making concerned noises.”

“Thank Leslie. She did the work. And Mr Hauptman told me about Wyoming — we’ve let them onsite and shared data, but they need to tick their own boxes.”
“Oh yeah. And thanks, SA. It’s a big help. Freed Pack are doing well, by the way. Wolf — the Elder Spirit — gave them the sort of knowledge free wolves should have and took them on their first hunt. Still looking gaunt, mind, but a lot better than they were. Detective Willis is trying to find a trauma counsellor who’ll take them all on, and Jenny’s agreed to represent them legally, so naturalisation and compensation stuff should be copied to her.” Westfield nodded. “Oh, and while we were Underhill I met the freed selkies, who were also in far better shape, though on two legs their scars were very clear. It’s probable they’ll be up for helping with underwater work in clearing the dams, and if so the federal fish budget should be very generous.”

There was a silence before Fisher shook her head.

“Always wanted to do something about that fish budget, sir. Underwater work, Ms Hauptman?”

“Yeah. Scoping out the river bottom or herding salmon or something. What do I know about selkies? They felt the need to repay kindness with kindness and I had to think of something useful I wanted three seals to do in a hurry. Go figure.”

“Huh. Can you herd salmon?”

Westfield laughed. “Good question, Leslie, but if she can’t, selkies and Salmon himself probably can. You really are an education, Ms Hauptman.”

“So the man said too, though to me most of it’s just pointing out the obvious. Are you keeping Ms Taylor and her crew at that distance?”

“Yes. Secret Service told us to. Camera can zoom in but it keeps the mike out of range.”

“Maybe, AED. Who knows how much space the Elder Spirits or Fae will take up? I’ll just go and have a word before the fun really starts.”

News of the housing cheered me up, though with the Freed Pack in Richland there’d be another media circus to deal with. Caroline would be able to help, but that wasn’t a discussion for live TV. Al was tracking me, so I gave a bright smile as I approached, and held out the brownies.

“Hey, Ms Taylor, Mr Hersch, Mr Dilman. I didn’t think anyone would have fed you, and it’s going to be another long shift for you guys, so I brought you some brownies. And there’s a big order from Benny’s due early evening, so you could add three to that on your account.”

“Thank you, Ms Hauptman. You don’t miss a trick.” Caroline gave me another stare for my collection. “And you are looking spectacular.”

“Cloak’ll do that, Ms Taylor, even for me, but I’m wearing it and the feather more for symbolic reasons than vanity.” And practical ones, however I didn’t expect to need magic again today. “You could call it hostess gear.”

“Could I? Anything more you can tell the world, Ms Hauptman? I believe my audience is currently several billion.”

“I bet. It’s been a pretty interesting day so far. And yeah, there is. Let’s see. The President’s talking to the Marrok, with the Secretary, and we’re expecting Medicine Wolf, Elder Spirits, and Gray Lords starting soon. Airspace closure is so that no-one collides with Baba Yaga’s flying mortar or whatever. Secret Service keeps having conniptions, because magic busts their SOP and freaks them out, and because Cantrip had told them a bunch of lies too, but there haven’t been any real problems so far. Mr Adelbertsmiter is dealing with some personal business, but he’ll be back at Hanford as soon as he can. And in other news, the freed that I’ve seen, wolf and fae, are doing
better than expected, while investigations in Wyoming are moving right along. AED Westfield and SA Fisher have been pretty spectacular themselves with that. Oh, and assuming we do get some kind of treaty or treaties out of all this, there are some cool ideas popping up about the forms interspecies co-operation might take when it comes to re-engineering the Columbia. Strikes me it would make a really good running segment or vlog for KEPR, and making very green engineering a hot ticket seems like a smart idea to me. Lots of Medicine Wolf time, too. Interested?"

Caroline had blinked several times during all that, but nodded fast enough.

“Just slightly, Ms Hauptman. And that’s more information than anyone else has given us all day.”

“Yeah, I gathered. Security issues, mostly, with some alphabet-soup stonewalling-on-principle. But I want as many of your several billion viewers as possible seriously on board and on side, especially those living in the US, so any political weaselling earns the weasels great big postbags and inboxes a thousand screens deep telling them straight up they just lost their next election. A Yakama Nation medicine man I rate as very wise told me the other day that when you push the world, mostly it pushes back hard enough to squash you, but thanks to Medicine Wolf, and lassoing you on Tuesday, we’ve pushed the world hard enough this week to move it some, and now we need to keep pushing. Successful negotiations will mean making concessions as well as getting things we want — Fae independence, for sure, and I’d guess that constitutional amendment to protect the rights of preternatural citizens, as well as really cleaning up the Basin. But remember what everyone will be getting, too, from preventing a war with the Fae that humans could not win to timing the Cascadia quake, Hanford, wolf forensics and S&R, and who knows what else? When you start doing the kind of thinking Cantrip was supposed to do, but didn’t even attempt, there are all sorts of ways that human technology and preternatural magic can do good things together. We and the FBI started on it in Wyoming, and with some mutual effort and tolerance it works really well. So, US citizens who are watching, keep calling or emailing your federal and state representatives, please, and keep them honest. This one is not for messing with by tying stupid things to its budget or staging hissy-fits to protect personal pork-barrels. Children can write too, and tell anyone being a problem that when they turn 18 that person is going to be out of a job. What’s about to happen here is an enormous opportunity, and we need to grab it with both hands.”

Just as I ended I felt the first throb of earth magic, and so did Caroline.

“What was that?”

“That was magic, Ms Taylor. I expect Coyote was listening in and knew a good cue when he heard one. Here we go.”
Chapter Fifty-Three

Chapter Fifty-Three

If Bran hadn’t felt the magic himself Charles would have done, but I sent a time’s-up signal to Adam anyway, letting him know I was already outside. By the time I’d reached the front door Warren and several four-legged pack were waiting, he, Charles, and Anna were coming through it, and he told me with an image that Bran would be watching on TV with Jesse, not putting his face in front of however many billion people. A second image of three Agents guarding the bathroom with fierce scowls while Sawyer waited his turn told me the Man would be along when they’d taken care of business, and I gave him a grin.

“Good one, love. How was it?”

“Productive and promising. Some of our stuff, and a briefing from the Marrok about Fae negotiating postures that made the man sit right up. That was some statement you gave Taylor.”

“You were watching?”

“Jesse messaged me you were about to be on, once you got to Baba Yaga’s flying mortar we were all listening, and you were pretty compelling again, even without using magic. Bran just sighed, but I bet the Man that by this time tomorrow at least a million emails will have been received by members of Congress, and he expects to lose.”

“Huh. What’s the stake?”

“One Benny’s pie with three double toppings of choice.”

I laughed. “Well, you can afford that.”

“Won’t have to, love. A lot more than a million won’t surprise me at all. Or him.”

It was what I wanted but I still wasn’t going to think about it now.

“Maybe. Oh, and Fisher’s found adjacent L and T units vacant somewhere off Duportail. Told Westfield I think it’d work for now if they fill the T with futons and give Ramona the L, with its first floor as pack space.”

He thought about it, and nodded. “Sounds good, and Bran will be relieved.”

The earth magic was picking up speed, and I was relieved myself to see the Man and Sawyer come out, agents fore and aft before spreading out to juggle spacing with Warren and the pack members. One of them tried ordering George to give way, and got a wolf sneer with half a growl before George shifted maybe an inch. Adam fixed the agent with a stare and the Alpha was rich in his voice.

“You’re talking to a twenty-year police veteran who could take your leg off with one bite and has an absolute obligation to take station on me, Agent. If you can’t manage professional respect you can at least be polite.”

The Man shot the agent a look too. “Brain before mouth, Hembley. Second and last warning.”
I wondered what the first had involved, but the Man was moving on.

“Can you explain what this pulsing is, Ms Hauptman? Is it what was happening Tuesday night?”

“Pretty much, Mr President. Call it the heartbeat of earth magic, coming closer. Charles?”

“I would say the spirits have begun to dance joyful welcome to Medicine Wolf and the Elders, but Mercy is not wrong. Those coming are powers of magic, and the earth responds to their tread.”

What the Man made of that I wasn’t at all sure, but as Medicine Wolf came into view loping down the middle of the Columbia I didn’t much care. Our river frontage was mostly guarded by wolves, the Feds being more concerned about snipers or whackjobs in cars than mad Russian frogmen or aquatic fae, and I felt Adam’s command that had them peeling back to clear a path. As Medicine Wolf hit the shallows a salmon that looked a lot more like the extinct sabretooth variety than anything I’d ever eaten leaped into the air beside it, transforming mid-leap into salmon-headed Salmon, and air shimmered as the others popped into existence around them, all in animal forms. Thunderbird, Hawk, Raven, and Owl dived from empty sky to join Salmon in animal-headed solidarity, and the beating magic dropped to a thrumming bass-note. A glance told me the Man was still feeling it, and as I was next to him I told him something else he and Sawyer didn’t know and would need to think about.

“Full house, Mr President, Mr Secretary, as far as I know, except for Bison, who’s still in a bad way from being pointlessly slaughtered far too many times. You do realise getting those captive herds in Yellowstone and elsewhere back to proper migration routes is a serious card you can play? Beefalos really don’t cut it.”

I felt Adam’s amusement as we stepped forwards — we were the hosts, not the Man — and more distantly Coyote’s flash of approval for an opportunity taken, but my attention was on Medicine Wolf, who’d dropped its pace to match that of Elder Spirits on two legs. So had their animal-form brethren, and seeing Bear, Snake, Wolf and the others deliberately strolling — not that snakes can stroll, exactly — was a serious blast. My hand found Adam’s, and we matched deep nods and extended outer arms as Medicine Wolf stopped in front of us and lowered its head, silver-on-gold eyes bright.

“Medicine Wolf, welcome to these negotiations and the hospitality of the Columbia Basin Pack.”

_Hello, Adam, and Mercy. How was Underhill?_

“Interesting. Do a quick read, if you like.”

I was already meeting its eyes, the magic only lasted for a second, and its voice was for us alone, though I still had no idea how I knew that.

_You did well, Mercy. I think it is a long time since Underhill took a human form, but it was a way for us to speak. Your power has increased again, also._

“I know. And I’d like to talk about the other when we can” — it hadn’t occurred to me that Underhill might have been obliged to human form for other reasons — “but for now we need some introductions. Mr Secretary Sawyer, you already know.” Sawyer gave a smile and a nod while I took a breath. “And this is the President of the United States. Mr President, meet Medicine Wolf, an avatar of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin.”

It was a moment for the history books, and I had to give the Man points for dealing with being sniffed up and down. He didn’t say anything about the six federal dead we’d started with either.
“It’s good to meet you, Medicine Wolf, and I’ll take the chance to thank you straight away for Hanford. That’s a real boon, and I’m looking forward to those conferences at Wazzu.”

I am pleased to meet you also. Medicine Wolf was back on a general band and Taylor was repeating him into a small hand-mike. And you are welcome, so far as Hanford is concerned. To be rid of the radioactive material is good for me too. It itched. But know that you are very fortunate that it was Mercy and Adam to whom this form first spoke. Their unusual natures and bond were a sharp new interest that countered my disgust with the way humans have treated my earth and water. You do well to heed them both now. And you must listen carefully to the Elder Spirits also — they still understand the harmony and balance most of your humans seem to have lost in the pleasure of your technology.

“I’m here to do just that, Medicine Wolf. And I do know that Mr and Ms Hauptman have added a lot of good to a week with a lot of bad.” The Man gave me a glance with some understandable nerves and some welcome amusement in it. “Who does the introductions?”

The animal forms made basic ID pretty clear, but Medicine Wolf pulled back a little, and Adam and I took the Man and Sawyer along the line, each oversize animal becoming the fully human version as we did so. The ones already on two-legs were at one end, so it was the birds and Salmon first, and Gordon set the tone by naming himself only as Thunderbird but accepting a handshake. I thanked him for the feather, and asked if it did anything except look good, and he gave me a smile.

“Maybe, Mercy. Wait and see.”

I had better luck with Salmon when I asked him if we could talk sometime soon about any contribution three talking seals could make to fish management during the re-engineering, and got a surprised blink before he shrugged.

“If you want, She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars. It sounds interesting.”

The Man was giving me a sideways look that I thought was about keeping pushing, or maybe my Blackfeet name, but that was his problem. So far the Elder Spirits had all gone male, and I wasn’t surprised when Wolf did too, though I was glad to know that the Freed Pack had made a good, clean kill, even if it squicked the man a bit, and that Asil had been with them before Wolf had left them feeding. But Bear became a very striking old woman in beaded buckskins I thought was Shoshone, maybe Yahandeka, and the Man blinked twice.

“Ah, hello, um, Ms Bear.”

She gave him a very ursine look.

“It’s just Bear. I know I looked male on Tuesday night, but we are all our kinds. Good call, She Doesn’t Only Fix Cars.”

“Jesse and I thought having some more women who aren’t fae involved would be a fine idea, Mr President, not only on principle.”

He stared at me for a second. “If you say so, Ms Hauptman.”

Snake was also a serious woman warrior who looked Apache, and Bobcat a younger Navajo girl with a really wonderful braid. The prey species were all male, though, and Coyote, waiting at the end of the line nearest the camera and, I’d bet, within range of Vince’s boom mike, gave the Man a poker face and as he became fully human held up a hand, palm out.

“How, Chief Paleface of the Government.” He cracked a grin. “I know I already did that joke with
you, Glen Sawyer, but it’s a good one, and we weren’t on camera then.”

The Man got himself more points by solemnly holding up his own hand.

“How, Chief Coyote.” He offered the hand instead, and they shook. “You have a very interesting not-exactly daughter.”

“Don’t I just? She’s really on a roll this week. I couldn’t be prouder. Well, I could, of course, but still. Adam’s a pretty interesting more-or-less son-in-law as well. We Coyotes have excellent taste.” I glared at him and he gave me another grin. “Well, we do. And I’m being very restrained, for me. I didn’t think you’d like it if we made all the prey species female, though it’d be pretty funny.”

“You thought right.” I was conscious of the camera’s closeness. “I expect you’ll all want to come out again to see the Fae arriving, but meantime we should head round to the back.”

“Nah, no point with these tight intervals of yours. And now we’re all out, so spectacularly, we can use the screen-time.”

The others had shifted into a circle, with Medicine Wolf at 12 and us at 6, and they’d let Adam’s wolves, two- or four-legged, hold their positions, as well as Charles and Anna, but not the man’s agents, who were awkwardly shifting to get behind us. Coyote gave the nearest a hard look.

“Settle down, you. No-one’s going to eat the President, but if you go on being silly we might eat one of you. It’d only take Bear or Cougar a couple of bites, and it’d give the week a nice symmetry.” He turned back towards the Man, whose eyes had gone suspiciously bright, but then gestured to Caroline. “And you can come closer, Ms Taylor. Ignore that Fed.”

To be fair the poor Feeb knew when he was outmatched, and simply stood back, letting Caroline, Al, and Vince move in. Coyote gave the Man and Sawyer a serious look.

“What we all want is actually pretty simple.” Saving Coyote and Salmon they all reverted to their animal forms. “Look at us. Give it a pan, Al the Camera. Aren’t we magnificent? The First People forms are pretty good too, but it’s about the animals and you Anglos, mostly, because your kneejerk reaction when you see almost any of our children is to want to shoot them, or poison them, or at best drive them away. Stop it. We understand hunting to eat just fine, but this killing-for-fun stuff was always a lousy idea and it’s still way out of hand. Wean yourselves off it, or we’ll have to think about our own Path of Assertion, and start hunting the hunters. That would mean that every time some NRA obsessive with bloodlust was lining up a shot at some poor deer or bear they had absolutely no need to kill, the nearest coyotes, wolves, bears, cougars, rattlers, ravens, rabbits and whatever would all be zeroing in on them. You’re not afraid of rabbits now, but you soon would be — they’ve got big teeth, they’re fast, and they come in large numbers. Think about it. An obituary saying you got eaten by rabbits is not going to look good, or console your families much, and you’re going to feel very silly indeed if you end up mounted as a head in a warren somewhere. And on top of that, while we could go proactive everywhere, in the Basin Medicine Wolf could add the land and water to the list of your enemies, and believe me you do not want to be hunted by the grass or rock you’re walking on, nor the stream you’ve camped beside. Wet bedrolls are the least of it when every frog and fish is aiming for your mouth. And then there’s all the land you spoil. It’s not just the Basin that needs cleaning up, it’s almost everywhere. Planting Cadillacs in a ranch is weird, if quite funny, but just dumping old pickups and whatever to rust and leak oil is nasty. So are the roadkill numbers. You need to slow down some, and push these hybrid cars too, to cut down on the exhaust fumes. And there are things you can all do for each of us, so listen hard a minute.”
Adam and I had gone from mild irritation through faint horror to mingled amusement and agreement, and so from their looks had Charles and Anna. What Bran thought was something I didn’t really want to know, but he could take it up with Coyote himself — we were just nominally neutral hosts, as ordered, and the Elder Spirits were getting on with it anyway. They became human again, and as Coyote led the Man and Sawyer round the circle, Al and Vince tracking them, they had seriously practical ideas to offer. They knew their pollution, had particular places and contaminants they really disliked, and Sawyer was happy to promise that, given precise information, some of the savings from Hanford could fund a very severe crackdown on the culpable companies and individuals, and that the lists of banned chemicals could be reviewed. They also had very clear ideas about some NPS policies that were not ecologically motivated, as well as the need for smaller sanctuaries from the NRA, what they called urban co-operation, and the crying need for wildlife crossings more or less everywhere. That last came with strong endorsements for what the Canadians had done in Banff National Park with the Trans-Canada Highway, and the Floridians with Interstate 75, as well as a firm offer from Medicine Wolf to assist within the Basin by raising or lowering land to reduce construction costs.

The underlying point was that it was all perfectly practicable — they weren’t demanding miracles, just a decent concern for the planet and all its denizens, and the Man did seem to get it, agreeing that serious efforts could be made without quite committing himself to anything. His time in oil had actually given him a fair knowledge of ecological impact studies, even if their recommendations had tended to be ignored whenever profits could be boosted, or they thought no-one was looking, and like any sharp politician he’d also understood immediately that Coyote was using the camera, much as I had, to push an agenda that already had rapidly increasing public support. He’d always be the man on whose watch Wyoming had happened, but he’d already ensured the history books would call him the President who’d abolished Cantrip, and he was beginning to see that if he went with the whole anti-pollution and stop-avoidable-killing thing he could use his remaining two years in office to become the first truly green president and secure photo-ops to make any opponents weep. The present one was already a doozy, and I wondered what the audience had grown to. It was all going to cost a great deal, but there really would be billions in savings to reallocate, and Wolf added to the mix by slyly suggesting that once the Cascadia quake was done and dusted the big insurance companies should tithe from whatever Medicine Wolf saved them in payouts, which made both Sawyer and the Man grin.

Charles and Anna had drifted to stand beside Adam and me, and though both were listening carefully, Charles with some reverence showing, after a moment Anna gave me a little nudge and spoke softly.

“Only just short of 5, Mercy.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m not interrupting until I have to, and as the Fae want their own show I imagine they’ll let us know when we need to look.”

“There’s that.”

Gwyn ap Lugh had been precise about the intended timing, and at 5 exactly, just as Elk was saying something to Sawyer about getting his children to co-operate with the brucellosis vaccination program, I saw the northern sky begin to lighten in a way that had nothing to do with sunlight.

“Excuse me, Elk, Mr Secretary, everyone, but we have an inbound faery rade, and I doubt any of us will ever get to see another. Mr Hersch, you want your camera pointing due north.”

Even with what he was presently filming Al didn’t need telling twice, and everyone turned, though Caroline was professional enough to slide over to stand by me with her extra mike.
“A faery rade, Ms Hauptman?”

“Yup. Like ride, but ‘rade’ is the proper term. The Gray Lords and entourage are about to enter the building. Or the garden, anyway. Just watch.”

A great circle of the northern sky was continuing to lighten, and I could feel fae magic building, underlyingly familiar and not unlike Underhill’s but still with a quality I’d never sensed before. The cloak rustled happily, wafting roses, and Manannán’s Bane was warm in my hand as horns sounded somewhere in the distance and were joined by a murmur of bells. In pretty much all the accounts I’d read humans heard a rade before they saw it, so that made sense, and we weren’t kept waiting long for the full show.

How far away the light was I couldn’t tell, but when the rade began to emerge from its centre the figures were clear — some of ap Lugh’s knights leading, and the others flanking the column, all on the same unnatural and I’d bet spectral horses they’d ridden in Boston, without saddles or bridles but gorgeously caparisoned in cloth of gold, and with what I’d bet were silver bells woven into ribboned manes and tails. Ap Lugh himself led the parade, also mounted, as were Nemane and others I didn’t recognise behind him, all in their finest glamour. Putting on shades would have been gauche, but I thought about it. Nemane was flanked by two women who had to be the rest of the Morrígan, Babd and Macha, and beside them strode a very large man — or perhaps middling-size giant — with the bushiest beard I’d ever seen and a serious staff. The Dagda was the name that popped into my head with the thoughts that their family dinners must be something else, and that horses clearly weren’t compulsory for non-giants because Baba Yaga was in her flying mortar, its pestle sticking up beside her knees, while — I swallowed — Edythe, still with spinning yo-yo though it now gleamed with jewels, was astride what might have been a really beautiful pony if it weren’t for the long silver horn jutting from its head. Unicorns, yet, but you had to give her points for style. Þorgerðr and Irpa were both walking, a relief as I couldn’t think of anything they might ride except dragons, if there were any, and both were in exceptional evening dresses that still made me think Chanel and did not make it any less weird to see them in mid-air. Especially as they both had troll clubs, and I’d happily believe those things did indeed work on almost everything. Zee, still in warrior-mode, was back to two swords and a gorgeous leather tunic anyone on Game of Thrones would have killed for, riding a jet-black horse with fiery eyes and breath that steamed. Further back there were other trolls, some riderless horses I thought might be kin to the Fideal, and smaller fae as well — oakmen, coblynau, brownies, selkies, and pixies I recognised, and other kinds I didn’t, though I’d bet the green ones wearing tunics embroidered with shamrocks were leprechauns, unless they were something else playing a fae joke with their glamour.

I thought it was probably a good sign that there were no overtly predatory creatures, nor any hell hounds, saving the Gray Lords themselves, and the whole thing made any Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade I’d ever seen look like the work of hopeless pikers. But it was only the Gray Lords, Þorgerðr and Irpa, and Zee, with ap Lugh’s fifty knights still flanking them, who from a point somewhere above the Columbia began to circle down in a great sweep that brought them to land just on the shore where Medicine Wolf had arrived. The rest of the rade spread out in the air, looking down at us with bright and compelling eyes, while at a slightly lower altitude sixteen of the knights peeled off and took station around the house like the points of a compass-rose. I sent Adam my earnest hope that we wouldn’t be getting any horse manure from that high up, and heard him swallow his laugh. By the time I dragged my attention back to the ground ap Lugh was pulling up about ten yards in front of me and Adam, and Baba Yaga’s mortar had set down to let her step out before it neatly vanished. Good housekeeping. Ap Lugh swung gracefully off his horse, the others and the remaining knights matching him, and while I couldn’t say he was at his most remote, he was certainly in high formal mode as he met my eyes and gave a fractional nod.

“Mercedes Hauptman, Daughter of Coyote, Elf-friend, we come upon your invitation and at our
promised hour."

With Adam’s very willing agreement, and a mental sigh, I took point as we stepped forward, offering our own version of something hovering between a bow and a deep nod.

“Prince Gwyn ap Lugh, you keep your word exactly, as always. I and my husband and mate, Adam Hauptman, Alpha of the Columbia Basin Pack, welcome you in peace and honour, with all Gray Lords and fae accompanying you, to our land and house, and offer the hospitality of the Columbia Basin Pack for quiet conversations, free and non-magical intellectual exchanges, and negotiations with the other great human and preternatural powers already here assembled. I name to you and all fae those who are your fellow-guests and -delegates — the President and Secretary of the Interior of the United States; Medicine Wolf, an avatar of the Great Manitou of the Columbia Basin; the Elder Spirits” — I named them all — “and the Marrok, who waits within.” The temptation to add that the Marrok was badly camera-shy was strong, but nothing like strong enough. “I ask you now to name yourselves to your fellow-guests and -delegates.”

Ap Lugh’s expression hadn’t changed at all but I thought he sounded approving all the same.

“We will be glad to do so, Mercedes Elf-friend, Daughter of Coyote, and wife and mate of Adam Hauptman, Alpha of the Columbia Basin Pack, as we acknowledge and are glad to accept your hospitality. I am Gwyn ap Lugh, once and again Prince of the Gray Lords and Master Underhill.”

I noted the new addition and that missing ‘of’. I very much doubted that any fae was ever Underhill’s master, but it and ap Lugh were clearly becoming more deeply aligned, perhaps bonded. I expressed my gladness for the gift of his name and further title, and we proceeded. Edythe was still just Edythe, and she wasn’t any of Ériu, Banba, or Fódla, because they were all present, so we were back to square one, but she knew it and was amused, so that was a plus of sorts. I’d been right about the bits of the Morrígan, and The Dagda, but some of them used what I thought were very old Gaelic or Celtic names I didn’t recognise — more ex-gods, I suspected, several who had to be connected by war and two very voluptuous women with scary eyes who must be fertility types. They were all still practising high formal, with measured nods, and for now that suited me fine, because each one was an acceptance of guestright and so also guest obligation, which included not magicking anyone without at least fair warning. And I was going to work on that.

Ap Lugh’s knights were still nameless, so with the Gray Lords done I was left with what had to be the guard detail, and consciously dropped my register a little.

“Dark Smith, Þorgerðr, and Irpa, be most welcome here also. I am glad to see you all again. Given those troll clubs and swords, would I be right to think you’re on security duty?”

Irpa’s coyote tattoo gave me a wink, and she gave me a grin

“You would, Mercy. And livestock control — the horses hear us, and the unicorn.”

“Excellent. If they need to graze, the grass between here and the Columbia is safe enough, but there are oaks in the woods, as well as a yew or two, and I can’t speak for what other plants might be growing in the eaves. Charles will know.”

Irpa was amused, and so was Zee.

“They will not eat anything they shouldn’t, Mercy, but we are glad of your offer and your care.”

“Good to know, Dark Smith. Do you need to co-ordinate with any non-fae security?”
“Not really, but to meet and speak would be sensible.”

“Right.” I swung, finding the senior agent present. “You, sir — come and be co-ordinated, please. Adam?”

“Warren and Darryl for the Pack, please. Make sure everyone is as on the same page as possible.”

I looked around again. “And AED, you as well, please, so the FBI on site are plugged in and up to date. Ms Taylor, Mr Hersch, Mr Dilman, stay well away from that colloquy. You’re all going to be busy anyway, because it’s time for the photo-call. I know, everyone, but you know too. We do it now, and it’s done, unless and until, so Gray Lords and others capable of fogging photographs, please don’t this one time, though do of course adjust your glamour if you wish.” I could feel ap Lugh’s gaze, but really, what did he expect? “Medicine Wolf, you’ve been the driving force in all this, and anything agreed here will be the Medicine Wolf Accords, so if you’re central everyone can take station on you.” I thought that name would satisfy most, and it just seemed right anyway. “So, Elder Spirits and Wolves, left please, Fae and Humans right. Pack to flank Medicine Wolf with Adam and me.”

“Isn’t she wonderfully bossy?” Coyote sounded admiring. “Can’t think where she gets it from.”

“That’s left, converging father. Maybe we’re a Fibonacci Series.”

Both Wolf and Gordon laughed, though others looked mildly bemused, which I thought had to count as progress. More importantly, even the Fae were obeying, caught still in their own formality and my acknowledged power as host, and I completely flummoxed Caroline by pulling out my phone, turning on the camera, and asking her to take the shot.

“There’ll be the KEPR footage, Ms Taylor, but take the formal stills. My copyright, but we’ll sort something with your lawyer and KEPR’s, including the tithe to Clean Up the Basin.”

She gave me another look before drawing a deep breath “Right. And what is the proper Fae equivalent of ‘Say cheese!’, Ms Hauptman?”

“Excellent question, Ms Taylor.” I turned, seeing everyone in position, expressions ranging from genuine amusement to po-faced incredulity, but I knew the late sunlight was catching the cloak and feather beautifully, and hostesses hostessed. “Do please look as happily dignified as possible, everyone. Doing so will make me very glad. Today is a good day, and by your collective grace the start of better days for all. And wolves, no tongue-lolling or you’ll already have eaten your last brownie for a long while.”

I put a little punch into that last, and Adam gave me a gorgeous grin as I went to stand beside him and Medicine Wolf lowered its great head so Caroline didn’t need to back up too far. Easily professional, she was holding my phone one-handed, and with the other counted from three, spread fingers folding down, immediately repeating the process. After five shots, she stopped, flicked through them swiftly and nodded at me.

I went to retrieve the phone, thanked her, took one glance, swallowing a laugh at the sheer absurdity of it all, and sent the lot to Jenny and Andrea as well as ap Lugh, the man, Adam, Jesse, and Bran before I pocketed it again, and turned once more.

“Honoured guests of all kinds, given Medicine Wolf’s size and the preference of many among you to be under the sky, we are set up out back. Please now follow Adam and the pack members around the house.”
Once they were under way I told Caroline that was it, officially, until there was something to announce, but that she, Al, and Vince were welcome to stay, front exterior only unless specifically invited, and to try to talk to any being who — or that — was around, as long as they didn’t impede or annoy security. The knights wouldn’t utter a word they didn’t have to, and were best avoided, but anything Irpa, Þorgerðr, or Zee might have to say about unicorns ought to make pretty decent TV, and those of the rade who hadn’t descended were still watching, though I didn’t know how clear an image Al might be getting when he swung up to include them. At least I didn’t have to think about feeding anyone who hadn’t landed. Then I joined Warren, and we went to collect Bran and Jesse to join the merry throng.
Bran was waiting with Jesse, and though he wasn’t grinning widely, as she was, he didn’t look put out and merely quirked an eyebrow.

“You are walking a fine line, Mercy.”

“Always have, Bran, and there’s more than one value of ‘fine’. I know fae are fae, but they need to relax enough to be useful. Do you know any of the newcomers?”

“Two or three, but rarely to speak to. Others I know of. And it is not quite a full house, but I think those absent are … very retired from any concerns save their own.”

I shrugged, the cloak rustling. “Their business, as long as we’re quorate.”

He laughed. “Undoubtedly, Mercy. Let us make it more so.”

He wasn’t surprised when I included Jesse, so she’d told him what I intended, and she seemed more at ease with him than I could remember her being — Medicine Wolf’s calm, on both sides, but also, I hoped, some greater familiarity lessening wariness. Passing through the kitchen we collected the tins of cooled brownies, and I gave Jesse a grin when I saw she’d labelled them with the dire threat that the fur of anyone stealing one would never be the same colour again, and hunting when bright heliotrope would not be fun.

“Good one, Jesse. Dying wolves purple in wolf form’s an interesting challenge.”

Bran did give us a stare at that, but as soon as we were out I needed to do another round of introductions that kept him busy. I did remember all the names, just, and if some of the fossilised Gaelic ones came out a bit wonky I was still clearly trying. They were also absorbing the arrangements out back, and the preternaturals at least were all far more pleased and intrigued than not. Medicine Wolf was too big to move about much, and had a space of its own where it would also obstruct angles of fire from anywhere with a vantage, which the agents were appreciating, but around it were other seats for those in colloquy. We had multiple strands, so I’d opted for a lobed constellation, like petals around a flower, with a low but cheerful fire already burning in the centre. Seating mixed native rugs and low stools with thick cushions and more ordinary but all-wooden garden chairs, and there were small tables within each lobe for glasses and plates when we got there — buying and transporting which had been the pack’s assignment while we’d been busy, from a place on West Canal Drive that followed pleasingly simple and sturdy designs. There were things I was sure some fae wouldn’t like much, but we were again clearly trying, avoiding metal or plastic, and I thought the design would earn a few points.

Dynamics were trickier, because the primary need now was to get Ap Lugh and the Man talking, and while neither would be alone there were more Gray Lords than humans, so some needed steering elsewhere. Taking a breath I explained what needed to happen, suggesting that Ap Lugh and some selected fae delegates should begin with the President, while others opened discussions with Medicine Wolf, Elder Spirits, and the Marrok about any issues arising, including both problems and what forms co-operation might take. There would be a mountain of pizza in a couple of hours, including vegetarian options, and beer would then be available, while in the meantime
Jesse and I would serve spring water and brownies. I didn’t need to tell any of the preternaturals
that their formally breaking bread, even in the form of brownies, would lock down the guesting
ritual, and I didn’t want to wait long on that, but after eyeing my all-too-exactly father and
receiving a soulful look I did make one final pitch to them all.

“Honoured guests, a lot has been said about coyotes this week, much if not all surprisingly
positive, but two things have stuck in my mind. Considering my propensity to find myself in the
middle of things, and to seek a new balance between them, Adam suggested he get me business
cards that say Coyote Services: Conflict Resolution with a Twist.”

There was laughter, human and preternatural, which was a step in the right direction.

“I know. The other was Charles Smith reminding Prince Gwyn ap Lugh that although Coyote
always brings change and chaos, it is usually good chaos.” Coyote grinned at me. “And despite
much that has been bitterly grim this week, it has been so this time too, by and large. I doubt any
here mourn Cantrip, and there are very many beneficial opportunities if you can take them. All
have their proper dignities and vital concerns, and formality is often necessary for the Fae in
particular, but you come to try to walk the Path of Mercy, and within this garden, around this
hearth, many things may be explored, if not yet in friendship, then in the absence of hostility. I ask
that you be willing to think imaginatively, to seek with honest goodwill to combine the diplomatic,
political, consular, environmental, economic, and aesthetic, the practical, technological, and
magical, to find answers that can work well and peacefully for all. There are gathered here many,
many millennia of knowledge and experience, burdened with more grief and sorrow, more rage and
resentment, than any one of us save Medicine Wolf can know. Yet there is also something
blazingly new, for never before have the powers here so assembled, in hope as with calculation and
knowledge of opportunity, and the world is watching. You each know better than I can how much
rides on your decisions, and for how many beings, but it can’t hurt to remember also that if you get
it right, or even just mostly right, you can all be heroes, and for a lot longer than one day.”

Gwyn ap Lugh’s look was almost up there with Bran’s, but Jesse was holding back a smile and
those who got it, including Coyote, most wolves, and the Man, were laughing again. More to the
point, they were all separating into smaller groups within the lobes and by Medicine Wolf, and if
some of the Gray Lords seemed to be doing a lot more listening than anything else, Nemane,
Edythe, and Baba Yaga were still taking point — Nemane with Raven, which would be about
Wyoming; Edythe with Medicine Wolf, where I’d bet Underhill was coming into it; and Baba
Yaga with Charles as well as Adam, which was anyone’s guess. The water was Mountain Mist,
from Tacoma, but decanted from plastic into glass or earthenware jugs, the brownies only took a
moment to arrange on a wooden tray, and Jesse and I started round.

Given the gravity with which everyone accepted what was a ritual offering it was hard not to think
of communion, but it was on the older ceremony communion probably reflected that the power of
it rested. As a daughter of the house Jesse’s participation and our joint hands in making the food
boosted it, the cloak and Manannán’s Bane were at work as well, and I got a mixture of thoughtful
looks, as well as a mostly-paternal grin from Coyote and approving nods from the Elder Spirits
who’d gone female. Even Medicine Wolf accepted a brownie, telling me it had added enough
digestive capacity for that and they smelt good, and had me splash some water on its tongue. The
immediate spike in the ritual’s power was palpable, drawing swift looks, and after a moment I
decided what had been added was a vast and implacable reservoir of patience, the perspective of
eons, that was yet salted with an appreciation of surprise, and I gave Medicine Wolf a pleased nod
that made its eyes gleam.

When we got round to Charles’s lobe I discovered Baba Yaga did some of the Fae’s accountancy
— who knew? — and the topic was investment opportunities arising from the re-engineering
project and putative Fae co-operation and assistance with S&R, forensics, and other possible joint enterprises, so that was alright, and Adam’s thoughts were very positive and calm, which was even better. I told her how glad I’d been to see her in her mortar, and she gave a cheerful cackle, saying it had its uses still, and that she was beginning to approve of coyotes, which I told myself had to be a good thing.

I’d left ap Lugh and the Man for last, because in some ways they were the greatest powers over their own people present, and by the time we got there Bran had joined that lobe, which made it three for three. The Man had felt some of the power, and so had Sawyer, but I heard Bran explain that it inhered in the ritual acceptance of guestright and duty, and no-one hesitated. Power crested and spread, bringing calm and even-tempered cheer, as alien to wolves as to fae and presidents, and the Man gave me a look while Bran’s gaze held something very old that wasn’t his beast. So did ap Lugh’s.

“You continue to integrate powers very smoothly indeed, Mercedes. And I am gladdened also by the way you spoke to those of the Selch and to Underhill.”

“As I am glad to hear your words, Gwyn ap Lugh.”

“You did well also, Jesse Hauptman, and by Underhill’s let are free to speak of your experience there to those you love or befriend.” He sipped water elegantly. “Perhaps not on social media just yet, though.”

“I hear you, Prince Gwyn ap Lugh, though I hope I might add my testimony to that of the President and Secretary, should they wish it.”

I was giving Jesse big points, when ap Lugh smiled.

“Of course, Jesse Hauptman. You are surprisingly like your stepmother.”

“And my step-great-aunts, sir. I’m hoping, anyway. I know it’s a big sideways even for their family, but even so.”

Ap Lugh actually blinked, and I trebled the number of points as I hid a grin and looked at the Man.

“That’s Coyote’s sisters, sir, who are a great deal less pesky than he usually finds them. More importantly, Mr President, Mr Secretary, the power of the guesting ritual is a gift Adam, Jesse, and I offer all delegates. Gwyn ap Lugh may be able and willing to speak more precisely, but I would say that while every being’s word remains binding, and strict honesty as well as very careful speech remains in their nature the only course possible with the Fae, you and all delegates are now confirmed as fellow-guests of the Columbia Basin Pack — and between those guesting together there are … traditional obligations of tolerance and amity. To assume anything like leeway, or slack, would be foolish and dangerous, but … as a mechanic I’d say it’s a bit of WD-40 in the stiffer joints.”

I think even Bran was surprised when ap Lugh laughed again, and the Man’s eyebrows joined his quizzical look.

“Ah, Mercedes Elf-friend. I believe we might have to agree with Coyote about the truth of the name he gave you, for that is well said, and helpful. We have already agreed that none will seek to deceive or entrap, but with your WD-40, yes, we may all also, within the bounds of honesty, speak more freely than would otherwise be possible.” He looked at the Man. “Open statements of gratitude in either direction would still be unwise, for that runs deep in all Fae, but with Medicine Wolf’s power augmenting it, the guesting-bond is potent enough that all can in some measure
relax.”

Sawyer nodded, and after a second so did the Man.

“I feel the truth of it, Gwyn ap Lugh, and hear you gladly.” He looked at me. “And I think I’ll risk a quick thanks to you, Ms Hauptman, and Mr and Miss Hauptman. As AED Westfield says, you all continue to impress, and you are all owed a great deal.”

Adam and Jesse weren’t saying anything, but after I’d swallowed I thought one reasonable request wasn’t out of order. Or even two.

“You’re welcome, Mr President. As I told you on … Wednesday night, we are patriots as well as whatever else, and some determined common sense will go a long way. But if you’re feeling humanly grateful …?”

He grinned. “I might be.”

“Then two things, sir. One is hunting land for the Freed Pack — the Columbia Basin Pack can share, but it will cause some friction. A little of your WD-40 in the federal compensation works would be good, so they actually think about the fact that for citizens on whom the Change has been forced by federal agents tracts of wild land are not an unreasonable luxury. The Freed Pack will have to go somewhere on full moons.”

Both Bran and Adam looked as if they couldn’t decide whether my pertinence or impertinence was the greater, but Sawyer got it, and to his credit so did the Man, who nodded.

“That I can see, Ms Hauptman. AED Westfield did tell me something about that, and I can certainly make the point where it matters, but I won’t have any direct say in compensation levels.”

“That’s fair, sir.”

“Good. You said two things?”

“Yeah, the other being the IRS. Do you have any idea how insanely screwy my finances have become after this week? And it’s not only my soaring personal wealth, but all the tithing to Clean Up the Basin. I’ll be delighted to be as transparent as glass, and let the IRS see all the contracts and accounts, but for the love of God please get them to send someone with an actual working brain and sufficient rank to make whatever she or he decides stick?”

This time even Bran was amused, and the Man gave me a genuine smile.

“Not an easy bit of personnel selection, Ms Hauptman, but I will speak to the Commissioner myself.” He shook his head. “Though I very much doubt that just now any federal official encountering you would dare to annoy you for long.”

I stared. “Sir, you needed to believe in Underhill, not Cloud Cuckoo Land.”

Sawyer laughed, and Adam reached over to pat my arm reassuringly.

“It’ll be alright, love. Now you can afford serious lawyers and accountants, anyone from the IRS will be talking softly, however big their stick.”

“I don’t care about softly, Adam, I care about reasonably. And if Jenny or that poor accountant in Pasco who’s trying to write it all down properly get any IRS grief, which is like asking about bears and woods, I’ll set them to dealing with Medicine Wolf’s tax liabilities and stand well back.” That
thought amused everyone, and I decided my mission was accomplished. “Is there anything else anyone needs?”

There wasn’t, and despite my spiking curiosity about what they might be saying Bran had a point about stepping back, so Jesse and I left them to it, heading into the house until Coyote drifted across to intercept us.

“That’s a serious hospitality spell you and the graught cooked up, converging daughter. More good work. Good brownies, too, as always.”

“We aim to please, and you know perfectly well the real kick in it is Medicine Wolf. Are you at a loose end, having done your big pitch outside?”

“You’re packing some power too, and I’m just politely waiting my turn.” He grinned. “Why? Something you’d like me to do?”

“Charles is hoping to talk about if and how magic boosts smell, for the forensics stuff. You said Bear could help too. Head that way when he’s done with Baba Yaga and investments?”

“If you want. Smells are always interesting. We could do with some more laughter too.”

“Un huh. Don’t you dare misbehave now. It’s going well enough, and we have no idea what half of those Gray Lords can do. Come in and steal brownie mix instead, while I replenish the tin to keep the ritual running despite buying in pizza.”

“Good pizza won’t do it any harm, especially as you’re paying, but brownie mix is a decent bribe. And I wouldn’t mind a closer look at that unicorn. Never met one before.”

That was unarguable, and as long as he was where I could keep an eye on him he could think what he liked, not that there was any stopping him. I laid the cloak over a chair with murmured thanks, and Jesse kept him usefully entertained with wildlife crossings and what a renewed bison migration would really need until there was a bowl of brownie mix, when they both helped fill trays and slide them into the oven. I’d done an oversize batch, and while I waited on the trays I thought about how late things might run, and pre-dawn chill, and set about an equally oversize bowl of leek and potato soup, with enough herbs to give it some zing and a strictly vegetarian stock, just in case. It was just about done when I heard the front door open and close, and a moment later Darryl came in with Westfield and Fisher, asking if I had a moment.

“Not a problem, Darryl. What’s up, AED?”

“Nothing, I hope, Ms Hauptman, though that impromptu co-ordination meeting was one for the books. I believe the Secret Service are more relieved than horrified that the twenty-three means of magical assault they hadn’t even considered are all nevertheless strongly warded against, and that the Columbia itself will rise against any intruder, but it was a close-run thing.”

We all grinned.

“Was that Irpa, Þorgerðr, or Zee?”

“Irpa, mostly, and Þorgerðr.” I don’t think he got the ths right either. “Does it matter?”

“No, and if they said it then it will be true. I’m just trying to calibrate troll humour some more, and the river rising is another Tolkien reference.”

Westfield blinked. “Of course you are, Ms Hauptman, and of course it is, so I’ll leave you to it. I
was mostly wondering when it might be right to speak to Nemane and how I should set about it.”

I shrugged. “Just go on out, AED, SA, and wait politely for a lull in the conversation. She was with Raven last I saw, so Wyoming probably came up already. Oh, and here.”

I put on the cloak again and gave them two of the last brownies from the guestright batch, with glasses of water, formally welcoming both as fellow-guests during negotiation of the Medicine Wolf Accords, though not delegates. I felt the spell claim them, and Westfield gave me an enquiring look as he rolled his shoulders.

“That’s … interesting, Ms Hauptman.”

“Brings calm among all my guests, AED, so it should ease your way out there. They’re all holding it in very properly, but there’s enough magic about to have anyone jittering, so I’ve tried to ease it along some.”

“You’ve eased it along a lot, exactly Elf-friend.” Coyote was grinning again. “I’ll take you out into the Garden of Mercy, Grant Westfield and Leslie Fisher. We’re all being pretty interesting just now, so it’s well worth a look anyway.”

“Oh, thank you, Coyote. I’ll say. Oh, and you might want to turn on KEPR soon, Ms Hauptman, Miss Hauptman.” Westfield glanced at his watch. “Irpa agreed to give Ms Taylor an interview once the horses were settled, and she seemed about done when I came in.”

Jesse had already flipped the TV on, but the studio was running captioned pictures of various Gray Lords and trying to summarise what the tales — or at any rate Wikipedia — had to say about their known or reputed powers. I was relieved they’d come up as clueless about Edythe as I was, and the older Gaelic names had them stumped as well, so they weren’t saying anything I didn’t already know. Jesse and Westfield were interested, though, there was no hurry, and Coyote didn’t seem to mind hanging on, especially once the first lot of brownies came out of the oven and the second went in. I made him share his scavenging with Jesse, and gave Westfield and Fisher a couple more each, but decided I’d done quite enough to earn a beer, and it had just gone six anyway. The cloak was pinning itself back comfortably, so I kept it on, and sat on the stool where I’d propped Manannán’s Bane. I was enjoying the beer and the reddening evening glow of still richly slanting sunlight when Jesse handed me her phone.

“It’s another megasale tee and tote, Mom.”

“Et tu, Brute?”

I gave her a look that only widened her grin before glancing down, and nearly dropped my beer. It wasn’t just the glorious wreathing of light around the cloak, emphasised by the clean fall the stool allowed it and the golden arc of Thunderbird’s feather rising from my hair to give me a halo and nimbus that’d make a Brockenspectre jealous, or even Carnwennan’s bone hilt gleaming white tinged with sunset colours, bright against my thigh with the fine shadows of the stool’s legs and Manannán’s Bane stretching behind me, but my own expression in three-quarter profile and the beer bottle glinting in my hand. I’d simply been relieved everything seemed to be going alright, with no casualties or hissy-fits, happy to get outside some beer after another busy day, and relishing the prospect of a miracle pie. But the guesting-spell was working on me too, the web of its calming power at once an ease to my nerves and a magnification of my will for the Medicine Wolf Accords to succeed, and what showed on my face was what Adam later described as serenely iron determination. For whatever weird photographic reason the simple dew on the curves of beer bottle, label peeking out behind my hand, was the perfect offset, and Jesse had framed it superbly, with a maximal pixel density that saturated colour and sharpened form.
I handed the phone to a curious Westfield and gave Jesse another look.

“I might forgive you, ex-kiddo, especially as with Andrea’s magic the chances are that will pay your college tuition. Send it to her and Adam?”

“Already did, Mom. I want a poster version.”

Coyote was looking over Westfield’s shoulder, and whistled.

“Looks good. And you almost have my profile, lucky you. The graught’s right about a poster, too.”

I flapped a hand at him, and Westfield grinned, handing Jesse back her phone.

“Even I might go for one of those. You’ve a wonderful eye, Miss Hauptman. Ah, here we go.”

KEPR’s coverage had switched back to Caroline, who wasted no time saying that Irpa had kindly agreed to an interview as the magical security was all looking after itself and the horses were sufficiently pleased I’d remembered to offer them guest-grazing that they were feeling quite mellow. The last had to be a quotation from Irpa, and I grinned some more as Caroline added that to make it easier they needed extra height, and we were all treated to the spectacle of Irpa casually lifting first her, then Al and Vince, to the roof of the Feebs’ MCC. They could just sit on her open palm, and I doubted she even felt the weight, but with it done she dusted off her hands and gave the camera its first close-up of a troll grin.

“That’s better for all our necks, Ms Taylor, and I doubt AED Westfield or SA Fisher will mind, as it’s in a good cause. Now what can your friendly neighbourhood troll do for you today?”

Westfield and Fisher had strange expressions that deepened as Caroline fed Irpa questions and troll humour became a bigger question than ever. Yes, trolls were naturally attracted to bridge-owning and guarding, and yes, Irpa still maintained a pedestrian bridge or three for old times’ sake, and the exercise, but motorised traffic, tollbooths, and digital pre-payment had taken all the fun out of it. No, troll-clubs weren’t everyday weapons anymore, because you didn’t now usually need severe overkill, and besides being big enough to squash other trolls, elephants, and any stray whales, they were extremely magical. Hers was called something that might translate as Giant-shortener, like all troll-clubs had been a present from Thor a long time ago, and no she wasn’t going to say anything more about him as he had quite a temper still when he was awake.

Caroline blinked, but she had good instincts, and shifted to Irpa’s preference for Chanel — though she also rated Dior, and generally approved of 1940s and ’50s styles. I wasn’t sure you quite had to love beehives, however good they might look on trolls, but I had to agree with the movies she liked and wondered whether a troll film-night would be in order, if we could rig an outdoor screen. Irpa’s musical taste was spot on too, as far as I was concerned, with affectionate respect for the better crooners and swing, as well as earlier blues, but a strong shift to the 1960s and after.

“Most fae still prefer older and simpler instruments, but trolls tend to approve of the electric guitar. We like wall of sound too.”

Caroline visibly decided not to go there, and asked about Irpa’s tattoo, which had looked as if it was enjoying listening and now sat up, skulls and roses shifting about.

“Skuffles was Mercy’s idea the other morning, when she needed to get someone’s attention. I thought it was cool, especially the Predator ruff-do, and we’d all been impressed by the way she and Lugh’s walking-stick dealt with Manannán. And she was wearing the cloak when it turned up, so I ask you — skulls and roses while we were rescuing many dead for burial, so they can be
genuinely grateful? No self-respecting Deadhead could ignore that combination.”

I didn’t try to stop a joyous laugh at the coyote’s name and the confirmation Irpa was a fan, as well as the thought about the Wyoming dead fitting the old legend, and she wasn’t done.

“I lived in Haight-Ashbury for quite a while, because it’s handy for the Golden Gate and the Bay Bridge, so I caught on to the Dead early. They were really something else. Used to go to gigs whenever I could, and they played a lot of them. I even dropped my glamour once, just to see if anyone noticed, and was promptly offered a toke.” Irpa looked reflective. “Shame about all those keyboardists, but the others kept going splendidly.”

Looking only mildly bemused, Caroline asked if she had a favourite song.

“Dozens of them, and it’s the jamming that matters, so they all tend to blend anyway. But if I had to pick, I’d say ‘Scarlet Begonias’ — those rhythm devils were inspired, and when they were really in the groove they could all nail it to the stars. Purity likes that one too, though she prefers eating the real thing.”

Caroline blinked. “Ah, who is Purity? And what real thing?”

“Edythe’s unicorn. She was asking me about the tattoo as well, so I was playing her some Dead and she rated From the Mars Hotel, especially the live bonus disc with the reissue. And she likes eating begonias, scarlet for preference but any colour will do.”

If I’d let the laughter out the way I wanted to I’d never have recovered, but my heart was very full. I really hoped the surviving Dead were among the billions watching, and that somewhere Jerry Garcia was grinning fit to burst behind all that beard. He deserved to know a unicorn rated him, and a troll with a lot of style. It had been a very long week indeed, but it had come up roses and Skuffles, which was seriously alright, and a convoy of Benny’s vans was just turning in to the drive, so I went to collect an absurd number of pies with a wide smile on my face.
Spend one busy week fixing the world, and your paperwork is backed up for ever. Go figure. It was another fortnight before my poor customers eventually got their cars back, and more than a year before my life stopped being hijacked on what seemed like a daily basis by fallout from all the events I’d set in motion, even though the Man kept his word and the IRS sent a brass hat who was almost reasonable. Some of it was plain necessary, however tough, like attending the funerals of Tyrone, Luke, and Estelle, in a common plot in Cheyenne with half the state government in apologetic attendance, and when the man asked me I could hardly refuse to address the interfaith national memorial service for the dead held in DC. It was not a pleasant task, but I could reinforce the lessons of Cantrip’s bigotry well enough, and most people seemed to think I did a fair job. On a very different scale, there were also cajoling Fred and Hank into making their statements, taking SA Kefliotas out to Walla Walla to get what statements she could from the freed fae, and talking to Caroline about her rape trauma, with what had and hadn’t worked for me. But far too much of everything happened in court.

I can’t say it didn’t have its moments, and some of them were glorious. Nuclear waste disposal is never going to be a big spectator sport, but with Medicine Wolf involved it was pretty compelling, and on the day that Hanford was declared a clean site there was another international audience of billions for KEPR. All the regathered contaminants, various storage tanks that had done a fair bit of the leaking, a couple of obsolete buildings that could not be safely demolished, and a great deal of other unwanted and very dangerous waste that Sawyer had had trucked in, all slowly tipped as earth and rock opened, then slid gently away down spiralling tunnels. A wash of manitou magic scoured the site before following, and when the tunnel mouths had all closed again a beaming Dr Tinton walked around with a geiger counter that was detecting only normal background radiation, setting off a Tri-Cities-wide street party that went on for a long while. It also mattered a great deal politically, because besides saving the Federal Government most of a hundred and twelve billion dollars, and probably a lot of lives, it put very effective pressure on Congress to ratify the Medicine Wolf Accords without dragging too many feet.

SA Fisher found herself promoted to SAC Kennewick–Richland, with a strong though not exclusive preternatural liaison brief, so we gained a friend. Her husband Jude was a sweetie, and their daughter Jenna between Jesse and Sally Willis in age, and soon tight with both of them, so that was alright too. We also had some luck with the forensics cooperation — called urgently to Zintel Canyon Park, Honey tracked a young girl, who’d been grabbed by her father from his ex without the benefit of a court ruling, to a carpark that had CCTV, allowing an APB in time to find his rental car on I-82 before he crossed the state line ; and when Clay Willis asked me to check a murder scene in Creekstone I was able both to find some trace evidence they hadn’t yet noticed and to tell him, after some very careful and thorough sniffing, that someone who’d been there when it went down was a diabetic needing an insulin shot who wore patchouli and had a fair-sized dog, which made for the very swift arrest of one of the victim’s co-workers. I had to go coyote to do it, undressing behind a blanket Clay and a uniform held for me — the first time I’d changed in public, caught in silhouette by one of the crime scene techs with a camera and made available at a KPD press conference after the co-worker confessed and was charged. Clay was very clear that the scent clues had saved the KPD hours of legwork and data searching, as well as bringing the victim’s family what relief there could be far sooner than would otherwise have been possible, Fisher added some warm FBI congratulations, and all the publicity was extremely positive.
The Wazzu conferences were also a big hit, not surprisingly with Medicine Wolf and a bunch of very cool and detailed computer graphics to gawk at, as well as the Man and all those state governors and international delegations — including fae who were interested and willing to help. With Hanford finished, Medicine Wolf had spent a lot of time with the geophys and hydrology people, plus a bunch of engineers on secondment from the utilities involved, and the graphics showed exactly how a Columbia–Snake–Flathead system without a single dam could with some adjusted gradients generate nearly twice as much power and reduce both maintenance costs and disaster hazard. Fae and manitou magic, without obligation, and preternatural muscle, at a hefty discount, also made for substantially lower demolition and construction costs than anyone had been expecting, and work was already well underway at Bonneville, The Dalles, John Day, McNary, and Priest Rapids to general satisfaction. Evacuating the West Coast remained a logistical nightmare, but with Medicine Wolf strongly suggesting that sooner would be a lot better than later a long weekend eighteen months away had been nominated, and planning was already in overdrive pretty much everywhere. Bills had already passed the California, Oregon, and Washington state legislatures closing airports to inbound flights, and mandating two east-bound carriageways on every interstate, for a week beforehand, while outbound flights were already booked solid, with more being laid on as fast as the airlines could manage. It was going to be a nineteen-ring circus, but as almost everyone thought that was a better deal than living in dread of the Big One, or having a falling skyscraper squash you extremely dead, they were maniacally cheerful at the prospect.

On the other hand, the school debate was a blowout, because none of the bigots dared put anyone forward and screening teachers for JLS and BF membership was a done deal anyway — but Stallings wasn’t complaining because when the Boss blew into town to open an all-star fundraiser for Clean Up the Basin he also played the school assembly, and neither was Andrea’s charming father, because he was a guest. The Boss turned out to be as good a man as I’d always imagined, and as he’d already written several songs about Medicine Wolf and Wyoming that put me in the nation’s ears as well as across their chests, I was too embarrassed to ask for favours, but Jesse had persuaded him easily, with predictable but not unwelcome consequences for her popularity to offset the chill of having permanent bodyguards.

David and his men had had to go back to rescuing people, but he and Adam had found a couple of Rangers and a Marine coming to the end of their hitches who were very happy to have well-paid jobs. They were as cool as they could be about things, but inevitably still cramped Jesse’s style when it came to hanging out, and she dealt with that by having friends over rather than going to their places, which was fine by Adam and me. Given my increased magic he was less worried about my security than he had been, but still found a lone wolf who was a black belt in several martial arts, and so pleased about Cantrip that he was willing to trail me for a year, whenever I was off our property. Brent Lanning was a wiry San Franciscan with some Japanese ancestry and good musical taste, so that was good, and being a wolf he could also follow me through Underhill at need. I still felt more antsy about having to be guarded than I should, and there wasn’t anything anyone could do about the looky-loos who gathered whenever I was in public, which I hated, but between a bit of Keep-Away pack magic from me and wolf-stares from him there weren’t many who did more than gawk, and sometimes applaud.

The all-star fundraiser was memorable in other ways too. Besides the Boss, Bob Dylan had returned to form with a whole set of manitou and Wyoming ballads, so he turned up, and so did the surviving Dead, including Robert Hunter and Phil Lesh. With amused permission from Medicine Wolf, who watched the whole thing with interest, the venue was Sacajawea State Park, and as the line-up leaked Adam had a remarkable number of wolves from all over as well as off-duty police volunteering as security, so I didn’t need to call on Irpa and Þorgerðr, and could just invite them as personal guests. It turned out trolls at jam sessions really are something else, and, Irpa being Irpa, after the Dead had kicked off with a ‘Dire Wolf’ dedicated to the host she asked them if they could
do ‘Scarlet Begonias’, and when Bob Weir laughingly agreed she opened an arch there and then and let Purity through — who brought her entire family, including foals. If kittens are cute, young unicorns are cuter, and though the amount of space bopping trolls and unicorns need makes manspreading look compact absolutely no-one minded at all. The whole set was a blast, Dylan joined them for a second, and the Boss for a third — and if you were among the tiny percentage of the planet’s population that wasn’t watching I can tell you that hearing that lot jamming though one another’s back catalogues was stupendous. The unicorns stayed bopping, they all hung in for a closing medley of the new Medicine Wolf songs, and when it wound down, having raised tens of millions even before the licensed CDs, DVDs, downloads, and repeat broadcasts kicked in, the musicians, trolls, and unicorns came to Kennewick to sit out back and eat pies, or graze, with Bran, Samuel, Arianna, Charles, Anna, Asil, and Warren as well as Coyote and Gordon, so it wasn’t long before the acoustic instruments came out. Actual ages were still not being quite spoken of, but everyone there recognised truly old music when they heard it, so a really interesting time was had by all, and even Adam was mellow enough that he didn’t object to the joints that appeared. There was no official recording, but thanks to Darryl Jesse and I wound up with very high-quality bootlegs all the musicians were really happy to have, and we could sometimes be persuaded to share.

The number of interviews I had to do was extremely irritating, especially after Time chose me as their Person of the Year, though Ligatt proved as sensible as I’d hoped and doing the National Geographic photoshoot and interviews with Coyote was another blast. I don’t think I’ve ever liked my pretty-much father more, and as my mother and sisters came too, with a surprisingly relaxed Curt, the photographer did us some family group shots that left me feeling very warm and fuzzy. The cover they chose showed Coyote and me furriely nose-to-nose, and a centrefold spread of four shots beat the first Time cover hollow by having us both on two legs, one on two with one on four, each way, and both on four. He told some really good Coyote stories, old and new, and we both had a crack at some bioscience and behavioural questions, because the point wasn’t just us but all coyotes, and the special issue went on to his children who couldn’t shift to two legs and walk away from things. Livestock predation, roadkill figures, pollution, and better coexistence were all in there, with a bunch of practical and affordable suggestions, and (taking Andrea’s advice) Coyote charmed himself a regular slot on their TV channel to work on children. He also got them to agree to a further special issue next year on bison and restoring migration routes for a real herd, to put pressure on that process, so we both came away well pleased with ourselves.

The publicity the issue received prompted a call from Linda Redruff, and though I had no chance of getting away to see her, we did meet at a humongous pow-wow the Yakama Nation organised. Some of it was beating the recalcitrant who owned river-frontage with Thunderbird’s feather, and plans for the Cascadia evacuations and quake, but there was also a lot of quiet but serious gratitude that made me itch, though I accepted it as gracefully as I could. Much better was Coyote managing, as promised, to introduce Jesse to her graunts, who were as cool as I remembered, quite amused with their grinning brother about my name, and had some sage advice about more advanced ways of keeping him honest that I filed away. Best of all, though Jesse had done very well in dealing with her memories, the graunts did some wordless singing that left us both feeling happier and more balanced, and I knew from Coyote’s look that they were welcoming her as family, however step-sideways. I wasn’t forgetting Joe, but I did drop the not-exactlies, mostly, and when we headed home I gave him a daughterly kiss that left him grinning.

With Darryl’s amused help I also got my customised version of Clue, which gave us all some edgy family fun on wet Sunday afternoons, but despite all those good and heartening things, a lot of what had to happen was in its nature unremittingly grim, and for Adam and me too often a very wearing exercise in walking a line between saying truthfully what was necessary and not saying anything unwise. For assorted legal reasons it proved better to court martial than to try Paul, with a bench of
Alphas, and in the end his commuted capital sentence of imprisonment for one hundred moons was suspended while his ongoing civil suit against Clements threw a great deal of mud that stuck at her and the JLS in general. I was less happy to realise that in some Alpha minds at least my having summarily cast him out somehow counted as a mitigating factor, but wolf rules being rather more pragmatic than human ones I was able to answer one snooty Easterner’s open incredulity about the warning I’d given Paul by silencing him with a pack bond. Hank Dawson almost lost his black judicial stetson laughing, and no-one doubted anything else I said, but Paul’s glowering misery and unassuaged resentment of anything he thought other was an unwelcome reminder of how stubbornly stupid beings could be.

Encountering Mrs Bradley again was also no fun at all, while the lawyer Bright Future had provided for her was almost as grotesque as she was and insisted on calling Jesse as a witness, which enraged Adam as well as me. But Jesse herself left the lawyer wishing he hadn’t, skewering Mrs Bradley’s pious lies to expose her not so latent sadism, while Jenny, Andrea, and Kyle between them made it crystal clear that despite a personal style and some weird beliefs Bradley had, in singling out Jesse and preaching anti-preternatural bigotry to the young, as on national TV, been acting in accordance with Bright Future’s clear policy. They couldn’t quite lock down that she’d been given orders, but beyond the facts of the policy and Crazy Courtney’s share in things they showed enough direct encouragement and approval from senior BF members that liability was established. The damages awarded by a thoroughly disgusted jury were enormous, BF had to file for bankruptcy, and Westfield rang to offer cheerful congratulations, telling us that many Feeb and other Beltway glasses would be raised to us.

That verdict led Bostock to seek a deal, which I allowed, and she was shortly followed by Fox with the same request, but as they wanted to admit no liability and wrap everything in non-disclosure agreements I refused the considerable temptation to be done with it, and spent two long weeks watching Jenny and Andrea nail them as well. Besides triggering two resignations-ahead-of-impeachment from the Supreme Court, and more elsewhere, the Watchdog Times revelation of how many of Fox’s senior management and news staff were Bright Future or John Lauren Society had already dumped them in hot water with a surprising number of their loyal viewers, who might broadly share their prejudices but had become very conflicted about the preternatural, and as it turned out really didn’t like knowing they’d been deliberately misled by what even CNN agreed was a cabal of kneejerk haters. The result, besides a very sharp drop in Fox’s profits for the year and another large rise in mine and Jesse’s, was a savage round of corporate bloodletting and a high turnover in screen faces that Adam and I cheered on.

In between all of that we both had to go to DC again, with Jim Alvin and Charles and Anna, for a whole slew of Congressional hearings. Formal input into the new Federal Bureau of Preternatural Affairs was welcome enough, and some pretty interesting half-fae were taking advantage, as well as a dozen Alphas and medicine men, and even Coyote for a memorable day or two involving straighter talking and more jokes than anyone in the Beltway was used to, but even then the ability of our elected representatives to grasp that making special provisions for preternaturals was not a concession but simple necessity seemed very limited. More than one senator was also distinctly grumpy about the fairly severe problems with guano the Director of the Secret Service was having, and did not find my flat statement that no-one got to abuse Jesse a sufficient justification, however the polls showed the public thought I had the right of it. They did take the point about minority hiring, though, and the nascent FBPA — for which no-one had yet provided a satisfactory vocalisation — was looking quite promising. But the several committees investigating Cantrip, Senator Heuter, and Wyoming, if far more efficient, were dealing with the purely vile, and, although both Adam and I welcomed the chance to make the Iraq connection, for all sorts of reasons lots of Beltway people were interested in far more than our direct evidence.

Besides the raft of senior Cantrip agents indicted on a wide array of charges, Heuter (with several
aides and other employees) was facing three distinct but parallel sets of criminal enquiries, by the Feds and Wyoming state authorities, and by the IRS. Well and good — but he was also specifically named in each of the lawsuits Jenny had filed against Cantrip: for Adam, Jesse, and me, claiming damages for attempted murder, assault, and kidnap, with the traumata and many expenses thereby incurred; for the Freed Pack, where the trauma and consequences of forced Change and prolonged abuse in unlawful detention were also in the mix, with the effects on their families; with support from both Bran and ap Lugh, on behalf of the Wyoming dead and their relatives, ditto, with additional status as a class action; and a second class action on behalf of Guayota’s and the River Devil’s dead and their relatives, citing utter incompetence amounting to gross negligence in Cantrip’s part in the investigations as well as the emotional trauma and distress caused by MacLandis’s slanderous uploads.

Nemane had recovered and identified all the Wyoming victims’ bodies, or what little was left of them, and as the cases were engrossed the spreadsheet of crimes and consequences Jenny had compiled for the court was a sickening wonder she used in a preliminary hearing to request the sequestration of sufficient funds to cover probable damages, which despite Heuter’s billions meant all of it. The Federal Government was offering no contest, as the Man had promised, but Heuter was, and though he had repeatedly been refused bail, as a flight risk, he was still using his money, including, as Jenny pointed out, multiple accounts mentioned in the IRS case materials, to hurl highly obstructive lawyers at everything. Adam and I were hardly legal experts but we could and did speak to the Congressional committees on behalf of the victims, as did a still quite apologetic Judge Cray, leaving them almost as irritated with the delays as we were, and with some added pressure from the Feds the relevant court finally pulled its finger out and made a ruling. Jenny didn’t quite get everything she wanted, but she did get the vast bulk of Heuter’s assets frozen with immediate effect — at which point a significant number of his more expensive lawyers bailed out, many pithy soundbites were heard, and all sorts of things lurched into action.

Once the Freed Pack had been housed in Richland Adam and I had, one way and another, seen a lot of them and of the multi-agency case team Wyoming had promptly sent out. They were more personally angry and ashamed than the Feds about what had happened in their territory on their watch, and as sometime fellow Wyomingites, even if by adoption, could appeal to the Freed in a different way, which meant they got lots of useful things, including the military organisation of kidnapping, rapes, and forced Changes, the tightly scheduled torture, and multiple testimonies of hearing Preskylovitch and Elias Heuter speak of things ‘the Senator’ would or wouldn’t like, or had demanded be done. They and the Feds also saw Zee and Tad pull several ingots’ worth of silver from the Freed’s bodies, very painfully but with immediate and obvious benefits, and wilfully negligent exposure to hazardous materials joined the mix, for whatever it might be worth. The torturers’ confessions and call records were just as inadmissible as we’d known they would be, including Elias Heuter’s regular DC contacts, but the Feds made available Senator Heuter’s own records of those calls and a lot more, including contacts with Hobson and MacLandis and Cantrip’s payment of salaries and very large ‘special expenses’ with Heuter money; Hobson himself was facing a raft of federal charges, though the trial wasn’t scheduled to start until next year. It had collectively been enough for Wyoming, taking a deep breath, to kick the charges against Heuter up from conspiracy and accessory to mass capital felony murder in the first, citing no less than five aggravating factors, and his lawyers had mounted an enormous if scattergun effort to stonewall everything.

Tame psychiatrists earnestly explained that the Freed would suffer from ‘traumatic pseudo-memory’ as well as outright delusions, tame accountants challenged the financial data, claiming to detect any number of inconsistencies, impossibilities, and putative forgeries, and strings of tame lawyers explained that the Feds and others including the Man were part of a vicious Beltway conspiracy to pursue revenge against a true patriot for their very proper and just humiliation in
Boston, and even if any of the evidence had not been misinterpreted, doctored, or downright fabricated it should be inadmissible anyway. Elias Heuter was — I can’t say posthumously, because he was still vegetating in hospital, but it came to the same thing — disowned, and some very dubious testimony offered by a pious staffer, who repeatedly called the Senator a great American and his cousin a traitor, that he had after Boston accused the grieving father of cowardice for failing immediately to avenge his son on the Fae by any means possible, so if by any faint chance the delusions of the Freed were actually credited, they must be supposed to have overheard wilfully malicious attempts to smear an innocent man.

Once Jenny managed to block the money, though, it was not only the sudden dearth of lawyers that mattered. It turned out that a lot of the tame experts had been foolish enough to do their dirty work on credit, with only expenses paid up front, and while they could hardly openly recant testimony on the basis of non-payment quite a few were pissed enough to make public the supposed emergence of further data that had them rethinking their professional opinions. If a single person in Wyoming or anywhere else believed them I didn’t hear it — even Fox derided them — and the state judiciary did not need the strong pressure from legislature and governor, as well as the public, to put a rush on things. Without his better lawyers Heuter was unable to prevent it, and a trial-date was set little more than a month ahead.

Given the days it would take for all of the Freed to give evidence, and how much they still needed one another, the whole pack would need to be in Cheyenne, and while the local pack could house and look out for them they wanted Adam and me too. So did Gwyn ap Lugh, on behalf of the freed brownies and pixies who had, with assorted kin and friends, started tending our garden a few weeks after the US–Fae strand of the Medicine Wolf Accords had been ratified by Congress. Wyoming might have been happy to let them testify behind closed doors, which I and they would vastly have preferred, but the Gray Lords had fair as well as foul reasons for wanting some harmlessness seen and suffering known, and none of the selkies, oakman, and dryad were remotely willing or able, so although I don’t think anyone actually ordered the earth fae to go they became resigned and quite fearful volunteers. With Jesse back in school and Adam back to a great deal of business, as well as the Freed in various kinds of counselling, all needing to be kept up, it was another if more personal logistical nightmare, and in the end, despite some real misgivings, I risked a conversation with Underhill and we wound up doing a great deal of commuting by cloak.

None of it was less than a burden I didn’t need, but Wyoming had given in to intense national as well as local pressure and allowed the trial to be televised, so there was a grim satisfaction in seeing the case built publicly, brick by damning brick, into an overwhelming and unanswerable indictment that had the senator looking ill. Fear can do that. Heuter had inherited the mine only because his father had found no buyers after closing it, and when he repurposed it he’d added several layers to the shell companies and offshore accounts concealing it, as well as paying for the doors, generator, and interior conversion. Hobson and MacLandis had exchanged emails discussing his demands that Cantrip find physical and other vulnerabilities that could be exploited to raise preternatural kill numbers, preferably by an order or two of magnitude, and though it couldn’t be proven he’d met Preskylovitch he had unquestionably been supplied, very illegally indeed, with his full army file, as well as those of all the other torturers. And if their decanted confessions were inadmissible, the Freed Pack could and did detail the worst of it, very admissibly indeed, over two interminable weeks. As Heuter must have known about them, Adam and I more than half-expected his lawyers to blow the lid on vamps even though Stefan had said he doubted that would happen, but for whatever reason — meaning Wulfe, I’d bet — it didn’t, and the weight of testimony the freed did give meant no-one was left wondering if they might have carefully left some things out.

Then the poor earth fae were on, and that brought me another exhausting round of national and international media coverage, because after much wrangling, and having given all my own testimony of the conditions in which the freed had been found, I had become a recognised Friend
of the Court for the Freed Pack, and something more for the earth fae. Ambassadors were due to be exchanged between DC and Underhill — not, she had told me, smiling, when we talked, without some lively Fae debate about whom they disliked sufficiently to appoint, and whether a human ambassador who annoyed them could find that his or her five-year term had expired in five Overhill minutes — but were not yet in place, so ap Lugh had unilaterally made me, as an Elf-friend necessarily involved anyway, a Special Envoy with power over anything concerning fae called as witnesses and voluntarily responding. And as Heuter’s remaining lawyers were a truly nauseating as well as increasingly desperate group I wound up using it.

With the Freed Pack their own steel spines and Ramona’s unyielding will had meant the lawyers got nowhere, though the Wyoming prosecutors still had to make repeated interventions to protest attempts to smear through previous status as illegals and even — which left me as angry as I was sickened — some kind of personal responsibility for being kidnapped, raped, and tortured. But the earth fae were far more nervous, desperately unhappy within a crowded and noisy building, and all the care I could take beforehand wasn’t enough. After some blunt words with the judge and others a witness stand they could actually see out of had been provided, made wholly of wood and not only filled with small plants but turfed; they were also allowed to stay in it together, though only one should speak at a time. But if that got them through their softly-spoken and damning direct testimony — they had heard both sides of several phone conversations, could positively identify Heuter’s voice, and had been caught by his half-fae nephew Benedict and handed directly to Preskylovitch, which linked the two sets of murders and had the federal observers sitting right up — it couldn’t help in cross-examination when they were to my ears as well as their own being shouted at. I asked the lead defence lawyer nicely, once, to moderate his voice, and when his reply was even louder, making Nuthatch, the brownie taking point, clap trembling hands to trembling ears while the others shrank behind plants, my eyes went golden, I very nearly lost it altogether, and I did pull a Bradley on him.

“Be silent!” He was, mouth working, and I managed to haul the rage in as I turned to the judge. “Your Honour, I apologise for any infringement of the court’s authority, but I speak now as Special Envoy, and with magical power. Forgive me if I am plainer-spoken than convention dictates.” She nodded warily, and I swung back, feeling the cloak lend my voice more oomph. “Hear me clearly, Denis Bernard Brewster. You have the right to ask these fae witnesses questions, and to seek from them clarification of their given testimony. You do not have the right to shout at them, nor to seek to bully and intimidate them, and to do so has consequences. Both the Federal Government and the State of Wyoming have promised the Gray Lords that fae victims voluntarily attending will receive every courtesy, and that I have had to use magic to stop your sonic assault means I am already bound to register a formal complaint of promise-breach. You would also be wise to remember that in addressing any full-blood fae you render yourself, under the terms of the Medicine Wolf Accords, liable to Fae justice for any harm done or lie told, and may already have earned condign punishment. Any further infringement and you will certainly do so. Do you understand?”

He didn’t, and was genuinely bewildered, his voice still far too loud.

“What the hell ha—”

“Be quiet!” I hauled it in again, breathing deeply to keep my own voice down despite its power. “Let me explain it to you in words of one syllable, Mr Brewster. These fae can hear a pin drop on grass yards away. A loud noise gives them the same urge to flee that a wild deer would have. Your shouts both cause them sharp pain, and scare them half to death. I will not let you hurt them one more time, and as you seem to have no wit at all I think you need a prompt in plain sight. Skuffles?”

Even while the Medicine Wolf Accords were still being negotiated I’d done some experimenting
with my new magics and the cloak’s ability to provide glamour, drawing in Irpa and my delighted not-exactly father. And since then I’d done a lot of quiet practicing, with Adam’s strong approval, as well as having that conversation about magic with Bran, which had been seriously interesting, and another with Zee, ditto. The net result was that when I had the cloak and Manannán’s Bane, and wanted Skuffles, it was there to do whatever I asked. Quite what it really was and how independent it could be were still very moot — even ap Lugh had said with a resigned look that there was no name for whatever it was I was doing with my melting-pot of stolen and gifted magic — but I was in the habit of treating Skuffles with all courtesy as a fellow coyote and Deadhead, and when it appeared with an enquiring look Nuthatch, who knew it, relaxed a little, Brewster squeaked, and everyone else froze.

“Thank you, Skuffles. Please stand just by Mr Brewster there, and if his voice rises anywhere above quiet, bite his tongue for him.”

Skuffles nodded agreeably, skulls and roses dancing, gave itself a good scratch, and padded over to a sweating, staring Brewster before letting its own tongue loll, showing a great deal of inventive dentition.

“Now, Mr Brewster, you are just as frightened of Skuffles as these earth fae are of you, so we have a rather more level playing field, which makes for a nice change, and you have the incentive you seem to need to behave like a reasonably polite human being. Additionally, I again remind you that you have already grossly breached agreed protocols for these earth fae, and that as that breach involves direct address and wilful harm you are legally subject to Fae justice as well as this court’s proper jurisdiction. One more breach of anything, Mr Brewster, and I will remit the matter to the Gray Lords, which will not turn out well for you. You have now been fairly and clearly warned, as the ratified Medicine Wolf Accords require.” I turned. “Your Honour, will you formally concur?”

If the President had realised that Heuter’s lawyers would be affected by the provision that anyone voluntarily addressing a known full-blood fae opened themselves to Fae justice he hadn’t cared, but the judge had been briefed and after a moment nodded.

“I will, Ms Hauptman, and your warning to Mr Brewster is formally noted. However, while I have no wish to offend, ah, Skuffles, its presence is extremely irregular.”

“So are witnesses who are caused serious pain by decibel levels humans can tolerate, Your Honour. And while everyone is being so quiet, a demonstration is possible. Please put your hand a few inches in front of your mouth and whisper any words you choose, while Nuthatch listens.”

She blinked, but I’d caught her curiosity and after a moment’s thought she did it.

“Nuthatch, did you hear?”

The brownie nodded gently, and in the silence his voice was clearly audible to all.

“She said ‘Jumping Jehoshaphat’.” Brown eyes found mine. “Who was Jehoshaphat, Mercedes Elf-friend, and why did he or she jump?”

“He was a king of Judah, recorded in the Christian bible, Nuthatch, but I have no idea why he jumped. The phrase is used to express surprise.”

Nuthatch nodded, satisfied, and I looked at the wide-eyed judge.

“I take it that’s correct, Your Honour?”

“It is, Ms Hauptman, and you make your point most potently. I was aware fae hearing could be
acute, but I had not properly understood what that meant.” She paused, frowning. “I know it is unwise to offer thanks or apologies to fae, but I will say that I regret the oversight.”

“I hear you, Your Honour. It is, incidentally, also one reason it is rude to shout at wolves — a bit like shining a strong flashlight into the eyes of someone you’re right next to.”

“I see. Thank you, that’s worth knowing. Mr Brewster, do you intend quietly to continue questioning, ah, Nuthatch yourself?”

Brewster looked at Skuffles, then at me, and swallowed. He spoke in a whisper, and I gave him a point for spine.

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“Then, Ms Hauptman, providing Skuffles will agree to begin a, well, warning growl I suppose, before taking matters into its own … jaws, I will countenance its presence during, and only during, cross-examination of fae by Mr Brewster.”

Skuffles looked round at her, head cocked, and then nodded before offering a demonstration of its own — barely a second of rising growl before a snapping lunge forward so fast its head blurred and the skulls clattered. Then it dropped its jaw at her in a coyote grin, and swung back to fix Brewster with a gimlet eye.

The rest of the cross-examination was notable for very subdued voices and an intense silence from all spectators. If Heuter had still had his first-team lawyers someone would probably have done something, and I had concerns about what any appeals court might say, so I was careful to allow Brewster all the latitude I could stomach, and as he was used to being able to cut off answers he didn’t like, and couldn’t recalibrate on the fly, he did Heuter a great deal of damage. Earth fae, like most, have exact memories, cannot lie, and do not quite grasp the idea of rhetorical questions, so far from impugning or contradicting anything they’d already said all Brewster managed to do was to elicit a lot of further details — among them an occasion when the Senator had cut short a call from his cousin because MacLandis was calling on another line. They couldn’t give a human date but could say it was full winter, with thick snow lying outside the mine, and some electronic searching by one of the prosecution lawyers produced the relevant log entries and a Wyoming weather report that all matched. They had also heard more clearly than any of the Freed Pack the human conversation when the torturers had seen KEPR’s broadcast of Medicine Wolf eating Preskylovitch, and though the prosecutors had dropped it after establishing that Senator Heuter had never been named directly Brewster’s fumbling prompted what had actually been said by one of the psyops guys — that the Senator was going to be dogmeat, just like his idiot murdering rape-o of a son and that psychotic shithead Preskylovitch he’d put in charge of avenging him.

The utterly un-fae-like language and their obvious distaste in repeating it left no-one with the least doubt of its truth. After that, with prosecutors alternating between wanting to kick themselves and to dance, Brewster gave up, looking almost as sick as the senator, Skuffles gave me a coyote grin and vanished back to wherever it hung out when not manifesting, and the fae were free to leave. Given how grey they were looking, and that Warren and Honey were with the Freed Pack members who were present, I got the judge’s permission to take them home directly from the courtroom, and with only Brent in tow asked the cloak to open an arch right there, ignoring the exclamations as they all scampered through and we followed. Just being in the Garden of Manannán’s Death was enough to bring some colour back to their cheeks, but they were still shaky and with some trepidation I told Brent we’d sit and wait awhile until they were happier. I was also betting the Fae would have some things to say, and although Underhill didn’t turn up it was only a few minutes before Gwyn ap Lugh did, nodding slightly to Brent, speaking to the brownies and pixies for a
while in a language I’d never heard before, which clearly calmed and helped them, and then sitting beside me with an inscrutable expression.

“Gwyn ap Lugh. Is all well?”

“It is, Mercedes Elf-friend. You have again earned your name this day.”

“I caused no offence, then? What happened makes an appeal more likely to have some traction.”

“True, but you respected human law as well as enforcing ours, and you have made it all but certain Heuter will be making any appeal from death row. It was not easy for these earth fae, but they did well, and they know the Gray Lords think very highly of their courage.” His face softened a little, and a glint came into his eyes. “Of you and Skuffles too. Even Nemane laughed at your command to bite that human’s tongue if he would not do so himself, as did Bran Cornick.”

“You were watching with Bran?”

“Teleconferencing, in case joint action or statements were called for. You need not worry, Mercedes — at least one of those lawyers was always going to step over the line, your response was clear and measured as well as memorable, and all have been forcefully shown that there are fae who need protection from humans as well as those that can eat humans. You can tell the lawyer we consider you to have dealt properly with his infringement, and will take no further action, but the warning stands and he would do well to take great care in future.” He cocked his head a little. “You have once again done well by us, Mercy, and as you steadfastly refuse to acknowledge any debt we need not be concerned with having asked you to do it.”

That particular problem had occurred to me before now, but it was still better than any explicit debt in either direction, and ap Lugh just smiled at the look I gave him.

“You are, however, likely to find your garden staff increasing still further as word spreads. Few of the small fae have ever been so publicly and effectively defended, and your eyes attested your rage on their behalf. Those for whom such loyalty matters a great deal will be strongly attracted.”

“Huh. Do Nuthatch and the others already in residence mind?”

“Not in the least, Mercedes. They are sociable creatures among their own kinds, and will welcome the company.”

I took that under mild advisement, but I already knew both brownies and pixies did like to talk, in their own fashion, with those they trusted, and enjoyed communal meals. Human ability to steam vegetables had something to with it — I’d never got through as many new potatoes, snow peas, and baby carrots as in the last few months — but as the kitchen garden and a new greenhouse were flourishing in ways I could never have managed, a number of quite well-grown oaks had surprisingly appeared on the rather bare corner parcel of land Adam and I had at last been able to buy, and the scrubland stretching down to the Columbia was looking more and more like a well-tended park every morning, I thought it would work out well enough, and nodded.

“Alright.” I blew out a breath, feeling a weariness as much of soul as body. Reliving that mine in testimony was almost as bad as seeing it, and I’d needed Skuffles to share rage as well as scare Brewster. “Unless there’s anything else, Gwyn ap Lugh, I should get them all home, and myself back to Cheyenne to collect the Freed Pack.”

“There is nothing else, Mercy, but a little longer Underhill would be no bad thing for these after their day. Return to Cheyenne, and I will see them safely home.”
It was thanks of a sort, and I wasn’t going to argue with two fewer trips, so I told ap Lugh I’d be glad to do so, exchanged farewells with Nuthatch and the others, and took Brent back to the courtroom in Cheyenne. Underhill had been proactive, and amid the shocked reactions I gathered we’d only been gone for a few seconds.

“It was rather more than that by Underhill time, Your Honour, so I can assure you that the fae victims are recovering from their renewed ordeal in the care of Underhill. Having spoken to Prince Gwyn ap Lugh about what happened today, I can also inform you and Mr Brewster that while the warning stands, so he should be very careful never again to offer any full-blood fae any offence, the Gray Lords will take no action against him at this time.”

The judge was clearly relieved, but shook her head. “Six impossible things before breakfast is the least of it, Ms Hauptman, but I will take your word for it, and ask you to inform the Gray Lords that I and the state of Wyoming are very glad to hear of their … restraint. I dare say Mr Brewster is too.”

He was, and though I didn’t really care I gave him a nod as the judge adjourned for the day to allow the extra witness box to be removed. Then there were the Freed Pack to reassure and gather up so we could all head out again, but as I was leaving the courtroom with them in tow Brewster stopped me to tell me he had only been doing his job.

“Really, Mr Brewster? How very convenient for whatever vestiges of your conscience survived law school, because further brutalising your client’s surviving fae victims while seeking to excuse him from the consequences of eagerly sponsoring mass murder, mass torture, and mass rape is just sick, however you cut it. The Fae have held their hand, respecting human justice while it takes its course, but they will not forget. Nor will I. Consequences are back in fashion, Mr Brewster, and you should think very hard about that. Now you must excuse me while I get the other surviving victims you and your team have verbally assaulted and wantonly sought to smear safely out of here.”

What I didn’t know, though I should have guessed, was that a canny studio director had kept a camera on me, and by the time we were back in Kennewick that little soundbite had gone just as viral as my earlier performance with Skuffles. There was some principled defence of aggressive cross-examination, but what I’d said resonated strongly with concerns about the way courts all too often allowed victims of rape and serious assault to be treated, and the Gray Lords had known what they were about because sight of Nuthatch and the others obviously distressed and cowering had punched a lot of buttons. Even before I retreated to bed with Adam there was a Skuffles Appreciation Society trending, and the list of requested interviews a mildly reproachful Mary Oliver presented me with in the morning was three screens deep and still growing. As I didn’t need to return to Cheyenne until the verdict, I had no excuse for not using the pool system for interviews Mary had set up, so after some hasty briefings from Jenny, Andrea, and Kyle, I spent the afternoon giving a long and tiring interview to (this time round) ABC about the ethics of justice.

No, I did not want anyone accused to lack an opportunity to defend themselves, nor to give false accusers any kind of free ride, but yes, where there was no doubt that an assault or rape had happened, I did indeed think that allowing someone accused or their lawyers to inflict further damage was incompatible with both ethics and justice. And yes, anyone accused certainly had rights, but so did victims, and if justice, in the name of fairness, systemically allowed damage already done to be worsened then it was unfit for purpose. No-one, from the Man down, could say what the average costs of mounting a prosecution and a defence were, as figures were not available, but in this particular case I could (thanks to Andrea) say that Senator Heuter had already, on paper at least, spent more on lawyers and tame experts in Wyoming alone than that state had spent on all prosecutions in the current financial year, including his own. That image of
blindfolded justice was all very noble, but meant justice could not see the wealthy and privileged pressing on one or other scale, and being at least as much a plutocracy and oligarchy as a democracy, the USA had been very happy not to do any serious thinking about that uncomfortable fact. But we might now have an opportunity to do something about it, especially if the pious were to help with pushing for it.

My suggestion to Reverend Jackson about a syndicated religious interview with Medicine Wolf had — largely thanks to her own determination, with the CSM guy’s, and some nifty footwork from the Bishop in Spokane — borne serious fruit. Medicine Wolf had been exceptionally patient, and unfailingly polite, but equally remorseless in asserting what it knew as an eyewitness to evolution and the existence of a Great Spirit it knew as the Great Manitou of Planet Earth. It also believed, but could not affirm, that any planet with a biosphere that had manitous as emergent properties — which it thought would in the nature of life be all biospheres — would have the same, though given the laws of physics and chemistry what they were like would very probably depend on the particular biosphere. Whether such planetary manitous might have an overlord, or a conclave, was beyond its earth, water, fire, and air, but making serious decisions based on what amounted to no more than random suppositions about the answer seemed less than sensible. Oh, and what was the distinction his questioners kept observing between ‘a miracle’ and ‘some magic’?

The effects on Bible-belters already hammered over the Stewardship Debate had been convulsive, in every sense, and one of the things I’d had to learn to remember was their intent discussion of everything I said. Which had its uses — twenty or thirty million people who seriously believed in grace and the remission of sins as well as justice and authority earnestly discussing the problem seemed to me like a useful resource, so I tapped it. I wasn’t so keen on the #MercysLaw hashtags that started trending even while the interview was still going out, but if they helped to get something done I could suck it up, and they pleased Jesse, which was a welcome bonus. It would take a while, but I felt I had at least lit a fuse, and having the Christian radio-shows eagerly discussing something half-way sensible had to be a step in the right direction.

About two weeks after that, and barely two hours’ deliberation, the Wyoming jury unanimously convicted Heuter and his aides on every last charge, including three-hundred-and-fifteen counts of grossly aggravated felony murder. Both Ramona and I flatly refused to countenance the return of any of the Freed Pack or earth fae for the penalty phase, but we did go ourselves, with Adam and every wolf and avatar who’d been on the rescue mission, including David, to underline one last time just how vilely degrading that mine had been, and to make formal submissions declaring that under Wolf law, and in avatar understanding of appropriate justice, a sentence of death would already have been carried out, and nothing less was worth a damn. I was not particularly surprised when Gwyn ap Lugh turned up as well, by arch, to say as much about Fae law, but more so when he added, with an implacable stare at Heuter and a gracious address to the judge reminding me Alastair Beauclaire been a very successful lawyer, that he was glad the responsibility of executing the father would not fall to him, as that of executing the son had so unhappily done. The Medicine Wolf Accords had formally expunged the Commonwealth charges regarding Les Heuter’s death, a provision already ratified in Boston as well as DC, and as Anna pointed out to me afterwards ap Lugh had — we both assumed quite deliberately — hit exactly the same note I had that Tuesday morning.

*They hurt my cub, and I will see those responsible dead for it.*

Quite right too, and so judge and jury decided. On the Friday the sentence was announced I rang Westfield, and we both raised a glass to the fact that a serving Federal senator had been convicted of mass murder and sentenced to death. So had his senior aides, though the lesser employees escaped with lengthy jail sentences. Toasting it wasn’t pretty, and it wasn’t noble, but it also wasn’t wrong, and Westfield cheered me considerably by telling me an impeachment bill was
already on the floor of the Senate, and that there was a growing Feeb vogue for tees and sweats bearing my line about consequences being back in fashion. I’d seen the licensing deals, and wondered about the heavy sales, but if I was going to be plastered across the nation’s chests that wasn’t a bad way to be so.

An equally pleased, equally pensive Adam sustained my mellowness overnight, until Saturday breakfast with an oddly evasive Jesse. Hangdog was the word that came to mind, and after several speaking glances exchanged with Adam I cracked.

“Spill it, ex-kiddo, whatever it is. You’re making us nervous.”

“Oh. It’s nothing really, Mom, just a hashtag.”

“What hashtag, Jesse?”

“A new one, that’s trending some.”

Adam and I exchanged another glance.

“One you started?”

“Um, well, sort of.” She gave us a nervy grin. “It was a joke.”

I sighed. “And we’re back to what hashtag, Jesse?”

“People were talking about the sentence in Wyoming, Mom, and that it was down to you more than anyone. Pulled in all the #MercysLaw feeds from last week, which already had Bible- and other types talking, and all sorts besides.” She gestured vaguely. “Sort of shocked appreciation, I suppose. I mean, holding a Federal senator responsible for his actions, and actually making it stick. Cantrip, too. And what happened to Preskylovitch and his goons, and then Manannán when he tried it for himself, and that Alpha at Paul’s court martial, and Brewster the other week. Everyone seems to really like Skuffles, and killing all the lawyers still hits a lot of buttons.”

She was burbling and Adam leaned forward, voice becoming just a tad growly. “Jesse, what is the hashtag? Straight up, now.”

“Um … #MercyForPresident.”

I gaped at her as Adam looked as if he wasn’t sure if he was swallowing a scream or a laugh, and swiftly held up a hand in my direction anyway.

“And you created this when?”

“Last night, Dad. About ten.”

“And it now has how many followers, or likes or whatever?”

“Um … the counter’s sort of blurry, but it just went through what I think is, um, forty million.”

There was a silence while Adam rested his chin in his hands and I fixed a not noticeably repentant Jesse with a seriously appalled stare.

“Ex-kiddo, you are so digitally grounded.”

Not that it was going to save me when no good deed ever goes unpunished, but that really is another story.
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