

## Chapter Fourteen

Will glanced at The Prodigal before turning back to look at Silversmith, desperate not to stare at the newcomer, but it turned out not to matter anyway. From the sudden ‘oooohs’ and ‘aaaahs,’ it was clear The Prodigal was marching right over towards their location.

“Ah, Alistair, I see you’ve decided to join us this year,” Silversmith said, his voice as devoid of emotion as Will imagined he could make it.

The Prodigal stepped right up to be only a foot or so away from Silversmith, removed one of his gloves, then slapped Silversmith across the face with it hard before dropping it to the floor. “Jonas Silversmith, Red Joker of The Deck, I, Alistair Wainsworth Crowley the 6<sup>th</sup>, challenge you to a duel for your title,” the man said, spitting at Jonas’s feet.

To Will’s left, Tommy’s chuckled and lifted his hand to his face, trying to keep from laughing much more openly, as Kelly, by contrast, looked like she wanted to rip the man’s eyeballs out, but remained in position, her commands from her Master clearly more important than her need for immediate vengeance.

“My dear Alistair, there are a dozen or so mages you could challenge and actually stand good odds of *taking* their title, but you should know that there is no point in doing so with me,” Jonas sighed. “Still, a challenge has been issued, and so it shall be accepted. Let us waste no time with this, as there is business to attend to tonight. Thusly, I choose the fight to commence immediately after the terms are settled. Weapons?”

“Spellcraft, naturally,” Alistair said, which made several people in the room groan.

Will noticed a rather curious and strange look on Silversmith’s face, almost as if he wasn’t entirely certain how to respond to that, but it wasn’t Silversmith who spoke next, but the mage captain Jonas had introduced him to earlier, Tommy Clarke.

“You can’t challenge a Dragonborn to a magical duel, Alistair, because as Dragonborn, he would have an unfair advantage, in that you cannot directly affect him with spells, but he can directly affect *you*,” Tommy said. “It’s in the dueling bylaws, under Dragonborn. You should know this. You want to try again?”

Alistair looked crestfallen for only a moment before regaining his composure. “Daggers then,” he said, his confidence returned almost immediately. “Your marksmanship is legendary, so I would not favor my chances should we duel with pistols.”

“Daggers will be fine,” Silversmith replied, as calmly as if he was ordering Sunday brunch. “I choose Captain Tommy Clarke as my second.”

Tommy nodded and started to walk away from the group, heading over towards a large wooden armory against the wall, a small man dressed in all black meeting him there to unlock it for him. Inside of the giant closet, Tommy looked through several boxes before finding the one he was looking for, removing it and letting the man in black close and relock the armory as Tommy headed back over to the two squabbling men.

“And I will choose Captain Janis Pettiworth as mine,” The Prodigy said, as a vampire significantly taller than the rest separated from the group, making her way over towards the proceedings.

Captain Pettiworth was definitely dressed in goth stylings familiar to the rest of her cohorts, but hers was in a much more Victorian fashion. She wore a long dress that hung down to her ankles, exposing as little skin as possible, with long sleeves and a collar that covered her entire neck. Her blonde hair was up in a beehive style bun atop her head. Her eyes were the deadest shade of gray Will had ever seen, as if every inch of life had been drained from them. By contrast, her lips were painted a very bright shade of red, like that of pumping blood.

She made no effort to hide her fangs.

Tommy set the box down on the table next to the two men and opened the top of it. In it were four daggers, two sets of two, paired and split down the middle, resting in a lush silk bed. The pair on the left were made of a light, silvery steel, with ornate inlay all along the center of the blade, but definitely sharpened deadly on the edges. The pair on the right were in stark contrast, dark metal blades with only a single line of character engravings going straight up the blood groove in the middle of the blades. Both sets looked capable of doing serious harm in the hands of a skilled person.

There was a level of ritual to this that surprised Will, as if traditions were well-established, and both sides knew them intricately. He hoped like hell nobody expected him to know how to react to a duel if someone challenged him.

“The severity of the challenge is up to you, Alistair,” Jonas said as he started removing his suitcoat. It was a testament to Jonas’ impeccable style that he still looked fashionable even without out. “I would recommend *not* to the death, but as the supposed ‘aggrieved party’ the final decision, is, of course, yours.”

Will found the whole methodical nature of this fascinating to watch but wasn’t entirely sure what ‘severity’ meant until he heard The Prodigal’s response. “Until one of us yields shall be enough, I suppose,” the man said, as he too removed his suitcoat. His style was a lot more spectacle and show in contrast to Jonas’ timeless look. “And you should know it’s nothing personal, old man. But you lost several steps during your absence, and it simply seems apparent to all on this side of the Veil that you are no longer fit to bear the title of Joker.”

“Of *course* it’s personal, Alistair,” Jonas said, patiently rolling up his sleeves, a stern look of determination upon his face, like a teacher whose authority had been challenged. “You have long bragged that you deserved a place within the Deck, and I have never disagreed with you in that assertion. You are a very talented mage, even if you’ve let that self-awareness cloud your judgment. Because you have also claimed that you were better than *me* in every way possible. I chose not to take offense, because what sort of lion would I be if I took offense to every flea and tick who wanted to proclaim itself king of *my* jungle? I offered you kindness, in sparing my gaze from your way, but you have taken that kindness and spat upon it, so the limits of my mercy have been reached. The flea has buzzed too long in the lion’s ear.” He removed the darker pair of daggers from their resting place, setting them aside on the table so he could inspect them one at a time. He swiped through the air with a quick flick of his wrist, and Will felt like if he’d blinked, he might have missed the strike with how fast Silversmith had moved. “I shall be quick and efficient in dealing with your insolence.”

A sizable crowd had been gathering, and The Prodigal moved over to inspect the other pair of daggers. He, too, seemed to be moving very quickly, but it wasn’t quite as pointed, or as surgical as Silversmith had made it look. There was still impeccable training there, but it didn’t look as natural or as graceful as Jonas’s movements had been. This, Will could tell, was not how The Prodigal had seen his day unfolding when he’d gotten up in the morning.

Will glanced at the swelling collection of people and wasn’t at all surprised to see there was someone taking bets, as if these kinds of things always attracted bookies. People were dividing into sides, and Will noticed that more people seemed to be on Silversmith’s side than The Prodigal’s, although The Prodigal seemed to have a sizable faction of vampire believers, so a lot of money was exchanging hands. There were scores gossiping about what was going on, but because Will had been instructed to stay by Silversmith’s side the entire time, he had not yet stepped away, and had gotten a front row seat to the proceedings, unable to get to what he might

have considered a safer place to stand.

Trish moved up behind Will, tapping him on the shoulder, as during all the commotion, the werewolves' arrival had gone unnoticed. It looked like there were about a dozen of them, and to his amusement, he realized Tommy had been right earlier – all of them were dressed as though they could've walked right out of a Soundgarden documentary. Maybe it truly was in the werewolf nature to trend towards the grunge look. "What did we miss? The werewolf contingent just got here, but it seems like something's going down," she whispered into Will's ear.

"We have a duel going," Will whispered back, "or we're about to. Between Silversmith and some dude called the Prodigal."

"Oh shit," Trish said with a soft little laugh, leaning up against him in a way that made a shiver run up the back of his spine, her hand just above his waist. "Who's taking bets, 'cause I want to get my money in on Silversmith."

"You and nearly everyone else here, it seems like," Will said. "Apparently the Prodigal didn't realize he couldn't challenge Silversmith to a duel in spellcraft? That seems like a pretty obvious thing to overlook, so I personally think it's a headfake, something the Prodigal's using to try and lure Silversmith into complacency."

"What are they using instead?"

"Daggers."

"Nasty. To the death?"

"Until someone yields."

Trish grumbled, rolling her eyes in disappointment. "That's no fun. One of 'em is bound to tap out early on. You're right, though. The Prodigal would've known all about Silversmith's protection and known that spellcraft wouldn't be an option for dueling, so he must be up to something."

"What do you know about this Prodigal dude anyway?"

"Bratty little son of a bitch, you ask me," Trish sniffed, glancing over to make sure the duel still had a couple more minutes before it started. "He's been on the scene a while. Comes out of Western Europe. Italian, I think, although supposedly he's got old Britton blood running through his veins as well. He came up during Silversmith's absence."

"His absence?" Will asked curiously, tilting his head, sure he was missing something. "The Prodigal mentioned that too. What's he talking about?"

"Silversmith disappeared for almost a decade, in the late 1980s and early 1990s," Trish said. "Our generation wasn't here for it, obviously, but for a lot of the mages, that's the same as just weeks ago to the rest of us. They took his disappearance personally. His work wasn't getting done and that meant that some of the less scrupulous members of the community were pushing their luck. Unauthorized feedings, humans hunting innocent creatures under false suspicious they were predators... dark times. But then, sometime in the early 90s, he reappeared and set about righting all the things that had gone wrong while he was away. Why he was gone, he never really said, although there were a few rumors going around. When he first came back, apparently a few people thought Kelly was his daughter, but he had her blow him in front of everyone during a gathering once to put that rumor to bed," Trish giggled. "That was kind of hot to see. And, of course, then it also came out that Kelly's a leanan sidhe, a faerie in case you aren't familiar with that term. She's basically his girl Friday now – assistant, security, fucktoy... whatever the occasion calls for."

"Were *our* kind getting out of hand during his absence?"

"Not *mostly*, but there are always a few bad apples here and there that will take any

opportunity to try and cause problems when they think no one's patrolling them," Trish said. "We've got our own gatekeepers and internal police who keep tabs on these kinds of things."

"Why didn't those gatekeepers find me then?"

"Your mother worked *very* hard to keep you off our radar, and by the time you were old enough for your wolf nature to be showing, you'd fallen off the rolls and nobody thought to check up on you or update your status," she said with a frown. "It's not all wine and roses being a werewolf, you know. We lost a lot of historical data in the handoff."

"The handoff?"

"About every ten years, the head of the Pack for each continent changes, and sometimes, there's a nice, smooth transition of power, but others... well, lots of historical data gets lost, and you find some administrations were much better about leaving a paper trail than others. The last handover was one of the worst ones we've ever had. All sorts of things got mucked up and we lost generations worth of information about our people. We're only now starting to get back some of what we've lost. People are having to figure out how to do their jobs without the experience of the people in the old regime teaching them how to do it, so we've lost a bunch of best practices along the way. Shit, my brother's been struggling to get down all of his duties as Hunt Captain, and he's one of the smartest men I know."

"Does the title of Hunt Captain mean your brother's one of the Captains of Green Werewolves' House as well?"

"They told you about the Color/Species system, huh?" she said, with a nod. "Clay's the Sixth Captain, so he's still relatively new, but the term 'Hunt Captain,' to us anyway, means he's got a timezone's worth of the United States to oversee. One Hunt Captain per time zone here in the US, one Hunt Captain for Canada, one for Central America, and then the Pack Captain, who oversees everybody. I don't think anyone else has their system set up like we do with ours."

"You gonna try for Captain?" Will asked her.

She shook her head. "That's not how it works. When there's a vacancy, there's a blind nomination process, then all the candidates are vetted by the existing Captains, who take a secret vote, and the candidate with the most votes gets the job. Not that I'd want the gig anyway," she said, nibbling on some snacks that had been brought by a roving waiter. "Too much sitting around and politicking and not enough fun stuff." She nodded over towards the central gathering. "Looks like they're about ready to start."

A ring of people had surrounded Silversmith and The Prodigal, and the two men were standing facing one another with a single solitary figure in the center, an Asian man dressed flagrantly in emerald high fashion, his green silk clothing flowed over him almost like it was made of water. His face looked to be in his late fifties or early sixties, although the man's body looked like that a strapping twenty-something from what Will could see when one of the sleeves slid back and exposed a remarkably well-chiseled arm.

"I am Grand Captain Feng of the Green Wizards' House," the man said to the gathered crowd, "and as the host of this social, it falls upon me to be regulator of disputes and duels. A call of challenge of rank has been issued and accepted. The terms have been accepted, and the seconds have been appointed. As a reminder, seconds, should your primary be unable to speak, the decision on whether or not to yield falls unto you. Are there any remaining questions before we begin?" He looked at both men, then at each man's second, and saw no responses from either. "Then stand back-to-back, take five paces, turn and let your duel... begin."

The two men moved into place, then began to take their steps away. Once they had moved the set distance away, they spun on their heels, each adopting a radically different fighting

style. The Prodigal held the daggers blades up, like they were tiny swords, while Silversmith immediately flipped them over, the blades extending out of the bottom of his hands. The Prodigal's stance was wide, his shoulders forming a straight line perpendicular to his opponent. Silversmith, by contrast, twisted his body and turned sideways, reducing the amount of visible target space his opponent had, and drew his arms tight to his body.

The Prodigal looked nervous.

Silversmith looked tranquil.

The first strike came quickly from The Prodigal, who jumped forward, swiping at Silversmith with a strike much faster than Will would've expected from a human, but when he concentrated, he could see tiny blue sparks around the outline of The Prodigal's form, even as his left arm sliced through the air, the blade grazing against Silversmith's shoulder just enough to lop a tiny bit of skin and cloth off, drawing first blood.

Silversmith leaped back, his gaze narrowing. "This is strictly a duel of blades, Prodigal," he said, his tone sharper and more dangerous than the knives appeared. "If you do not remove your spell, I will be forced to consider this open spellwar, because you could not adhere to the terms."

The Prodigal laughed, rolling his eyes. "You're no fun, old man." He closed his eyes, and suddenly entire waves of colored dust seemed to appear, outlining him against the rest of reality, before they suddenly all fell to the earth in a sandstorm losing all velocity, a waterfall of prismatic dust, somehow leaving the man a little barren of color and sparkle. "There, now I am completely without enchantment. May we continue?"

Silversmith looked to Grand Captain Feng, who raised his hand in The Prodigal's direction, a light blue aura glowing about him momentarily, before the wizard nodded and the aura disappeared. "I am satisfied. On three?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"One... two... three!" As the last word left his mouth, Silversmith lunged forward, his blade slicing a clean line across side of the Prodigal's thigh, drawing a plume of blood from the flesh beneath the fabric. The move from Silversmith was quick, but it was the sway of his arm that had made it especially hard to predict where the strike was going.

The Prodigal looked at his own leg as if it had betrayed him, but could take no time to scold it, as he needed to respond, striking out on his own with another wide swing, but this time, unaided by the blur of magics, Silversmith could see the incoming arc and simply spun away and out of its path.

Will regretted not putting a bet in on Silversmith.

Silversmith countered with a slice of his own, but this time The Prodigal saw the cut coming and also moved himself away from the path of the blade, trying to swat at Jonas's arm, but the older mage also saw that his strike didn't connect, and kept moving, so his arm was just out of The Prodigal's reach.

The two men danced with one another for a minute or two, taking turns attempting to cut slices out of each other before an overly aggressive downward strike from The Prodigal left him open for Silversmith to dip in with a counterstrike, drawing another clean line across The Prodigal's body, this time a not-too-deep scratch along the younger man's rib.

"Is this the point where I'm supposed to say 't'is but a scratch?'" The Prodigal asked his opponent, as Silversmith grinned back.

"Only if I'd actually taken an arm off, and you were an overconfident Black Knight," the older mage said with slight amusement. "I didn't cut you that deeply, did I?"

“Hardly,” The Prodigal said, charging once more, another powerful stab that Silversmith deflected with one of his own blades, sparks flying as the metal came in sharp contact.

The spiraling ritual continued, each lashing out time and time again, neither able to connect, although it looked like The Prodigal was tiring much faster than his opponent. Silversmith had kept his movements carefully timed and restrained, as if he was expecting The Prodigal to come rushing at him with as much fury and noise as possible.

Within a couple more minutes, Will felt confident that Silversmith was simply biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment to strike, and it would come when The Prodigal tried to spread his arms as wide as he could before bringing them both forward and down, trying to pin in Silversmith.

Instead, Silversmith simply stepped back, letting the younger man swipe into open air, and once he had, Jonas stepped forward and shoved one of his daggers right into the left shoulder of his opponent, The Prodigal letting out a loud scream as he dropped the dagger from his left hand, reeling back in pain, the blood leaking heavily from his stab wound.

“Alistair, will you yield, sir?”

The Prodigal snarled but didn’t respond. But then he looked over at Captain Pettiworth, his second, who shook her head at him, and he sighed before glancing back at Jonas, the illusion of a smile back upon his face once more. The entire atmosphere within the room changed at that moment. “Alright, old friend, I yield,” he said, dropping the other dagger and bowing. His hands moved in some incredibly quick and sharp gestures, and the colored dust that had fallen to the floor earlier cycloned around him and began to repair and restore his wounds.

Will expected to see anger and frustration between the two men, but the Silversmith helped the Prodigal back to his feet, and then dusted him off, looking with genuine concern to make sure the man’s wounds had been repaired by the spells. There wasn’t any animosity in Silversmith’s face, and while the Prodigal didn’t look happy, he definitely looked like he’d lost the fight in him.

This, Will guessed, would not be the last he heard about this particular disagreement.

The seconds moved out from their places at the sides, gathering up the blades, cleaning them and returning them to their box, which Will watched Tommy take back to the large cabinet that he’d gotten it from earlier.

Kelly moved to stand next to Will, a slight smile on her lips. “Knew the Prodigal wasn’t anything but a little bitch,” she said to him as she leaned against him for a moment.

“Heard him yelp and stomp before have you?” he asked the goth faerie.

“He’s a lot of bark and no bite, but he does *love* to bark,” she grumbled. “Sorry, I shouldn’t bitch about the people the boss keeps company with, but the Prodigal’s always struck me as a weaselly opportunistic bastard, and I was hoping it would’ve been more than to yield. The boss has been too much of a softy lately and needs to remind people of the old *sturm un drang* he can get up to when the situation calls for it.”

“Oh yeah? Seen him tear some shit up on bad days?”

Kelly smirked, and she let Will see her rows of sharp teeth, much more sharklike than human. “If the situation called for it, he’d kill everyone in this whole building without batting an eyelash or breaking a sweat. We’re talking real Old Testament shit.”

“I don’t doubt that at all,” Trish said. “That’s one of the reasons he scares the fuck out of me.”

“Yeah?” Kelly giggled, pushing off from Will to stand upright again. “What’s another?”

“The fact that even if he killed all several hundred souls here, he wouldn’t have a bit of

remorse.”

“I only kill when necessary, Kelly,” Silversmith said as he moved to rejoin their party. “You know this, and here you are, stoking rumors about my ability to go nuclear, should the situation call for it. That’s a last resort only.”

“If you aren’t going to keep your reputation in the public eye, Boss, it falls upon your humble slut to do it,” she said, batting her eyelashes at him like some gangster’s moll. “When they aren’t scared of you, your job gets harder.”

“Then let us hope that fight calms some of the rowdier members in attendance tonight. Shame the faeries and shades hadn’t arrived to see it,” Silversmith said with a slight disappointment.

“No, the faeries are here, Boss,” Kelly said. “They’re just over in the far corner, keeping to themselves.”

Will glanced over and he saw a group of five or six people, all of whom were dressed in the most flagrant revival of 1960s punk fashion that he’d ever seen. The hair was spiked, chopped and pulled within an inch of its life, leather jackets with spikes and chains ran rampant and everything had holes in it, but instead of dark and gothic colors, most of the colors were bright and gaudy. In fact, a couple of them were even wearing plaid pants. “Yeah, Jonas, how could you miss them? Are they always dressed like that, Kelly?”

“They’re peacocking, because they want to put on a good show.”

“That just leaves the shades,” Will said. “What the hell even *is* a shade?”

“Shade is a class of supernatural entity that applies to anything that refused to transition to the next existence after their death, and chose to remain, for whatever reason, trapped between this world and the next,” Silversmith said. “Ghosts, zombies, ghouls... the undead.”

“Aren’t vampires undead?”

“Not at all,” Silversmith said. “That’s just another horrible myth perpetrated by that nefarious drunken Irish hack Stoker.”

“Wait, Stoker actually knew about vampires?”

“I should certainly hope so,” Silversmith chuckled. “He was one. But he chose excommunication from the rest of his people, and eventually he died from syphilis. He just didn’t contract it the way most people do.”

“So where do the undead come from?”

“Oh, from all walks of life,” Silversmith told Will. “Some are former humans, former dragons, former vampires, former faeries... it’s extremely uncommon for an elf to become a shade, although I’ve never quite understood the reason for that, although I’m told it has to do with elves being well prepared for their eventual demise. Ah, here they come.”

A small group of four people walked into the room, although they entered by phasing through the wall, not by using any door or window. They didn’t seem to have a consistent style like any of the other tribes, but the fact that they were semi-transparent was probably enough to make it clear which group they belonged to.

Silversmith patted Will on the back. “We should take a seat. Grand Captain Feng will be going through introductions of all newcomers before we get down to brass tacks and the business of the meeting. Would you like to join us, Trish?”

Trish smiled politely and shook her head. “I’m here in official capacity tonight, so I need to be over with the rest of the tribe. Grand Captain Keene’s got some things to discuss with the crowd, and it’s best if I’m by her side when that happens. Solidarity and all that.”

Jonas nodded. “Of course. We will see you later.”

“So if you’re both a wizard and part dragon,” Will had to ask, “where do you sit?”  
“Wherever the hell I want to...”