

**Dog Wars**

A Victorian Steampunk Adventure

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Abstract:

We're in an alternate universe, circa Dickensian London. Leofric Lieven, a local crime lord, is about to find the past catching up on him. The Romany Carnival has come to town, and a gypsy woman, his former lover and partner in crime, demands from him a favour which will redress his betrayal of years before: he must secure a stolen object and return it to her. But things go horribly wrong when local delivery boy Cards Bennish is kidnapped by Leofric's competitor before he can deliver the goods that will cover Leofric's debt to the gypsy.

In this world, humans can shape shift into animals, entirely or only partially, dog fighting is the favourite pastime for high stakes betting, and power belongs to the highest bidder. The gypsy's final bet, for the highest stakes yet, will seal the fates of a number of people, for better or worse.



## CHAPTER 1

The fog that descended over London every evening had always been an unusual beast. It rose slowly from the hills and outskirts, and crept forward, almost invisible at first. It migrated slowly, filling the city from the bottom like opium smoke in a lifeless room. In the slums and quagmire, ankles were the first to vanish in the growing, swirling whiteness. It flowed from the streets, into the houses, lean-tos and squats slowly expanding to fill every available space. Knees followed and then hips, then shoulders and finally people seemed to be drowning in it as it swallowed them whole. The fog grew over the course of the evening until, in the starlight, all that could be seen were church spires and clock towers. It was under the cover of this blanket, not in the sunlight, that most denizens of London plied their trades, made their fortunes, or lost everything.

Floating quietly above the blanket of white, a large figure was coming silently in to dock above the Thames, mooring on Rotherhithe Street. The figure had been floating gently over London for almost a week now, and went by the name *The Dancer*. It was a huge, egg-shaped balloon with a double decked cabin attached. At the back were two huge propellers that drove the ship forward, but they hadn't turned since the *Dancer* had arrived. The entire exterior was beautifully maintained to look like a circus tent with the letters 'Romany Carnival, Circus and Menagerie' emblazoned down both sides. The cabin itself was painted red and gilded with gold, with enough space to house the entire Romany Carnival staff as well as all their attractions.

The *Dancer* and the Romany Carnival were one of a kind. They were one of only a handful that was a carnival, circus and menagerie and, of those that existed; they were the largest by far with over one hundred different animal species to view. They had six different acts every night for two weeks with different costumes each night, and they also had a full carnival of attractions to enjoy. Everything from a Ferris wheel, to rotating swings, to prizes to be won, the carnival provided it all. What made the Romany Carnival completely unique however was the fact that they were the only carnival to travel by air.

Romany Carnival traced its origins back to the royal courts of old. They were said to have been one of the first circuses established, and were born from the entertainers of Kings and Sultans. Before the *Dancer*, the Romany Circus was its only title. They had some of the most spectacular, and original attractions ever seen. The Corletti twins were an acrobatics act, the two sisters moving as a single body. Nicodemus was a man at least three times the size of any other, and spent most of his time in a tank of water to ease his breathing. On land, he could lift the main circus tent pole above his head. They had jugglers and fire breathers, contortionists and dancers, clowns and tamers, and different acts every time they came to town. They were a world class act, and they worked hard to maintain that status.

A few decades ago, they expanded their business to include a carnival, and a small menagerie which grew quickly. They would travel from town to town by train, set up all their attractions for two weeks, and then vanish before the next morning. They always visited the same town for the same two weeks, and they were as much of a holiday as any of the harvest festivals. It was four decades ago when the Romany Carnival, Circus and Menagerie purchased the *Dancer*. They took to the skies, and became the only airborne circus in the world. People would gather from far and wide, coming to see the balloon

The circus in all that time had always been owned and run by the Romany family. Legend goes that the first Romany was the head of the entertainments in the court of King Richard the Lionheart, although there is no tangible proof that she was ever there. She was said to have left the court after the King's death, gathered her group of talented people, and took to the road to bring joy and wonder to the peoples of the world.

What is known of the Romany Carnival is that a daughter is always the leader, and this generation is no different. No one knows if this is law or coincidence, but that has been the case for five generations of memory at least. The performers change often, sometimes there will be a whole different group from year to year, but their standards never dropped. The carnival has always been willing to take anyone of talent, and give them a chance to earn from that talent. That said, very little of what happens backstage is ever spoken of. Very little is known about the stable members of the Carnival, even by those who have been there a lifetime.

This generation of the Romany Carnival is run by a woman known as Lynn. She does not perform, but has driven her family business to new heights of prosperity. It is

unknown how wealthy the carnival truly is, but what is known is that they have maintained themselves for centuries without ever asking for help.

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As the ship parted the dense fog and floated silently into anchorage, a lone figure could be seen standing on the bow, holding one of the lashing ropes. She was wrapped up against the cold in a thick green woollen blanket. Her long brown curls were swept out of the blanket and carried behind her in the wind. She stood there quietly, staring down at the towers, and the spheres of light, waiting for the city of London to wake up. In just a few hours time, they would wake to the *Dancer* in their skies and then flock to meet the joy that the ship would bring them.

She could almost hear the laughter, the mirth that the Romany could bring, but in this city she heard something else as well. It drowned out the laughter, the smiles, and the joy and brought her back to where this chapter of her story began. Movement crossed her vision and she blinked it away, but the more she closed her eyes, the more she remembered and the angrier she became.

She was lying on her side in the ring fighting for her life with every breath she had left. Her three opponents were all around her. How had they all gotten in? She could not remember, but she was sure they had been thrown in by their owners. The floor was wet with blood, both hers and others and there was no way she could even stand up, let alone get out.

He had betrayed her and now she was supposed to die there. For that betrayal, he would never be forgiven. She had met him a long time ago in an underground ring in this very city. He had tried to pull a con and failed miserably, but his gall at even attempting it had attracted her attention. She had been so very young then, not as young as people thought, but still a child by all accounts. She had saved him because the two of them shared a gift, something she thought she shared with no one else. They were both full-shift shifters, something that was very rare and uniquely hated. Shifters existed in this world everywhere, not everyone was one, only one in five. However, they all shared the ability to partially transform, to anthropomorphise, into an animal from their third birthday to the day they died. A full-shift shifter could do more; they could become their particular animal completely, but maintain their human mind. She was one of the few

and she paid his debt in exchange for conversation. He was the only other full-shift shifter she had ever met.

She grew to like him over the next few days and he came to stay with them on the Romany train, the gypsy princess Lynn and her urchin Leofric. However, their arrangement after they shared their secret became a lucrative one. They agreed to become the make-believe owner of the other in full-shift, to allow the shifted one to fight and win them money, and win they did. They would fight in the towns where they landed together, they were an unbeaten team. Over the next few years, they had bested all who came up against them. They tried not to kill their opponents, usually succeeding, although less so for Lynn. They won a fair amount of money over the years as their fame built until there was no one around who would challenge them.

That was until one night in a fight in London. She was the dog, he the owner. They had fought in these rings for years, the game not really changing since its inception. She was ready to take on all who came, but that was the last night she saw Leofric in person. She did not know, but he had placed a bet against her. She was unbeaten, so the return was high. Those who held the bets knew how high it would be and convinced him to change the rules. Instead of one challenger, she faced three when the doors opened.

She fought for her life in that ring, but it was to no avail. She lost and over the foaming mouths of her opponents and the ear-splitting barks, she watched him turn and leave. She gave up hope of escape when a figure jumped into the ring and pulled the dogs off of her, throwing her out before being bitten himself. Larkin was his name and he had followed them for some time, promising to keep her safe from everyone and anyone. He was just a boy back then, barely twelve, but he had saved her. She would never forget that night.

She stood on the deck of that ship, feeling the cold whip around her when a hand touched her shoulder. She whipped around, but relaxed almost instantly. The hand on her shoulder tightened before the other hand slipped around her waist. She felt him move to stand on the behind her on the deck, solid as a rock even up in the sky.

“You shouldn’t be up yet, it’s too cold out.” She smiled and leaned back against him.

“I like the cold, makes me feel alive.” She looked out at the skyline, just coming into view with the dawn. It was so beautiful and tranquil up here, but there was still something missing and everyone knew it.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” She couldn’t stop the derisive bark that left her lips.

“Bit late to ask me now, don’t you think?”

He turned her and she was forced to look into his face. She could see the concern in those deep blue eyes, but the pain as well. He was searching for surety she could not give. She tried anyway. His shoulders relaxed, but his face didn’t. Those eyes, to her, still belonged to a boy even though he was clearly a man. She smiled and took his hands, removing the woollen gloves. The scars across the back and palms from the fight all those years ago were still clear as day and she held them as she smiled.

“We are going to get this right Larkin; we have come too far to give up now. He will pay for what he did, make no mistake about that.” She gripped his hands tightly and shook him to send the message home. He wrenched his hands free and wrapped her in his arms.

“I just don’t want you to be hurt; can you promise me we will leave London together?”

“That much I can promise you. We will leave London together as soon as this is all done. Now is everything in place?” He nodded as he let her go.

“Good, then get below deck before you catch your death. I need to guide us in.” Larkin nodded again and finally released her, walking back to the cabin door. He hesitated for a moment before walking inside.

Lynn turned and pulled a sextant from her coat pocket. They had all made sacrifices for this plan to work, she would not dispute that, but she doubted any of them understood the gravity of what she had done. She hoped they never would. As she waited for the docking call to guide them into Rotherhithe Street, she touched the empty silver chain around her neck and took a few deep breaths.

She would reclaim all that was taken from her. She would restore her own honour and that of the Romanys that was taken all those years ago. Leofric would pay for his betrayal.

## CHAPTER 2

The first glimmers of dawn were creeping on the horizon as Cards stirred. It was still early and he could smell the bad wine and cheap tobacco on his coat and hair. He had been up until very early that morning. He uncurled his spine bit by bit, his long dark-furred tail unwrapping itself from around him. He flinched and whined softly as the cold air rushed over his warm belly before stretching. He extended both delicate, but filthy front paws and shook his head to get rid of the cloudy sleep. Sitting up, he rubbed the pads of those paws to clear his eyes and yawned widely, thin and sharp teeth on display for a moment.

As he yawned, one of the fox's large ears touched the stone roof of his hole and they gained a few more grains of loose dirt for their trouble. He instinctively laid them flat as he stared up at the dirt, unimpressed. While he had to admit this was the best nest spot yet, it had a few drawbacks, one of them being that it was literally a hole in a wall. It was a warm space he did not want to leave, but the consequences of missing this morning's meeting would be far worse than a little cold. He stretched luxuriously, shaking sleep's hold loose before stepping into his shoes and lying still again. He listened for anyone on the other side of the canvas he had hung in front of the hole; it paid to be careful no matter how high up you were. Hearing nothing he grabbed his hat and gradually slid out into the cold London air.

As he moved, a sensation passed over him, like that of taking a breath and he felt that familiar change. The first thing to vanish was his tail, sliding back over the top of his trousers. He instantly regretted the change as his thick coat vanished, leaving only the dirty blonde hair on the top of his head in its now chilly wake. His delicate paws grew only slightly into long-fingered hands that gripped the hand-holds to pull him out. The musculature of his legs shifted, shortening his foot and lowering the arch back into place as his knees became more necessary than his ankles as both feet lowered onto the ground in shoes that were a size too small for him. None of these changes were ever painful, but he had to admit that shifting back and forth had taken some getting used to as a child.

He stood outside the squat and moved on the balls of his feet to get the blood flowing again. He rubbed numb hands together to try and return feeling lost to the cold night air before he felt the first rumblings of his perpetually empty stomach. He checked both left and right instinctively before reaching back behind the canvas sheet and pulling out half a loaf of somewhat stale bread and a bottle of water. He took a bite of the bread and took a few sips of the slurry of frozen water before beginning to walk down the ancient stone guttering, stopping just before the disintegrating edge and kneeling down to finish his breakfast.

Cards stood on the top edge of an ancient church, the section under him all but abandoned, although the sign on the gate three stories below said 'renovation'. It was one of the highest accessible points in London and he had managed to find it and keep it all to himself. While he preferred his burrows closer to the ground, he knew he was easier to find there. It had happened time and again, the fog often giving his burrow away. As he ate he watched the city of his birth.

Beneath him, London looked something like he imagined Avalon from the stories would have. The fog was still heavy over the city, mixing with the smog of chimney fires to create the thick, soft blanket London woke to every morning. Like lights in cotton wool, the glow of the gas lamps could still be seen gradually dimming from the centre of the city as they were extinguished for the day. The city was exceptionally silent at that moment, it being still a little too early for even maids to be up and about. That was soon to change though and he knew it. He needed to get moving.

As he finished his last mouthful, Cards could just see the Queen's clock rising out of the fog. Though he had no real concept of how time on a clock worked, he knew that one hand moved far faster than the other and that different combinations occurred at different points in the day. He knew his usual combination of a solid line from top to bottom had not happened yet, but he also knew that that he was just too early for the combination appropriate for this meeting. He was put out that he had left the nest earlier than he needed to, but shrugged at the news. It was always better to be early than risk making someone wait.

Leaning forward, he nimbly grabbed the edge of the stone guttering and swung down. Holding onto the downpipe he slid down two stories, landing on a few crates and barrels always stacked near the wall of the building. He hunkered down and wove his way to street level silently, checking before standing and stepping out onto the street.

The city was still in the grip of the fog, but it receded quickly back to the hillocks as the sun rose. Pulling a pre-rolled cigarette out of his sleep-creased coat, he began to make his way out towards the docks. He wove his way between the derelict buildings, listening intently for any sound of him being followed, but there were none. Walking to the opposite corner of the building, he leaned against the street wall and waited for the sun to clear some of the fog. Knowing he was too early, he lit his little indulgence and waited, watching for the first stirrings of life and motion in the city below.

Cards had been skulking through the backstreets of London for almost a decade now. He had made it his business to know all of the back alleys, hideaways, thoroughfares and over-passes the city had to offer. He had lost his parents to the flu shortly before his fifth birthday and was sent to the workhouse when none of his relatives would take him. He lived there for almost seven years when he made a break for it and ran. He ran halfway across the city and swore to never go back to that place.

The tiny amber light shone brightly for one last moment before it was dropped to the filth below and snuffed out under a worn, thick-soled boot. Cards' lone figure began to make his way through the city. His boots knew the path even though his eyes couldn't see much past arms length. He stepped into one of the market streets and was about to take another step when a pottery cart materialised out of the fog. It came to a sudden halt where he was about to step, cup and pitchers tinkling. His sudden appearance spooked the horse-shifter drawing it who whinnied in surprise and stamped a dinner-plate sized hoof.

"Move it small fry or I'll step on ya next time!" Cards looked up to the face of an angry silver Ayrshire carthorse and smiled apologetically as he tipped his hat.

"Sorry sir!" he chirped as he slid past and back into the fog.

Winding forward down the road, he passed quite a few people now pouring out of their houses on their way to work. The fog began to part under the onslaught of people, revealing the squalor that lived beneath it. As it all began to lift and recede, Cards realised that he was going to run out of time if he wasn't quick. His work had its charms but it also had its downsides. He was perpetually afraid of being followed because someone like him could easily be relieved of his possessions and he knew that. He often used the fog as a cover, but if he didn't hurry, he would be out in the open. Even though foxes were predators and that instinct came in handy for him, they were very delicate. In human form he broke bones easily but, as a fox, he may as well be made of

glass. His light skeleton gave him an edge in speed and agility, but it could not stand up to any kind of attack. He had learnt that the hard way. Looking to the east, he could see the glow of the sun and began to hurry slightly.

He had to duck and dive past obstacles, his frame slipping easily through the hustle and bustle. He got on a roll and moved quite far before overconfidence caught up with him and he bumped into an early morning patron on Fleet Street. The man was a head taller than Cards and could have politely been referred to as rotund. He was dressed in filthy clothes that were probably once quite fine. He had been standing against a wall and Cards was almost sure he had been asleep there until Cards touched him.

“Oi! Wha’cha want?”

Cards recoiled backward and threw up both hands in defence.

“Sorry, no harm meant,” he whimpered before sliding past the man who was staring down his snout at him. He snorted in irritation and Cards took off at a jog. The last thing he needed was to make a swine, twice his size and four times his bodyweight, angry enough to follow him to the meeting.

He jogged all the way down the first convenient alley away from the boar. He made his way down most of it effortlessly, but had to slink round a broken horseless carriage shell with a few sleeping figures inside before finally appearing silently on a corner of Garford Street. There were fewer people here and the fog still hovered overhead, the gas lights still shining bright circles onto the road in the perpetual London smog. Over his beloved Isle of Dogs, the sky was only just starting to turn shades of pink and orange. He realised it was slightly earlier than he thought it was and slowed again. He was in a slightly better part of town and so pulled his hat down a bit and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He didn’t want any of the Peelers to take notice of him; jail was the last thing he needed. He calmly wandered down past the fancier food stalls and market sellers, all sleepily eyeing the stranger in their midst. They were just beginning to unpack their goods and enliven a space that was quiet now, but would become the seething mass of shoppers, messengers, and thieves in just a few hours.

In this part of town, his kind was less prevalent and easier to spot, shifted or not. The few you did see who remained here were like the one he could see in the distance. A human woman in a purple frock had just climbed out of a cab followed by a friend in yellow. They were chatting merrily and ignoring the tower of a man that stood behind

them although very few others did. The monster was almost twice Cards' height and as broad in the chest as a doorframe. Arms like anchor ropes were helping the ladies with their bags before they wandered into a building. The Taurean was dressed impeccably in a footman's suit from his shiny boots to his gleaming horns. He took up a stance in front of the door the women closed just as Cards ducked into Bridge Road.

He turned the corner and the creaking of the dock boards replaced the sound of cobblestones. As he padded under the dimming gas lamps, he took a look at all of the giants on either side, sleeping in their watery beds. As he continued into the warehouse areas, the scenery changed to a topical issue he had only recently been made aware of. Scattered around, here and there, were some of the new machinery that the current establishment had 'gifted' to some of the wealthier warehouse owners in order to make the 'work easier on the men'. Recently invented by someone with a name he couldn't pronounce, the mechanical men, wider at the shoulders than three normal workers were causing quite a stir. These gifts had done exactly as promised and had in fact made the work so easy, quite a few ordinary workers had been given the bronze handshake and sent on their way. The only workers who could hope to keep up were a few of the carthorses that made the docks their home and even for them it was a hard pull.

He made his way back out onto the dock area and was about halfway down his usual stretch when he noticed two ships he didn't recognise and came to a halt. He looked them over to make sure he didn't know them and then took a moment to remember them, their names and their colours. Who knew, maybe the information would be worth something to someone. Satisfied, he continued down and passed the darkened warehouse of Messrs Scott, Russell & Co. He glanced up at the imposing steel doors and smiled with the memory. He had been just ten years old and had just started to make it on his own when he moved down onto the docks. He had made a nest for himself in what he still considered a clever place, but was too small eventually. Not a week after moving in he awoke to a huge commotion on the dockside. The gentlemen who owned the yard had just finished building the SS Great Eastern and he had managed, over the course of the day, to see it launch onto the Thames. Many of the people dockside had had to pay, but from his old nest, he managed to watch it for nothing. It was the only real bit of luck he had ever had, and that was more than a decade ago. As he remembered the huge ship sailing past, he spotted the little staircase and made his way down onto Robert Street.

Suddenly life appeared once more as he landed on the boards below the street level. There was always something going on under London, if you knew where to find it. Many were packing up while others were unloading. Most of the things found here were not supposed to be around, but where there was a demand there would always be a market. Knowing it was safer now; he ducked behind a stack of crates and took a deep breath. He felt his warm red-brown coat seep out of his skin, race down his spine, legs and arms before spreading around his back and chest. His tail cascaded over the top of his trousers and he felt himself shrink slightly as his bone-structure rearranged itself to an even lighter build. He padded out and began to make his way down.

He walked past a group of women in what were once lovely dresses, two mollies standing around and what looked to be a human girl with them. He smiled in their direction and Calico, the older molly, twitched her whiskers in his direction.

“You come skulking around, Fox-kit?” she asked, placing a hand on her shapely hip.

“Won some money last night and looking for a good time?” He smiled and padded past them, tail flicking back and forth.

“Nah Callie, love to be chasing your tail this morning but I unfortunately gotta work.” His chirp earned an indignant purr and a light whack with her fan as he slipped past.

“Cheeky boy, you watch that mouth!” He turned and tipped his hat with a wink before turning again. Unfortunately his momentary distraction made him walk straight into another woman standing on the docks.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. No harm meant,” he said, recoiling instantly from the touch. His ears flattened and his tail lowered instinctively before he looked at the person he had walked into.

Standing there staring at him huffily was one of the most beautiful women he had seen in a long time. She was a small woman, the same height as he was, but that didn’t change the impact her figure had. The explosion of curly chestnut hair that tumbled down her back was held back from her face by a cotton scarf, framing a round face with olive skin. Each ear had only one hoop earring and around her neck was a plain gold chain. She had one hand on her ample hip while the other was held out in defence. The clothing she had on was as eclectic as it came, but the jewellery was what labelled her a gypsy.

Around a solid torso, she was wearing an orange woman's bustier. A long-sleeve olive-coloured jacket wrapped a pair of lithe and clearly powerful arms. Her skirt was a patchwork of greens and oranges that all blended together over a pair of legs he was sure matched the rest of her frame. She wore brown leather boots and matching leather fingerless gloves that fed into an entire forearm full of golden and silver bangles. What captivated Cards however, were her eyes. They were so brown they reached on honey. They were framed by heavy lashes which curled up slightly at the edges, as did the corners of her lips. He could have sworn that those eyes sparkled like stars on water, but didn't have time to dwell as she had begun to speak.

"Careful where you're walking young one, you nearly took me out." Her voice was pleasantly deep and her accent was definitely English, but he struggled to place where.

"Sorry Miss, won't happen again, I promise" he said as he tried to slink past and away. He felt a strong hand grip his upper limb and flinched instinctively. This was not good.

"Hey kid, you can't almost knock me into the Thames and then just wander off." Cards curled even smaller and refused to look up as his tail slipped between his legs. Fighting never got him anywhere, just generally worse injuries.

"Please Miss!" He braced for impact but it never came. Slowly, he opened his eyes to see her looking down at him curiously, the corners of her lips twitching up in a smile.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her eyes dancing in the lamplight. He released slightly but didn't straighten up.

"Aren't you going to hit me, Miss?" She raised a dark eyebrow.

"Why would ya think that? I just wanted to talk to you. Haven't ever seen a fox in London itself for years, you been here long?" Card relaxed a little more and although something about her kept his heart racing, he didn't think he was in immediate physical danger.

"My whole life Miss, all nineteen years of it. I was born in London." The surprise on her face was evident.

"Nineteen? Already a young man and so brave to stay here. I remember when they used to hunt your kind for sport. I thought there were none left." Cards was not sure if she was joking or not, not that it mattered at that juncture.

“I’ve never met another one Miss; I just thought they were somewhere else. London’s a big town,” he said looking around.

“So it is but you still haven’t told me what you’re in such a hurry for.” Cards was acutely aware that she was still holding his upper arm and that the Thames was just below them.

“I ... ah ... I’m on my way to a meeting Miss, for work.”

“Lynn,” she said with a small smile. He blinked.

“Wha?” he asked, not too sure of the context.

“My name isn’t Miss, its Lynn. Use it.”

“Yes Miss... Lynn. Yes Lynn.” She smiled and the grip on his arm loosened slightly. “You’re on your way for a meeting with whom? And what’s your name, Fox?” Cards did not like where this was going, but he didn’t look forward to a morning swim in the Thames either.

“Name’s Cards and it’s just a drop I’m going to. I move packages; take whatever needs to be moved from where it is, to where it’s going. I’m a runner, with Romulus.” She instantly let go of his arm and he fought the instinct to take off. She looked at him from a different angle and took a step forward.

“You run for Romulus? Are they still going?” Cards’ tail was once again between his legs but he didn’t step back.

“Yes ... Lynn and I’m really sorry but I’m gonna be late.” She took a step back and smiled again.

“Well then you’d better scamper. Goodbye Cards.” He looked at her cautiously.

“Goodbye ... Lynn,” he said as he tipped his hat to her and took off running.

He knew he was really late as he made his way down onto the short, rocky beach below the dock. He took refuge deep in the darkness under the boards to make sure he couldn’t be seen. He didn’t think so, but he sincerely hoped he didn’t miss them or he may as well go for a swim, they would make him swim anyway. Trying to calm his nerves, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his small pouch of tobacco and a pipe. He packed and lit it quietly, cupping his hands in order to protect the match-flame from the river mist. He took a deep breath of smoke and smiled before exhaling over the river. The pipe tobacco was a pleasant break from the sour smell of the water, beautiful as she could be in the noonday sun. He took a deep breath to calm down and regain his senses.

He sat back against a rock and exhaled again, this time the smoke clearing revealed the view to the newest attraction of the London Docks, the *Dancer*. Still attached to her mooring a few yards above Rotherhithe Street, she floated on the opposite bank of the River. As the first rays of diluted light fell on her top, he could just see the first of what he assumed were the pilots, crew and hands climbing the huge rope ladder to bring her to life. He had no idea why the stupid thing was so popular, but had to admit that it was rather imposing even when moored. It was a huge Zeppelin with 'Romany Carnival, Circus and Menagerie' painted in huge letters across the side. It supposedly housed a full menagerie, a stage and an area for open performances. It belonged to the Romany Carnival that had arrived in town about a week earlier, one of the best in the world or so they claimed and the only one that travelled by air.

Just after the *Dancer* had arrived on the London Docks he, like many others, wanted to know what the giant egg was all about. A few weeks later he had fallen into a conversation with a slightly inebriated man at the Skipping Stallion, a pub near his squat. According to this man, the *Dancer* was one of the new Zeppelins that had been recently invented as a form of air travel. Apparently they had already been around a few years, but were the province of the military and explorers. Originally they were used to carry soldiers, supplies and building materials, but the *Dancer* was the first of its kind to carry passengers. He was not the only one who was sceptical of it, but then again those who were as suspicious as he was, oddly, were also those who could not afford the 50p per person fare.

Sitting on the rock, he stared at the thing decked in its ribbons and regalia. He wondered if Lynn was part of the Carnival, she certainly seemed the type. He began to imagine her figure in one of the costumes, walking a tightrope. He smiled as the image changed to her taming a lion or other fierce creature. Or she could have been one of those fortune tellers who could tell you your fate and change it, for a small fee. He became so lost in his imagination he didn't hear the boat pull up next to him on the shore, starting as wood grated against stone. He got a hold of himself quite quickly, but realised he needed to be a lot more awake; fading into dreamland like that could have been dangerous.

"Morning Gentlemen," he greeted the three damp sailors, only one of which acknowledged him.

"Have a good trip then?"

"Shut up fox. The others'll hear ya. Take the stuff and piss off."

He thought about replying, realised the redundancy and just saluted instead. He pulled a hiding pouch from under his jacket and arranged it under his arms as they opened the hidden sections where the goods were. It was a smaller haul this time, but he also knew that this haul was going to be... the one.

\* \* \*

After walking the length and breadth of the Isle of Dogs, Cards decided to make a pit stop. Wandering down a few familiar alleyways, he finally found the place he was looking for. A little section of nothing special tucked away in the middle of an unremarkable alley was the ultimate disguise for Madeline's Pub. From the outside, it looked like a garbage heap in front of what used to be, quite possibly, a halfway respectable building. Now it looked as though it ought to be condemned. He wandered up slowly in the early morning shadow, ducked the 'No Entry, Livestock Only' sign and walked into Madeline's Pub just as the sun hit the top of the Old Bailey.

He instantly had to step to one side to miss the two men walking out as he entered, tipping his hat to them as they scowled and the one closest elbowed him into the corner. Stopping there, he removed his coat and hat to shake off the condensation. Unlike most customers however, he quickly donned them again before taking a long look around the dark and smoky front room. The usuals were all still there, pink-cheeked and merry from an evening of revelry and their week's wages now in the lockbox. Still sitting amongst them, their aging queen, Madeline, had drunk more than half of them combined. Good news for him, he wasn't her favourite person at the moment.

The bar itself was an old pigpen, situated in the middle of the front room. A few planks had been nailed to it to create a rather sturdy counter surface with the spare drink in a cellar below the middle. Around the bar were a few stools and around them were a variety of mismatched couches and tables with chairs that formed a maze bordered by three of the walls. The ceiling was also quite low, a few of the patrons having to duck to miss the ceiling beams.

Off to the right hand side was an area with a few old and broken sofas cordoned off with planks. It had been at one point another pig pen, but was now a dais in front of a

door in a wooden wall which led off to the back rooms where business deals of all sorts took place. Behind that wall, he could hear the whines of the weekend's entertainment waiting to be brought out to fight to the death. Cards in and of himself had no moral problem with dog-fighting; he just found cards and dice more reliable to bet on than animals. He could see there were people on the couches and as he peered through the haze they slowly came into focus.

Sitting on one of the sofas was the infamous Owain Langton, owner of the back rooms fighting rings and rival to Cards' own boss Leofric of Romulus. Across from him he saw some poor devil apparently trying to make a deal or beg for mercy, Cards was never sure which. He continued to look around and as his eyes fell on a figure on a couch, his ears lay perfectly flat. Sitting peacefully, but staring straight at him, was an English Bull-Terrier with a tattered black ear but otherwise flawless brown coat. His eyes met with the dog's and he was sure it was giving him the nastiest look he had seen in weeks. He noticed it seemed to be sitting next to a large man he was sure he had seen recently. However, his mind was too busy trying not to panic to try and think where. He felt an unnatural chill race down his spine and quickly looked for the nearest safe place away from the dog.

He scampered to the left side bar, putting it between himself, Madeline who was between the sofas and hound, and the hound itself. Feeling irrationally safer, he managed to recover just as a young woman appeared from under the counter with two mugs. She was about seventeen, only a few years younger than Cards, but far more baby-faced. She was going to be quite the woman soon, but at the moment encompassed the definition of buxom wench. His brain calculating faster than he realised, he flashed a roguish smile at Madeline's eldest daughter.

"Ello Sarah, 'ow you this fine morning?" Sarah looked up in surprise, the apples of her cheeks instantly turning pink as she just about dropped the mugs she was holding.

"Cards? What you doing 'here?" She glanced behind her at her mother before leaning closer. "You know mum's gonna have a fit if she sees you..." she said in a harsh whisper.

"Ah, that's if she sees me, and you know me," he said, leaning in as well.

"Well, what do you want, why you back?"

"I'm all but done with my morning deliveries but needed a break to see something lovely," he whispered as he caressed her cheek.

“Cards...” her cheeks went from pink to scarlet as she looked away. “Well, I guess I...”

“Come on love, what can ya do for a poor beggar like me? I’m dying here.” Sarah looked up again and bit her lower lip. She hesitated before reaching under the bar and handing him a half-mug of beer.

“Someone left it and I ain’t thrown it out yet. Best I can do, now vanish,” she whispered.

“Ta love, you’re a peach,” he said, lifting the cup and winking in thanks.

It was true that he had been told to not come back, but how was he supposed to resist a beauty like Sarah? Also, what Madeline didn’t know didn’t hurt him. Sarah wandered off to refill glasses and he took a look around at what could help him pass the time.

He had left to catch a few hours of sleep, planning fully to catch the rest after his deliveries, and they were nearly done. He had dropped all the less important boxes off at the small places first, but he still had the most important one of all on his person. He had been working for the Romulus crew and their leader Leofric for a while and they were by far the best group he had met. They paid on time and treated him better than anyone else had done. He also knew that if he showed up at their door in the wee hours of the morning, he was more likely to be greeted with a shotgun than a smile so decided to deliver those packages last. He still had the small boxes, covered in brown paper in the possum pouch under his shirts, but considering it was no bigger than his palm, he knew that there would be no problem hiding it under all the layers he generally wore.

As he scanned the plank-walled room, he squinted through to see if anyone he knew was still there. It took him some time to make them all out, but there was an unmistakable silhouette in a corner of the room and he made a bee-line for it. Earle Knuckler was an oddly proportioned man with a deceptively tall frame. While in actuality taller than most men in the room, he stooped so far that he was barely taller than Cards. The reason for the stoop was his obvious massive shoulders and extraordinarily long arms with hands that hung to his mid-thigh. This titanic upper half was then sadly paired with a rather small waist and stubby legs. Cards had always had a suspicion about his friend’s odd shape and impressive strength. He was virtually sure that his dark friend was a primate shifter but the opportunity had never arisen to ask, so Cards still didn’t know the answer.

Noting his friend currently huddled over what had to have been Knuckler's last drink of the evening, Cards wove his way over through the maze. He slumped into a recently vacated chair, giving its previous scowling occupant his most charming smile before taking a sip from his drink.

"Ello Knuck, you been 'ere since I left?" he asked. The seat he had chosen was great, not only because it was next to the back door but because he could see Madeline clearly from here, just in case she saw him. He could also see the man with the untethered Bull-Terrier from here, although he couldn't see the dog. His preoccupation was noted by his large friend with a broad smile.

"Yea. How you doing? You done for the day?" Satisfied that Madeline was occupied by her drunks and the dog was nowhere to be seen, Cards sat back in the rough wooden chair and relaxed for the first time since he woke up, taking another sip and feeling excitement begin to build.

"Me? Yea, I'm fine." He managed a moment before sitting forward again.

"Actually I'm more than fine, I'm fantastic." Knuckler raised an eyebrow.

"Fantastic, huh?"

"Yeah, absolutely fantastic," he said.

"And why are you ... absolutely fantastic?"

"Why? I've finally done it. I'm finally going to be on the map; I'm gonna be someone people know the name of. I know it's taken years and I know there have been a few misses along the way but I finally have it in the bag. Literally." He leaned closer with a genuinely excited smile. Knuckler knew this story though; this wasn't the first time he'd heard this speech.

"Oh yeah, and how do you plan to get that right this time?" asked Knuckler, also leaning forward and steepling his massive fingers.

"With ..." he was about to move when the brown dog leaped up onto the chair next to Cards and he dove off his own. It came to stop and just sat there, panting happily as Knuckler roared with laughter. Cards reappeared, his ears flat and teeth bared.

"Come on you scaredy-fox, where's your spine? She just wants some attention, don't you girl?" Knuckler was gently scratching the dog behind the ears and she seemed to be enjoying it.

"My spine is currently trying to jump out my throat, thanks for asking." He slowly slid back onto his chair, his ears still flat.

“What I was going to say was that I have this.” Cards reached up under his shirt and pulled out three small boxes wrapped in brown paper.

“Boxes? How are boxes gonna put you on the map?” his friend asked, and Cards’ head dropped to his arm for a moment.

“Friend, it’s not the box, it’s what’s in the box and the fact that I have to deliver the boxes. Ones he ordered personally. Ones that only I’m supposed to touch before they go to him. A personal delivery will mean that he will know my name, but more importantly, he will know that I’m reliable. And if he knows that, he is more likely to use me again for bigger things, once he trusts me I can start moving up, understand? And after I start moving up I can get a real house and a girl and clothes and food and maybe even take a trip on the *Dancer* and...” Cards rattled off into silence, staring happily into the middle distance. Knuckler wasn’t biting.

“So, if it’s so important, what’s inside it?” Cards, whose eyes had been twinkling with the ideas running through his mind, looked like he had been brought back to earth with a sharp bump. He looked down at the little boxes in his hand, shifting his hat with the other.

“What’s inside it? It’s a... well you see, it’s a... kind of a thing...I think,” he said pulling the box back towards himself and looking down at it. A moment of silence passed before Knuckler continued.

“A... thing?” Cards smiled.

“Yes, exactly, a thing.” Knuckler blinked again fighting back a smile.

“So is this thing valuable then?”

Cards looked down at the box again and contemplated it before smiling up at Knuckler. He had been so distracted by the conversation, Cards had forgotten about Madeline. It was at that moment that Madeline looked across the bar and recognised the face that sat there.

“Jackson Cards Benish! Get your sorry behind out of my bar! You stay away from my Sarah!” Cards started at the sound of his full name and took Madeline’s rapidly colouring face as his cue to hightail it out of the bar again. The dog leapt off the chair as he downed the rest of the pint before slamming it down and looking at Knuckler.

“Of course it’s valuable mate, why else would it be wrapped up? Now listen, I have to go before she finds her broomstick. See you around!”

With that, he slipped the box back under his shirt, grabbed his jacket close and hopped out the nearby back door. As he left, he passed a few guys outside, leaning against a few crates. He automatically tipped his hat to them before taking a step forward. He had only seen them for a moment and his brain had registered them as familiar, but was still placing them when one of them called his name.

“Cards?”

“Ey?”

He stopped at the sound of his name. As he turned, he felt his entire world grow cold.

## CHAPTER 3

The tumbled crystal glass sailed across the room and smashed into the automaton holding a drinks tray near the door. The amber liquid spilled down its fake dinner jacket, but seemed to have no other ill effect on it. It just stood in place, waiting for an order. Leofric grabbed the letter and began to pace the room, muttering under his breath as he paced.

The morning had begun so well for him. He had woken up in a warm bed to a beautiful sunrise with a full breakfast waiting. The promise of a day of good business was ahead of him with an evening of entertainment to follow. After donning his robe, he had wandered downstairs and taken a whiskey to read the morning paper and his mail. He ran a few legitimate businesses, mostly to cover for what really made him money. As he opened to page three of *The Londoner*, a small hand written letter had fallen out from between the pages. It was plain white writing paper with a basic seal, things you could get at any post office. It was only when he picked it up that he smelled the perfume. He knew that scent, the one that always clung to the back of his throat.

Suspicious, he opened the letter slowly. The script inside was beautiful, but as he opened it up completely something metal almost fell out. It was a dog tag, an ancient owner's tag. The moment he saw it, His heart skipped a few beats and his hands went cold. He shoved it into his pocket and fell backwards into his armchair.

*Hello Leo,*

His heart skipped a few more beats. No one had called him that in decades, no one was that brave anymore. Only one person had ever called him by less than his full name. His mind filled with an odd sort of buzzing sound and thoughts began to race around all at once in jumbled order. The only word he could currently make out was why. Why would she send him a letter now, after so many years? Why did she pick now to finally speak to him? He'd had an idea that she had survived, but he honestly didn't think she would ever contact him again. At least that had been his hope. His mind flashed to the last time he saw her, before he could shut the thought down. She had been laughing before the

match, eternally confident in the result of the fight, always knowing the champion. They had been a unit, a pair that was unbeaten and that, he had convinced himself, had been their eventual downfall.

There was so much money that could be made of a pair that was never beaten but, as he found out, even more could be made when they finally did fall. There had been so much at stake, so much riding on those fights of long ago. Many people, most of them owners, had approached him over the years. Those men and women had asked so many times for him to throw the fight. At first he told them he would never, but over the years, the amounts they offered grew to staggering heights and his resolve crumbled in the face of the wealth. He finally agreed to throw the fight if they would make sure it was a fight to the death. His fingers tightened around the crystal glass in his hand. All his dreams came true that night, save one. Her laughing face, that lovely hair, vanished from sight and was replaced by the aftermath of that fight. Those monsters had lied, not about the money, but about the method. The fight was not over quickly, it dragged on for almost ten minutes.

She took all comers, or so she boasted; so she got three of the best opponents in the game in one ring. The fight was horrific, blood everywhere. Nothing that could be done to save her, or so he thought standing there. He took his money and ran. He blinked away the memory and took a sip from the tumbler before daring to read on.

*Been a long time hasn't it? For me, it's been a bit longer.*

Almost forty years, he realised, since he had last seen her. Four decades since he had run to the underbelly of London and begun his own business there. He had started right where the two of them had left off those few weeks earlier. For the first few years, it had been him fighting his fighter in full-shift, just like the two of them had as partners. The only difference this time, he had a new handler. He had used that con for years, but it had become less and less necessary as he learned what to look for in the dog.

He had been dog-fighting for as long as he could remember. He had fallen into it, somewhat literally when he was just a youth. He'd wandered into a bar where fights were being held and in his curiosity to see what everyone was yelling about. He thought it looked interesting and snuck into a cage at the back and shifted further than any shifter he knew. Before he knew what was happening he was pushed into the ring. He

was forced to fight the challenger that night not for money, but for survival. As he found out, survival was something he was, in fact, quite good at.

*You're probably wondering why I sent you this after so many years. Truthfully, before now, I had nothing to say to you.*

He was sure that was a lie, she always had something to say. He was sure she would outlive them all just to have the last word. He had met her shortly after he began fighting. She had always been around the fighting pits, the young Romany girl, and she seemed to know what was going on, who to talk to and how it all was done. She knew how to stay safe and he knew she wasn't afraid to order for the kill if it meant winning. The first fight he saw her in, her dogs managed to take down three competitors in an evening. He didn't say anything to her until she approached him. They spent quite a lot of time talking, but eventually, he shared his secret with her and she with him. From that moment they were partners. He would be her fighter when she was challenged and she would become his. They had an uncommon gift, the both of them, and it worked spectacularly to their advantage until that one evening so long ago.

*After we split that night, there was nothing left to say, but old demons are not the reason for this note.*

He wasn't sure why, but that bothered him more. He knew she was angry; she had every right to be poisonously angry. He'd stacked the odds so high against her, he had caused her downfall, and he was her reason for losing. He was the cause of the only fight he had ever seen her lose. So the fact that she claimed she wasn't angry or upset made her unpredictable and in his world, it was something he tended to avoid. He knew she had something planned, he could feel it, and it unnerved him. Resourceful was something she had taught him to be. If she wasn't calling up old wrongs, then what was it that she wanted? He doubted it was money; she never really cared for it, so much as what it could do for her, but still, what was the point of contacting him now?

*I need your help.*

Of all the sentences that could have followed, this was only one of the remote possibilities he had thought of, but there it was. She needed him, she hadn't in almost

half a century, but she needed him now. What for? What could she need from him that she couldn't find someone else to do it or find a way to do it herself?

*Something of mine was taken, something really dear to me. It was stolen from the Dancer and I would really like it back.*

He blinked twice to make sure he didn't read that incorrectly. Someone had stolen something from the *Dancer*? Well, they were either commendably brave or terminally stupid. He did not penetrate her world very far during their partnership, but he got far enough to know that you did not try to take something that was not yours. Her people were not kind and he had a feeling that whoever had taken something from them was in for a sticky demise. The Romany Family had a reputation for both their generosity and their brutality. It was early in his stay there when he got see their version of justice first hand. They had picked up a new performer at the last stop. He had been a quiet man but they were half way to the next town when that same performer had been over one of the female boat-hands. He had been following her since they had last landed and he had joined but he had not spoken to her. One of the other deckhands heard the commotion and pulled him off her. His excuse was that it was consensual. It was his misfortune that the girl in question was Lynn's cousin's daughter. Lynn's punishment was that he was stripped of all clothing and tied to the inside of the bow. The balloon climbed to its maximum height. It took the man four days to die from the cold.

*I know that it's going to make it into London in the next few weeks and I know you are a resourceful fellow. Please would you reacquire it for me?*

Her being complimentary was something of a surprise, but as he thought about the scenario, the more he was resistant to it. She wanted him, out of the blue, to drop everything and try to find something without a description. His indignation was quickly outgrowing his respect for her, however he realised that it was not caused by what was being asked of him. Somewhere deep in his soul he was injured that the only reason she had gotten back in contact was because the thief was stupid enough to come to London. If they had gone anywhere else, she would have never written to him. This realisation combined with the anger he already felt, culminated into a resistance to the idea. He convinced himself that the problem was he had no idea what he was looking for and where to send it. The *Dancer* did not exactly have a postal address.

*The Carnival flies to London in a few weeks time, so my associates will pick it up then. I would really appreciate it if you would do this little thing for me, after all, we were a pair once.*

No. That couldn't happen. They were coming here? To London? His heart skipped a beat, but the letter implied that she wasn't coming with them. The Romany Family was huge, she could have been anywhere. Her audacity astounded him. She was honestly expecting him to do this. Why on earth would... then it occurred to him. We were a pair once. The dog tag. He felt the breath leave his chest. She knew the secret and she could have told anyone. For her it was immaterial, but for him, it would guarantee the end of an empire.

*Have a good walk,*

The line made him tighten his grip and he could feel his face turning red from anger and embarrassment. She had some gall to do this; that was all he was willing to admit. He had been certain all these years that she was dead but he should have shot her, just to make sure. She knew everything and if she told anyone he was worse than sunk. Running as your own fighter was about as crooked as it got. If she told anyone that he was a full-shift, he would never fight again.

*Lynn*

He crumpled the letter and threw it into the fireplace. He looked down at the tumbler in his hand, fine cracks where he had gripped it. His anger finally ticking to boiling point he threw the glass and stormed out of the room.

That was three weeks ago.

He stood at the window overlooking the docks, another whiskey in his hand. The fire had burned low hours ago, but he hadn't moved to fix it. The fog still lay over like a thick woollen blanket. That blanket had swallowed all his and others' sins for so long, he was sure that was what made it so thick. It seemed to refuse to move as the sun began to rise over his little kingdom, but like everything else, it would eventually give way. Leofric

shifted his weight and fatigue began to seep into his bones. He hadn't really slept the night before; all he wanted was for this to end.

He had managed to locate the item he was supposed to find about a week previously. After her letter had arrived, he had puzzled over what he was meant to be looking for. It was only after his temper died down that he realised there was only one thing that Lynn would want back badly enough to ask him for help, her mother's antique pendant. It was an amethyst cabochon set in sterling silver. In the centre of the cabochon was sapphire held in place by silver filigree. The entire thing was less than twice the size of a thumbnail. It also had a very distinctive pattern around the edges. It had been passed to the women in Lynn's family, supposedly from medieval times. He highly doubted that from the workmanship, but he never said anything. It was a set piece to her usual attire. It was also, as far as he could understand, connected to the *Dancer*. He knew that when Lynn and her necklace were not on board, the zeppelin's massive propeller engines didn't move. The piece in and of itself was valuable, but not worth dying for. Unfortunately for the group who stole it, they did not realise that to Lynn and the Romanys, it was worth killing for.

He had no idea who the group was who had the gall to break into the *Dancer* zeppelin and take something. Through a web of contacts he found someone who wanted to sell a trinket very much like the one he knew to be hers, but in Ireland. Sure enough, he made an appointment to buy it and was sent an image of the correct pendant. His boys purchased it, but they had transport issues and were stuck in Ireland until that morning. He knew the ship smuggling the pendant and a variety of other items were only arriving today, probably pulling into port now.

The second problem was choosing the pickup. He eventually chose the witless wonder Jackson Benish, better known as Cards. The boy was loyal to a fault, but he was also ignorable. He knew nothing about the things he picked up and had not lost a package of importance to date. No one thought he would ever be given something of actual value, so they didn't try. He was supposed to be at the door within the hour and then Leofric's nightmare would be over.

## CHAPTER 4

Cards felt them both beside him before he saw them. The two men stepped from behind crates on either side of the alley and grabbed his arms, easily lifting the fox about half a foot off the ground before he could move.

“Wha... what cha want?” He looked from one to the other, hoping against hope they were just muggers.

“Shut it,” was all that came along with a left hook to the side of his head and the world went dark. There was silence.

For a moment, he was sure he had been asleep and it had all been a bad dream. He tried to smile, his hopes safe in that illusion. He had just one solitary moment of peace before the first thud. It tore through his skull, making him feel like it just split open. There was a moment's respite and then other, silence, and then another. He was almost sure that someone was trying to beat him to death with a blunt object. The only thing missing was that all too familiar feeling of warm liquid seeping through his fur. That was curiously absent. It took a moment but Cards came to the realisation that he'd been knocked out and he didn't know for how long. It took a while for his brain to process the thought but as soon as it did, his stomach did a somersault.

“Ah, sleepin' beauty finally decided to join us.” He heard the voice and his eyes flew open. He was in a rather large room, the roof stories above his head. In a state of disrepair, the room was leaking puddles of what he hoped was water nearby. The air inside was dank, cold and generally unpleasant while an odd, sweet smell he couldn't place permeated everything. There were huge iron skeletons vaguely reminiscent of the ships that he had seen all his life strewn about the huge area. He was in a dry dock warehouse.

He looked ahead of him and it didn't improve his mood or his chances for survival. On a sofa just off to the left of him, reclined a rather large man. He was dressed in a linen shirt now creased and sweat stained from more than a day's wear. His suit was clearly tailored to fit him with a corduroy jacket hanging over the arm. He was quite short and a little dumpy, though no one would ever dare say so, with a chin that quite

literally lay on his chest when his trademark cigar was not occupying his mouth. He was known to wheeze when worked up, and often needed the assistance of his two guards to get out of the old sofas that he conducted his business meetings upon. He was known everywhere he went and never for being the gentleman he pretended he was. This man's name was Owain Langton.

Standing scattered around were three of the meanest bully-boys Cards knew. The one leading them was called Bert Ashdown. He was known around London as one of the oldest and most cantankerous fists for hire. He was a cart-horse shifter, but looked nothing like his younger, healthy, sober brethren. Unlike those generally strapping colts and stallions trying to make their way on the docks, Bert was a rather thin, and long in the tooth stallion although few would say it to him flat. He was well beyond rehabilitation for his legendary Opium habit, but all of this did not take away from the fact that he still hit like a prize boxer. Suddenly the acrid sweet smell in the air made perfect sense, there was a pipe nearby. On the couch next to Owain was the brown dog again, and Cards realised that she must have been one of his new fighters.

Cards was still a fox and hanging from his paws in midair. He looked up and realised they had fitted the ropes to his paws. If he shifted back now, he would cut his own hands off. He had to stay a fox and that was dangerous for his health.

“Good evening Mr. Cards, it’s been a while.” Cards began to feel the panic rising in his chest, the unpleasant imploding of his stomach making him draw his legs up a little.

“Hello Mr. Langton.” He looked around and the other three.

“Wha ... can I do ... fo you?” Without a word or motion, the two flanking him stepped forward and each took him roughly by the shoulders. His tail was firmly wedged between his legs as he tried predicting why he was there.

“Oh Mr. Cards, it’s not what you can do, but what you’ve done.”

Owain stood up from the couch with difficulty that no one commented on. No one said a word and eventually Cards filled the silence.

“What... I’ve ... done?” Owain took a few steps forward, followed by Bert.

“Why yes. You work for Leofric don’t you, of the Romulus?” Cards said nothing as his pulse pounded in his chest.

“You deliver packages for him, yes?” Cards swallowed hard as he nodded once.

“Did you know that some of those packages hurt quite a few of my deals?” Cards shook his head, his ears laying flush with his skull. Owain said nothing, but stepped out of Bert’s way.

“Let me explain. Each of the packages you deliver is for my competitor. That hurts ... my business.” As Owain spoke, Bert slammed his left fist into Cards’ midsection, throwing most of his weight behind it. Cards wheezed as all the air flooded out of his lungs and refused to return. He tried to take a breath, but the wind taken out of him, refused to return. He tried to curl up to defend his belly but the hands restraining him for the most part in the perfect place. Cards looked up at Bert and tried to shy away from the larger man, but that didn’t even seem to break his or Owain’s stride.

“Every time you help him to fix a fight...” another blow to the midsection, “it hurts ...” another blow “my business.”

One final blow and the hands holding his shoulders released. Cards leaned forward pretty sure his ribs were cracked and tried to curl up into as much of a ball as he could while still held down. He was gasping for breath and unable to think, the pain in his head and stomach threatened to make the world dark again. Tears began to seep from the corners of his eyes, blurring the world again as he tried to get his breath back and understand why what he had done was not good enough. Bert crossed his arms and stood a pace away.

“It took a long time to trace you, I’ll give you that. It took a while to search all the holes and hovels you hide in, but it wasn’t all that hard in the end. We manage...” Owain took a half-step forwards and Cards shied away. Struggling to speak with his lack of breath, he sputtered out.

“I... I’m so...rry, sorry. I... I didn’t k... I didn’t mean...”

“And that’s supposed to make it better? To get me my money back?” Owain waved a dismissive hand at Cards. Bert began to close in again. Owain walked over and stroked the hound behind the ears. Cards had no idea what else to do.

“P... please Mr. Langton...” Bert’s face was so close Cards could see him clearly through his tears and was utterly terrified. Cards could smell the cloying sweetness that permeated his clothing and knew that Bert could feel nothing of what he was doing. Owain turned around again.

“Please Mr. Langton what?” Cards had to pull all the courage he had left together just to speak over Bert’s shoulder.

“Please... some...something I ... can do? Make it better?”

Owain turned and took a step back towards him, Bert backing off. He stared at Cards intently for a moment before reaching into his pocket and pulling out the boxes from Cards’ possum pouch.

“What are these?” Cards sniffed and blinked trying to see clearly.

“Th... those are the packages I was supposed to deliver this morning.”

Owain sighed in frustration.

“Well done genius, but what is inside them?”

Cards looked from the small packages to Owain, his confusion about the question evident in his voice.

“I... I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

Cards looked from the boxes to Owain and back again.

“I mean I don’t know sir. I never look inside; I just take them to and from where I’m told.”

Owain looked as though he was ready to slap him and Cards recoiled slightly.

“I...if I look in the boxes, i... it could cost me my life sir.”

Owain tilted his head in disbelief.

“Are you telling me you have never opened any of these?”

Cards nodded, the tears still running tracks through his fur.

“I... ah... I never thought it was worth it.”

Owain threw his arms up in frustration and waddled off towards the couch.

“What good are you then?”

Cards balked at the noise in his head, making his ears ring.

“I was hoping to know what was so important that your boss would risk the ports at the end of the week.” Owain looked down at the boxes.

“Where were you supposed to drop these?” Cards said nothing until Bert placed a hand over his head and began to squeeze.

“T...to Leofric himself!” Bert’s grip slackened. “To his front door sir. That’s why I had them so late this morning. Usually I’m done before I come to Madeline’s.”

Owain looked at the boxes again.

“To him personally?” Cards nodded and Owain looked contemplative.

“Then there must be something in here he wants badly and that gives me an idea...” He smiled at the three boys and Cards felt a sinking sensation in his belly.

\* \* \*

Leofric sat at his office desk, glancing out of the window every so often. It was long past midday and the boy still hadn't shown. Although he was the picture of calm and routine on the outside, he was beside himself on the inside. If he didn't deliver that trinket, Lynn would make good on her promise. Of that he had no doubts; she was never one to say something she did not mean. The mixture of emotions that rode under the surface was not something he had felt in a long time. The overwhelming emotion that he felt was anger. Anger at the situation he found himself in, anger at the audacity of that little woman to involve him in her problems and anger that he did not have the spine to stand up to her.

Underneath the anger, there was fear. He was afraid that she would ruin everything he had worked so hard to build. He was afraid of what would happen when his true nature became public, what his competitors would do once they found out how his game worked. Everyone cheated in these games, but it was respected since everyone would do it given the opportunity. His gift however, put him above the rest, he had a cheat none of them ever would use and for that they would take him out of the game, permanently. Sitting in his office seething, he refused to admit that there was something under the fear, sadness. He was hurt that it took four decades, and something of hers getting stolen, to speak to him again and then only to make a deal. It hurt, however irrationally, to think that she never actually wanted to see him again.

He sat there quietly until a knock at the office door startled him.

“Yes?” One of the many dim-witted that roamed his corridors opened the door and bowed.

“Sir, there is a communication for you. It's important.”

He blinked for a moment before the message sunk in through his own thoughts. He rose out of the chair and pulled his jacket back on. He was sure that whatever it was, it was not good news. He straightened his suit before following the lunk to the communicator. The device, relatively new on the market but very useful, resembled a brass and glass sphere about half a metre in diameter, filled with smoke and fitted into an end table. The brass half was at the bottom. A thin spider-web of wires all linking to a

crystal prism in the centre separated the two. Someone with a communicator or using a public communicator for a fee could contact you through it. The sending prism took an image of the light and transferred it to the receiving prism, the glass dome holding the image like a reflection. Sound was transferred through wires in the support's feet linked to the city network.

As he arrived, the communicator was turned back on and his heart felt as though it had skipped a beat. He didn't have time to speak when the image greeted him first.

"Good afternoon, Leofric." He had to fight back a scowl as at the pudgy triumphant face reflected in the glass.

"Owain, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Owain looked like a kid in a candy-store and Leofric was just about ready to hit him.

The two had been rivals from the moment they had met. Leofric had struck it lucky enough to allow him to set up shop in London and his moxy was all that kept it running. Almost no one knew how he did business and he made sure that no one but himself, saw the bigger picture. Since his big win, he had stuck his fingers carefully into a number of pies; each with their own problems and returns, but no one knew just how much he had going on at any given time. The mystery kept him powerful and kept him safe.

Owain on the other hand was a different story. He was an ordinary human, born with a proverbial silver spoon in his mouth, and from the day he could walk, he had been taking silver and gold away from others. He began a life of crime and swindling from an early age and got rather good at it. Good enough that his family sent him to London just to be rid of him. The Langtons had been a good family, no one knows what happened to Owain, but they are no longer so highly thought of.

The two came into the business of dog-fighting in London at almost the same time. In another universe they could have been brothers but here, they were the most well-known rivals in town. They were in straight competition with each other in almost every area and lately, Leofric had been winning. The face that reflected to him on the fog smiled.

"Always so polite Leofric, your mother would have been so proud."

"Owain, what is it that you want, I am actually quite busy and you wouldn't call just to be social, so speak."

Owain scowled for a moment and then smiled again.

“That’s the Leofric we all know to love, rude as a fishwife.” Owain stepped out of the way and Leofric’s heart turned to ice. Behind him he could see the unmistakable silhouette of the fox hanging in midair between two humans. Suddenly, the boy’s tardiness made sense and all Leofric wanted to do was scream at the timing of it all. Why did she have to appear now, when he was so busy? Why did Owain have to choose that morning of all mornings, to take Cards and, he assumed, his delivery? Why did Cards not deliver it as he always did? All of these questions burned in his mind as Owain continued to speak.

“As you can see Leofric, I have something of yours. I think you might want it back.” Leofric could not believe the words he was saying, but spoke them.

“Let the boy go Owain, he has no idea what he carries around for me.” Owain looked to Cards and laughed.

“Not before we make a deal.” The picture zoomed out slightly to show the rest of the room as Owain stepped away from the communicator. Leofric waited for Owain to finish having his moment of glory, he refused to be baited into asking the obvious questions. Owain seemed to be waiting for him, but in the face of his excitement at finally having beaten Leofric, gave in a few moments later. He began to pace slowly to and fro in front of the communicator.

“You see Leofric; I know that this little mutt of yours has been delivering to all my competitors for a long time. Some of yours too, to throw the trail, and it almost worked.”

Leofric kept his best game face on to disguise the fact that he had no idea what Owain was on about. It was true that he had been making deals that would hurt Owain, but that was how this business was run. You had to know who the winner was going to be and the only way to do that was to make sure you knew yourself. Most of the time it was unaltered talent, but every so often things could not be left to chance and that was when deals had to be made. What confused the situation was that he would not have trusted the Spineless wonder-child with that type of delivery. To Leofric’s knowledge, Cards had never carried any messages or packages that were important; he only carried things that were not too much of a problem if they went missing. He carried memos, some cash, but not much, boxes of betting slips and other such things. That’s why Leofric had chosen him, he hoped this trend would protect the boy, apparently not. Owain had the wrong man at the worst moment possible. The irony was that if he had

picked anyone else on any other day, there could have been a chance that he might have been correct. Cards could have been delivering the slips telling Leofric how much Owain had lost on a fight but the fates had other plans. Now he was just in the way.

Owain continued to pace.

“I know you have been setting up deals that end with me deep in the red ink.” Leofric stood his ground, crossing his arms. Some of his frustration and anger had combined into a rather hard humour toward the situation. The fates clearly had it in for him and while he did not blame them, he did not approve of the situation at all. He said nothing and so Owain continued.

“I know you have been doing this for months, I just could never actually find out who was moving the documents. Now, I want you to know that I’m a little tired of it. I’m tired of being left in the dark and...” he stopped pacing and looked straight towards Leofric. “So, to try and recover some of my money, I want to make a deal.”

Leofric was now intrigued in the face of all that had happened in the last few weeks. If all the Owain wanted was a little money, it would not be hard to organise - But Leofric was not sure where the game was going so kept his cards close to his chest.

“What kind of deal did you have in mind?”

Owain began pacing again.

“Nothing too difficult to organise, least of all for the two of us and I want there to be a sporting chance.” He walked over to a sofa over to one side, one that was facing Cards. Leofric hadn’t noticed, but there were the ears of a terrier sticking up over the back. Suddenly the fox’s unadulterated terror made a lot more sense. Though he couldn’t see most of the dog, he watched as Owain ruffled its ears, letting the moment drag on.

“I challenge you to a fight, my fighter versus yours.”

It took all the self-control he had to not burst out laughing. A dog-fight? That was what Owain wanted? He wasn’t joking when he said that it was going to be easy to organise, and in Leofric’s opinion, easy to win and get the goods back. However, he couldn’t agree to this too quickly or the lunk-head may get suspicious. The more he believed that this decision cost Leofric, the more secure he would be that he had made the correct decision. Leofric took a deep breath and stepped toward the left,

“A fight?” he looked back to the communicator.

“What are the terms?” The smile that appeared on Owain’s face was terrifying.

“Like I said, nothing too complicated. I challenge one of your fighters to take on one of mine. The only thing that will be raised will be the stakes on the winner.” Leofric could taste that something was not quite right here, Owain was playing some sort of game; but in for a penny, in for a pound. He stepped twice to the right.

“What stakes were we looking at?”

Owain’s smile widened, “One thousand pounds.”

Leofric could not stop the look of shock that crossed his features. That was more than double than was usually passed in the highest bets. He turned to face the monitor to make sure that Owain was in fact serious.

“One thousand pounds?”

“Yes,” said Owain as he dropped onto a chair near the sofa. “One thousand pounds, winner takes all, no buy in. Those are the stakes.”

Something was wrong here, Leofric could taste it. That kind of money was not something to risk on a dog-fight and here was Owain, willing to do it. Leofric was certain that one thousand pounds was more than the amount that Owain’s rings moved in a month; if he lost, it would be the end of his business and he would stop being the bane of Leofric’s existence. That said, it would also be the end of Leofric’s if he lost and he knew that. Despite the hilarious insanity of the request, he was greatly intrigued. He looked to Owain, his scepticism evident on his face.

“So what brought this idea on then? Why this particular challenge and no other?” He waited to see if Owain would bite, he needed to know more before staking that kind of coin on a dog-fight.

“Ah, now that is a fine question. You see, recently I have come to own a rather lovely fighting dog. I believe that it is by far the best dog I have ever seen fight in a ring. So I thought that it would only be fair and in good sport to pit your best up against it.”

So that was his game... suddenly his overconfidence showed itself for what it really was. Owain had found a lucky mutt and was now convinced that a few good moves would best all comers. He had seen that kind of arrogance before and it never ended for the best. However, if a dog-fight ended both his troubles with Lynn and got rid of Owain in one move, who was he to look a gift horse in the mouth? Things were finally going his way again. He paced a bit before moving in to close the deal.

He stepped to the right twice.

"All right, Owain: let me make sure I understand you clearly. You have my runner and what he was carrying, correct?"

Owain smiled. "That is correct, yes."

He took two steps to the left, his arms still crossed.

"And in order for you to release both, you have challenged the best in my kennels to your new prize fighter, correct."

"Yes again."

"To make this interesting for you on top of that inconvenience, you say the stakes on the fight are a thousand pound prize with no buy in. So the winnings are pure profit?"

Owain sat back against the chair. "You have it all correct. So what is your answer, I have other meetings." Leofric breathed deeply and waited a moment before looking at the communicator.

"Fine, I agree to your terms, but on one condition." Owain raised an eyebrow.

"The winnings will take either of us a few hours to a day to liquidate but if I win, I want the boy and the goods back immediately." Owain smiled.

"That I can agree to, I'll bring him with me to the ring."

"Fair enough. Have a good evening." The communicator powered down.

Leofric took a step back from the dome, his heart pounding in his chest. This was unprecedented. He knew that Owain wasn't the brightest globe on the street, but this was beyond stupidity. None of his fighters had ever managed to best Leofric's, only once or twice did they get the upper hand, but never for anything important. Owain was a business man and a shark, but he was not a trainer. For him to be this confident in a fighter was unusual but Leofric had known Owain to make stupid decisions before. There was a reason Owain got out of the smuggling business: he got caught every time.

\* \* \*

Owain turned the communicator off and began to dance around the room, oblivious to the fact that half a dozen people were watching him.

"Yes! Finally I'm going to put that old fart out of business and it's all thanks to you!" He danced over to a man that had been standing outside of the communicator's field.

"Leofric suspects nothing and shortly we will make sure he is out of business for good. Oh what did I do before I had the two of you?" Owain fell onto the couch and began petting the hound again who seemed to enjoy the attention.

The man he had spoken to was dressed nothing like the rest of them. He was a stocky man of average height with brown wavy hair that hung to his shoulders when not tied back. He was probably younger than he looked, but the stubble on his chin aged him somewhat. His clothing, while clean, was old. It was fine silk and linen but looked as though it had been scavenged. Over it all he was wearing a large brown coat that kept the weather away and protected from the fog. His boots were heavy leather with the rubber soles often worn by fishermen and his hands bore the scars of a lifetime of hard work. His name was Larkin.

Larkin and the people of the Romany Family had been doing business with Owain for the last three or so decades, since the first time they came to London while he was in business. They commissioned him to find them new talent and keep it for them. He sourced exotic animal cubs that could be trained and added to the menagerie. He also greased the palms of those who would want to halt their coming to London for whatever reason. They had a mutually beneficial agreement and the Romany Family paid him very well for his assistance. The Family had also always dabbled in dog-fighting, but never outside the Carnivals. They would fight their own dogs but not against others. That was why it was such a surprise when a few months ago, Larkin had approached Owain on behalf of Lynn who ran the Romany Family.

She wanted Larkin to show him a fighting dog they had in their kennels. The dog was nothing special to look at, smaller than most by a little, and a bit on the thin side, but the moment she fought, she decimated the competition. She took out every challenger there was and Larkin wanted her to quietly get involved with the London ring and surrounding areas. Owain decided not to make the little dog a star, but to rather keep her as his secret weapon. What a weapon she was... whenever Owain thought he was going to lose a quiet, high stakes fight he would call on Larkin who would arrive the next day with the little dog to fight, and she never let him down. It was after her last victory, her win-streak unbeaten, that Owain had dreamed the idea to challenge Leofric. Owain continued to pet the little dog as she watched the fox dangle from his bonds.

"Larkin my good man, I do not know what I would have done without you. You and your little dog have saved me so many times and now you are going to help me put the last nail in that bastard's coffin lid." Sure that the communicator was off, Larkin wandered out from behind some old shelving and forward towards the couch.

"You were right that he would fall for the plan. He thinks I'm useless, unable to do anything. Well this will show him, will it not? With your help, he will be out of business for good!" He leapt out of the chair surprisingly nimbly for his girth, and with no one helping.

Larkin walked forward and the dog sat up nudging his scarred hand.

"Glad we could be of assistance. The Family has had nothing but good business from you." He looked down at the dog who looked back up at him. "There is just one last thing to confirm."

Owain stopped and looked to Larkin, slight suspicion in his eyes. "Yes?"

"The agreement still stands?"

Owain breathed in relief and nodded enthusiastically.

"Twenty five percent cut of the money he gives me, up from the usual twenty and her own bodyweight of the best steak in town for your lovely little lady here," he said ruffling her ears until she nipped at him.

Larkin smiled, "Good, just making sure all terms are agreed." He looked back down at the dog as she jumped off and went to sit in front of the dangling fox.

"When did you plan the fight for, Mr Langton?"

"Oh please, call me Owain. The fights generally happen on a Saturday or Sunday night. I don't really care which, but I'll make sure everything is secure and to the letter, don't you worry."

Larkin nodded slowly. Things seemed to be coming together. Everyone was pleased with how things were running and in the lapse in conversation, a noise brought all of their attention back to the other side of the room. Cards sneezed.

Larkin who was standing near the couch, Bert who had retreated to his pipe, Owain who was still near the communicator and the little dog all looked at him. Cards froze.

"S... sorry. I didn't m ... mean to interrupt."

Owain stared at him for a moment before another smile crept across his face.

"Ah, the runner boy! I had almost forgotten you were here. Let him down boys, none of this would have been even remotely possible without him." One of the boys hit a release, button and Cards came crashing to the floor. He lay on the ground, in too much pain and too afraid to stand up. As the boys picked him up, he yelped, the numbing pain in his shoulders forcing pins and needles down both arms to his paws. He had no hope of escape and so he just stood being supported.

Cards looked at the hound in front of him, far more afraid of her than anyone else in the room. Humans he could handle, even shifters he could deal with, but his innate nature made him terrified of the dog. He knew what those jaws were capable of doing to his light bones and insides. He knew that once she had his scent there was nowhere for him to hide and that made her his biggest threat. He also knew that it only took one command from the man who trained her, for her to rip his throat out.

Owain wandered over and placed both hands on Cards' upper arms. The motion sent waves of excruciating pins and needles down his arms but he tried his best not to make a sound.

"You my boy were the key to this whole endeavour, without you this wouldn't have been possible so I thank you." He looked to the two holding him up.

"Boys, take him somewhere and make him comfortable for the evening. Tomorrow, we will be the only business of note in town, but we need him till then." A low whine began in Cards throat but he was lifted and taken to a door before being thrown inside.

"Nighty night foxy, sleep well." Cards hit the ground hard and instantly curled up away from them as the door was shut and bolted.

"Now that he is secure and Leofric has taken the bait, there is nothing left to do but celebrate!" Owain walked over to an old cabinet and pulled out a bottle of scotch.

"Want one?" he raised the bottle to Larkin who nodded. Owain poured two tumblers and returned. The little dog had wandered away from her previous spot and jumped back onto the sofa. She laid her head on his lap after Larkin had sat down with his glass. There was silence as both men took a sip, but there was a tension in the air, only broken when Owain spoke.

"Tell me something, Larkin." He placed the glass on a rickety table nearby.

"This plan to bait Leofric, how did you know it would work?" He watched the man carefully as he answered.

Larkin looked down at the dog for a moment before answering.

"Honestly I didn't, but after all you have told me about Leofric, I imagined that he was not the kind to pass up a chance where he thought he would come out on top."

"Yes, but how did you know the fox would be carrying something he would be interested in getting back badly enough not to just write it off to a loss and move on?" Larkin smiled.

"My mother set it up, Mr. Langton. She asked Mr. Leofric to acquire something of great value and threatened to sully his name if he didn't deliver it. We knew he managed to get it, but I didn't know the fox would be the one carrying it. Then again it made sense for it to be the fox if you thought about it." Owain's confusion was evident on his face.

"How so, son?"

"We in the Family never give runners who look important anything valuable to carry because they are always a target. You give the important stuff to someone people ignore; and for your competitor, the fox Cards was that runner," he said, nodding to the door. "After we got back in contact with your competitor, I figured he would be the one to move the important items, the ones too important to write off. The fox is slight, he is agile, he is resourceful and he is completely ignorable. You understand?"

Owain was not sure he did, but he nodded anyway.

"So this entire setup was thanks to your mother?" Larkin paused.

"I suppose you could say so yes." Owain sighed and smiled.

"Well then, to astoundingly astute deductions and wonderful mothers," he said raising his glass and draining it.

"Will the wonderful woman be arriving to view the fruits of her labour tomorrow night?" Larkin shook his head.

"No, she does not care for dogfights; she says they disrupt her humour."

"Ah, I see, women's sensibilities, well, pass on my thanks to her." Owain stood again, this time donning his coat.

"Now, I'm sorry for being rude my dear man, but I must be off, until tomorrow night then." Larkin nodded and drained his own glass before tapping the dog on the back and leaving the warehouse.

## CHAPTER 5

By the time the fog rolled in again, Madeline's Pub was packed. There were people sitting on or standing near every available surface. Word of the ultimate high-stakes fight had gotten around so everyone wanted to come and see, some there already from the early morning. It was so busy that Sarah had called in two friends to assist at the bar and the girls still could not keep up with the demand. Something interesting to note was that Madeline's Pub was not in fact a pub, at least not in the usual sense. It was once a livestock auction room, a semi-respectable business attended by hard-working people. Unfortunately, that business became a thing of the past after Madeline's husband, Luke, died. Owain blew in and bought the place, throwing out all of the auctions and converting it into the establishment it is today.

The history of the place is, however, still written in the walls. The front room, still panelled in decaying oak in desperate need of re-varnishing, and replacing in some areas damaged by brawls, stood as a testament to the place's respectable history. The stone floor, worn smooth by decades of human feet and animal hooves, still stands the test of time, as well as in the iron rings still attached at intervals along one of the walls. The reason that the business has continued as long as it has is due to the fact that the building is so old it is nearly soundproof to the outside world. It is also so deep into the slum territories of London that if the door ever saw a constable, it was because he had gotten lost on en route.

Just after sunset, Owain appeared at the fight rings. The crowd parted for the kingpin and while he smiled at all those standing around, he shook no one's hand. Following him in from the haze outside was Bert, his best bully-boy holding a bag close to his chest. Behind them came two men with a slim young man between them who looked as though he hadn't slept in weeks. His face was bruised and he held his arms around his chest as he walked forward, shoulders hunched and looking at no one in particular. They made for the back rooms, behind the pits which were behind the main bar. Even standing back here the crowd in front was deafeningly loud as the time for the match drew closer.

This fight was planned to make the supporting fights nothing but a pale imitation. Still, their stake was not the only one going on tonight. A fair amount of money was going to change hands here this evening, with Owain's bookies raking in the commission on each transaction. Larkin hadn't made contact, but he trusted the man to show up, even the Romanys, high and mighty as they were, knew what was good for them. Owain paced slowly to and fro in the back store room, catching glimpses past the doorway, but trying not to be seen and not to engage with the great unwashed on the other side.

There were no doors between the sections, just curtains that were at the moment held back for easy access and fresh air. It was a few minutes later when Larkin pushed his way through the crowd to the back rooms, the brilliant little fighter following on a lead behind him. They pushed their way through the door and finally Larkin took a breath.

"Evening Mr. Langton. Does it always smell like that out there?"

Owain also took a breath of relief; his fighter had finally shown up.

"Evening Larkin, and yes, unfortunately it does." He leaned forward and braced to not topple over.

"Hello sweet pup, hope you are ready for tonight." He ruffled the dog's dark ears but it just began to pant in the heat. Now the ball was in Leofric's court. Larkin decided that the back rooms were too hot and moved off towards the bar, followed by his fighter. Owain watched as he sat casually; indeed, he seemed completely unbothered by the state of affairs. Not that that was unreasonable, he was in a win win situation, he owed no one anything. In fact, as Owain thought about it, everyone seemed to owe him something. He was sitting at the bar, having rum while his mutt sat under his stool, panting and looking serenely out over the knees of the thronging crowd. Owain almost envied Larkin for his inner peace; he had never had a time when he owed no one anything, not money, not favours, nothing. He still wondered if he would ever know what it was like. He thought it was possibly the best feeling in the world.

Owain made his way over to his usual seating area next to the ring and ordered a brandy to be brought to him from the bar. He was not in the mood to fight the crowd and it seemed like the lump Madeline was not in a state to be useful. It was only when he reached his section that he took his first deep breath. It was unbelievable just how foul another being could smell. He could not understand how they could bear it for

hours at a time. He began to unload his usual entertainment items from his jacket before removing it. This included his cigars, a small bottle of brandy if the bar was too busy, etcetera. He considered pulling the small boxes from his jacket and then thought better of it. He left the items alone before hanging up the jacket and taking a seat over the fight ring.

There was another span of time as bookies wandered in and out to talk to him and keep him updated as to the current fight odds and how the bets were going. It seemed as though everyone was prepared and waiting, but he and Leofric were, unsurprisingly, the last official fight of the night. He just sat by and watched as the rings were prepared and owners were given their fight times. There were a few close matches and some even got him to the edge of his seat. It was unusual because he did not often stay at fights and watch; it was not really something that interested him. He watched his own opponents and fighters, but staying to watch for fun was not really something Owain wanted to do regularly. However, he was too excited to leave the bar and so just waited. He lit a cigar and the brandy he had bought never seemed to empty as he watched fight after fight.

Owain wouldn't admit it, but he was nervous for this fight. During a lull in the activity he did make his way over to the bar to talk to Larkin. The bully-boys made space for him as he made his way directly to the bar. His eyes automatically scanned the crowd, but saw nothing he wasn't expecting or out of the ordinary. As he approached Larkin, the little fighter turned her head and watched him the entire time. He placed a friendly hand on the young man's shoulder as he placed his glass on the bar for Sarah to fill.

"Hey, you ready?"

Larkin, who had been staring at the cages of angry dogs in the next room and the desperate men who owned them looked away and to Owain.

"Connie and I, we were born ready for this Owain. What about you?" It was the first time Larkin had named the dog in front of him and it took him slightly off guard though he couldn't say why.

"I'm ready; the only person we are still waiting for is Leofric. See you in the box soon m'boy," he said as he wandered off towards his area with a full glass of brandy.

Leofric knew he was going to be late, but the ruse had been worth it. There was only one way that this was going to work, and that was if he fought his own fight. He had

appointed one of his most trusted lieutenants to act as his owner as he prepared to shift. This was not something he did very often anymore. He stepped out of most of his clothing and exhaled. The fur began to race down his skin, starting from behind his neck and down his arms and spine. It ran down the back of his legs and began to spread around until he was coated in soft white fur. His eyes turned to a deep blue colour as a black patch appeared over the left one. A short black tail sprouted just below the small of his back. He took another breath and unlike most shifters, continued. He began to reduce in size, his bones and musculature rearranging itself until he was a slightly larger version of an English Bull-terrier. He shook himself to settle the change and then pawed at the door till it opened. His lieutenant collared him and they left in a carriage for Madeline's Pub. Tonight was going to be the fight to end all fights.

They arrived as the last bouts for the night were taking place. They slipped in and he could see that Owain was intent on watching the last fight. The bout took quite some time before it ended, the dogs clearly well matched as they decimated one another. He watched them tear into each other, only one dog surviving and he began to think back on all the fights he and Lynn had ever been in. From the moment he had run from the workhouse, he had been on his own. He didn't even know that he was a full-shift until he had done it by accident. It was his good fortune that he trusted no one with the secret at first. He learned quite quickly that full-shift shifters were more hated than ordinary shifters for their ability to disguise themselves and swindle people.

Leofric shook his head to clear it and sat close to his handler. The initial fights ended with most of the men and women carrying out their fighters, half of them then happily wandering over to the bookies, while others tried to leave the building unnoticed. There were the owners, some with a better record than others in the rings, developed over years of the game. There were the watchers who came for the blood and then screamed for more, spending all their week's wages on bets and mead. Then there were the breeders, those that took the best who could not fight anymore and put them with others in heat, breeding what each called the best new fighter. His eyes slid over the pens of puppies, most cowering from the noise and smell of the place. They were almost perpetually there, the ones who died thrown out into the street for rats to feast on or the homeless to find.

By the time the last round of fights had finished, the ring was doused with buckets of water to wash some of the blood away and armfuls of new hay were strewn

across the floor. The rings were becoming too slick and Owain didn't want to risk a confrontation with a mob taking in alcohol at the rate of barrels. There was another short break before the crowd-pleaser fights began, even though it was well past sunset already and the fog had swallowed up the whole town. These were the fights where the dogs and their owners were named and people already knew that they had standing. A few decades ago, he and Lynn had been among them.

Two hours passed before their turn in the now bloody ring loomed near. Leofric's handler stood up from the barrel for the first time in hours and made his way back over to where Owain was sitting. It took a few seconds for Owain to notice him.

"Mr. Langton, Mr. Leofric begs an apology, but he has taken ill this evening and cannot attend personally. However, I am here to represent him with his best fighter." The lieutenant performed perfectly to script and placed Leofric on the ground where he looked up at the slightly taken aback Owain.

"Oh... I see." He seemed to deflate a bit.

"Well, no matter. Do you have an official letter from Leofric?"

The man reached into his pocket and produced a letter Leofric had written earlier.

"Very good, come this side and prepare. I need to go find my fighter."

Leofric and his handler were led to the other side of the ring where his handler kneeled down and helped him to stretch the way they had done in the past.

Owain got up a little out of sorts. He had hoped Leofric would attend personally, but it didn't actually matter if he did or didn't. His fighter was here, so the match was on. He found Larkin who had not moved. He seemed to be ignoring the goings on in favour of conversation with whoever was nearest. Owain placed a hand on his shoulder to get his attention and motioned for him to follow. Owain led him off into the back rooms, past the rings, Connie following along and ignoring the noisy dogs in cages all around her and found a safe space away from all of them to lie down again.

Larkin was about to ask where they were going when Owain turned around to face him. He looked tired, but there was also the spark of excitement of someone who was not going to be beaten.

"Just so we are clear on the plan, for the last time, Larkin. Connie needs to win this thing by any means necessary. There are three rounds, but I would rather it ended

sooner rather than later right?” Larkin smiled at him, but said nothing as his eyes floated over to Corrie. Owain stood in front of him and looked at him straight.

“Larkin, are you two clear on the plan? Connie needs to...”

“I heard you Owain, but I don’t know why you’re telling me. You should be talking tactics with the fighter, not the transportation.” He gestured at the dog. Owain was a little upset by his behaviour, but left it.

“Just make sure she does what’s needed or all hell breaks loose, for me at least.” He turned and left, walking over to his side of the ring before lighting up another cigar.

People began to make their way back to the ringside. Owain watched as Connie was calmly led over to the east side by Larkin. He was sure by now that the dog was one of the many deaf terriers in London as she paid no mind at all to anything around her. Larkin hunkered down and for the first time Owain could see what Larkin was doing. Clearly whispering to the hound, he played with her, gaining a playful nip and lick to face in response. Larkin seemed to be playing more than anything and while all Owain wanted to do was watch her, his eyes were also drawn to the other side of the ring. Leofric took up position with his handler at the west gate, not too bothered that he hadn’t actually been able to spot his competition in the crowd. The crowd finally seemed to find their spaces as the clock struck ten o’clock and the announcer took centre stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is the fight we have all been waiting for. This is the high stakes fight for one thousand pounds. Two challengers and two dogs, winner takes all.” He gestured left.

“To the east we have the challenger owned by Mr Leofric. He could unfortunately not be present, but is represented by his second. The dog is one of his champion fighters with an unbeaten record.” He gestured to the right and all eyes followed.

“To the west the defender owned by Mr. Langton. He is also being represented by his trainer. The dog is also a champion fighter with a flawless record. Place your bets now, the fight starts in two minutes.”

The referee took up his station on a packing crate overlooking the blood-stained ring. A ring guard took point on Larkin’s side and was mirrored by another on Leofric’s side. Both dogs on opposite sides took up position at the gates. His hatch lifted and he wandered into the ring and shook his coat before sitting down, watching the other side

as the hatch lowered. The crowd pressed in as the referee held out both arms straight in front of him.

“Both dogs ready?” Nods from both sides made Owain lean forward. The referee looked into the crowd before looking down into the ring.

“Alright then, brace yourselves.” He glanced at both fighters.

“Ready...” He brought both arms down. Every breath caught.

“Fight!”

As the other hatch lifted, Leofric’s heart stood still. He had been taken for the ultimate fool and he had followed along every step of the way. He had no idea how long she had been fighting for Owain, but there was no way that it could not be her. The boy who handled her was an anomaly, but those dark ears belonged to only one person and she was leaping towards him. He had no choice, but to try and fight her. Only one of them would walk out of this ring alive.

Owain felt his heart begin to race with adrenaline. He could not help but watch the ring along with everyone else. Lynn as Connie, the little brown fighter, kicked her back legs against the straw floor and launched towards Leofric. His instinct was to flatten to ground level and he just managed to dive out of the way of the attack. Lynn slammed into the opposite barrier, leaving a void in the bloody straw on the floor. She snarled as her entire body took the shock of impact, but recovered almost instantly. Lynn turned to find him, spotting him just next to where she had just been. Her feet, using sharpened nails, found traction almost immediately. She kicked off from the opposite side, this time connecting with Leofric before he could dodge it again. Leofric did however manage to duck and get under her jaw, taking Lynn’s legs out from under her, leaving her flailing.

Lynn waited for the door to open, the taste of revenge so close. The doors opened, she braced and shot forward like a bullet. She had been in quite a few practice rounds in the last few weeks, but it had all boiled down to this. It was her against the man who left her to die. She underestimated his reaction time because he managed to get out of the way, her body slamming into the barricade.

“Damn!” sounded to the world a snarl, but she wasn’t shaken yet. She found him again and kicked off, this time connecting hard and going for the throat. She was going to make him pay dearly for what he did, that much she knew already. Leofric was done for and Owain already had the pendant, so she could retrieve it at any moment. All her

plans were coming together. She opened her jaws to bite down, but he surprised her again. He dove down and took her legs out from under her before running to the other side of the ring. She was going to have to slow this down a bit, she realised as she heard the first round go to Leofric.

Everyone expected him to bite down but Lynn's lack of recovery gave round one to Leofric. Owain tensed and looked to Larkin whose eyes were fixed on the ring. Finally climbing back to her feet on the blood-soaked floor, Lynn took off again, connecting with Leofric and driving him back against the barricade. He once again managed to slip under her snapping jaws and wriggled out the back, backing away from her. They separated and circled the ring, Leofric watching her with hackles raised, but not making a sound. It seemed as though she were smiling as she licked her chops. Lynn's lack of patience in planning showed itself and she took another dive with no warning. Leofric saw it coming in time to leap over her, avoiding a narrow encounter with his death. She slammed into the barrier again, causing a split in the wood. She took longer to recover this time, gaining round two to Leofric by default. Owain was turning red in the face. There was now only one way to win. Larkin was infuriatingly still and Owain dragged on his cigar to try and calm his nerves.

Lynn heard the second round go to Leofric, now she had no choice, and they both knew it. The only way to win this now was to kill her opponent. It would be a sweet revenge. He had left her there, bleeding out on the floor. It was her lucky stars that Larkin didn't listen to stay behind. All she remembered was his shadow falling over her and the bandages around his arms the next morning. Now Leofric would know what it felt like to fight a fight he couldn't win.

Lynn shook her head and turned again, finding traction and trying to bowl Leofric over. Leofric dove once more to ground level, taking Lynn's feet out from under her as he did so. She collapsed onto her side, but finally managed to get lucky. From her side she managed to find and bite down onto Leofric's left hind quarter, tearing through the flesh. He howled out and whipped around. For a dog that had been winning on the defensive, his change was as instantaneous. No one was sure how he managed it. Leofric turned in the opposite direction sank his jaw into Lynn's exposed midsection, tearing into her underbelly. Her eyes widened and jaws released in shock. His did so too, the two separating and both wounded. Lynn was bleeding badly from her midsection and

he was dragging a leg. The two circled but this time Leofric thought he saw an opening. Nothing happened for a moment and then he sprang into action.

Using his signature move, he gathered his legs under himself for one last move, and jumped to attack Lynn. Lynn watched the preparation and if she could have smiled any wider, she would have. Unlike every fight before, she did not jump as well, she used his signature move against him. Lynn lay still on the ground until Leofric was fully airborne before launching herself straight into the air. The two collided more than three feet from the ground, her jaws snapping down around his throat. Leofric couldn't change direction without traction and was dead in the air as the impact hit. He felt the teeth break the skin as Lynn took hold of his throat before ripping it out. Leofric hit the floor of the ring first, slowly bleeding to death as Lynn landed on top of him. His blood spilled over the ring floor, quickly turning it to soup. He twitched a few times whining in pain. There were no thoughts, no feelings, just an encroaching darkness as all his hopes and dreams appeared in their final death throes before he lay still.

The crowd exploded into a cacophony of noise. The referee called the fight to Connie as the winner, bringing his arms down as a marker. Owain felt his world burst around him. He was finally the winner and he didn't even notice the other people standing around as he hugged Bert. Larkin vaulted the side of the ring and pried Connie off the other dog, picking her up as soon as she was free. He saw Connie shake her head and nestle up into his neck, whining softly. He pulled a bandage from a coat pocket and wrapped the wound to her midsection. It was not as bad as it looked, but it would still need stitches. Larkin began to rock her as you would a crying child as people congratulated him on the win of his fighter.

The lieutenant jolted into motion as the shock of what he just witnessed wore off. He stepped over the barrier and picked up the body of Leofric while the crew mopped him off the ring floor. His instincts made him turn to leave, but he didn't even manage to take the first step before being cut off from the door by Bert. The man in front of him, quite possibly an equine shifter from his build, placed his hand on his shoulder and turned him around. Standing in front of him was a triumphant Owain.

"What are you playing at my boy? You need to hear the terms to repeat to your boss." The lieutenant said nothing.

"Tell him I want my money in the next forty-eight hours or I'll come knocking."

"Yes Mr, Langton, I'll pass on the message."

“Good, now get.” He stepped out of the way as the man vanished into the thronging crowd, all trying collect their winnings. He then danced over to Larkin.

“My boy that was spectacular. You and that wonderful little dog had me going there but you pulled it off and how!” Larkin smiled as he held the dog.

“I heard you said forty-eight hours to that man, so when can I come and retrieve our cut?”

Owain looked a little disgruntled.

“Oh, don’t worry; I’ll contact you as soon as I have it. Now why don’t you take that lovely peach home and we will talk in the morning.” Larkin nodded and after a glance down at the blossoming crimson on the bandage nodded and wandered off into the crowd.

Owain stayed to have a few drinks to celebrate, only leaving in the early hours of the next morning. Most of the patrons had gone home by then, only the diehard locals left spending their bets. He stepped out and took a deep breath of the cool, damp air before looking up. He tilted his head in confusion and slight wondrous delight. The factories in London were using a new chemical that left through the chimneys. It didn’t affect the air during the day, but some nights, he swore the fog had a red hue when lit by the moon. Dismissing it, he knocked twice and the carriage left.

## CHAPTER 6

### *The Previous Night*

The pain in Card's upper limbs was excruciating and Owain gripping them was just intensifying the pain as it came in waves. His instinct was to cry out and try to run but his rational mind knew that would only make things worse for him at that point. The only thing he could do was to try his best not to make a sound and not let on. He didn't look at Owain straight on in case he offended him, instead glancing at him sideways as he spoke, tail firmly between his legs.

"You my boy were the key to this whole endeavour, without you this wouldn't have been possible so I thank you." That was not something Cards wanted to hear, he was the cause of all this trouble so that meant that if he survived Owain's game till the following night, and he was as good as dead when Leofric got his hands on him. Owain looked to the two holding him up.

"Boys, take him somewhere and make him comfortable for the evening. Tomorrow, we will be the only business of note in town but we need him till then."

A low whine began in Card's throat. Being put somewhere was never good but at that moment, he had no choice but to do what they told him. There was no way to fight either of them, let alone Bert. He was lifted into the air, all sensation in his limbs and paws going awry, and was taken to a door in the south wall. They wrenched the metal thing open before throwing him bodily inside.

"Nighty night foxy, sleep well." Cards hit the ground hard and instantly curled up away from them as the door was shut and bolted. As soon as the door closed, all the lights went out and he knew that he was finally alone. It took quite a long time for him to unfurl, most of the sounds outside had died down by the time sensation returned to his body. He could hear that the bully boys were still there but it sounded like Owain and the man who owned that terrifying dog had left. Calming himself down a little, he took a look around.

The room seemed to be some kind of store room, probably for tools and things back when this place still worked as a shipyard. Now there was very little in here.

Against one wall was a whole bunch of shelves stacked together to make space. They seemed to have odds and ends of mechanical parts and a few tools, all of which were rusted through. Next to them were pieces of what looked like the new automatons but they seemed also a little worse for wear. He sat up off the cold floor and could see out of a barred window that was near the ceiling. There was a strip of light from under the door but the globe in the light in this room was clearly broken. He stood slowly but not slowly enough. Pain shot through his chest but he wasn't wheezing. He realised Bert must have bruised or cracked some of his ribs.

He limped over to the door and placed a dish-like ear against it. He couldn't hear perfectly but far better than a human would have. Bert was still smoking away at his pipe but they seemed to be playing a game. After a while he was too cold and stood up again pacing the room to try and warm up. It worked to warm him slightly but the best was that the feeling returned to his arms and paws, he could curl his front paws properly once more. Feeling the cold, he began to look around at what was available to build a burrow.

There was an old tarpaulin that he managed to extract without too much noise. He lay that over a set of shelves that was on its back. He also managed to find some rags to pad the floor with but it was still too cold, the only thing that would work was to lift himself slightly using a piece of corrugated iron. He managed to move it silently but placing it made enough noise for Bert to bang on the steel door.

“Ey! What you up to in there. Keep it down!” He had just managed to get it in place as he whipped around.

“Yes Bert, sorry, won't happen again!” The rags on top of this with the tarpaulin meant that the pocket of air around him began to warm up as he wriggled inside.

He looked out of the gap up to the window. The fog was so high tonight; it was flowing gently into the room like a cascade. He could just see the moon through it, a glowing ball in all the cotton wool.

“Well Cards, fine mess we're in this time. I'm beginning to think we should get a pay rise. Maybe even a food allowance.” He lay down and began to think of all the foods he had ever wanted to try, dreaming about them as he dropped off to sleep.

Cards was awoken from his burrow rather abruptly the next morning. Someone grabbed him by the tail and yanked him out before he even had time to remember

where he was and what was going on. He yelped in surprise and tried to scramble away but stopped struggling when he saw that Bert was who was holding him up.

"Morning princess, sleep well?" He didn't even have time to answer when Bert released his tail and he dropped to the ground, head first. He managed to break the fall, but wasn't allowed a moment to reorientate himself before he was grabbed by the two bully boys and hauled off to a cab.

He had clearly been asleep for a long time because it was almost sunset again. Owain was in the carriage already. Cards was thrown bodily into the carriage and Bert followed Cards' abrupt entrance. As soon as the other two were on the back, the carriage trundled off. Cards sat quietly on the floor as he tried to breathe, his midsection little more than a solid bruise from the day before. His diaphragm ached with every breath he took, but he managed to assess that nothing important was broken or bleeding. Deciding that it would make it easier to breathe, he shifted back to his human form. The only downside was that his bruises were now visible. They arrived at Madeline's Pub and Owain was the first one out. Cards was lifted by the collar and sent out after him, only managing not to fall because there was a wall to collide with. Bert stepped out of the carriage and placed Cards in front of him before they wandered inside.

The place was packed to the rafters with people but Cards kept his head as low as possible, not wanting to be recognised. Most people didn't even know who he was but he knew Knuckler was there somewhere and really did not need an 'I told you so' at that particular moment. Knuckler had always been preaching that he was going to get himself in trouble one day with his mouth and trouble was now as bad as it could get. He also knew Sarah was there but he hoped she was too busy to see him, he really didn't want to have to explain this to just about the only person who genuinely liked him. He just followed Owain and was pushed onto the dais by Bert when they got there. He had always wanted to know how it felt to be sitting in the best seats in the house. Now that he was finally up there, he found out it was awful. The higher you were, the hotter it got. Cards sank to the boards between the two sofas and sat there quietly, trying to make himself as small as possible while Owain took care of business.

Bert took a seat on one of the couches, cutting off the only way out so Cards did not even consider running. Bert in a good mood had made his chest blue and it hard to breathe, he didn't think he would survive Bert in a bad mood. They were clearly early as

fight after fight happened without there being any sign of Leofric. He had no idea why they were there that early but Owain seemed to be enjoying the fights, egging on fighters in every match. Cards just sat quietly trying not to move or make a sound. He was currently being ignored but was surrounded by people larger and meaner than him. Attention to himself was not what he needed, it was never what he needed

Cards sat quietly for a few hours when a man, strangely dressed for the setting, wandered over to talk to Owain. The man in question was wearing a crisp suit with polished shoes. On a lead behind him was a white English Bull-terrier with a black patch over its eye on a lead. The man stopped to talk to Owain in a tone that also set him apart as less of a fighter or owner and more as an aide of some sort.

“Mr. Langton, Mr. Leofric begs an apology, but he has taken ill this evening and cannot attend personally. However, I am here to represent him with his best fighter.”

Cards raised an eyebrow along with Owain. Leofric wasn't coming to his own fight? There were only a few things that could mean. Leofric was as healthy as a horse, he was never sick to Cards' knowledge, and he had been working for him for a while. So that meant that he either didn't care to attend or that he was too scared to show face in case he lost. Cards really hoped it was the former for his sake if nothing else. Owain, who had been bouncing all night in anticipation, seemed to drop his mood slightly. Cards pulled a little further into his corner in case Owain exploded, but the only person still aware of him was Bert.

“Oh... I see.”

“Well, no matter. Do you have an official letter from him?”

The aide reached into his pocket and produced one to Owain before wondering around to the west half of the ring.

Then it was Owain's turn to wander off into the crowd. Cards did not know what was happening until the referee stood on his box a few minutes later. Cards put his hands over his ears as the noise in the room picked up. The only words that managed to make it through were:

“Ready...” His breath caught along with everyone else's.

“Fight!” Cards did not turn to see the fight but he could hear it and it made his heart race. He had successfully managed to block out all of the other fights but this one had every fibre of his being on edge. The first bell rang.

The dogs did not stop even though there were lulls in the snarling and barking as they attacked one another. Cards was by now shaking as his mind showed him pictures of every dog that had ever attacked or tried to attack him, and it was a fair few. He tried to shrug it off but it was too much for him. A second bell and a lull in the fighting enough to make him think it was over when he heard one dog squeal, the unmistakable sound of tearing flesh and his nose picked up fresh blood, lots of it. There was a moment when everyone was frozen in time and then the cheering started. The floor bounced as Owain jumped and hugged, and all Cards could do was try not to cry. Leofric's fighter had lost.

People began to collect their winnings and lament their losses and Bert got up to go and catch Leofric's representative before he left. Everyone was so busy that Cards saw his opening to try and escape. He slowly pulled his feet in under him and was about to make a break for the crowd when Bert's huge hand dropped onto his shoulder, pinning him in place.

"And where do you think you're going, Fox-kit?" Cards had nothing to say but began trembling again from the look in Bert's eye. He was about to say something when Owain wandered back over.

"Trying to make a run for it Cards, that's really not a good idea," he said as Bert hauled him to his feet. The bar area was beginning to empty as people made their way home for the evening and he was shortly going to be alone with a sadist and his pet mule.

"Seems you've been left in the lurch my boy," Owain said, as he fell back onto a sofa that creaked under his weight.

"The deal for your freedom was only if he won, so now what am I to do with you?" Bert grabbed his other arm and held them behind his back. Cards had nothing to say, he was beyond terrified. No one knew who he was, where he lived and what he did with his life except for a few who didn't care. He would not be missed, he knew that and so did Owain. Bert sat him roughly on the wall of the dais area and Cards did not even try to fight.

"You are a little young for any work I could give you... and definitely too skinny," Owain said, looking him over. "You are clearly not that good at your job if I can get my hands on these." He pulled the three boxes out of his jacket pocket. "So what are you good for then, hmm?"

Cards said nothing, a low whine issuing from his throat.

"I didn't ask for a song, I asked you a question."

Bert's hand released his arm, cuffed the side of his head hard enough for him to see stars and grabbed him again in one fluid motion. Cards rocked for a moment before managing to sputter,

"Nothing," he took a breath, "I'm good for nothing sir."

"Then tell me something, why in the world should I keep you alive?"

Tears began to appear, but he did not answer. Owain sighed and looked to Bert before glancing back to him.

"Alright, everything has gone my way so I'll make a deal with you, Fox. You leave here tonight and crawl away to whatever hole you've found. I'll leave you be because you made this all happen. But, if I ever catch you hurting my business again, I will personally see to it that you will never be heard from again. Are we clear?"

Cards nodded vigorously.

"Good, now fuck off." Bert released his arms and Cards took off out of the bar and into the fog.

The moment he was out the door, Cards tried to put as much distance between himself and Madeline's Pub as possible. He vanished down alley after alley, hoping to lose anyone who was possibly following him. The fog around him hung like a curtain, obscuring anything further than a few meters on all sides. The only reason he knew where he was going was because of the muscle memory gained from walking those streets for a lifetime. It was only when he was sure there was no one behind him that he began to take stock and realised that he was soaked through to the skin. He still felt like this situation was unreal and that he was going to wake up any moment. Not paying attention, he almost walked into a wall and, taking a moment, he realised that he had no idea where he was. The pain in his head from the cuff was still pounding in concert with the pain in his abdomen, distracting him for a while, but as he looked around a different type of fear began to set in. He was standing in a small courtyard, a slightly larger space where four alleys met. Looking around at the looming buildings and blinking through the opaque curtain, nothing looked at all familiar. The closed windows of the buildings were all dark, not a soul stood in the fog with him. He sank down holding both the side of his head and his belly, the warm tears now leaving trails down his face.

He hadn't really noticed the rumbling in the distance but a crack of thunder ripped across the sky and Cards started, making for the nearest overhang, the underside

of a cart. He dove underneath gaining a brief respite from the icy rain but realised he was now covered in mud. He didn't think it could get any worse than this.

The pain was beginning to subside, so his mind whirred as he tried to come up with a plan to get out of the trouble he was in. With his boss gone down the tubes with no more money, Cards was convinced that Leofric was coming to hurt him. He needed to get out of London and at the moment there was only one person he knew with a way out. The only question now was how he was supposed to get back to his own hunting ground. He had been sitting long enough to have the pain in his belly fade to a dull ache and he began to try and think of how to find his bearings when he had no hope of seeing the sun or the stars. He took a deep breath and felt the change come over him. At least this way he was lighter and slightly warmer. His coat, while still dirty, was almost waterproof.

Cards snuck out from under the cart. Lightning lit up the sky so the fog shone but there was a void in the light. Silhouetted against the dark evening clouds was the *Dancer*, making her way back to her berth after a round trip over London, advertising. She was being lit up by the lightning all around her, the windows of her cabin warmly steamed up from the occupants inside.

Cards braced himself as the rain began to fall; his fur slick but resistant to the water that covered his skin. He braced for the cold as he darted out from under the cart and into the rain, taking off at a run. He began to weave between the buildings, carriages and people, following the *Dancer* on its course. The voids in the rain that had begun to pour were what his huge ears listened for; the *Dancer* was where the water wasn't falling. He had to pull up short a few times, almost running into walls in the unplanned London sprawl. Once he hit a dead end but going around would mean he would lose time on the *Dancer*. Gathering his legs up under him, he leaped, catching the edge of the wall and hauling himself over, his wet overcoat weighing him down. He ran for what felt like forever before bursting out back onto Bridge Road, just in time to see the zeppelin throw down her anchor lines. Finally back in familiar territory, he began to make his way towards Robert Street.

Jogging down the alley he crossed the road and immediately spotted the short staircase marked by a lamp glowing in the cotton wool. He wandered towards it and as he left the last stair, the fog and rain vanished. The underbelly of London was still thrumming but he made his way towards a particular flophouse. It was only when the

damp weather was removed that he looked down and realised that he was a sorry sight but there was little he could do about it now. At least the rain had washed most of the mud from his clothes and fur. He wandered towards the flophouse avoiding anyone he thought would recognise him until he found the one he was looking for. He slipped into the flophouse and tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. The rain was pelting down on the roof but it was warm and dry inside. It was only now that he realised that somewhere in the last few days he had lost his hat and that was just the icing on the cake. He prayed that she said yes as he looked for the particular figures he remembered. Smoothing his fur and futilely wiping the water from his face, he made his way over to the tables where the large men were sitting.

Cards stood near the table, the conversation stopping instantly when they noticed him.

“Evening gentlemen.” He was trying to be his usual suave self but he was too tired.

“What do you want?” The man he was looking at he was sure had to be related to the fighter Owain had hired. They looked almost alike.

“Um, I’m looking for a woman named Lynn. I think she is an associate of y...”

“She isn’t here,” interrupted another man sitting at the table. Cards was at the end of his tether but he was trying to keep it together.

“I guessed but do you know where I can find her?” They all laughed.

“Little fox, come watch the circus and maybe you see her but for now, go drip somew...”

“Look!” Cards finally let everything that had happened to him go. “Your lady, named Lynn, and that is all I know, asked my boss to get something for her which I was supposed to deliver. I had no idea what it was but because of that tiny box I have been kidnapped, I have been beaten and forced to watch my boss lose in a dogfight I’m pretty sure she set up the challenge for.”

He took a breath.

“Because of her, I have lost my job, I have probably lost my home, I know my boss is going to come looking for me probably to kill me and I haven’t eaten in more than a day.”

He took another breath.

“I’m not asking for a miracle, I’m not even asking for something hard, all I’m asking is if you know where she is because I need to speak with her. So, do you know where she is or will be soon or don’t you?”

Silence reigned over the table as he finished speaking, fighting back tears of frustration. No one said a word as they stared until another man appeared from behind a screen. Cards recognised him as Larkin, the owner of the terrifying dog. His hands were covered in blood but he seemed fairly calm.

“Why are you looking for Lynn, fox? What do you want from her?” Cards took another deep breath.

“I’m looking for her because she is the only one who could possibly save my hide right now. I was supposed to deliver a package and I didn’t manage that. Vicariously, my boss losing was her fault, so I was hoping there would be a space for me on that boat to get me out of this town before they set the dogs on me and use my pelt as a carpet. Do you know where she is?” Larkin looked him slowly up and down before answering.

“Yes, I know where she is and I’m sure she will meet with you, just not right now. She can only see you in a day’s time but if you are worried, stay here. We will protect you. Now, go dry off.” Cards was ready to cry. He wandered close to the fire and that was when he realised almost all the people here were probably with the carnival. A woman wandered over with a bowl of broth and some bread and a glance at Larkin gave him permission to eat it. He devoured it in front of the fire and the plate barely touched the ground before he was fast asleep.

## CHAPTER 7

Owain woke up the next morning unable to stop smiling. Everything was finally going according to plan. It had been a long wait, but he was finally rid of that old fart Leofric. As he sat up in bed another fantastic realisation hit him. With Leofric now without money, he couldn't fulfil his delivery contracts, he had no money to front for the goods. Those lucrative contracts were now open for the taking if one was astute enough to know who to get in touch with. There would be no more turf wars, no more stolen goods, no more deliveries that were late if they arrived at all. Business was about to become the best it had ever been.

Leofric's lackey, the one from the fight, had arrived with the money in a bag late the previous evening, but it had been short fifty pounds. He had tried to run while they were counting, but Bert and the boys caught him less than a street away. They searched him and the cab he arrived in but the rest of the money and Leofric were nowhere to be seen. He set Bert to question the man but by the time Owain retired to bed, all they had managed to get out of him was that Leofric was gone. He refused to say where. Owain had been a little upset by that, he thought Leofric had more of a spine even in the face of a lost bet. After all the times they had knocked heads in business and in person, to just skip town after a loss was embarrassing.

Owain sat back as he considered how long the two of them had been in competition. Decades, he realised, three if not more. Since they had both moved to London they had moved in the same circles, but where Leofric seemed to have all of the luck finding resources and contacts, Owain felt like he had to work for each and every one. He had found his buyers one at a time and his suppliers by actually looking through the underbelly of London. Now, all of that was about to change. Now it was his turn to be the lucky one, the connected one and there was nothing and no one who could stand in his way.

He climbed out of bed long after the fog had retreated from the sun and slowly got dressed. There was no need to hurry in his life anymore; there was no one to beat. The leisurely pace was one he could get used to, it felt as though a huge weight had been

lifted off his shoulders. He wandered downstairs and poured a brandy before taking a turn to look through the papers. While his victory would never be reported on those thin pages, it felt as though it was in there somewhere. He settled into his favourite sofa and looked everything over, ignoring the hustle and bustle that was going on around him. His boys were bringing in and moving shipments, meeting with clients and making sure everything was going as planned for the day. He sat back as breakfast arrived and could not help thinking that it was good to be in charge.

It was a few minutes into breakfast when he heard a strange noise issuing from the parlour room. He was about to throw something at his aide when one of the servants emerged from the room.

"Sir, there is a Miss Lynn on the communicator for you." Owain raised an eyebrow before a nasty smile split his face.

"Tell the gypsy-woman I'll be right there." He took a full three minutes before wandering into the communications room. He smiled as he wandered up to the dome.

"Lynn my dear, how are you this morning? Sorry for the delay, I was a little preoccupied." The reflection of Lynn in the glass smiled back to him.

"I'm fine thank you Owain; I was just wanting to talk a little business before the *Dancer* leaves."

"Really and what sort of business would that be?" he said, settling into a chair nearby.

It was clear that wherever Lynn was, she was not on her own ship. The background to her lovely face was that of planked walls and quite a bit of background noise. It was dimly lit and there seemed to be an amalgamation of disused items lining the walls behind her. He could see indistinct figures of men, half-lit by the lights from the wall behind them. There were a fair number and they all seemed to be listening in on the conversation. Owain had no idea who they were, but he had a vague idea they were trouble for him. The sooner the Carnival left London the better off he considered himself.

The Romany carnival, while very good for his business, also made him nervous from the first time they had gotten into contact with him. They had wanted him to find them a pair of Slow-worms, snake-like lizards that they wanted to add to their menagerie as an attraction. He eventually managed to find a breeding pair and that was the first time he had met Larkin. The man was imposing to say the least, but they had

become fairly good acquaintances. It was this acquaintanceship that led Owain to say yes to the scheme that had just made him the most successful underground pit runner in the British Empire. He knew that Larkin was there somewhere but he was not about to just roll over for the gypsy queen. He liked Larkin, but had very little regard for Lynn. In his opinion, she was a woman above her station and needed to be taken down a notch. She had grown full of self-importance on that contraption in the sky, but here in London, she was nothing more than a peasant. He was going to make sure she knew that.

“The business of my necklace which is still in your possession?”

Owain looked thoughtful for a moment before looking back to her.

“Oh that, what about it?”

Lynn was smiling but her eyes darkened.

"It is a rather important matter to my family and I. Perhaps we could meet in person to discuss this further, rather than on public communications?"

Owain was wary of Lynn and her compatriots, but was having far too much fun to stop now.

"I think a plan can be made, but would appreciate if you didn't bring your entire family along. I will send a cab to the *Dancer* to come and fetch you if you don't mind." Lynn's smile was fixed to her face.

"Not a problem, I shall see you shortly. Good day."

He barely got to greet back before the line was cut. As soon as his own communicator powered down he burst into laughter. This was becoming far too easy. He dispatched the cab and wandered to the parlour to await her arrival.

The brown glass bottle sailed across the tightly packed room and smashed into the opposite wall, near the door. The clear liquid spilled down the wall, but seemed to have no other ill effect, the whole room was already alcohol soaked. Most people just stood in place, waiting to see what would happen next. Lynn grabbed another brown bottle and began to pace the room, muttering under her breath. The nerve of that little weasel was beyond comprehension. She handed him the city of London on a platter and this was the thanks she was getting? This ... human needed to be taught some manners.

Lynn limped over to the fire. She looked down at the fox who was still curled up there, and sighed. Some people around here knew that she was a woman to be feared; even Leofric knew to show her some respect, and now this little upstart was humiliating

her in front of her family. He would regret this decision, but she was not sure how, yet. No one had said a word out loud, all going back to their muttered conversations as she limped back across the room, deciding who would accompany herself and Larkin when the cab eventually arrived.

Larkin had managed to stitch up her belly and bandage it, but she was still in pain. It was the first injury she had sustained in a long time while in the ring, but Leofric always was a good fighter, she had made sure of that a long time ago. She continued to pace around the room, ignoring Larkin's attempts to get her to settle down.

She remembered the fighter who had been up to his neck in trouble, the boy who was like her. It took her a long time to tell him she was a full-shift as well, but from the moment she trusted him, their lives improved dramatically.

Each of them would shift down depending on the fight, and the other, still human, would be their handler. The idea was that they were to split all profits fifty-fifty. That was what she thought anyway. Then came the fight of a lifetime, not unlike the fight last night. She had gone up against something that had a Dane somewhere in its parentage; it was a monster of a dog. She was not too sure how this would end but she was foolish enough to put her trust in Leofric. The fight began and all she could do against the titan was survive. She tried to signal to him to end the fight, she even tried to feign with the hope of coming out alive.

None of it worked and it nearly cost her her life. Leofric took off that night, leaving her in the ring to die. Unfortunately, neither of them was so lucky. She had trusted him and he had betrayed her. She had no idea why she thought Owain was going to be any different. She tapped Larkin's brother on the shoulder and when all three of them were in the cab, the cab set off towards Owain's apartments.

The carriage trundled over the cobblestones as Lynn seethed inside. She was not in the mood for this, all she wanted was her mother's pendant and to be back home on the *Dancer*. They had had it now for almost twenty years, since the first ones came out, and it still seemed strange to her to be on solid ground. As she sat there in the carriage, she considered ways of getting this whelp to understand what was what. He needed to know that just because they were travellers did not mean he could disrespect them the way he just had. However, she was too upset to think straight and slightly inebriated to assist with the pain. She kept rearranging herself until she could take no more. She was not going to show weakness here, not today.

She drew the blinds on the carriage, startling both the men. She instructed Larkin to open the back of her dress and rearrange her bandages; she wanted them as tight as possible, so they were invisible under her clothing. He was going to argue but one look from her made him do as she said. The pain increased as the bandages tightened but as soon as the dress was re-laced, it faded to a dull ache in the background. It was now a level of pain she could handle. As the cab stopped, she buttoned up her jacket just in case she bled through; she was not in the mood to let Owain see that. If he did, something less than proper was going to happen to him, and it was irrelevant how many people in high stations he knew; he would vanish.

They were welcomed in politely by the help, and all three were shown through to the parlour. Owain was seated there having tea and took a moment to look up.

"Ah, there you are, welcome to my humble home. Please sit down."

Lynn marched over but said nothing as she lowered herself stiffly to a sitting position.

"Good morning Owain, sorry to be rude but I would like to get this finished." Owain said nothing as he finished shaking hands with the two gentlemen who took seats on either side of her. He wandered back over and took a seat.

"Ah yes, the business of your pendant was it?" Lynn slipped on her best poker face and resolved to not rip his throat out for the moment as she answered.

"Yes, I would like it returned and our commission paid," she said calmly.

"We leave tomorrow or the next day and I would like this finished by the end of the day." Owain sighed deeply and took a small jewellery case out of his gown pocket.

"I assume that this is the pendant in question?" he asked, showing it to her. She nodded.

"Yes, now may you please return it? I shall send someone to collect our commission this afternoon." Owain shut the box quickly and inhaled.

"The thing is Miss Lynn, I think this is a rather beautiful pendant and I am rather loath to part with it." He looked her straight in the eye.

"Especially when I don't have to." There was movement on all sides and Lynn realised she was surrounded. She was just about to explode when a thought struck her. A delightfully vicious thought.

The man she had handed London to, the man who was supposed to be their partner was an idiot, the likes of which she had never met before. He assumed that

because he lorded over the rats and beggars that infested this little town that he also had the right to tell her what to do. A few people had tried this in the past, they had all made the wrong choice and so had he. The only hiccup this time was the pendant.

It was more than just a bit of jewellery; it was the ignition key for the engines that drove the *Dancer*. Without it, they would be nothing, but a fancy balloon at the mercy of the winds and that was not something she would allow to pass. They had been drifting for over a month already and they were falling behind their performance schedule. As it was, they had to skip the week in Ipswich and head straight for Cambridge to get back on target and to do that, they needed to get the engines back online. She tried to remain composed. It was clear that Owain thought it was just a trinket and she was not going to enlighten him. She had mistakenly assumed herself that there was a scrap of loyalty in the man, she was wrong. Well, where loyalty had failed her, greed would have to take its place.

Lynn remained calmly seated on the sofa, and though both the boys reacted, they followed her cue.

"I see, I wasn't aware of the state of affairs between us." It was Owain's turn to look confused.

"So we seemed to have come to a crossroads, Mr Langton. You see that pendant, while not of great value within itself, has significant personal value to me and I do not wish to leave London without it." Owain nodded in mock sympathy, but his smile never left his face.

"So I have a proposition for you." Lynn did not move a muscle as she spoke, never taking her eyes off Owain.

Owain was starting to enjoy this less and less; the woman would just not crack. No matter, neither would he.

"A proposition? What kind of proposition?" He sat forward, now intrigued by what she had to say. Lynn's smile widened.

"A bet, of sorts. You seem to be having a streak of good fortune so, I thought it might interest you." Neither of the men moved although Larkin's jaw set. Owain's smile broadened

"What is the bet on?" Lynn took a deep breath.

"The *Dancer* will leave London tomorrow morning as the fog begins to retreat. This evening Eddie here will bring two dogs to you. One of them will be the fighter who

won you seven hundred and fifty pounds and an empire; the other will be just a mutt. If you can tell the difference between the two, you win. If not, I win. Sound fair to you?" Owain's eyes widened in surprise and delight as he began laughing.

"But the dog that fought last night is injured; this isn't a bet, more like a farce." "Does that mean you won't play?" Owain looked at Lynn not sure what the game was.

"If I play and win, what is the prize?"

"You may keep my pendant and our commission for the fight last night. We will continue to do business as though nothing has gone between us and you will have all of London to swindle and coerce." Owain was a little taken aback by her tone, but he let it slide.

"And if, by some miracle or idiocy, you win?"

Lynn smiled. "Then you release my pendant to me and our commission doubles to fifty percent." Owain almost coughed as she said but still. He sat in silence for a moment.

"And all I have to do is select the correct fighter from last night? The dog I have been petting all week?" Lynn nodded.

"Yes, that's all." Owain fought it for a moment but a smile crossed his face.

"Fine, I agree to the bet on those terms. The smile that crossed Lynn's face, made him falter slightly but it was too late now. The two men lifted her in one smooth motion from her seat and she turned to the door.

"See you tomorrow morning." She took two steps forward and then stopped. "By the way Owain, if you ever see Leofric send him regards from me."

They left the apartments in the same cab. Owain stood looking confused in his parlour. After they realised he wasn't in town, Owain had sent men to go look for him at all the exits to London. They would find him and the rest of The Romulus and bring them in, that much he was sure of. Was there a reason he wouldn't see Leofric again? He stood in thought for a few moments, shrugged and returned to his sofa. Owain sat back and watched them leave, unable to stop chuckling. What was just proposed was not a bet; it was in fact a desperate attempt by a woman to get her trinket back without seeming desperate. He could not understand the logic of it, but then again he could never fathom women. He could also not understand the men who put her in charge, as clearly irrational as she was. She had just cost them more money in one sentence than they probably saw in a year. He knew the Romany Carnival was popular but really, how

popular could it really be? They were nothing but a bunch of riff raff with a smidgeon of talent for making children laugh.

He stood up and made his way over to the writing desk trying to put it all out of his mind. It was a done deal, he was about to be two hundred and fifty pounds richer, but something about her surety got under his skin as her tried to write letters in response to those that had just arrived. She seemed far too pleased that he had agreed to something that seemed like it was impossible to lose. Perhaps there was something to it, a trick maybe that she was hoping to pull? Perhaps the lovely little brown dog had a sibling that looked almost like it? He smiled and shook his head, that would make sense. It would be how he would pull a trick of mistaken identity and if she thought that he was going to fall for it, then she had another thing coming. He had seen dogs that could be easily mistaken for one another at a glance, but not if you looked carefully. No fighter looked exactly like another, there was no way they would have the same ears, the same scars, the same personality and she did not specify how long he had to make up his mind.

Believing himself satisfied, he continued on with his day, but often found his mind wandering to the events of the evening. At first he was excited but as the day wore on, he grew less and less enthusiastic. Her ploy was disrupting his concentration, his ability to plan ahead. By the time it was evening, he was in a foul mood, just wanted this entire charade to end. It was well after dark when a cab pulled up and Owain met them at the door. Eddie stepped out, followed by two covered crates.

"Evening sir, you ready for this?"

\* \* \*

Cards awoke the next morning, warm for the first time in days. As he sat up he yawned and stretched luxuriously, his soft coat finally dry. He could tell from the lull in the conversation around him that it was early in the morning. He sat looking around for a moment before a large woman, reminiscent of Madeline a few decades back, wandered over and gave him another bowl of meat broth and a small loaf of fresh bread. If he were any braver, he could have kissed her.

He retreated into a corner next to the fireplace and ate quietly, trying not to draw attention to himself. He learned long ago that the less people noticed him the better off

he was. These last few days were proof of that. No one seemed to pay him any mind and he finished his second bowl of warm food in years. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement and instinctually recoiled from it, but relaxed when he saw who it was. Lynn had wondered over to sit down next to him. She reached out a hand to him and he shied slightly from it.

“It’s alright cub, I won’t hurt you.” He sat still and she began to scratch behind his ear, inspecting the bruises that could be seen under his fur. No one had ever done that to him before and he had no idea why. It was the most amazing feeling in the universe. His skin tingled, his fur stood on end and for some strange reason he felt safe enough to lean into it and began to yip quietly without realising. He fell into the sensation for a while, until she spoke again, her smile from his behaviour still on her lips.

“So I understand that you desperately need to talk to me? Isn’t that why you’re here?” He blinked twice and moved away from the amazing feeling.

“Um, yes. I thought I might find you here. I’m really sorry if you don’t want to talk to me, but you were the only other person I know who might be able to help.” She raised an eyebrow, her one hand on his slim shoulder the other around her midsection holding a blanket around her shoulders.

“You see, after your fighter killed my boss Leofric’s, he lost everything and I know the Romulus are gonna blame me and I don’t stand a chance if I stay in London. I was supposed to deliver the package and I didn’t, so all of this, it’s my fault in their eyes.” Lynn’s looked at him curiously.

“And what were you hoping I could do about that?” Cards looked at the bowl in his hands, licked clean for the second time. He took a deep breath.

“Two things. The first was ... well ... I was hoping to catch a lift ... with you, if that’s okay?” Lynn sat back slightly in surprise.

“I mean, I’m a good worker and I don’t mind staying out of the way and I don’t take up much room, I promise. I was just hoping for a lift to the next stop, just out of London so that I don’t have to worry about...” Lynn squeezed his shoulder and he stopped talking, the desperation in his eyes evident.

“Cards, was it?” He nodded.

“Anyone willing to work is welcome on the *Dancer*. I know you are in trouble but if you can make your way, you can stay as long as you like. And the second thing?” He took another deep breath.

“Can I bring someone else along with me?” Lynn raised an eyebrow.

“Like who?” Cards swallowed hard, he knew how this was going to sound.

“A girl, named Sarah. She’s Madeline’s daughter and she works at the pub but things there are ... not so great ... for her.” Cards looked at Lynn, his eyes hopeful. “Could I bring her along too?”

Lynn sat back in thought for a moment before smiling. “If she is willing to work, then she can come as well.”

He bodily turned and took her hand in both of his slim ones, his heart almost audible as it hammered in his chest.

“Thank you, thank you so much, you don’t know how much this means to me. I’ll work hard, we’ll work hard, I swear. ” She smiled, removing her hand gently and stroking the fur on his head. For the first time, he leaned into it and nudged her hand in affection.

“There is only one condition.” He looked at her, concern creeping into his elation, ears flattening.

“You have to stay like this,” she gestured at his shifted form, “as often as possible. For two reasons: it is really cold all the time up on the *Dancer* and you are adorably soft like this.”

He smiled shyly, tail twitching. “I think I can manage it.” His ears pricked up as footsteps approached. One of the men placed a gentle hand on Lynn’s shoulder and she glanced at him before looking back.

“It’s almost time for us to go so if you have any belongings or clothing, you will have to fetch them quickly.”

He shook his head. “All I have is Sarah and what you see here. Nothing else. Leofric paid me in food and that’s all gone now.”

Lynn looked him up and down. “We’ll go get her and then see what’s lying around, come along then.” Cards gave the bowl back and stood at the same time as Lynn. It was his luck that at that moment she pitched forward and he caught her.

“You alright...” he didn’t finish.

His pupils contracted as he smelled fresh blood on her. He glanced down to the source which was her abdomen. There was a red stripe seeping through the dress across her midsection. She was bleeding right where... He stopped and looked her straight in the eye, ears flattening.

“You were...”

“Hush little fox, it’s not polite to give away a lady’s secrets.” A hand slid behind his head and pulled him close enough for a whisper. His tail slid firmly between his legs.

“No one here will hurt you. We are guard dogs, not attack dogs so...” she pulled away and straightened.

“Let’s go get your girl then.”

Cards swallowed hard, but as she turned, he made his decision and followed her out. There was a mass exodus from the bar as the *Dancer* floated over them and people began loading provisions and other crates that stood around. One of the men took his hand and put reins in it.

“Go get her.”

Cards was never any good with horses, they just didn’t seem to like him, but he managed to get to Madeline’s and tied the horse outside. He ducked inside and managed to avoid eye-contact with the few people there. He stepped up to the bar as Sarah appeared from beneath it. The colour drained from her face.

“Cards, what are you doing here? Mum will kill you when she gets back!”

Cards said nothing but leaned in, Sarah hesitating for a moment, but doing the same.

“Sarah, do you want to leave this place?” She looked at him like he had lost it.

“What do y’mean leave?”

“I have passage on a ship, with jobs, waiting to leave London. Do you want to come with me?” Sarah stood stunned, dropping the glass in her hand.

“You mean leave today, with no warning?” Cards grabbed her hand and looked her in the eyes for the first time in a long time.

“I mean right now, with no warning. The ship is leaving right now. Do you want to stay here, or do you want to come with me to wherever the ship goes?” She hesitated.

“Passage, on a ship, paid for, with jobs to earn money?” He nodded at every break. Sarah stopped breathing for a moment, her eyes glancing all over the room. Drunken patrons collapsed on tables, floors bloody from the fights, bodily fluids in corners.

“Sarah?” She took another deep breath and then a terrified smile appeared across her face. “Okay, let’s go, just give me one second.” She leaped over the bar and vanished up the stairs, appearing a minute later with an old coat and small bag. Cards

took her hand and they vanished outside. He helped her onto the horse and climbed up in front. After a minute of struggling, she reached around his waist and took the reins. They began to move and he told her where to go.

They arrived while most people had already climbed the rope ladders to get onto the deck in the sky. He arrived with Sarah and they both dismounted. He took Sarah's hand and led her over to Lynn who turned as she heard them. Neither Larkin nor the other man was anywhere to be seen.

"Lynn, this is Sarah. Sarah, Lynn, the woman who owns the *Dancer*."

Sarah curtsied and Lynn smiled. "Welcome to the crew of the *Dancer*."

Cards looked around, the crew worked fast. All the goods were loaded for the journey, he helped with the moving, packing and lifting as far as he could but even he could tell that they were waiting for something. It was only as the light broke the horizon behind the fog that they heard a cab pull up. Larkin and the other man stepped out with a covered crate. Cards nose told him it was a dog, so he just moved away from it as the man walked past. Larkin wandered up to Lynn and kissed her on her cheek.

"Is it done?" Larkin nodded and opened his hand. An amethyst cabochon pendant set in sterling silver with sapphire held in place by silver filigree was revealed and Lynn's face lit up.

"I got grandmother's pendant back. The *Dancer* will soar again. Owain made the last wrong choice of his life." As he spoke he walked around her and strung it onto the chain that was around her neck. As soon as he was done, she turned and hugged him.

"And then there's this." He handed her a thick wallet. He smile was dazzling.

"You are my good boy, now get on board." Larkin smiled and then nodded at Cards and Sarah.

"They're coming with us; I think they will do well in the skies, don't you?" Larkin called Cards over and they fashioned a sling to get Lynn and Sarah on deck with the least strain before making in up themselves. Cards stood on the deck as the ropes were hauled in and the propellers started for the first time. The city of London was below him, further than it had ever been. The fog was omnipresent and from here, it looked as though it would never leave.