

# HEXED

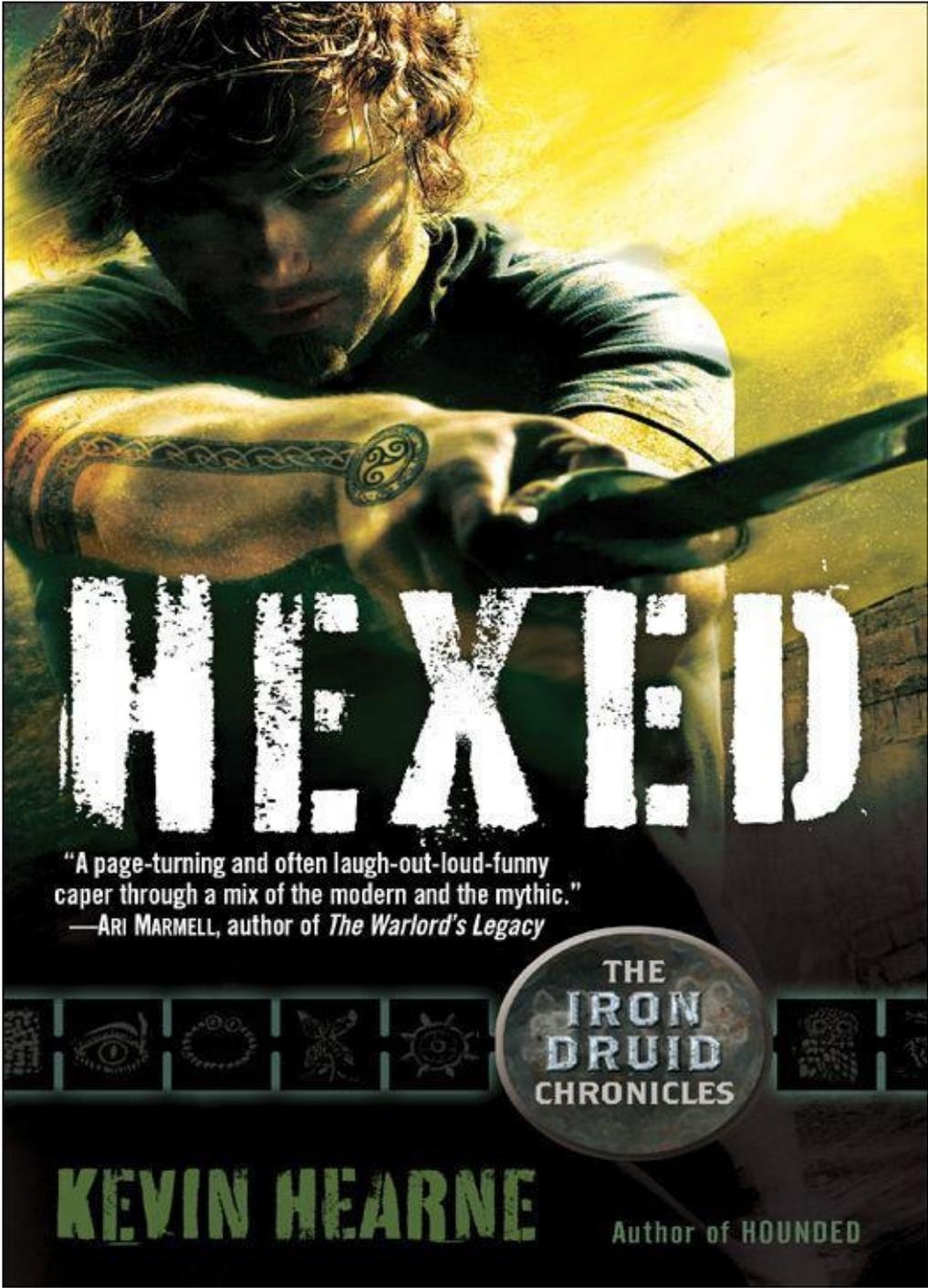
"A page-turning and often laugh-out-loud-funny caper through a mix of the modern and the mythic."

—ARI MARMELL, author of *The Warlord's Legacy*

THE  
IRON  
DRUID  
CHRONICLES

KEVIN HEARNE

Author of *ROUNDED*



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*Hexed* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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v3.1

For my father,  
who never saw these books in print,  
but at least left us knowing  
his son had achieved his dream

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## Pronunciation Guide

Just as with the Irish words in *Hounded*, I wouldn't want anyone to see the Polish, Russian, German, and Irish in *Hexed* and think to themselves, Do I really have to read that stuff properly? You don't. I want you to enjoy yourself, and if you prefer saying words any old way you like, then I'm on your side. But if you're the sort who'd like to hear precisely how things should sound coming out of the mouths of these characters, then I've provided the guide below to help you do that.

### Names of the Polish Coven

Written Polish has a few letters that aren't pronounced the way they are in English. Rather than try to explain them all, please take my very informal phonetic pronunciations here and trust me—unless you'd rather not.

Berta = Berta (this one's just like it looks; I promise things will get interesting soon)

Bogumila = BO goo ME wah (However, her American nickname, *Mila*, would be pronounced ME lah, because otherwise Americans would constantly question why she pronounced her *l* like a *w*)

Kazimiera = KAH zhee ME rah

Klaudia = Klaudia (just like it looks)

Malina Sokolowski = Ma LEE nah SO ko WOV ski (that's right, no *l* sound in her last name)

Radomila = RAH doe ME wah

Roksana = Roke SAH nah

Waclawa = Va SWAH va

### Irish Phrases

Bean sidhe = BAN shee

Dóigh = doy (means *burn*)

Dún = doon (means *close* or *shut*)

Freagróidh tú = frag ROY too (means *you will answer*)

Múchaim = MOO hem (means *extinguish*)

### Irish Doodads

Fragarach = FRAG ah rah (named sword: The Answerer)

Moralltach = MOR al tah (named sword: Great Fury)

The remaining phrases in Polish, Russian, and German can all be listened to online as sound files on my website, [kevinhearne.com](http://kevinhearne.com), if you feel like clicking on over there.

## Irish God

Goibhniu = GUV new (member of the Tuatha Dé Danann; master smith and brewer of fine ales)

## Chapter 1

Turns out that when you kill a god, people want to talk to you. Paranormal insurance salesmen with special “godslayer” term life policies. Charlatans with “god-proof” armor and extraplanar safe houses for rent. But, most notably, other gods, who want to first congratulate you on your achievement, second warn you not to try such shenanigans on them, and finally suggest that you try to slay one of their rivals—purely as a shenanigan, of course.

Ever since word got around to the various pantheons that I had snuffed not one but two of the Tuatha Dé Danann—and sent the more powerful of the two to the Christian hell—I had been visited by various potentates, heralds, and ambassadors from most of the world’s belief systems. All of them wanted me to leave them alone but pick a fight with someone else, and if I successfully lanced the immortal boil that vexed them, I’d be rewarded beyond my wildest dreams, blah blah barf yak.

That reward business was a giant load of shite, as they’d say in the U.K. Brighid, Celtic goddess of poetry, fire, and the forge, had promised to reward me if I killed Aenghus Óg, but I hadn’t heard a word from her in the three weeks since Death carried him off to hell. I’d heard plenty from the rest of the world’s gods, but from my own? Nothing but the chirping of crickets.

The Japanese wanted me to mess with the Chinese, and vice versa. The old Russian gods wanted me to stick it to the Hungarians. The Greeks wanted me to knock off their Roman copycats in a bizarre manifestation of self-loathing and internecine jealousy. The weirdest by far were those Easter Island guys, who wanted me to mess around with some rotting totem poles in the Seattle area. But everyone—at least, it sure seemed like everyone—wanted me to slay Thor as soon as I had a free moment. The whole world was tired of his shenanigans, I guess.

Foremost among these was my own attorney, Leif Helgarson. He was an old Icelandic vampire who had presumably worshipped Thor at some point in ancient history, but he’d never told me why he now harbored such hatred for him. Leif did some legal work for me, sparred with me regularly to keep my sword arm sharp, and occasionally drank a goblet full of my blood by way of payment.

I found him waiting for me on my porch the night after Samhain. It was a cool evening in Tempe, and I was in a good mood after having much to give thanks for. While the American children had busied themselves the night before by trick-or-treating on Halloween, I had paid plenty of attention to the Morrigan and Brighid in my own private ceremonies, and I was thrilled to have an apprentice to teach and to share the night with. Granuaile had returned from North Carolina in time for Samhain, and though the two of us were not much of a Druid’s grove, it was still a better holy night than I had enjoyed in centuries. I was the only real Druid left, and the idea of starting a new grove after such a long time of going it alone had filled me with hope. So when Leif greeted me formally from my front porch as I came home from work, I was perhaps more exuberant in my response than I should have been.

“Leif, you spooky bastard, how the hell are ya?” I grinned widely as I braked my bike to a stop. He raised his eyebrows and peered at me down his long Nordic nose, and I realized that he was probably unused to such cavalier address.

“I am not a bastard,” he replied archly. “Spooky I will grant you. And while I am well”—a corner of his mouth quirked upward a fraction—“I confess not so jocund as yourself.”

“Jocund?” I raised my brows. Leif had asked me in the past to call him on behaviors that broadcast how much older he was than he looked.

Apparently he didn’t want to be corrected right then. He exhaled noisily to express his exasperation. I thought it amusing that he employed that, since he had no need to breathe. “Fine,” he said. “Not so jovial, then.”

“No one uses those words anymore, Leif, except for old farts like us.” I leaned my bike against the porch rails and mounted the three steps to take a seat next to him. “You really should spend some decent time learning how to blend in. Make it a project. Popular culture is mutating at a much faster rate these days. It’s not like the Middle Ages, when you had the Church and the aristocracy keeping everything nice and stagnant.”

“Very well, since you are the verbal acrobat who walks the tightrope of the zeitgeist, educate me. How should I have responded?”

“First, get rid of ‘well.’ Nobody uses that anymore either. Now they always say, ‘I’m good.’ ”

Leif frowned. “But that is grammatically improper.”

“These people don’t care about proper. You can tell them they’re trying to use an adjective as an adverb and they’ll just stare at you like you’re a toad.”

“Their educational system has suffered serious setbacks, I see.”

“Tell me about it. So what you should have said was, ‘I’m not stoked like you, Atticus, but I’m chill.’ ”

“I’m ‘chill’? That means I am well—or good, as you say?”

“Correct.”

“But that’s nonsense!” Leif protested.

“It’s modern vernacular.” I shrugged. “Date yourself if you want, but if you keep using nineteenth-century diction, people will start to think you’re a spooky bastard.”

“They already think that.”

“You mean because you only come out at night and you suck their blood?” I said in a tiny, innocent voice.

“Precisely,” Leif said, unaffected by my teasing.

“No, Leif.” I shook my head in all seriousness. “They don’t figure that out until much later, if they ever figure it out at all. These people think you’re spooky because of the way you talk and the way you behave. They can tell you don’t belong. Believe me, it’s not that you have skin like two-percent milk. Lots of people are scared of skin cancer out here in the Valley of the Sun. It’s once you start talking that people get creeped out. They know you’re old then.”

“But I *am* old, Atticus!”

“And I’ve got at least a thousand years on you, or have you forgotten?”

He sighed, the weary ancient vampire who had no need for respiration. “No, I have not forgotten.”

“Fine. Don’t complain to me about being old. I hang out with these college kids and they have no clue that I’m not one of them. They think my money comes from an inheritance or a trust fund, and they want to have a drink with me.”

“I find the college children delightful. I would like to have a drink with them too.”

“No, Leif, you want to drink *of* them, and they can sense that subconsciously because you radiate this predatory aura.”

His affectation of a henpecked husband sloughed away and he looked at me sharply. “You told me they can’t sense my aura as you do.”

“No, they can’t consciously sense it. But they pick up on your *otherness*, mostly because you don’t respond like you should or act like a man of your cosmetic age.”

“How old do I look?”

“Ehh,” I appraised him, looking for wrinkles. “You look like you’re in your late thirties.”

“I look that old? I was turned in my late twenties.”

“Times were tougher back then.” I shrugged again.

“I suppose. I have come to talk to you about those times, if you are free for the span of an hour or so.”

“Right,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “Just let me go get my hourglass and my freakin’ smoking jacket. Listen to yourself, Leif! Do you want to blend in or not? The span of an hour? Who says shit like that anymore?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“No one is so formal! You could just say ‘if you’re free’ and end it there, though it would have been better to say ‘if you ain’t doin’ nothing.’ ”

“But I enjoyed the anapestic meter of ‘for the span of an hour’ followed by the iamb —”

“Gods Below, you compose your sentences in blank verse? No wonder you can’t carry on a half hour’s conversation with a sorority girl! They’re used to talking with frat boys, not Shakespearean scholars!”

<Atticus? You’re home?> It was my Irish wolfhound, Oberon, speaking directly to my mind through the connection we share. He was probably on the other side of the door, listening to us talk. I told Leif to hold on a second as I spoke with him.

*Yes, Oberon, I’m home. Leif’s out here on the front porch, acting his age.*

<I know, I smelled him earlier. It’s like Eau de Death or something. I didn’t bark, though, like you said.>

*You’re a good hound. Want to come hang out with us?*

<Sure!>

*I have to warn you, it might be boring. He wants to talk about something for a while, and he’s looking particularly grim and Nordic. It might be epic.*

<That’s okay. You can rub my belly the whole time. I promise to be still.>

*Thanks, buddy. I promise we’ll go for a run when he leaves.* I opened the front door and Oberon came bounding out, oblivious to the fact that his wagging tail was delivering steady blows to Leif’s upper arm.

<Let’s go down to Town Lake after the dead guy says good-bye. And then Rúla Búla.> He named our favorite Irish pub, from which I’d recently been banned.

*The management of Rúla Búla is still mad at me for stealing Granuaile away from them. She was their best bartender.*

<Still? But that was ages ago.>

*It's been only three weeks*, I reminded him. Dogs aren't all that great with time. *I'll let you run around the golf course and you can keep any rabbits you catch. Flop down for your belly rub. I have to talk to Leif now.* Oberon promptly obeyed, rattling the timbers of the porch as he thudded heavily onto his back between my seat and Leif's.

<This is the best! There's nothing better than belly rubs. Except maybe for French poodles. Remember Fifi? Good times, good times.>

"All right, Leif, he's a happy hound now," I said as I scratched Oberon's ribs. "What did you want to talk about?"

"It is fairly simple," he began, "but as with all simple things, vastly complicated."

"Wait. You sound too accomplished with adverbs. Use *really* and *very* for everything," I advised him.

"I would rather not, if you will forgive me. Since I am not trying to disguise my true nature with you, may I speak as I wish?"

"Of course," I said, biting back the observation that he should use contractions more often. "I'm sorry, Leif, I'm just trying to help, you know."

"Yes, and I appreciate it. But this is going to be difficult enough without running my words through a filter of illiteracy." He took a deep, unnecessary breath and closed his eyes as he slowly exhaled. He looked like he was trying to center himself and find a chakra point. "There are many reasons why I require your aid, and many reasons why you should agree to help me, but those can wait a few moments. Here is the short version," he said, opening his eyes and turning to look at me. "I want you to help me kill Thor."

<Ha! Tell him to get in line!> Oberon said. He chuffed as he always did when he found something particularly funny. Thankfully, Leif did not recognize that my dog was laughing at him.

"Hmm," I said. "Thor certainly tends to inspire murderous thoughts. You're not the first person to suggest that to me these past couple of weeks."

Leif pounced. "One of the many reasons you should agree to help. You would have ample allies to secure whatever aid you needed and plenty of grateful admirers should you succeed."

"And plenty of mourners should I fail? If he's so universally hated, why hasn't someone else done the deed?"

"Because of Ragnarok," Leif replied, obviously anticipating the question. "That prophecy has everyone afraid of him, and it has made him insufferably arrogant. Their line of reasoning says that if he is going to be around for the end of the world, then obviously nothing can be done about him now. But that is poppycock."

I smiled. "Did you just say Ragnarok is poppycock?" Oberon chuffed some more.

Leif ignored me and plowed on. "Not all of the prophesied apocalypses can come true, just as only one of the creations can possibly be true, if any of them are. We cannot be tied down by some ancient tale dreamed up in the frozen brains of my ancestors. We can change it right now."

"Look, Leif, I know you have a saga full of reasons why I should do this, but I really can't internalize any of it. I simply don't think it's my duty to do this. Aenghus Óg and Bres both came to me and picked a fight, and all I did was finish it. And, you know, it could have easily gone the other way. You weren't there: I nearly didn't make

it. You've seen this, I imagine?" I pointed to my disfigured right ear. A demon that looked like the Iron Maiden mascot had chewed it off, and I hadn't been able to regenerate anything except a mangled mass of cartilage. (I'd already caught myself singing, "Don't spend your time always searching for those wasted ears.")

"Of course I've seen it," Leif replied.

"I'm lucky I got away with so little damage. Even though I haven't paid a huge price for killing Aenghus, I've had several unpleasant visits from other gods as a result. And that's only because I'm still small potatoes. Can you imagine what the rest of the gods would do if I managed to knock off someone big like Thor? They'd all take me out collectively just to remove the threat. Besides, I don't think it's possible to kill him."

"Oh, but it *is* possible," Leif said, raising a finger and shaking it at me. "The Norse gods are like your Tuatha Dé Danann. They have eternal youth, but they can be killed."

"Originally, yeah," I agreed. "I've read the old stuff, and I know that you're after Thor version 1.0. But you know, there's more than one version of Thor out there now, just like there are multiple Coyotes and various versions of Jesus and Buddha and Elvis. We can invade Asgard, kill Thor 1.0, and then, if we manage to avoid getting creamed by the rest of the Norse, we could come back here to Midgard only to have the comic book Thor smite the hell out of us like the naughty varlets we are. Did you think about that?"

Leif looked utterly bewildered. "Thor has a comic book?"

"Yeah, how did you miss this? There's a movie about him based on the comic too. He's a heroic kind of guy here in the States, not nearly so much of a dick as the original. He'll ignore you unless you draw attention to yourself, and storming Asgard will probably get his attention pretty fast."

"Hmm. Say that I can put together a coalition of beings willing to participate in the physical assault on Asgard and accompany us back to Midgard. Could I count on your aid in such a scenario?"

I slowly shook my head. "No, Leif, I'm sorry. One reason I'm still alive is that I've never gone toe-to-toe with a thunder god. It's a good survival strategy, and I'm going to stick with it. But if you're going to do something like that, I recommend avoiding Loki. He'll pretend to be on your side, but he'll spill his guts to Odin first chance he gets, and then you'll have that entire pantheon coming after you with a wooden stake."

"That might be preferable to me, at this point, than continuing to coexist with him. I want revenge."

"Revenge for what, exactly?" Normally I don't pry into vampiric psychology, because it's so predictable: The only things they tend to get exercised about are power and territory. They enjoy being asked questions, though, so that they can ignore you and appear mysterious when they don't answer.

Leif never got the chance to answer me, though he looked ready enough to do so for a half second. As he opened his mouth to speak, his eyes flicked down to the base of my throat where my cold iron amulet rested, just as I began to feel the space between my clavicles heat up—even burn.

"Um," Leif said in perhaps his most inarticulate moment ever, "why is your amulet glowing?"

I felt the heat surge like mercury on an August morning, sweat popped out on my scalp, and the sickening sound of sizzling in my ears was a little piece of me frying like bacon. And even though I instinctively wanted to peel off the necklace and chuck it onto the lawn, I fought back the urge, because the smoldering lump of cold iron—the antithesis of magic—was the only thing keeping me alive.

“I’m under magical attack!” I hissed through clenched teeth as I clutched the chair arms, white-knuckled and concentrating on blocking the pain. I wasn’t working on that only to silence my screaming nerves; if I let the pain get to me, I was finished. Pain is the fastest way to stir up the reptilian brain, and once awakened, it tends to shut off the higher functions of the cerebral cortex, leaving one witless and unable to function beyond the instinctive fight-or-flight level—and that would have left me unable to communicate coherently and connect the dots for Leif, in case he was missing out on the salient point: “Someone’s trying to kill me!”

## Chapter 2

Leif's fangs popped out and he launched himself from his chair to the edge of my front lawn, scanning the darkness for assailants with all his senses. Oberon likewise leapt to his feet and growled at the night, threatening whoever was out there with all the menace he could muster.

I knew already that they would find nothing. Someone was doing this from afar.

"Witches!" I spat as my amulet continued to cook my upper chest. The spell itself had ceased and the red glow was beginning to fade, but the smell of grilled me was still wafting up to my nose. The effort of shutting down the pain and trying to restore my melted skin was quickly draining my reserves, so I struggled to my feet and hobbled gingerly down the steps to the lawn, where I could kick off my sandals and draw power from the earth. I bent over and rested my hands on my knees, intending to let the amulet dangle from my neck away from my skin, but it remained where it was—fused to my flesh. Not good.

"I would agree that you are a victim of witchcraft, but I sense no one nearby but the usual residents," Leif said as he continued to search for trouble. "However, now that you have delicately broached the subject—"

"Is that what I just did?" I said, tension straining my voice. "Delicately broach the subject of witches? Because I thought I was doing something else entirely, like getting my ass flame-broiled by witches."

"I beg your pardon. I was flailing about for a segue and utterly failed to find a facile one. My professional reason for visiting you tonight was to tell you that Malina Sokolowski has agreed to your latest terms without revisions or amendments. She's ready to sign the nonaggression treaty as soon as you are."

"Yes, well." I winced as I pulled on the amulet's silver chain, peeling it off my chest and taking some blackened skin with it. "This kind of puts her nonaggression to the lie, doesn't it?"

"No." Leif shook his head. "She would not do this so close to settling a peace between you."

"Maybe it's the perfect time to take a shot at me. We haven't signed anything yet, so that puts her high on my list of suspects." Malina was the new leader of a coven of Polish witches who called themselves the Sisters of the Three Auroras, and they had claimed the East Valley—the local sobriquet for the cities of Tempe, Mesa, Scottsdale, Chandler, and Gilbert—as their territory since the eighties, long before I arrived. When I rolled into town in the late nineties, they pretty much ignored me; I was only one guy, after all, and I displayed zero aggression and not much in the way of power beyond a talent for herbal remedies. We'd been content to live and let live until our interests diverged: They were interested in helping out a god who wanted to kill me (in exchange for what I originally thought was passage through Tír na nÓg, but turned out to be an estate in Mag Mell), and I was interested in staying alive. That was the point where they discovered they had epically underestimated me. There used to be thirteen

of them, but six of them died while trying to kill me, and despite all Malina's noises about doves and olive branches, I still believed she would take any chance she got to avenge them.

"I do hope you will not suggest that I pay her a visit," Leif said in a stuffy voice.

"No, no, I'll call on her myself."

"You relieve me excessively. Your inquisitive neighbor, by the way, is taking an interest in us."

"You mean Mr. Semerdjian?"

"That's the one." I cast my eyes sideways across the street, moving my head only a smidge. I could see one pair of blinds in the house opposite mine parted fractionally wider than the rest, and in the dark space between them no doubt lurked the darker eyes of my poisonous neighbor.

"You don't, uh, smell anything different about him, do you?" I asked Leif.

"Different in what way?" my attorney asked.

"No whiff of the Fae about him? No whiff of demons?"

Leif chuckled wryly and shook his head. "The world will never plumb the depths of your paranoia."

"I hope not, because then it might catch me unprepared for something. What does he smell like?"

Leif wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Like a chili dog with mustard and cheap light beer. His blood courses with grease and alcohol."

<Wow. I didn't think he would smell that good,> Oberon said.

"All this sniffing of blood reminds me that I have yet to drink tonight," Leif said, "so I think I will leave you to your healing and your own personal witch hunt, now that my duty is done. But, ere I go, will you at least consider joining me and others in an alliance against Thor? Dwell on its benefits for a time, as a personal favor to me."

"All right, as a favor to you," I said, "I will consider it. But, honestly, Leif, I do not wish to give you any false hope here. Killing Thor is an honor I dream not of."

Icy glares from vampires are far icier than icy glares from people. And when the vampire giving you an icy glare is originally *from Iceland*, you are confronted with the archetypal origin of the term, and you shouldn't be surprised if your core body temperature drops a few degrees. Leif threw one such glare at me for a few seconds, then said quietly, "Are you mocking me? When you quote Shakespeare, it is often to mock someone or to point out their folly."

<Whoa, he's got you there, Atticus,> Oberon said.

"No, Leif, I'm just under a bit of stress here," I said, gesturing at my sweating face and the still-steaming amulet dangling from my neck.

"I think you are lying."

"Come on, Leif—"

"Forgive me, but our association has allowed me some small knowledge about the way you think. You quoted Juliet just now. Are you suggesting I am something like Romeo here, Fortune's fool, perhaps, driven to a rash and ill-considered confrontation with Tybalt out of revenge for Mercutio's death? And you think perhaps I will end tragically, like Romeo, if I pursue this course of action against Thor?"

"That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all," I said, "but if that were my intent, I would have chosen to speak as Benvolio rather than Juliet: 'Part, fools! You

know not what you do.’ ”

Leif stared at me, utterly still, the way only vampires and pet rocks can manage. “I’ve always preferred *Hamlet*,” he finally said. “ ‘Now could I drink hot blood, and do such bitter business as the day would quake to look on.’ ” He spun on his heel and moved quickly—perhaps a bit too quickly for a normal human—to the door of his sleek black Jaguar XK convertible parked in the street, where he muttered a sulky “Fare thee well” before leaping in, gunning the engine, and screeching off in an undead hissy fit.

<Dude. If that was a Shakespearean quote duel, he just kicked your ass.>

*I know. But I slipped in some T. S. Eliot and he didn’t catch it. Hopefully next time I won’t be recovering from an assassination attempt, and then I’ll do better.* I was still hunched over awkwardly, trying to prevent the amulet from falling back to my chest, and I needed to do something about it—but I didn’t want to do anything in front of Mr. Semerdjian, who was doubtless still watching me.

*Oberon, I want you to go across the street and park yourself on the edge of his lawn, sort of off to one side, and stare at him.*

<That’s it? Just sit? Because I don’t want to do anything else while he’s watching.>

*That’s it. I need you to distract him, is all. Ever since you left him a present that one time, he’s been terrified you’ll do it again. It’s the gift that keeps on giving.*

It was a shame that Mr. Semerdjian and I didn’t get along. A slightly pudgy Lebanese gentleman on the wrong side of sixty, he tended to get excited quickly and loudly and would probably have been great fun to watch a baseball game with. We might have gotten along famously if he hadn’t been such a jerk from the moment I moved in—which is kind of like saying the drowning victim might have lived if only he had been able to breathe water.

<All right, but I’d better get a sausage out of this.>

*Deal. We’re still going for that run too.*

<Wait. He doesn’t remember any of that business in Papago Park, does he?> Oberon was referring to an unfortunate incident during which a park ranger had died and Mr. Semerdjian had tried to lay the blame at our door.

*Nope. Leif took care of all that with his patented vampiric mindwipe.* That thought led me to reflect that having a vampire around was pretty handy sometimes; I hoped Leif wouldn’t remain angry with me for long.

<Okay, I suppose this will be kind of fun.> Oberon trotted across the street, and the space between the blinds abruptly widened as Mr. Semerdjian abandoned all attempts at subterfuge. <I can see his eyes now.>

While the two of them were engaged in an ocular tête-à-tête, I drew power from the earth and summoned a thick but very localized fog. Arizona is legendary for its dry air, but in the first week of November with a storm rolling in, it’s not that hard to find some water vapor to bind. While that took time to condense, I shifted my concentration to healing my burned skin and made better progress now that the amulet wasn’t cooking it faster than I could heal.

Since the amulet was still far too hot, I walked hunched over to my garden hose and turned it on, checking to see if the fog had rolled in properly before continuing. I could still see Oberon, who was sitting underneath a streetlight, but not the windows of Mr. Semerdjian’s house, so that was good enough. I held one hand up in front of my face

to protect it from steam, then turned the hose on the amulet.

It hissed and spat and the expected steam geysered up, but after a few seconds it noticeably began to cool.

<Hey, I think he's coming outside,> Oberon called.

*That's fine. Just stay still and stare at him. Wag your tail if you can manage.*

<I can't. I really don't like him.>

I heard Mr. Semerdjian explode out of the house in high dudgeon. "Get out of here, you filthy mutt! Shoo! Go away!"

<Did he just call me a mutt? That was rude. Hey, he has a rolled-up newspaper in his hand.>

*If he comes at you with it, growl at him.*

<Cool. Here he comes.> I heard Oberon growl menacingly, and Mr. Semerdjian's peremptory commands abruptly changed to shrill pleas a couple of octaves higher.

"Ahhh! Nice doggie! Stay! Good dog!"

<He must think I'm stupid. He comes at me with a newspaper, intending to slap me upside the head, and then he says "good dog" and expects me to forget all that? I think he deserves a couple of barks.>

*Go for it.* The amulet was cooling down rapidly now; a few more seconds would allow it to rest on my chest again without doing further damage. Oberon barked viciously, and Mr. Semerdjian's panicked voice immediately leapt to Mariah Carey territory.

"O'Sullivan! Call off your dog, damn you! O'Sullivan! Get over here! Where did this fucking fog come from?"

Satisfied, I turned off the hose and stood up, letting the amulet fall back against my chest. It wasn't fully healed, but it was getting better and I had the pain firmly under control. I walked leisurely across the street to where Oberon was still sitting.

"Here now," I said calmly as I coalesced out of the mist into a wan column of light next to my hound. "What's all the fuss, Mr. Semerdjian? My dog is simply sitting here, offering you no violence whatsoever."

"He's off his leash!" he spluttered.

"So are you," I observed. "If you hadn't advanced upon him in a threatening manner, he never would have growled at you, much less barked."

"Never mind that!" Semerdjian spat. "He's not supposed to be running around loose! And he definitely shouldn't be on my property! I should call the police!"

"I believe the last time you called the police on me, you got cited for falsely calling 911, did you not?"

Semerdjian's face purpled and he shouted, "Just get off my property! Both of you!"

*Step backward into the street with me until we disappear from his view,* I told Oberon. *Now.* We retreated, keeping our eyes on Mr. Semerdjian as we let the mist envelop us, and I imagined what it must look like to my neighbor: He watched a man and his dog walk backward in tandem without the man giving the dog any audible command, until they vanished like spectres into vapor.

*That should creep him out pretty good,* I told Oberon. Sure enough, Mr. Semerdjian called after us as we turned up the street.

"You're a spooky bastard, O'Sullivan!" he yelled, and I stifled a laugh at the irony of his insult. "You and your dog had better stay away from me!"

<That was fairly amusing,> Oberon chuffed. <What's that word for when you play a joke on someone?>

*A prank, I said, beginning to jog as Oberon trotted beside me. I released the binding on the water vapor, letting the fog disperse. We are like the Merry Pranksters of 1964, giving Mr. Semerdjian his own customized Acid Test without the benefit of any acid.*

<What's an Acid Test?>

*Well, I'll tell you all about it when we get home. Since you are apparently a filthy mutt—*

<Hey!>

*—you need a bath, and while you're in the bath I'll tell you all about the Merry Pranksters and the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. But now let's run to the market and get you your promised sausage.*

<Okay! I want one of those succulent chicken–apple ones.>

*You mind if I make a call? I need to call Malina and let her know her spell didn't work.* I pulled out my cell phone and began to look up Malina's number.

<Sure. But before I forget, I think you should know that Leif was probably lying to you just now.>

*How so?* I frowned.

<Well, you remember how I got a nose full of demon four days ago when you rescued me in the Superstition Mountains?>

*That was three weeks ago, not four days, but yes, I remember.*

<Well, Leif told you Mr. Semerdjian didn't smell like demon, but he kind of did. He still does, actually. Shape-shift into a hound if you don't believe me; that lame human nose isn't doing you any favors.>

*Wait. Hold up, I said, stopping in the middle of the street. Oberon pulled up after a few steps and looked back at me, tongue lolling out. We were still on 11th Street, just over a block away from my house; streetlamps periodically cast cones of light like yellow party hats in the darkness. You still smell demon even though we're all the way down the street?*

<Yeah. And it's getting worse.>

*Oh, no, that's not good, Oberon, I said, putting my cell phone back in my pocket. We need to go back to the house. I need to get my sword.* A block ahead of us, something shifted in the shadows. It moved unnaturally above the ground, the size of a small Volkswagen, and then I discerned what was moving it: grotesquely long insectile legs, supporting a bulk that vaguely resembled a grasshopper. Insect size is supposed to be restricted to six inches or so, due to the limits of their tracheal systems, but apparently this demon didn't get the memo.

*Run home, Oberon! Now!* I pivoted and sprinted at top speed for my front yard and immediately heard the demon leap into pursuit, its legs drumming out a chitinous clacking on the black asphalt. We weren't leaving it behind; if anything, it was gaining on us. There would be no time for me to get my sword.

## Chapter 3

Demons smell like ass—nasty ass that slithers down your throat, finds your gag reflex, and sits on it with authority. I got an overdose when Aenghus Óg unleashed a horde of them on this plane with the command to kill me, and now I finally caught a whiff of this one. It wasn't a fragrance that Gold Canyon candles would be offering anytime soon.

Some of the demons had been strong enough to resist Aenghus Óg's binding at first and run for the hills to work their own mischief. Though Flidais—the Celtic goddess of the hunt—had tracked most of them down, I knew a few must still be out there and they'd eventually come looking for me. Despite Aenghus's demise, his binding was the sole reason they were on this plane, and until they obeyed its commands they'd never be truly free; the binding would just keep tugging at them until they lost the will to resist. I had killed most of the horde with Cold Fire, but this one must have gotten out of range pretty fast, and only now had it tracked me down in obeisance to the binding.

*Run around to the back, Oberon,* I said. My friend was already ahead of me. *There's no way you can fight this thing.*

<I'm not going to argue,> he said. <I wouldn't want to take a bite of something that smells that bad, anyway.>

I was coming up hard on my lawn, with the demon close behind; I could hear the whistling of its spiracles in addition to the skittering of its six legs. Once I hit the earth, I could draw power and slap the thing with Cold Fire, but there were drawbacks to that plan: One, Cold Fire took some time to work, and, two, using it weakened me so much that I'd be completely vulnerable after casting it.

With no sword to penetrate its chitin and no safety cushion for Cold Fire, I'd have to depend on my magical wards to take care of the demon before it took care of me. That, too, would take some time, but perhaps I could dodge behind my mesquite tree and stay out of the range of its serrated front legs long enough for my Druidic juju to do its work.

The earth is all too willing to help out with getting rid of demons: They don't belong on the earth, are in fact anathema to it, and thus it takes very little coaxing to set up a demonic ward around one's house. Teach the earth to detect a demon's presence upon it and encourage it to tidy up the soiled area, and you're done—sort of.

The problem is that the earth isn't renowned for its reaction times. Every ten years I like to meditate for a week and commune with its spirit, which people like to call Gaia nowadays, and she chats fondly about the Cretaceous period as if it were something that happened just last month. A security-conscious Druid cannot afford to take the long view on intruders, however, so I set up my mesquite tree as a first line of defense and as an alarm bell for the elemental of the Sonoran Desert. The elemental would get the earth's attention much quicker than I could—and perhaps make an appearance as Gaia's champion. The truth was I didn't exactly know what would happen when a