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JIM BUTCHER

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COLD DAYS

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

THE DRESDEN FILES

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ACADEM'S FURY
CURSOR'S FURY
CAPTAIN'S FURY
PRINCEPS' FURY
FIRST LORD'S FURY

JIM BUTCHER

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For Chris Achterhof, writer of “Greed” (he’ll know why after reading this), and all my old gaming buddies in the International Fantasy Gaming Society. You people are all silly, and you made the nineties a much brighter place.

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Chapter

One

Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, monarch of the Winter Court of the Sidhe, has unique ideas regarding physical therapy.

I woke up in softness.

What I probably should say was that I woke up in a soft bed. But . . . that just doesn't convey how soft this bed was. You know those old cartoons where people sleep on fluffy clouds? Those guys would wake up screaming in pain if they got suckered into taking one of those clouds after they'd been in Mab's bed.

The fire in my chest had finally begun to die away. The heavy wool lining coating my thoughts seemed to have lightened up. When I blinked my eyes open, they felt gummy, but I was able to lift my arm, slowly, and wipe them clear. I'd gone jogging on beaches with less sand than was in my eyes.

Man. Being mostly dead is hard on a guy.

I was in a bed.

A bed the size of my old apartment.

The sheets were all perfectly white and smooth. The bed was shrouded in drapes of more pure white, drifting on gentle currents of cool air. The temperature was cold enough that when I exhaled, my breath condensed, but I was comfortable beneath the bed's covering.

The curtains around the bed parted and a girl appeared.

She was probably too young to drink legally and she was one of the lovelier women I'd ever seen in person. High cheekbones, exotic almond-shaped eyes. Her skin was a medium olive tone, her eyes an almost eerie shade of pale green-gold. Her hair was pulled back into a simple tail, she wore pale blue hospital scrubs, and she had no makeup at all.

Wow. Any woman who could wear that and still look that good was a freaking goddess.

"Hello," she said, and smiled at me. Maybe it was just the bed talking, but the smile and her voice were even better than the rest of her.

"Hi," I said. My voice came out in a croak that hardly sounded human. I started coughing.

She placed a covered tray on a little stand beside the bed and sat down on the edge of it. She took the cover off the tray and picked up a white china cup. She passed it to me, and it proved to be filled with not quite scalding chicken noodle soup. "You do that every day. Talk before you've gotten anything down your throat. Drink."

I did. Campbell's. And it was awesome. I flashed on a sudden memory of being sick when I was very young. I couldn't remember where we'd been, but my dad had made me chicken noodle soup. It

was the same.

“I think . . . I remember some of it,” I said, after several sips. “Your name is . . . Sarah?” She frowned, but I shook my head before she could speak. “No, wait. Sarissa. Your name is Sarissa.”

She lifted both eyebrows and smiled. “That’s a first. It looks like you’re finally coming back into focus.”

My stomach gurgled and at the same time a roaring hunger went through me. I blinked at the sudden sensation and started gurgling down more soup.

Sarissa laughed at me. It made the room feel brighter. “Don’t drown yourself. There’s no rush.”

I finished the cup, spilling only a little on my chin, and then murmured, “The hell there isn’t. I’m starving. What else is there?”

“Tell you what,” she said. “Before you do that, let’s shoot for another first.”

“Eh?” I said.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“What, you don’t know?”

Sarissa smiled again. “Do you?”

“Harry Dresden,” I said.

Her eyes sparkled and it made me feel good all the way to my toes. More so when she produced a plate that was piled with chicken and mashed potatoes and some other vegetables that I had little use for but which were probably good for me. I thought I was going to start drooling onto the floor, that food looked so good.

“What do you do, Harry?”

“Professional wizard,” I said. “I’m a PI in Chicago.” I frowned, suddenly remembering something else. “Oh. And I’m the Winter Knight, I guess.”

She stared at me like a statue for several seconds, absolutely nothing on her face.

“Um,” I said. “Food?”

She shivered and looked away from me. Then she took a quick breath and picked up an odd little fork, the kind they give to kids with motor control issues—it had lots of rounded edges—and pressed it into my hand. “If you’re willing to go for three, we’ll have had a really good day.”

The fork felt weird and heavy in my fingers. I remembered using forks. I remembered how they felt, the slender weight of them, the precision with which I could get food from the plate to my mouth. This fork felt heavy and clumsy. I fumbled with it for a few seconds, and then managed, on the second try, to thrust it into the mashed potatoes. Then it was another chore to get the stupid thing to my mouth.

The potatoes were perfect. Just warm enough, barely salted, with a faint hint of rich butter.

“Ohmmgdd,” I muttered around the mouthful. Then I went for more.

The second forkful was easier, and the third easier than that, and before I knew it the plate was empty and I was scraping the last of the remains into my mouth. I felt exhausted and stuffed, though hadn’t been all that much food. Sarissa was watching me with a pleased smile.

“Got it all over my face, don’t I?” I asked her.

“It means you enjoyed the food,” she said. She lifted a napkin to my face and wiped at it. “It’s nice to know your name, finally, Harry.”

There was the sound of light, steady footsteps coming closer.

Sarissa rose immediately, turned, and then knelt gracefully on the floor with her head bowed.

“Well?” said a woman’s velvet voice.

My whole body shuddered in response to that voice, like a guitar’s string quivering when the

proper note is played near it.

~~“He’s lucid, Your Majesty, and remembered my name and his. He fed himself.”~~

“Excellent,” said the voice. “You are dismissed for today.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” said Sarissa. She rose, glanced at me, and said, “I’m glad to see you feeling better, Sir Knight.”

I tried to come up with something charming or witty and said, “Call me.”

She huffed out a surprised little breath that might have been the beginning of a laugh, but shot a fearful glance the other way and then retreated. The sound of her sneakers scuffing on the hard floor faded into the distance outside the curtained bed.

A shadow moved across the curtains at the end of the bed. I knew whose it was.

“You have passed your nadir,” she said in a decidedly pleased tone. “You are waxing rather than waning, my Knight.”

I suddenly had difficulty thinking clearly enough to speak, but I managed. “Well. You know. Wax on, wax off.”

She didn’t open the curtain around the bed as much as she simply glided through, letting the sheet press against her, outlining her form. She exhaled slowly as she reached my side, looking down at me, her eyes flickering through shades of green in dizzying cycles.

Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, was too terrifying to be beautiful. Though every cell in my body suddenly surged with mindless desire and my eyes blurred with tears to see her beauty, I did not want to come an inch closer. She was a tall woman, well over six feet, and every inch was radiance. Pale skin, soft lips the color of frozen raspberries, long silver-white hair that shone with opalescent highlights. She was dressed in a silk gown of deep frozen green that left her strong white shoulders bare.

And she was about six inches away from being in bed with me.

“You look great,” I croaked.

Something smoldered in those almond-shaped eyes. “I *am* great, my Knight,” she murmured. She reached out a hand, and her nails were all dark blues and greens, the colors shimmering and changing like deep opals. She touched my naked shoulder with those nails.

And I suddenly felt like a fifteen-year-old about to kiss a girl for the first time—excitement and wild expectation and fluttering anxiety.

Her nails, even just the very tips, were icy cold. She trailed them down over one side of my chest and rested them over my heart.

“Um,” I said into what was, for me, an incredibly awkward silence. “How are you?”

She tilted her head and stared at me.

“Sarissa seems nice,” I ventured.

“A changeling,” Mab said. “Who once sought of me a favor. She saw Lloyd Slate’s tenure as my Knight.”

I licked my lips. “Um. Where are we?”

“Arctis Tor,” she said. “My stronghold. In the Knight’s suite. You will find every mortal amenity here.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “What with my apartment burned to the ground and all. Is there a security deposit?”

A slow smile oozed over Mab’s mouth and she leaned even closer to me. “It is well that you heal,” she whispered. “Your spirit wandered far from your body while you slept.”

“Free spirit,” I said. “That’s me.”

“Not anymore,” Mab murmured, and leaned down toward me. “You are shaking.”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes filled my vision. “Are you frightened of me, Harry?”

“I’m sane,” I said.

“Do you think I am going to hurt you?” she breathed, her lips a fraction of an inch from mine.

My heart beat so hard that it actually hurt. “I think . . . you are who you are.”

“Surely you have no reason to fear,” she whispered, her breath tickling my lips. “You are mine now. If you are not well, I cannot use you to work my will.”

I tried to force myself to relax. “That’s . . . that’s true,” I said.

I hadn’t seen her picking up the thick, fluffy pillow beside me while she held my eyes. So I was totally unprepared when she struck, as fast as any snake, and slammed the pillow down over my face.

I froze for half a second, and the pillow pressed down harder, shutting off my air, clogging my nose and mouth. Then the fear took over. I struggled, but my arms and legs felt as if they’d been coated in inches of lead. I tried to push Mab away, but she was simply too heavy, my arms too weak. Her hands and forearms were frozen steel, slender and immovable.

My vision went from red to black. Sensation began to recede.

Mab was cool. Unrelenting. Merciless.

She was Mab.

If I did not stop her, she *would* kill me. Mab couldn’t kill a mortal, but to her I was no longer one of them. I was her vassal, a member of her court, and as far as she was concerned, she had every right to take my life if she saw fit.

That cold knowledge galvanized me. I locked my hands around one of her arms and twisted, straining my entire body. My hips arched up off the bed with the effort, and I wasn’t even trying to push her away. There was no opposing the absolute force of her. But I did manage to direct her strength just a little to one side, and in so doing managed to push her hands and the smothering pillow past me, freeing my face enough to suck in a gasp of sweet, cold air.

Mab lay with her upper body across mine, and made no effort at all to move. I could feel her eyes on me, feel the empty intensity of her gaze as I panted, my head swimming with the sudden rush of blessed oxygen.

Mab moved very slowly, very gracefully. There was something serpentine about the way she slithered up my body and lay with her chest against mine. She was a cold, ephemeral weight, an incredibly feminine softness, and her silken hair glided over my cheeks and lips and neck.

Mab made a low, hungry sound in her throat as she leaned down, until her lips were almost touching my ear.

“I have no use for weakness, wizard.” She shivered in a kind of slow, alien ecstasy. “Rest. Heal. Sleep. I shall most likely kill you on the morrow.”

“You? A *Princess Bride* quote?” I croaked.

“What is that?” she asked.

Then she was gone. Just *gone*.

And that was day one of my physical therapy.

* * *

I could describe the next few weeks in detail, but as bad as they were, they did have a certain routine to them. Besides, in my head, they’re a music video montage set to the Foo Fighters’ “Walk.”

I would wake in the morning and find Sarissa waiting for me, keeping a polite and professional distance between us. She would help me take care of the needs of my weakened body, which was rarely dignified, but she never spoke about herself. At some point after that, Mab would try to kill me in increasingly unexpected and inventive ways.

In the video in my head, there's a shot of me eating my own meal again—until, just as I finish, the giant bed bursts into flames. I awkwardly flop out of it and crawl away before I roast. Then, obviously the next day, Sarissa is helping me walk to the bathroom and back. Just as I relax back into bed, a poisonous serpent, a freaking Indian cobra, falls from the bed's canopy onto my shoulders. I scream like a girl and throw it on the floor. The next day, I'm fumbling my way into new clothes with Sarissa's help—until a small swarm of stinging ants comes boiling out of them onto my flesh, and I have to literally rip the clothes off of me.

It goes on like that. Sarissa and me on waist-high parallel bars, me struggling to remember how to keep my balance, interrupted by a tidal flood of red-eyed rats that forces us to hop up onto the bars before our feet get eaten off. Sarissa spotting me on a bench press, and then Mab bringing a great big old fireman's ax whistling down at my head at the end of my third set so that I have to block with the stupid straight bar. Me slogging my exhausted way into a hot shower, only to have the door slam shut and the thing start to fill with water. Into which freaking piranha begin to plop.

On and on. Seventy-seven days. Seventy-seven attempted murders. Use your imagination. Mab sure as hell did. There was even a ticking crocodile.

* * *

I had just gotten back from the small gym, where'd I'd hiked about four miles up and I don't know how many miles forward on the elliptical machine. I was sweaty and exhausted and thinking about a shower and then bed again. I opened the door to my quarters, and when I did, Mab opened fire with a freaking shotgun.

I didn't have time to think or calculate before she pulled the trigger. All I could do was react. I flung myself back, slammed my will out into the air ahead of me, coalescing it into a barrier of pure energy. The gun roared, deafening in the enclosed space. Buckshot slammed against the barrier and bounced, scattering everywhere, landing with pops and rattles. I hit the floor, keeping the barrier up, and Mab advanced, her eyes glittering through every shade of opal, wild and ecstatic and incongruous against her otherwise calm expression.

It was one of those Russian-designed shotguns with the big drum magazine, and she poured all of it into me, aiming for my face.

The second the gun went click instead of boom, I flung myself to one side in a swift roll, just in time to avoid the pounce of a silver-grey malk—a feline creature about the size of a bobcat with wicked claws and the strength of a small bear. It landed where my head had been, its claws gouging chips from the stone floor.

I kicked the malk with my heel and sent him flying across the hall and into the stone wall. He hit with a yowl of protest. I whirled my attention back to Mab as she dropped one drum magazine on the floor and produced another.

Before she could seat it in the weapon, I slashed at the air with my hand and shouted, "*Forzare!*" Unseen force lashed out and ripped the magazine and the shotgun alike from her hands. I made a yanking motion, and the bouncing shotgun abruptly shot across the empty space between us. I grabbed it by the barrel (which was freaking *hot*) just as the malk recovered and leapt at me again. I swung the

empty shotgun two-handed and slammed the malk in the skull, hard enough to knock it from the air and leave it senseless on the floor.

Mab let out a delighted silvery laugh and clapped her hands like a little girl who has just been told she's getting a pony. "Yes!" she said. "Lovely. Brutal, vicious, and lovely."

I held on to the shotgun until the stunned malk recovered and began slinking sullenly away, and only after it was out of sight around the corner did I turn to face Mab again.

"This is getting old," I said. "Don't you have anything better to do with your time than to play Grimtooth games with me?"

"Indeed, I do," she replied. "But why play games if not to prepare for challenges that lie ahead?"

I rolled my eyes. "Fun?" I suggested.

The delight faded from her face, replaced by the usual icy calm. It was a scary transformation, and I found myself hoping that I had not provoked her with my wiseassery.

"The fun begins when the games end, my Knight."

I frowned at her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"That appropriate attire awaits you in your chambers, and that you are to get dressed for the evening." She turned to walk after the departed malk, her gown whispering on the stone of the floor.

"Tonight, my wizard, shall be . . . fun."

Chapter

Two

Back in my room, I found my clothes waiting for me: a tux in dark silver and pearl. The first of two small paper envelopes proved to contain a pair of jeweled cuff links, the stones too blue and too brilliant to be sapphires.

The other one held my mother's amulet.

It was a simple silver pentacle, a battered five-pointed star bound within a circle, on a simple silver chain. The pentacle's center was filled with a small red stone, cut to size. I'd once fastened the gem into place with hot glue. Apparently Mab had sent it to a genuine jeweler to attach it with something more solid. I touched the stone gingerly, and could instantly sense the energy within it, the psychic journal of my late mother's travels.

I slipped the amulet on over my head and felt a sudden and profound sense of relief. I had thought it lost when my bullet-riddled self had fallen into the waters of Lake Michigan. I stood there with my hand over it for a moment, just feeling the cool metal press against my palm.

Then I got dressed in the tux and examined myself in a mirror the size of a pool table.

"Just a gigolo," I sang, off-key, trying to enjoy myself. "Everywhere I go, people know the part I'm playing."

The guy looking at me out of the mirror looked raw and hard. My cheekbones stood out starkly. I lost a lot of weight while I was in what amounted to a coma, and my rehabilitation had added only lean muscle back onto me. You could see veins tight against my skin. My brown hair hung down past my jawline, clean but shaggy. I hadn't cut it or asked for a barber. Things that know magic can do awful stuff to you if they get hold of a lock of your hair, so I'd decided to hang on to mine. I'd ditched the beard, though. Beards grow out so fast that if you shave every day, there isn't much of a window for anyone to use them against you—and shaved stubble is too diffuse to make a decent channel anyway.

I looked a little more like my brother with the long hair. Go figure. Long, lean face, dark eyes, a vertical line of a scar under the left one. My skin was absolutely pasty-pale. I hadn't seen the sun in months. Lots of months.

As I looked, the song just sort of faded out. I didn't have the heart for it. I closed my eyes.

"What the hell are you doing, Dresden?" I whispered. "You're being kept locked up like a goddamned pet. Like she owns you."

"Does she not?" growled a malk's voice.

Didn't I mention it? Those things can talk. They don't pronounce words too well, and the inhuman

sound of it makes the hairs on the back of my everything stand up, but they talk.

I spun, lifting my hand in a defensive gesture again, but I needn't have bothered. A malk I didn't think I'd seen before sat on the floor of my chambers, just inside the door. His too-long tail curled all the way around his front feet and overlapped itself in the back. He was a huge specimen of the breed, maybe eighty or ninety pounds, the size of a young adult mountain lion. His fur was pitch-black, apart from a white spot on his chest.

One thing I'd learned about malks was that you didn't show them weakness. Ever. "These are my chambers," I said. "Get out."

The malk bowed its head. "I cannot, Sir Knight. I am under orders from the Queen herself."

"Get out before I get you out."

The very tip of the big malk's tail twitched once. "Were you not the bond servant of my Queen, and were I not obliged to show you courtesy, I should like to see you try it, mortal."

I squinted at him.

That was very unmalklike behavior. Apart from one, every malk I'd met had been a bloodthirsty little killing machine, primarily interested in what it could tear apart and devour next. They weren't much for small talk. They also weren't terribly brave, especially when alone. A malk might jump you in a dark alley, but you'd never see him coming.

This one . . . looked like it might like to see me put a chip on my shoulder.

I extended my senses cautiously and suddenly felt the nearly silent thrum of the malk's aura. Whoa. The thing had power. Like, lots of power. You couldn't usually feel a wizard's aura unless you were close enough to touch it, but I could feel his from across the room. Whatever that thing was, it only *looked* like one of the other furry, terminally ADD homicidal maniacs. I reeled in on the attitude.

"Who are you?"

The malk bowed his head once. "A faithful servant of the Queen of Air and Darkness. I am most often called Sith."

"Heh," I said. "Where's your red lightsaber?"

Sith's golden eyes narrowed. "When first your kind began scrawling knowledge upon stone and clay, my name was ancient. Walk carefully around it."

"Just trying to brighten the conversation with humor, Sithy. You need to cheer up."

Sith's tail twitched again. "Slicing your spine into coasters would cheer me. May I?"

"Gotta go with 'no' on that one," I said. Then I blinked. "Wait. You're . . . Cat Sith. *The* Cat Sith?"

The malk inclined its head again. "I am he."

Hell's bells. Cat Sith was a major figure in faerie folklore. This thing wasn't just a malk. It was the freaking monarch of the malks, their progenitor, their Optimus Prime. I'd taken on an ancient faerie creature like this one a few years back. It hadn't been pretty.

When Cat Sith had offered to slice my spine into coasters, he wasn't kidding. If he was anything like the ancient phobophage, he could do it.

"I see," I said. "Um. What are you doing here?"

"I am your batman."

"My . . ."

"Not the notional hero," Sith said, a bit of a growl in his voice. "Your batman. Your orderly."

"Orderly . . ." I frowned. "Wait. You work for me?"

"I prefer to think of it as managing your incompetence," Sith replied. "I will answer your questions. I will be your guide while you are here. I will see to it that your needs are met."

I folded my arms. "And you work for me?"

Sith's tail twitched again. "I serve my Queen."

Aha. Evasion. There was something he was avoiding. "You are to answer my questions, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Did Mab order you to obey my commands?"

Twitch, twitch, twitch went the tail. Sith stared at me and said nothing.

Silence could generally be taken as assent, but I just couldn't resist. "Get me a Coke."

Sith stared at me. Then he vanished.

I blinked and looked around, but he was gone. Then, maybe a second and a half later, there was the *snap-hiss* of a beverage can being opened. I turned and found Cat Sith sitting on one of the room's dressers. An opened can of Coke sat beside him.

"Whoa," I said. "How did . . . You don't even have *thumbs*."

Sith stared at me.

I crossed to the dresser and picked up the can. Sith's eyes tracked me the whole time, his expression enigmatic and definitely not friendly. I sipped at the drink and grimaced. "Warm?"

"You did not tell me otherwise," he said. "I shall be happy to similarly fulfill any such command you give me, Sir Knight, but for those that contravene the orders of my Queen."

Translation: *I don't want to be here. I don't like you. Give me commands and I will give you hell for it.* I nodded at the malk. "I hear you." I sipped at the Coke. Warm or not, it was still Coke. "So what's the tux? What's the occasion?"

"Tonight is a celebration of birth."

"Birthday party, huh?" I said. "Whose?"

Sith said absolutely nothing for several seconds. Then he rose and leapt down to the floor, landing without a sound. He flowed past me to the door. "You cannot possibly be that stupid. Follow me."

My hair was still pretty messy. I slopped some water on it and combed it back, which was as close to neat as it was going to get, and then walked after Sith, my patent leather formal shoes gleaming and clicking on the stone floor.

"Who's going to be at this party?" I asked Sith when I caught up to him. I hadn't left my chambers in a while. My entire life had been eating, sleeping, and getting myself put back together. Besides, I hadn't wanted to go sightseeing around Arctis Tor. The last time I'd been there, I'd pissed off the faeries. Like, *all* of them. I hadn't fancied the idea of bumping into some hostile bogeyman looking for payback in a dark corridor. The door leading from my chambers opened by itself, and Sith walked through it with me behind him.

"The high and mighty among the Winter Sidhe," Sith said. "Important figures from the Wyld. There may even be a delegation from Summer there."

As we emerged into the capital of Winter, the corridors changed from what looked more or less like smooth, poured concrete to crystalline ice in every hue of glacial blue and green, the bands of color merging, intertwining. Flickers of light danced through the depths of the ice like lazy fireflies of violet and crimson and cold sky blue. My eyes wanted to follow the lights, but I didn't let them. I couldn't tell you why, but my instincts told me that would be dangerous, and I listened to them.

"Kind of a big event, huh?" I said. "Think there'll be a problem with the paparazzi?"

"One may hope," Sith said. "Dispatching the perpetrators of such an intrusion would be gratifying."

The air was arctic cold. I could feel the biting depth of the chill, but its fangs couldn't seem to break my skin. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it didn't matter. I didn't shiver. I didn't shake. I

chalked it up to the power Mab had given me.

Sith led me down a much dimmer corridor, and we passed in and out of patches of deep darkness and cold, sullen light. As we did, our shadows danced and stretched. After a few seconds, I noticed that Cat Sith's shadow was larger than mine. Like, seven or eight *times* larger than mine. I gulped.

"The last time I was at a supernatural shindig, I got poisoned and then everything there tried to kill me. So I burned the whole place to the ground," I said.

"An appropriate way to deal with one's enemies," Sith said. "Perhaps you will find Arctis Tor less flammable."

"I've never met a place I couldn't blow up, burn down, or knock over with enough motivation," I said. "Think anyone at the party wants to kill me?"

"Yes. I want to kill you."

"Because I annoy you?"

"Because I enjoy it." Sith glanced up at me for a moment. His billboard-size shadow on the wall mirrored the motion. "And you also annoy me."

"It's one of my gifts. Asking annoying questions is another. Other than you, is there anyone at the party I should make sure not to turn my back to?"

"You are of Winter now, wizard." He turned his golden eyes away from me again. "Don't turn your back to anyone."

Chapter

Three

Cat Sith led me down passages I had never seen on my previous visit to Mab's seat of power. Heck, back then I had thought it consisted entirely of a wall around a courtyard and a single turreted tower. I hadn't ever seen the complex beneath the ice of the courtyard. It was enormous. We walked for ten minutes, mostly in the same direction, before Cat Sith said, "That door."

The one he spoke of was made of ice, just like the walls, though it had a thick ring of what might have been silver hanging upon it. I grabbed the ring and tugged, and the door opened easily onto a small antechamber, a little waiting room complete with several easy chairs.

"Now what?"

"Go in," Cat Sith said. "Wait for instructions. Follow instructions."

"I'm not good at either of those things," I said.

Sith's eyes gleamed. "Excellent. I have orders to dispatch you if you disobey Mab's commands or undermine her authority in any way."

"Why don't you go ask Eldest Fetch how easy that one is, Mittens?" I said. "Scat."

Sith didn't vanish this time. He just sort of melted into shadow. His golden eyes remained behind for a few seconds, and then he was gone.

"Always stealing from the greats," I mumbled. "Lewis Carroll's estate should be collecting a licensing fee from that guy."

Unless, of course, it was maybe the other way around.

I went into the chamber and the door shut behind me. There was a table with what looked like handmade candies on it. I didn't touch them. Not because I was worried about my svelte figure, but because I was standing at the heart of wicked faerieland, and eating random candy seemed like a less than brilliant idea.

There was an old book on the table next to the candies, set carefully and precisely in place beside the dish. It was titled *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. I leaned down and opened it. The text was in German. It was really old. The pages were made of paper of the finest quality, thin and crisp and edged in gold foil. On the title page, under the title, were the names Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and the year 1812.

It was autographed, and personalized, "For Mab." I couldn't read the text, so I settled for the illustrations. It was better than reading those stupid celebrity magazines in every other waiting room, and was probably more grounded in reality.

The door opened soundlessly while I looked at the book, and a vision came into the room. She

wore a velvet dress the deep blue-purple of twilight. She glanced back toward the hallway behind her as the door closed, and I saw that the dress plunged low in the front. She had matching opera gloves that reached to halfway up her biceps, and there was a garland of periwinkles in her dark hair that complemented the dress gorgeously. Then she turned back to me and smiled. “Oh, my,” she said. “You clean up nicely, Harry.”

I rose politely to my feet, though it took me a couple of seconds to say, “Sarissa. Wow. You . . . barely look like you.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me, but I saw a pleased tilt to her mouth. “My. That was almost a compliment.”

“I’m out of practice,” I said. I gestured toward a chair. “Would you care to sit?”

She gave me a demure smile and did, moving with an absolute and liquid grace. I offered her my hand to help her sit, which she didn’t need. She gripped my fingers lightly anyway. Once she was seated, I sat back down myself. “Did you want a bit of candy?”

Her smile somehow contained gentle reproof. “I hardly think that would be wise. Do you?”

“Hell’s bells, no,” I said. “I just, uh . . . You make conversation when you’re, uh . . . I’m not sure what to . . .” I picked up the priceless copy of the Grimms’ tales and held it up. “Book.”

Sarissa covered her mouth with one hand, but her eyes twinkled. “Oh, um, yes. I’ve seen it a few times. I’ve heard rumors that Her Majesty worked hard to make sure the tales were put into print.”

“Sure,” I said. “Makes sense.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Oh, the Sidhe’s influence had been waning as the Industrial Age gathered steam,” I said. “By making sure the tales kept being told to mortal children, she made sure that she and her folk were never forgotten.”

“And that’s important?” Sarissa asked.

“If it wasn’t, why else would she do it? I’m pretty sure that being forgotten is bad for beings that live with one foot in the mortal world and the other over here. Wouldn’t shock me if she greased some wheels for Walt Disney, either. He did more than anyone else to bring those stories into modern time. Hell, he built a couple of fairylands in the mortal world.”

“I hadn’t ever thought about it that way,” Sarissa said. She folded her hands in her lap and smiled at me. It was a completely calm and lovely expression—but I had the sudden instinct that she was concealing unease.

I might not have been able to tell a couple of months ago, but she’d been on the periphery of several of Mab’s therapy sessions, and I’d seen her react to sudden fear and stress. There was that same sense of controlled tension in her now as there had been when a small avalanche of poisonous spiders—big ones—had come cascading out of the towel cupboard in the workout room. She’d been wearing capri pants and no shoes at the time, and she’d had to hold completely still while dozens of the things swarmed over her naked feet, until I could clear them off, gently and cautiously, so as not to threaten the little things into killing us.

That particular test had been all about regulating one’s reaction to sudden fear. Sarissa had done it by refusing to let her anxiety control her. She’d waited, expressionless and almost calm, looking much then as she did right now.

It made my feet start to itch.

She was expecting spiders.

“So,” I said. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? Do you need me to perform some last-minute yoga routines?”

“You took to yoga like a duck to vacuum,” she said. “I know how much you love the routines, but I’m afraid I must disappoint you. ~~Tonight I’m to be on your arm, by command of the Queen. I’m supposed to tell you the protocols for a gathering of the court and make sure you don’t get too bored.~~”

I leaned back in my chair and regarded her thoughtfully. “I can’t remember the last time I had that problem. And gosh, walking around with someone as lovely as you all night sounds like torture.”

She smiled and lowered her eyes.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“I didn’t use that like a rhetorical question,” I said. “I’m serious. I’d like to ask you something, but if you would rather keep it to yourself, that’s okay, too.”

That put a crack in her mask. I saw her eyes flick up quickly to my face for a moment, and then back down. “Why wouldn’t I want to answer your questions?”

“Because we’ve been working together every day for eleven weeks and I don’t know your last name,” I said. “I don’t know what you do in the real world. I don’t know your favorite color or what kind of ice cream you like best. I don’t know if you have family. You’re very, very good at talking about things that don’t matter, and making it seem like the only conversation that could possibly have made sense.”

She very carefully did not move or answer.

“Mab’s got something on you, too, doesn’t she? Just like she does me.”

There was another moment of stillness. Then she said in a bare whisper, “Mab has something on everyone. The only question is whether they realize it or not.”

“I get that you’re afraid of me,” I said. “I know you saw Lloyd Slate in action when he was the Winter Knight, and I know exactly what a peach of a human being he was. And I figure you think I’m going to be like him.”

“I didn’t say that,” she said.

“It wasn’t an accusation,” I said, as gently as I could. “I’m not trying to trick you into saying something. I’m not hoping that you’ll give me an excuse to do something to you. Okay? I’m not like Lloyd Slate.”

“Neither was he,” Sarissa whispered. “Not at first.”

A cold little feeling wobbled through my guts.

See, that’s the tragedy of the human condition. No one *wants* to be corrupted by power when they set out to get it. They have good, even noble reasons for doing whatever it is they do. They don’t want to misuse it, they don’t want to abuse it, and they don’t want to become vicious monsters. Good people, decent people, set out to take the high road, to pick up power without letting it change them or push them away from their ideals.

But it keeps happening anyway.

History is full of it. As a rule, people aren’t good at handling power. And the second you start to think you’re better at controlling your power than anyone else, you’ve already taken the first step.

“This is the reality, Sarissa,” I said quietly. “I’m the Winter Knight. I’ve got Mab’s favor and blessing. I can pretty much do as I damned well please here, and I won’t have to answer to anyone but her for it.”

The young woman shivered.

“If I wanted it,” I said quietly, “if I wanted y . . . to hurt you, I could do it. Right now. You couldn’t stop me, and no one else would do a damned thing. I’ve spent a year on my back and now that I’m moving again, um . . . my various drives are clamoring for action. In fact, Mab probably sent you

in here to see what I would do with you.”

The pleasant mask faded from Sarissa’s face, replaced with wary neutrality. “Yes. Of course she did.” She switched her hands, moving the bottom one to the top, carefully, as if she worried about wrinkling her dress. “I know exactly what role she has in mind for me, Sir Knight. I am to”—her mouth twisted—“be at your convenience.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “That isn’t going to happen, obviously.”

Her eyes widened slightly. She held completely still. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m not Lloyd Slate,” I said. “I’m not one of Mab’s pet monsters—and I’ll die before I let her make me into one. You were kind to me and you helped me through a bad patch, Sarissa. I won’t forget that. You have my word.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“It isn’t complicated,” I said. “I won’t take anything away from you. I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do. Period.”

I couldn’t interpret the expression on her face when I said that. There could have been anger in it, or suspicion or terror or skepticism. Whatever was going on in her head to make her face look like that, I couldn’t translate it.

“You don’t believe me,” I said. “Do you?”

“I’ve lived a third of my life inside Arctis Tor,” she said, and turned her face away. “I don’t believe anyone.”

In that moment, I didn’t think I’d ever seen someone so entirely lovely look so utterly alone. A third of her life in Winter? And yet she could still be compassionate and friendly and caring. She’d probably seen things, had to face ugliness that few mortals ever did—the Unseelie were endlessly enthusiastic about their amusements, and they liked their games nasty and cruel.

But here she was, facing a fate she must have feared since she was a child—being given to a monster to be devoured. Facing it calmly. Staying in control of herself, and still managing to be warm to me, too. That told me she had a lot of strength, and strength has always been something I found attractive in a woman. So has courage. So has grace under pressure.

I could really get to like this girl.

Which, of course, was why Mab had chosen her—to tempt me, to make me convince myself to abandon the high road so that I could have her. Then, once I’d done one little thing, she’d start scattering new lures in front of me, until eventually I picked another one up. Mab was Mab. She had no intention of keeping a Knight with a conscience.

So she was planning on assassinating mine an inch at a time. Once I’d abused my power over the girl, Mab would use my guilt and self-loathing to push me to the next step, and the one after that.

Mab was one cold-blooded bitch.

I looked away from Sarissa. I was going to have to keep her safe—first and foremost from me.

“I understand,” I told her. “Or at least I understand part of it. My first mentor wasn’t exactly Officer Friendly, either.”

She nodded, but it was an entirely noncommittal gesture, an acknowledgment that I had spoken, not a statement of agreement.

“Okay,” I said. “Uncomfortable silence is uncomfortable. Why don’t you tell me what I need to know for tonight?”

She collected herself and slipped back into her pleasant demeanor. “We’ll enter next to last, just before the Queen. She will present you to the court, and then there will be a meal and entertainment. After the feast, you’ll be expected to mingle with the court and give them a chance to meet you.”

“That’s the protocol? Thanksgiving dinner at the in-laws’?”

Something like a real smile brought a little light to her eyes, at the sight of which my glands did *not* go pitter-pat. At all.

“Not quite,” she said. “There are two laws all must follow under pain of death.”

“Only two? Man, how do Unseelie lawyers make a living?”

“First,” Sarissa said, ignoring my wiseassery, “Blood may not be spilled upon the floor of the court without the Queen’s express command.”

“No murder without getting the nod first. Got it. Second?”

“No one may speak to the Queen without her express command.”

I snorted. “Seriously? Because I’m not much for keeping my mouth shut. In fact, I’m pretty sure physically can’t. Probably because I was influenced at an impressionable age. Did you ever read any Spider-Man comics when you were—”

“Harry,” Sarissa said, her voice suddenly tight. She put her hand on my arm, and her lean fingers were like heavy wires. “No one speaks to the Queen,” she whispered intently. “No one. Not even the Lady Maeve dares disobey that law.” She shuddered. “I’ve seen what happens. We all have.”

I pursed my lips and studied her hand thoughtfully for a moment. Then I nodded. “Okay,” I said. “I hear you.”

Sarissa exhaled slowly and nodded.

Just then, a door I hadn’t seen before opened in the center of what had looked exactly like a wall. Cat Sith stood on the other side of the door. He ignored me pointedly, turning his golden eyes to Sarissa. “It is time.”

“Very well,” Sarissa said. “We are ready.”

I rose and offered Sarissa a hand up. She took it, and I tucked her arm into mine. Her fingers gave my forearm one quick squeeze, and then we turned to follow Cat Sith down another hallway.

Sarissa leaned a little closer to me and whispered, “You know what this is, don’t you?”

I grunted quietly. “Yeah,” I said. “It’s my first day in the prison yard.”

Chapter

Four

Sith led us down yet another passageway, this one darker than the others, until finally I couldn't see the malk at all in the dimness. Instead, a very dim phosphorescence in the shape of his paw prints began to rise from the floor, giving us just enough light to move by. I could feel Sarissa growing increasingly tense beside me, but she said nothing. Smart. If anything was going to jump up and eat us, our ears would tell us about it first.

The sound of our steps on the floor changed, and I realized that we had moved into a large open space. Just as I did, the glowing paw prints in front of us vanished.

I stopped at once, pulling Sarissa in closer against my side. Again, she remained completely silent except for one sharp little inhalation.

Silent seconds went by.

"Sith," I said quietly. "You are a suck guide. I don't care how big your shadow is."

My voice echoed cavernously while I waited, but apparently Sith didn't have a comeback. After a few seconds, I reached up and tugged my amulet out of the tux.

I held it up and concentrated, sending a microcurrent of my will into the design, and an instant later it began to glow with a blue-white light. I held it aloft and looked around.

We were in another ice cave, this one filled with enormous, bizarre . . . structures, was the only thing I could think to call them. I might have called them sculptures, except no one does sculptures the size of buildings these days, even in ice. I looked around the place slowly. There was something odd about the structures, something almost . . .

Sarissa was looking, too. She seemed alert, but not frightened. "Are those . . . giant pieces of furniture?"

. . . familiar.

The structures *were* sculpture, built on a scale of maybe one to eight, of a couch, two easy chairs, brick fireplace, bookshelves. . . . Mab had re-created my old basement apartment in ice, right down to the textured carvings of all of my area rugs crafted into the ice of the floor.

I had about a second to take that in before the cavern exploded with sound, color, and motion. A wave front of pure noise slapped against me as a sudden horde of beings from every dark folktale ever told surged into view at the edges of my light, their screams and cries coming from all around me.

This was a worst-case scenario for a mortal wizard. We can do amazing things, but we need time to make them happen. Sometimes we get that time by preparing well in advance—creating tools that help us focus our abilities more quickly and with greater precision. Sometimes we get the time by

picking where and when to begin our battles. Sometimes we do it by slinging the spell from a couple or a couple hundred miles away. But I didn't have any of that going for me.

My convalescence with Mab had kept me way too busy recovering or sleeping to have enough time to create new tools, and my amulet was all I had. On the upside, Mab had given me a serious workout magically speaking. I'd been forced to use my abilities without any kind of tools or crutch to help me or else perish. I was better at wielding raw magic now than I'd ever been in my life.

It just wasn't going to be enough to survive what was coming at me.

I moved without thinking, putting myself between Sarissa and as many of them as I could, and bringing my will to bear upon my right hand. Pallid blue-white fire suddenly engulfed my fingers as I let the pentacle fall. I raised my hand—no time to think or aim or plan—determined to take someone down with me.

Sarissa's hand snapped out and she grabbed my wrist, jerking my arm down before I could unleash the spell, and I heard two things in the vast roar of sound:

First, Sarissa screaming, "No bloodshed!"

Second, I realized that everything else in the cavern was bellowing, "SURPRISE!"

The horde of all things dark and hideous stopped maybe twenty feet short of Sarissa and me, and the walls and floor and ceiling began to glow with light. Music began to play, a full symphonic freaking orchestra, *live*, somewhere on the other side of the giant replica of my old secondhand sofa. High up on the ceiling of the cavern, thousands of wisps of eerie light swarmed deep within the ice, swiftly forming up like a flotilla of synchronized swimmers until they formed the words: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DRESDEN.

I stood there with my heart beating too fast for several seconds and blinked at the entire place. "Uh. Oh."

Sarissa studied the ceiling for a moment and then looked up at me. "I didn't know."

"Neither did I, really," I said. "Is it Halloween already?"

"Just barely, I think," Sarissa said back.

It got weirder.

They started to sing.

They sang "Happy Birthday."

Remember when I said that a malk's voice made my skin crawl? It's nothing next to the cackling rasp of a swamp hag, or the freaky-weird whistling voice of a manticores. Goblins can't carry a tune if it has handles, and the huge bat things that served as Mab's air force shrieked in pitches that could barely be heard. Trolls, hideous giant thugs towering over ten feet tall, sound like laryngitic foghorns.

But layered all throughout that cacophony were voices that went to the other extreme, voices that carried the melody with such perfect, razor-edged clarity that it made me want to slash my wrists on it. People always equate beauty with good, but it just ain't so. Amongst the Winter Court were beings of haunting beauty, mesmerizing beauty, disarming beauty, flawless beauty, maddening beauty, bloodthirsty beauty. Even in the mortal world, a lot of predators are beautiful, and if you're quick and motivated enough, you can admire that beauty while they kill you and eat you. Like all the other things there, the Sidhe sang to me, and I could feel the weight of their attention on me like the pressure wave from an onrushing shark.

You don't listen to music like that. You survive it.

The voices ended abruptly, and left one crystalline alto singing, "And many more."

The crowd of creatures parted suddenly, and a girl stepped out of their ranks. She paused for a moment, for dramatic effect, and to give everyone time to admire her.

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