Burninate (or, Will Someone Please Put Daddy in a Corner?)

by windfallswest

Summary

It's a TRAAAAAAP!

Notes

So this started out being a short couple of alterna-scenes to illustrate, briefly, where this AU turns off of Blood Rites and set up the thing I actually wanted to write when I started all this, which is Harry/Marcone. But then it kind of kept on going, and when it finally lumbered to a stop it had ballooned into this huge, structurally-unsound monstrosity. Oops. Also, I know what about babies?

Quotes from the book belong to Jim Butcher. Quotes from various movies belong to their creators. Quotes from the Bible belong to the big guy upstairs. Blame for disturbing things can be spread pretty equally, including to me.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

"No, don't take out the—"

"WAAAAAAAAAHH!"

"—pacifier."

Michael frowned. "Harry, you didn't—"

Molly's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously?" She stuck the pacifier back in. The siren stopped. "Awesome."

"It's for unexpected gunfights, okay?" I said a little defensively. Actually, the charmed pacifier was about the best thing anyone had given me, ever. It was a gift from one of the small-time practitioners I'd gotten to know a little better over the past couple years. I tried to use it responsibly, though.

"Am I given to understand that someone has been shooting at you?" Michael's wife, Charity, sounded even more disapproving than her husband.

"Look, there's only so much I can take in one day. She's not hungry, she's not wet, driving hasn't helped—"

Michael interrupted. "Harry, you're not still driving her around in that car, are you? It isn't safe."

I crossed my arms. "That harness I rigged up is more secure than most car-seats. It's a better shock-absorber than what they put under Volvos. Anyway, that's not the point. The point is, I lost my office."

"Well, I don't know what you expect when you don't pay the rent." Charity sniffed.

"I pay—I paid the freaking rent. They've condemned the building," I said.

"Well, I can see how that's much better."

The thing was, it was kind of weird. Look, the problems with the elevator, they weren't my fault. I'd gone on the thing once in six years, once, and the scorpion started it anyway. But a cranky elevator wasn't enough reason to demolish a whole building, and the new owners had done some serious renovations just a few years ago.

"In any case, I refuse to have this sort of thing in my house," Charity continued, removing the charmed pacifier.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Molly cringed, jiggling the teething baby hopefully.

"Oh, just give her here," I told her, resigned.

Sometimes I could tell what was bothering Maggie if I extended my magical senses. It hadn't worked so far today, but it was always worth a try. Maybe she was picking up my pissed-off vibes. Mostly, I figured it was the teething, and I started rooting around for a non-enchanted pacifier with one hand while I tried to reclaim Maggie from Molly with the other.
I'd been hoping it was just that she was bored, which I think in retrospect was why she'd been so cranky for the first few weeks of her life. In which case Sunday dinner with the Carpenters would be just what the doctor ordered. No joy.

"Oh, no, don't worry, Aunt Harry; I can—" Molly started to say.

"No, really, I've got thi—" I said at the same time, reaching for the Scamp. My hand bumped Molly's and I felt a buzz like brushing a live wire. I jerked, startled, and met Molly's eyes.

Between us, we almost managed to drop the baby; I looked away just in time to prevent a soulgaze. I had already found out more about Molly Carpenter than I think she wanted me to know.

I recovered first. "I think she needs changed. C'mon, Mols; give me a hand," I said pointedly.

Molly followed me meekly, not doing a very good job of not looking like she was scared out of her mind.

"How long?" I asked once we were alone.

Maggie continued to scream like Fran Walsh. I let Molly keep hold of her, not for distance from the noise but because as long as she was holding my kid, she was less likely to just bolt.

"Couple weeks," Molly mumbled.

I finally succeeded in locating a vanilla pacifier and handed it off to Molly to try and shove into the beast's gaping maw. "How'd it happen?"

"Last month?" Molly said, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the task at hand. "The van wasn't out front when I got home from school and it was raining, so I just assumed Mom had taken the Jawas out to run errands and came in the front door."

"Let me guess: you didn't stop to take out the body-jewellery."

Molly was Michael and Charity's oldest. She'd equalled her mother in height a year or so back, but she was just now starting to fill out. If you caught her at home, she looked a lot like Charity: blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin, just shy of six feet; that same look of stubborn determination. As soon as she was away from the house and out of sight of the parents, her face sprouted about four times its usual number of little gold hoops, most of them not in her ears. Her clothes suddenly looked as though she'd pulled them out of some sort of industrial machinery, and the hem of any skirt she was wearing rose several inches. I maintained my status as Cool Aunt Harry by looking the other way. Hey, I was a young idiot too once. Now I'm just an idiot. Age has destroyed any illusions I once held of being fashionable.

Molly blushed. "Yeah. Except Gran had taken the little ones out because Mom was sick, so Mom was still at home. And I was standing there in the middle of the living room, just wishing the floor would open up and swallow me. And then she...didn't see me."

"Really?"

"I heard her coming and I closed my eyes; I wanted to die. But she came in and turned on the TV and didn't say anything. I mean, at first I thought she was in shock or something; but she really hadn't seen me. So I walked out really, really quietly and snuck up to my room and changed my clothes. She never even glanced my way once. I almost had a heart attack."

"Wow. I'm impressed," I told her truthfully.
"Yeah?" Molly looked up for the first time.

"H—uh, heck yeah. You called up a veil on pure instinct; I can't do a reliable one on purpose, half the time." Also true, alas.

"Why not?" Molly asked.

I shrugged. "Why does Leech have a killer fastball and Matthew can't hit the broad side of a barn? It's just something I don't have."

"Like subtlety?"

"Hey, watch it, munchkin, or I'll kick you out of the Lollipop Guild," I threatened.

Molly continued to smirk unrepentantly.

"But hey, no kidding: it's a rare talent. Which brings us to some other stuff," I said seriously.

Molly's face went panicked. "Please, please don't tell my parents!"

"Wasn't planning to," I said.

Molly slumped in relief.

"You're going to," I continued.

Molly's mouth dropped open in the picture of horrified teen betrayal. It was kind of funny, actually.

"You can't hide it forever," I pushed on relentlessly. "If nothing else, you're going to start blowing out the lights and TV. And your cellphone, and—"

"Okay, okay!"

"You need the basics, at least. That way you don't keep making things happen without meaning to."

"Yeah, but do we have to, like, tell my parents? Really? Couldn't you just give me lessons or something on the DL?" Molly wheedled.

"Mols, your parents have done way too much for me. Not just with the, I made a poundy gesture in Maggie's direction, "your dad has literally put his life on the line for me. I owe 'em. Big."

Molly's head fell back with a groan. "They are gonna flip."

"Eh."

"Aunt Harry!"

"Look, I'm gonna give you the basics. I'll talk with your parents and try to explain things. Again. But you," I pointed at her, "need to start thinking about more than just how grounded you're going to be, because you're going to have to make a decision."

"What decision?" Molly asked, a little intimidated

"Once you've got some control, you can go further. Keep studying, make this a real part of your life. Or you can choose not to use it, and eventually, it'll go away," I told her.

"Go away?" she said, sounding puzzled.
"The power dwindles if it's not used," I explained. "If you really don't want it, it'll fade, and you can have a normal life. Your dad's job will keep you safe; you won't have to worry about all the weird stuff."

"Yeah, but can't you tell them?" Molly circled back around to what she felt was the most important point.

"Look, trust me: it's better coming from you. They're going to go postal for a little bit, but in the long run what's going to count is the honesty." Having learned that with Murphy, the hard way, which involved me getting punched in the face. "Your parents are good people, and they love you. And I'll be right there with you. Promise."

I went out to the Beetle and rifled through the box of pamphlets I'd gathered from my office. I still didn't know what I was going to do about my furniture and files. I had a little less than a week to figure it out.

Michael and Charity took it about as well as Molly predicted. To be fair, Charity did most of the yelling. Michael's face just got kind of grey and set in this where-did-I-go-wrong? expression I tried not to take personally. I did not entirely succeed. For well-meaning folks, Michael and Charity can still be closed-minded about certain things.

I was really proud of Molly. She stood up in front of Michael and Charity and spoke her piece, even though she was obviously scared half to death. Kid had inherited Michael's guts.

She flinched when Charity started laying into her. I bit my tongue and made myself not interrupt immediately. Molly's face grew crumpled as anger fought it out with the building tears. I had witnessed several different rehearsals of this argument since I started spending more time with the Carpenters, so I knew all the road signs. The subject-matter was usually largely incidental; but in this case, I wanted to break it up after Charity had had a chance to let off some steam but before Michael got pulled in, because I was pretty sure he'd wind up pissing me off, at which point nobody would be thinking rationally. I stepped forward, putting a restraining hand on Molly's shoulder to draw her back and interposing myself into the line of fire.

"I think that's about enough."

Charity rounded on me. "And you! Don't think I don't know this is all your fault."

I glanced at Molly, having a feeling. "I think that's a conversation you want to have later."

Charity flinched and, remarkably, shut up long enough for me to get a word in edgewise.

I continued. "This isn't something you can make go away by shouting at it. There's no reason to make it into this huge, horrible thing."

"Isn't it?" Charity retorted.

"Charity, she's right. Yelling won't change anything. We should hear her out," Michael said quietly.

"Look, I know what the Bible says, and I don't pretend to know what's going through god's mind. But I do know magic. I believe in it. This is my thing, okay?" I said.

"It's unnatural," Charity maintained stubbornly.

I controlled a sigh. "I've tried to explain this to Michael before. There is nothing unnatural about magic in its purest form. It's—it's the energy of creation. Magic is generated by life. It comes from
nature. It's not separable. Just because everybody can't see it and manipulate it directly doesn't make that any less true." I waved a hand at the window. "Look—out there. You can see the seasons turning, the leaves changing, the trees going to sleep. There's energy in all of that; big, slow power. Bigger and slower than the power in people, but essentially the same."

"If it's all so natural and pure, then why are you always dragging Michael away to help you fight sorcerers?" Charity shot back.

"Power can be misused," I said levelly. "Even when you don't mean to. That's true of any power, not just magic. But magic is worse; misusing magic wounds your spirit. Do it once, and it's easier to do it again. To do more, worse, because through your spirit, it will start to affect your mind, how you think and how you feel. Who you are. What you're capable of." I took a deep breath. "And that's why it's important that Molly gets some instruction and isn't just left to blunder along on her own. This isn't just going to go away. Power uncontrolled is dangerous. I know Molly doesn't want to hurt anybody, and I know you don't want that either."

I was uncomfortably reminded of some of my own bad decisions. Some of which Michael had to be thinking of too—for instance, the coin I'd handed over to him winter before last, the one with the fallen angel inside it. It was one of thirty, the Knights of the Blackened Denarius. They acted through hosts, people dumb or weak enough to pick up a coin and be tempted by the admittedly formidable power the Fallen bound inside offered. I'd grabbed it to protect someone else, true—the Carpenters' youngest, in fact, my namesake—and I'd entrusted it to the church once I knew I was having Maggie.

But that apparently wasn't enough. As soon as I touched the denarius, the Fallen housed in it had left an annoying mental photocopy on my brain. Lasciel's shadow had been trying to tempt me to the dark side for over a year. I could understand Michael's hesitation in allowing his daughter to mould herself off my life choices. Do as I say, not as I do? I was the only wizard in Chicago, though; if they wanted someone with a better track record, they'd have to ship her off.

"There's another reason, too. Michael, you know about the White Council. You know they have laws, and what the penalty for breaking them is."

Charity looked at Michael. Michael looked like he'd just swallowed something he didn't much like the taste of. Molly looked at them, then at me.

"White Council?" she asked. "Anybody want to clue me in? Or are you just going to keep dropping cryptic hints over my head?"

"The ruling body of wizards," I told her. "It's sort of like a union: they take a dim view of scabs. Believe me, you don't want to cross their picket lines."

A little line formed between Molly's eyebrows while she processed that. "So if you use magic, you have to join up?"

"Sort of. It's complicated," I said. It hadn't escaped my notice that when I mentioned the White Council, Charity went still, too. "You see where I'm going with this. Nothing's decided yet, except that Molly needs instruction. Just because you know how to do something doesn't mean you have to. How much do you guys use calculus in your daily lives?"

"She—can't she just ignore it? Why does she have to learn at all?" Charity protested.

I spread my hands. "Magic starts out as just stuff happening because you want it to. You have to learn how you're making it happen before you can locate the on/off switch, or it'll just keep
"That does make sense, Charity," Michael told her softly. Charity wheeled, looking ready to lay into him next.

Oh, great. "I've talked with Molly, and I've agreed to give her lessons in exchange for babysitting when I need her to in the evenings and on weekends." Molly gaped betrayal at me again; I returned her a look of wide-eyed innocence. Well, we'd agreed before we engaged the enemy that I would do the talking—and by extension, the drawing of the parental fire. "Learning responsibility is as big a part of wizardry as the actual technique; my old mentor used to send me to sleep with the sheep at lambing."

Charity sniffed disbelievingly, but looked somewhat mollified by the proposed disruption of conventional Dating Hours. In due course, I trusted, the cautionary tale/object lesson element of single-parenthood would occur to her. Molly would surely be extra-impressed by the glamourous life of wizardry as demonstrated by my three-room apartment. I was just thrilled to have a reliable someone I could plant with Maggie behind my wards. Not that I'd actually leave Molly alone, in danger.

"Well," Michael said at last, "this obviously isn't the last we'll be discussing the matter. But right now we need to agree what to do next. Charity?"

Charity left off glowering at me to frown at her husband. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Michael said, taking her hands. "But we have to deal with it anyway. Harry's right; this isn't something we can just pretend away."

Charity turned her face away, so I couldn't see if she was crying. Her voice was thick when she spoke. "Oh, Lord. Something bad will come of this; mark my words."

"Not if I can help it," I said.

Charity rounded on me angrily. "You can't promise that."

"Charity—"

"She can't, Michael."

"I can," I said, "promise to look after your daughter as if she were my own. As you have done."

"Harry," Michael said.

Charity made a sound like oh. She looked about twenty years older.

"Guys, it's not like I'm dying or anything." Molly rolled her eyes. "Chill out."

"I'm with her," I said.

"Something very bad," Charity repeated.

I was spending the morning packing up my office, dumping my files into cardboard boxes while I kept one eye on Maggie, who'd been hanging onto things and cruising around upright for a while and—far too early, I was certain—showed signs of wanting to try this walking thing freestyle. She was burbling happily, anyway, but gnawing on one of her toys in a way that made me think her teeth
might be bothering her again, when the phone rang.

"Hi, Harry. How's the Scamp?" Karrin Murphy greeteed me when I answered the phone.

"Scampering. What's the word?" I asked, flipping my braid back over my shoulder.

"You're not going to like it." Murphy sounded grim. Then again, even though she looked like a cheerleader, Murphy was not usually what you'd describe as perky. It only stood to reason: I haven't met very many perky cops. Being head of Chicago PD's Special Investigations department would have put the peppiest Cheer Queen on prozac.

"Murphy, come on. No one's going to knock down an entire building just to piss me off," I said.

Murphy snorted. "Really, Harry?"

"Yeah, yeah. But who's going to get it notaris—son of a bitch. It was Marcone, wasn't it?" I thumped my fist down on the box I was folding. Maggie turned her head at the noise and I hastily unclenched my hand.

"You do anything to offend him lately?" Murphy asked.

"I may have been peripherally involved in this thing where some of his stuff got partially disintegrated," I muttered.

It had gotten the Beetle, too, or I wouldn't have been sitting on a one-by-six and strapping Maggie into what looked like the bastard child of a spider-web and a sea urchin and taking safety flak from Michael. Well, okay, Michael hadn't thought the Blue Beetle was kid-safe before; but the number of times you have get smacked in the face by an airbag for no damned reason before you get the message is unsurprisingly low.

"Only you, Harry." Murphy's tone was wryly amused.

There was a knock on my door.

"Hey, look, thanks, Murph. I've got someone at the door," I said.

"Harry, try not to do anything stupid," Murphy cautioned me.

"Who, me?" I asked innocently, and hung up.

It was a puzzle: maybe Marcone was pissed off by my continued rejection of his really very transparent bribes. I'd have liked to think we'd gotten past that part of our non-relationship. Oh, well. Deal with it later.

"It's open!" I called to whoever was on the other side of the door.

A little asiatic bald man in an orange robe peeked his way hesitantly in. "Hello. You are Wizard Dresden?"

I looked up from the files I was cramming into a box, piled up on top of other boxes. "That's me. What can I do you for?"

"I Brother Wang. We great need your help."

"You have got to be kidding me," I said to the ceiling.

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I'm afraid I was giving Molly more babysitting duties than magical instruction; but if I was going to replace my office, I would need Brother Wang's money and this was a bitch of a case, a lot of really tedious legwork. I felt a little guilty about it, but she did have schoolwork to focus on.

Besides, I was getting hints that Molly's magical strengths were in wildly different areas than my own. I had bought some time by handing her a copy of my old teacher Ebenezar's book, one of the only purely theory-based texts on magic—a lot of them tended to lean pretty heavily on religion. It's kinda like the difference between teaching evolution versus creationism—yeah, that's right: I just called magic science. Want to make something of it? Science means looking at things rationally and systematically. It's defined by method, not content.

I was eating lunch with Maggie at Mac's and complaining about losing my office—it still stung, and I still hadn't had time to look for another, and my files were all in boxes and blocking access to the bottoms of my bookshelves while my office furniture had ended up so much rubble in the wreckage of my former office building.

About halfway through my diatribe, Thomas Raith walked up to the bar from one of the back tables and sat down next to me. Someone else—no one I knew—had been sitting with him when I came in, but whoever it was had left. Mac nodded greeting and served him promptly, then vanished down to the other side of the bar. Traitor.

Thomas listened to my griping for a few minutes, then started sassing me about it. Thomas was a sometimes pseudo-ally of mine, a White Court vampire from their ruling family but seemingly on the outs with it. He'd helped me out a couple times in the past, usually with an eye to his own self-interest or some kind of backhanded counting coup. Thomas was at least moderately reliable—not an automatic enemy, but difficult to pin down.

White Court vampires are the closest to human of all the vampires I've encountered. They're born, not killed and turned, and they are unaffected by garlic, sunlight, and even the articles of faith that will hold off members of the Black and Red Courts. Although probably not beheading. In lay folklore, they aren't even grouped in with other vampires: ever heard or succubae? Vampires of the White Court feed on emotions, not blood. Thomas had an unusually monogamous and consensual relationship with a beautiful but volatile young woman who preferred to manage her condition via sex vampire and not drugs. It still skeeved me out quite a lot.

I let him talk me into giving him a ride home. Hey, if he wanted to sit on a box while I stole back puppies from flying purple monkeys, that was fine with me. I'd been killing time at Mac's so I'd arrive while the flying-monkey-summoning sorcerer would be out picking up his Mu Shu Pork when I got there; but you never know, and I'd learned not to say no to backup. Besides, it was a school day and I needed someone to hold Maggie.

That turned out to be a wise idea, when I found myself sprinting out of a burning building (not my fault!) clutching a box full of puppies eager to flop out and scatter and dodging flaming monkey poo (told you the fire wasn't my fault). I was glad I'd started running with Maggie in the stroller for more reasons than being able to fit into my pants again.

I tried to decide which were worse: mould demons, or flying purple flaming-poo-flinging monkeys that could smush together into flying purple flaming-poo-flinging giant gorillas. The flaming poo was definitely a more deadly immediate hazard, but the mould demons had them beat for long-term consequences. They had, after all, not only cost me my office by eating Marcone's property, but also completely gutted the Beetle's cab, if I hadn't mentioned that already. Hence Maggie's web-harness contraption and the ghetto bench Thomas and I were sitting on.

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The next morning, I woke up paid, employed, with a puppy in the sub-basement and a Black Court vampire somewhere in town, gunning for me. And a cat standing on my face. Five seconds later, Maggie opened her eyes and started crying. I stubbed my toe on one of the cardboard boxes spread around my living room on the way to let Bob and Mister out. Something told me it was going to be one of those weeks.

It was barely dawn, but instead of going for a run I got both of us fed and dressed, forestalling Maggie's current favourite past time of chewing everything within biting-radius with a pacifier fresh out of the icebox. The puppy that had stowed away in the Beetle—missing, I was afraid, his ride back to that temple in Tibet with Brother Wang and the rest of his siblings—allowed himself to be tucked into one of my leather duster's big pockets.

My duster was a life-saver, sparing me the necessity of having to carry a bulky and awkward baby bag around with me everywhere I went, thus irreparably damaging my image and destroying my street cred. The long coat was more or less made of pockets: there were pockets for toys and pacifiers, pockets for baby wipes, pockets for ad hoc spell supplies and pockets for writing implements, pockets for spare baby clothes, pockets for small summonings and pockets for baby food, pockets for clean diapers, and even a pocket spelled to contain odours for dirty ones (the major downside of using cloth diapers instead of the disposable kind). My wallet, keys, and pen knife went in the pockets of my jeans—which, since I am so tall, are men's jeans and so have room for these things.

The baby bag got packed today anyway, since I hoped to pass the Scamp off to Molly at some point. Molly was still new enough to her driver's licence that she'd cheerfully drive the length of Chicago to buy you a pack of gum, so even though—as the oldest of seven—the shine had long since worn off babysitting for her, I wasn't worried about persuading her to do the legwork.

I convinced myself that I'd be well enough armed with my staff and blasting rod and I could leave my gun (another .44 revolver, like the one I'd lost in the same trainwreck of events during which Maggie was conceived) in the home-defense basket by the front door. My calls, I'd made while trying to convince Maggie to swallow her carrot mush (I swear, the only thing she wouldn't put in her mouth was food) instead of using it for face paint.

My first stop of the morning was Dough Joe's Hurricane Gym, where I doffed my coat and handed off Maggie to one of the cops taking a breather and heckling their fellows from the sidelines. Since having Maggie, I had discovered that all cops are secretly enormous softies, and even the ones who think I'm an attention-hungry charlatan bilking the Department and conning the public will melt as soon as I wave the baby in front of them.

I kicked off my boots, watching Murphy thrash some poor rookie who didn't realise that the fact he and John Stallings were double-teaming her ought to outweigh the fact she was only five feet tall in his calculations. I've always had a bit of the stereotypical hopeless straight-girl crush on Murphy, which has in recent years faded away to an immense spiritual satisfaction whenever I see her kicking ass and taking names.

"You make any of 'em cry yet?" I raised my voice to get Murphy's attention over the general hooting.

"You volunteering?" Murphy shot back.

What felt like a particularly sharp grin stretched itself over my face as I stepped onto the mats, waiting for Murphy to grab a stick. "You're welcome to try." I was feeling the need to express some aggressive tendencies this morning.
"Wasn't expecting you until tomorrow," Murphy observed as we warmed up. "You've been skipping."

A couple months ago, I'd asked Murphy if she'd help me infuse some technique into my deplorable hand-to-hand. Because my most trusted babysitters were still in school, I usually came down on the weekends to practice. I'd been thinking of bringing Molly with me, but she had a lot on her plate right now. Maybe next summer.

"Had a case."

"It go south?" Murphy asked, matching me easily as I pushed for a faster pace.

"Got paid and everything. Hell's bells!"

"Ease up," she said curtly as I put too much weight into a blow and she almost disarmed me. As it was, I stumbled and spun before I found my feet again. "Then what's eating at you?"

I grunted, suppressing frustration as Murphy took us back to the beginning of the exercise. "Black Court jumped out at me last night. Maggie was in the car."

Murphy sucked a breath in sharply. I don't know if I can explain the strength of the protective maternal instincts still present in the human animal, or at least in this one. I had been about half a second away from taking off after that vampire last night and flambéing it; the only thing that had stopped me was that Maggie was strapped into the back. By the time I got her out, the vampire would have been long gone, and no way had I been about to leave her with a debatable ally after that. If I'd've been able to convince Thomas to stay behind, which I doubted: human-like he might have been, but he was still a predator, and it's a predator's instinct to chase when prey flees.

That berserker outrage was still simmering, not too far beneath my conscious thought. These monsters had come into my territory and threatened my child. Maggie wouldn't be safe until I had hunted each and every one of them down and rendered them to dust, doused in holy water and baked in sunlight. I'd recognised the vampire who'd attacked us: the last time I'd seen him he'd been alive. It was at the same party where I'd lost Hawk to Bianca.

So Mavra was in town, which meant this was personal. I'd stepped all over her plot and incinerated her protégé, Margravine Bianca Whups-You-Shouldn't-Wear-a-Dress-Made-of-Fire-Unless-You're-Prepared-to-Follow-Through St. Claire of the Red Court. Mavra was bad news: a Black Court vampire at least moderately skilled at magic, slick enough to have survived the destruction of that Court, and with three years to build her strength and grudge since our last encounter.

Which brought me to Murphy.

"You want me to track 'em down?" she asked.

"Wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on missing persons. But I was thinking of something a bit more proactive."

Murphy glanced around, making sure none of the other sparring pairs were close enough to hear us. "Like what?"

"Like killing them," I said, emphasising the words with a particularly forceful blow of my staff.

Murphy's brows rose. "You got a plan?"

"That is the plan."
"I like it."

"It's simple," I agreed.

"Like you," Murphy catted back, but her expression was intent and fierce.

I bared my teeth again. "Just like me."

"We going tonight or tomorrow?" Murphy asked a little too casually.

"Maybe tomorrow; I have to find them first. I want to hit them in daylight and as soon as possible. Black Court is going to start racking up the body-count fast. Unless you're busy." I frowned. I'd hoped Bob could track them down today and we'd be able to move on the weekend, when I could leave Maggie with Molly, safe behind my wards or at her parents' house.

"Absolutely free." It was Murphy's turn to slip up, and I left her with bruised knuckles. She frowned at herself and came back up to speed.

"We can do it another day if you've got plans."

Murphy huffed a sigh. "It's the annual Murphy family reunion, okay? I usually try to be working."

"Er...why?" I asked, caught a little off guard and then having to concentrate to keep up from getting my own knuckles whacked.

"Look, I know you're excited to finally have a family, and I'm really happy for you. But—"

"—You would rather spend the day force-feeding vampires garlic and pounding wooden stakes through their chests than sit down and talk with yours?"

"Garlic? Stakes? Seriously?"

"Oh, yeah. Stoker was a plant." I grinned.

Murphy laughed. "God, Harry. I don't even know why I'm surprised anymore." She sobered. "How many?"

"Don't know; at least two. Probably more."

"Backup?" she asked.

"I'm working on it. This is strictly off the record, you understand."

"I know some guys who that wouldn't bother."

"Thanks, but I've got some calls in," I told her.

"Who to?" Murphy asked.

I tried to hide a grimace. "That's an argument I'd rather not have until I know it's going to happen."

From the look on her face, that didn't sit very well with her. It was going to sit even less well when I actually told her, but we'd just have to work that out when the time came.

"There going to be humans working with them?"

"Don't know. If there are, we disable them and move on. I want Mavra's scourge; if you want to play
human rights advocate, go ahead."

"That's cold, Harry."

"Sorry."

Murphy made her last strike and we stood down, bowing properly. "No, you're not." She stood staring down at the staff in her hands, not looking me in the face. "Spar with me."

I shook my head. "I've got to leave for the new job soon."

"Three falls," Murphy insisted. "Come on."

I didn't need much persuading. I'd been itching to hit something since last night, and Murphy was safe, Murphy could hit back. It took her about four seconds to drop me the first time. I came back to my feet, because that part I'm good at, but my back hit the mat twice in close succession right after anyway.

Murphy stood over me with her staff hovering over my throat, ready to deliver the crushing blow. I raised my head, on the cusp of blurring out some pseudo-Latin and— "You're fighting angry," she told me. "And you're making stupid mistakes."

I glared up at her for a second, then closed my eyes and dropped my head back to the mat, making a conscious effort to release my grip on all that furious, murderous tension. I lay there, breathing, taking a moment to reconnect with my surroundings. There was the sound of bare feet slapping vinyl, mostly male voices rising in kiai and grunts, the muted smacks of flesh impacting flesh. Hell's bells. I had almost just—

I opened my eyes. Murphy searched my face, then lowered her staff and offered me a hand up. She had to really brace herself to keep from being pulled down instead.

"Thanks," I muttered, looking a bit to the left of her eyes.

Murphy nodded. "I'll help you get the vampires, but I want you to tell me we won't break the law. I'll go as far as vampire-hunting; not vigilantism."

"Okay," I agreed.

We bowed again and I hurried over to put my shoes back on and reclaim the Scamp from the group of hard-bitten, sergeantly types who'd been handing her off between rounds on the punching bags, explaining the art in crooning falsettos.

I'm telling you: hearts of butter.

Murphy caught me trying to put on Maggie's sling and my duster while holding both baby and staff and helpfully confiscated two of them. I donned first sling and then duster, but when I reached for Maggie, I noticed a strange look on Murphy's face. I looked down to make sure I wasn't trailing diapers or something.

The expression on Murphy's face became even more painful-looking, like when you're trying to outmanoeuvre someone in thumb-wrestling, only Murphy was doing it with her lips. "You know, I think most acts go for the rabbit."

Oh. Other side. My stowaway had poked his fluffy little head out of my pocket and was currently
looking around with much the same expression Maggie got in a busy new place. *Oh, no you don't*, I told myself.

I repossessed Maggie firmly and handed Murphy the puppy. One was *quite* enough. Murphy yielded my wizard's staff in favour of this more interesting object. "Good for you, Harry. Every kid should have a dog."

"What? Oh, no. I'm not keeping him."

"Uh-huh. What's his name?"

"I just told you, I'm not keeping him, Murph. But hey, if you like him so much, he's yours."

One of the puppy's ears had a notch on it; it flopped inside-out as the puppy wriggled on his back to expose a fluffy grey belly. "They take too much attention, and I'm gone at all hours."

"Tell me about it," I said, pointing exaggeratedly at Maggie. "Can you take him for the day, though?"

"Why?"

"Because I already have one to look after. And, you know, if you just so happen to run across someone who's looking for a dog..."

"I'm not keeping him either," Murphy said instantly.

"I never said you, Murph," I said, a little distracted because Maggie was rooting for my nipple and I was trying to locate a pacifier before she either ripped my shirt open or started crying. I flipped my braid back out of her range. Weaning was...interesting. Well, mostly I was weaning and Maggie was refusing to get the message and applying her food like Kabuki makeup. Kids.

"I'm not keeping him," she repeated. I found the pacifier, wiped it off on my shirt, and popped it in.

"Well, neither am I, so that makes two of us," I said inoffensively.

Murphy glared at me like I was making fun of her. Which, to be fair, I was. "Just for today. Because I'm doing deskwork anyway. And you'd better pick him up by five."

"Thanks, Murph. You won't even know he's there," I promised.

"Uh-huh. So, what's the new job?"

"I'm going undercover on the set of an adult movie. Someone's been targeting their employees."

Murphy did something I can only describe as cackling. "You know, you're betraying the sisterhood again."

"I thought porn was supposed to be empowering," I said defensively. "Own your sexuality and all that."

"Only if you have a penis, Harry." Something occurred to her. "You're not taking Maggie, are you?"

"Well, it's not like I can leave her anywhere. I called Molly, and she's going to pick her up once she's done with school."

Murphy just shook her head. "I can't believe we leave you alone with a baby."
"You're telling me," I muttered. "Hey, it's not like the kid's going to, like, remember any of this."

"Honestly, I don't even know where to start."

I gave her a dirty look and bounced Maggie a little, pointedly. "Don't you have some paperwork to do?"

"Five. O. Clock. Traitor."

I pulled into the parking lot with a few minutes to spare, so I took the time to inventory my pockets for the day's work- and baby-related supplies. While I was at it, I checked to make sure Maggie was dry and still generally in possession of all her parts. The string-charm I'd tied around her ankle with strands of my hair woven into it was still in place under her clothes, dispelling random energies that might upset or cloud her spirit (I'd take all the help I could get) and generally acting as a thaumaturgical lojack, not that literally every cell in my body wouldn't point due-Maggie the second you ran the suggestion of a tracking spell through it. The charm, because I'd made it, also retained a bit of the sense of my presence, which I hoped was comforting even when I wasn't right there with her.

I was hefting my old black nylon backpack over one shoulder—no one would think it was strange, what with Maggie hanging off me and everything, but it was actually stocked with some of the bulkier magical standards I thought might be useful on this job—when another car pulled into the space next to the Beetle. It had rental plates and was green and still shiny from the lot. Two guys got out of it, one fit and one built. I'll let you guess which was wearing the leather pants.

The fit one gave me a very familiar double-take. "First day?" he asked.

"Yup," I said.

He walked over and offered his hand with a friendly smile. "I'm Jake."

His friend re-hinged his jaw long enough to do the same. "Bobby. My pleasure—I mean, I'm looking forward to—that is, uh. Nice to meet you," he babbled.

I raised an eyebrow. "Harry. Nice to meet you too." I turned to unbuckle Maggie from her MacGyvered harness.

"You're going to like working with Arturo," Jake said. "He likes to make everything feel very comfortable and natur—woa."

"Holy shit, that's a baby!"

"Well-spotted," I said drily.

"But—you can't bring a baby on set!" Bob-the-Built objected.

I twitched my braid back over my shoulder. "Well, I wasn't going to put her on camera."

Jake cleared his throat. "Um. Are you really sure it's appropriate for her to see you...?"

"See me what?" I asked, confused.

Jake and Bobby turned from white to red with a suddenness that would have been amusing if I hadn't just realised both of these guys had been assuming we'd be having sex today. In public. On
camera. I must have been turning some interesting colours myself, because Jake at least was starting to look uncertain as well as uncomfortable.

"Murphy was right: the porn industry is totally chauvinistic," I said.

Bobby-the-built was suddenly all shoulders. "Fuck you, you're one of those damned evangelical—"
—obviously, I should have been wearing my pentacle outside my shirt—
"—prudes, coming here to tell us we're all going to hell!"

"Hey, pal. You're the one who assumed that just because I'm a woman I was automatically here to spread my legs for you. I'm sure there's no reason I could possibly be here that doesn't involve you getting a leg over," I said, staring down right into his left eyebrow and not giving an inch.

Jake got between us, holding his hands palm-out in either direction. "Woa, woa. Bobby, calm down a second. Ma'am, do you work here?"

I still wasn't sure how I felt about getting ma'am ed, on principle; but I'd come to realise no one was going to call me miss when I was holding the Scamp. Maybe I should go for a doctorate or something, like Billy and Georgia. Doctor Dresden. Like I wasn't short enough on sleep already.

"Production assistant," I said at last.

"Okay." He gave Bobby a gentle push. "Just a little misunderstanding. Let it go; it's a shooting day. Go on in and drink some of Trish's springwater or something."

Bobby stomped off toward the building, avoiding both our eyes. Jake turned back around, giving me a few steps' more space in the process.

"Um, sorry about that. We shouldn't have assumed. But you've really worked in the industry without it coming up before?"

The guy seemed genuinely apologetic, and I decided to let it slide. "I wouldn't say I've worked in this industry before. Does that happen often?"

Jake glanced after his departing colleague. "What, Bobby? Don't mind him; he's under a lot of pressure."

"No, people harassing you about your, er, lifestyle," I said.

Jake shrugged. "Not so far on this shoot. Outside the established studios in California, sure, all the time. Security usually keeps them outside the gates, though. I guess they just don't know where we are yet."

I wasn't so sure.

I had some unexpected time off that afternoon. I'd kept anybody from dying, but the hospital visits and clean-up were going to take a while anyway. Emma-I'm-also-a-mom had melted like cheap wax in the face of my secret weapon, although I had to sit through another round of why-you-don't-bring-your-baby-to-an-adult-film-set.

Still, I'd gotten some potentially useful information out of her, not to mention a front-row seat to the malocchio. Which, while not actively good, at least gave me a better idea what I was dealing with.
I was just changing Maggie and debating the most efficient order of food, apartment, and puppy-retrieval when a dark green SUV with tinted windows turned into the almost empty lot. I sighed, a little annoyed but not surprised.

The SUV parked a careful few spaces away and sat there, idling passive-aggressively. I took my time buttoning Maggie back up and walking over. Marcone had already gotten out and was waiting for me with a politely interested expression on his face.

"I can't say this is someplace I ever expected to find you," Marcone said, meeting my eyes like it was a casual thing. Like that wholesome, paternal image was anything but a mask over the ruthless crime kingpin. Eye-contact with Marcone was as serious as a fucking heart-attack.

"A parking lot? I'd say your imagination could use some work," I told him blandly.

Marcone smiled condescendingly. "Although I must admit that the presence of emergency vehicles makes much clear." He looked down at Maggie and frowned. "Harry, you didn't really bring your daughter—"

"Hell's bells, do I really have to go through this again?" I groaned.

Marcone segued smoothly to the next node on his flowchart. "Then why don't you come have a seat out of the wind? I believe you said you had business to discuss."

Marcone held the door for me: they didn't call him Gentleman Johnny for nothing. Infuriatingly, it's one of his few good points. I got in, because it was true, I'd called him and there was business. I could argue with Marcone about his maladjusted acquisitive compulsions later—god knew he wasn't going to change anytime soon. I did, however, raise an eyebrow when I saw the car seat strapped in back. "Seriously?"

"I try to be prepared for contingencies; Mister Hendricks will drop you anywhere you like," Marcone assured me.

I spared a glance for Marcone's carrot-top gorilla, who if given a choice would probably have dropped me over a cliff. Cujo and I have a very special relationship, but I think we would have both preferred it if Marcone would just leave me the fuck alone. "How about back at my car?"

Marcone heaved an understated but much put-upon sigh. "Very well. What would you like to discuss?"

"How about the fact that you got my office building condemned?" I suggested.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Petty, Marcone. Very petty. Just because I refuse to be bought off—"

"I offer nothing more than incidental aid to your capable efforts in raising your daughter, as any friend might," Marcone baffle-gabbed in his best corporate style.


Marcone refused to be ruffled. "I did deliver her, Harry. You can't blame me for taking an interest in her well-being."

"I delivered her, you overbearing jackass. You sat there swearing at a pregnant woman."
"Given the language you yourself were employing at the time, I hardly think you're in a position to throw stones."

I scowled. "I can look after my own kid."

"There's nothing wrong with accepting a little help, Harry," Marcone told me in an infuriatingly gentle tone.

"I told you not to call me that."

"I'm certain your friend Mister Carpenter doesn't reject aid when it is offered," Marcone continued blithely.

"Yeah, but his help usually comes via archangel. For some reason I don't really think that's your circle, John," I sneered back.

Marcone leaned back and steepled his fingers. "Perhaps not. But you didn't arrange this meeting to talk about urban renewal, or to criticise my areas of operation."

I bared my teeth in a cheerful grin. "Oh, yes I did. You owe me one, Marcone."

Marcone was suddenly paying a great deal of attention. "I take it you have something in mind. If you're interested, I could find you space in a building I recently acquired in the South Loop..."

"Ha. Leave the bad jokes to me, why don't you? I was thinking of something more along the lines of vampire-hunting," I told him.

"Really."

"How much do you know about vampires?" I asked.

"They organise themselves into four Courts: Black, Red, White, and Jade," Marcone replied promptly. "There is no organised Jade Court presence on this continent. The Black Court suffered heavy attrition following, I am given to understand, the publishing of Mister Stoker's book, from which they have not appreciably recovered. The White Court are schemers; they feed on emotional energy and operate on a high level and behind the scenes throughout the developed world. The Red Court consists of bat-like creatures who feed on blood and have some degree of vulnerability to most of the same banes as Black Court vampires: sunlight, holy water, and other articles of faith. They control much of South and Central America, and had been expanding northwards over the past few decades, although their advance has stagnated since the outbreak of war with your White Council of wizards. Local incidents identifiable as Red Court vampire attacks have dropped to next to nothing in the past two years."

I gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence. "How about that?"

"Yes. I am impressed you left the structure more or less intact; it is a historical landmark, after all."

I twitched and resisted the urge to explain that I wasn't the one who had brought in the heavy artillery. Actually, the guy who'd brought the real firepower was next on my list of potential allies for this gig; but Kincaid was a mercenary and I hadn't exactly been rolling in dough before I started raising a kid. All things being equal, Kincaid might have been the better man for the job; but Marcone was a territorial bastard like no other when it came to Chicago. He did not tolerate poachers, mundane or supernatural, period. For once, we both wanted the same thing. His owing me a favour was just pretext, a way for me to keep him off me and for him to excuse not making the move.
Don't get me wrong: Marcone wanted me. He'd made no secret of that fact. But he wanted me the way he wanted Chicago—his to possess and control. If he wanted to fuck me, it was the same way Lea had, the way Mab did and Nicodemus, the way I'd have realised Justin wanted to if I'd known how to interpret the expression on his face. Well, I owned myself, thanks; my self-esteem still wasn't that bad.

"This nest is Black Court. There aren't a lot of them left, but the ones that survived the turn-of-the-century vampire-hunting mania are serious business," I told him.

"What is it, exactly, that you are asking me to do?" Marcone cocked his head inquiringly.

"I want to take them out; I need backup."

"I see. And how much of the city are you planning to level?"

"Ha, ha. That's where the backup comes in. I don't want this getting out of hand; what I need is a small group of people who are clued in and can keep their heads when things get nasty. So far I've got one thug and a wheelman."

"You have a plan then?"

"Find them. Kill them," I said.

Marcone twitched, like I'd caused him physical pain. "Ah. And have you found them?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Not yet; I want to be ready to move quickly, though. Black Court's going to be hell on the neighbourhood." Plus they were gunning for me.

Marcone grimaced. "Yes."

"Also, I'm calling the shots. Non-negotiable."

Marcone searched my face, then nodded once, sharply. "But I do hope you're open to suggestions."

I eyed him warily. "Suggest away—but the final call is mine."

"Acceptable. Tell me everything you know."

I filled Marcone in. After about a minute and a half, he pulled a pen and legal pad out of a briefcase and started taking notes. The urge to crack up was very, very tempting, but I was already pushing the guy. I could be the mature adult for once.

Marcone's face was intent. I could already see that big brain of his churning away. He asked a lot of questions, too, not all of which I could answer. I promised to check my sources (Bob), and get in touch when I (Bob again) found out where Mavra's scourge was holed up. Hendricks even unlocked the doors without being asked. It was almost civilised.

I drove back to my apartment and called around about Genosa and his start-up. I might as well not have bothered: all I got for my trouble was a laundry-list of internet addresses, which were about as useful to me as athlete's foot. Even the freaking Bible-thumpers; what is the world coming to? Annoyed, I packed back into the Beetle to pick the puppy up from Murphy at SI, since I didn't think I'd have another chance to swing by before her deadline at five.

I ran into Stallings in the outer office, nominally keeping an eye on the puppy from his desk. He also
seemed to be doing paperwork. Oh, good. That always put cops in such a wonderful mood.

"If you came for a rematch, I'd rethink it," he greeted me.

"Says the man who tried to take her out by ramming her foot with his stomach."

I crouched down and scooped up the puppy, who had been savaging a familiar, stained Snoopy dog when I came in. Stallings stood up and stretched, coming around to lean on his desk.

"I was expecting her to go for a joint lock. Woman is a nasty infighter. Everyone tried to tell O'Toole, but he's still young enough to think he's invincible."

"Gotta beat that out of 'em early," I sympathised. "She around?"

"Depends," Stallings said. "You feel like getting beat?"

I pondered that. "Maybe I better leave these with you, then," I said, dumping the notch-eared puppy on Stallings' desk and unslinging the laden baby sling.

Stallings accepted Maggie with the casual competence of a man who's done a lot of baby-holding in his day. I cowboied up and went to beard the lion in her den.

Murphy's office was on the far end of the SI bullpen. It was a post-construction addition, probably sectioned off when they created the Special Investigations department, I think ten or fifteen years ago. It was done a while ago, anyway, but it must've been done in a hurry, because the walls were unfinished plywood and they didn't hang the door right.

Murphy had had the job six years, which was about five and a half longer than any of her predecessors. Yeah. When the department set up SI, they weren't looking to handle supernatural crime in Chicago; they were looking to set up a revolving door of scapegoats for otherwise embarrassingly unsolvable crimes, while also setting up a mechanism to phase out politically inconvenient officers. They gave you a promotion and a department to run, then waited for an excuse to fire you or put you on psychiatric leave or whatever. You lost your job and your reputation, and the Department came out smelling like a rose.

Murphy's tough, but she's also smart. What she learned to do was get shit done and then lie all over the reports. She hated doing it, but it kept her in SI, which kept SI from being cannon fodder. And, incidentally, kept Chicago's only professional wizard in skittles and diapers.

"God dammit, I said not now!"

Yup, that was definitely Murphy doing paperwork. I wondered if I had better postpone our raid until after the weekend, as a mercy to the vampires. Of course if I did that, she'd have no one to kill but me when I broke it to her that I had brought Marcone in.

"It's Harry," I called through the door, knowing better than to open it before she had a chance to unplug things. "I'm picking up the dog."

"Oh, god. Back away from the door."

So paranoid. Fry someone's hard drive once or twice, I tell you. But I took a step back, because I was about to win the pissing off Murphy jackpot and there was no point in fighting out the penny-ante stuff.

Murphy stuck her head out and yeah, I was starting to think I maybe wanted to have this
conversation not on police property because there was probably going to be a lot of highly incriminating yelling. She looked positively demented, and I found myself checking to see if she was armed.

"Get more away. I've been fighting this computer all day long. I swear, if you blow out my hard drive again, I'm taking it out of your ass."

I can't tell you what it cost me to pass up a straight line like that. Biting my tongue, I held up my hands in surrender and took another step back. "Right. I'll just be going now. I'll get in touch with you about the other thing later."

"Fine." Murphy all but slammed the door in my face—if she'd put any more shoulder into it, I wouldn't have been surprised if the badly-anchored plywood had fallen down.

Okay, that was a little extreme even to be explained by shovelling white coal into the bureaucratic steam engine all day. I tongued the chip in my tooth from the last time I'd seen her this upset and considered. On the one hand, Murphy was upset and I did not want to upset her more; I wanted to un-upset her. This, alas, was not my forté.

On the other, both Murphy and I are both very deeply not feelings people, which is why we have a relationship based on sarcasm and threats of anatomically explicit and often obscene violence that would be the envy of any two red-blooded heterosexual males. And, you know, the other way of looking at my situation was that Murphy was going to be pissed at me anyway, so I might as well give her the chance for some catharsis while we were at it.

"Murph?" I leaned towards the door without stepping closer. "You realise the Dark Side doesn't actually have cookies, right?"

Murphy yanked the door open again and glared at me. "What do you want, Dresden?"

"Actually, now I kind of want a cookie."

"I'm really not in the mood—"

"Gee, I never would have guessed. Could it be you have something on your mind?"

Murphy continued to glower. "No shit, Sherlock. It's called paperwork."

"Uh-uh." I shook my head. "Not buying it. C'mon, Murph. Who was it telling me just this morning not to fight angry?"

Murphy leaned her forehead against the door and let out a long breath, visibly releasing her tension. Without it animating her, she looked suddenly very tired.

"C'mon. Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

"Oh, god. You're not pregnant again, are you?" Murphy's eyes widened comically.

"Ha freakin' ha. I don't know what I was thinking: you're a regular riot."

Murphy rolled her eyes and came out, shutting the door behind her. We stopped to pour two little styrofoam cups of Joe from the department pot, and I stuck a bill in the fund jar.

"I look that bad, huh?" Murphy asked when we'd cleared the bullpen. It looked like she was headed for the vending machines.
"Only slightly rabid," I assured her.

"Christ, that's just what I need."

She punched the buttons a little viciously; I leaned back against the opposite wall, giving the machine as much space as I could.

"Murphy. What's up?"

"My mom called," she said at last.

"...Bad news?" I hazarded. It could hardly have been good news. "She let you off the hook?" That might account for this sort of schizophrenic frustration.

"What? No, no. I don't know." Murphy stopped staring at her Snickers bar and unwrapped it. "My sister, Lisa, got engaged."

She took a savage bite out of the candy bar. I imagined her white teeth biting off a little nutty-nougat head. Yowch.

"You have a sister?" I didn't know Murphy had a sister.

"I have a baby sister."

"I'm...sorry?" I guessed.

Murphy took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. "Harry, do you remember when you got first got pregnant and you were complaining to me all the time about how your friends the Carpenters were pressuring you to get married?"

Boy, did I. Hawk had been surprised but, you know, as supportive as you could be via mail. He sent me money when he could. We'd both made our choices, though, and I wasn't about to haul ass down to frigging South America, drag him to the altar, and give up my wizardly ways. Not to mention the half-vampire thing, which you'd think would eclipse bastardy and single motherhood on the sin-list. "Thank god they've given up on that."

"Now imagine thirty-three years of that," Murphy said. "Imagine you have a sister. Imagine she's twenty years old. Imagine, after thirty-three years of that, your twenty-year-old sister waltzes into the family picnic with her brand new fiancé. While you're standing around. Alone."

"So she's showing you up? But," I went on, confused, "weren't you like seventeen the first time you got hitched? That should count for, you know, something. You've got double husband quota. You're set."

Murphy pinched the bridge of her nose, a pained expression on her face. "The Murphys are Catholic, Harry. Two ex-husbands are twice as bad as one, and about four times as bad as nothing at all."

"Oh." I was kind of building my family from the ground up, so Murphy's degree of familial dementia was still alien to me, augmented as it was by nonsensical religious conventions.

"I grew up thinking I was going to...take over for my mom, I guess. Oldest daughter, become head of the clan. And now I'm basically the black sheep. There's a lot of my personal choices between us. Not to mention work."
"She doesn't approve of you being on the force?"

Murphy laughed, a bleak, hollow sound. "God, Harry; my mother doesn't know what I do for a living. It's changed me, and there's no way I can talk with her about it."

"But you can still talk to her about other stuff, right?"

"It doesn't work like that."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It just doesn't." Murphy crumpled the empty candy wrapper and threw it in the trash.

"It's really scary. Being a mom," I said after a minute. "Sometimes, Maggie cries and I have no idea why, except maybe she wants to be in a heavy metal band someday."

That got a laugh out of Murphy, although it still wasn't a very good one.

"But it kills me, because she's my kid and she's crying and I can't do anything about it. I know your mom doesn't want you to be alone or hurting. She wants you to be safe and happy and fulfilled and all those other sappy, cliché things. But you know what really worries me? I look at you and your mom. Or Mols and Charity. And I know, I know that they act the way they do because they love you and they're afraid for you; but they are so willfully blind and deaf to what would in fact get you guys shitting rainbows. And I think, well, I may be clueless, but surely I'll never be that far out of touch with reality. And then I think maybe that's what Charity thinks too. And then I get vertigo," I added to lighten the mood.

Murphy jogged me gently with her elbow. She was blinking a little too fast. "You're a good mother, Harry."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Hey now; don't go having a moment on me just yet. I'd hate to screw it up."

Murphy's eyes narrowed. "What have you done this time?"

I looked around for anyone who might overhear us, but the hallway was clear. "Nothing. Just, you know, got us some backup."

"I can bring in some extra hands, if you think we'll need them."

I shook my head. "Your guys are good, but this is the big leagues. The vamp we're going after is the one who was working those binding spells a couple years back."

Murphy went quiet. She'd taken a spiritual beating at the hands of Mavra and Bianca's partner on that case. "O'Toole from this morning is Micky Malone's nephew," she said quietly. I assumed she meant the ox she'd been stunning in the gym when I got there.

I winced. "It's gotta be people who have already been through a serious supernatural shitstorm. SI isn't there yet."

"Your holy knight friend?"

"No," I said firmly. "I've asked enough of him already, not even counting how many times he's gotten hurt when I pulled him in on my business. Besides, I'd just as soon have someone backing up Mols and Maggie. Just in case."
Murphy nodded understanding. "So who did you have in mind?"

"Local guy; owes me a favour." I didn't know why I was bothering to try and hide the fact that it was Marcone; she'd find out sooner or later, and going by experience there was less chance of me getting punched if it was sooner.

"Anyone I know?"

"Nnn, sort of?" I cleared my throat. Hall was still clear. I was fairly confident I could outrun Murph: she was pretty short. "You've met. He's good with a knife."

I watched the pin drop. "Oh, hell no. I cannot believe—" I made frantic hushing motions. "—believe you!" Murphy hissed. "You promised me we wouldn't—" Murphy cut herself off with a snarl.

"Look, just because he's," I made a vague gesture intended to convey scuzzy criminal druglord kingpin, "doesn't mean everything he does is automatically, you know. This is my thing; he'll toe the line."

"Harry, it's the principle of the thing. I can't be seen—"

"By whom? The vampires? He doesn't want them in town any more than we do."

"And you honestly think it's not going to come back to bite me in the ass later?" Murphy snapped, crossing her arms.

"I won't let it. I promise," I tried. Murphy continued scowling, unmoved. "We'll do it tomorrow."

Murphy gave me a pitying look. "You really are pathetic, Harry." She pushed off the wall and headed back to SI.

"Does that mean you're still on-board?" I called after her.
In other news, you would not believe how catty, er, adult film actresses get when faced with a six and a half foot tall woman. Even one carrying a baby. I kept fighting the urge to look for a kick-me sign on my back. Made me wonder if the blow-dart someone shot at me wasn't completely unrelated to the case.

Although believe it or not, I did actually almost have a modelling career one time. I had just left Eb's, and I didn't really think the thing through beforehand. The guy who recruited me was really excited—he came up to about my armpit—but I realised my mistake almost immediately, when the big, showy lights started popping. I'd made a hasty and embarrassed retreat. It was pretty flattering, though, if you look at it right and not like the fashion model type is bony, gangly, with no boobs and weird facial structure (about the nicest words you can use to describe mine are 'long' and 'sharp', I'm afraid, and that's not even mentioning my nose).

Also, there had been way too many mirrors around.

Anyway, I'm used to getting a certain amount of attention from guys, mostly the kind I call 'mountain-climbers'. Oh, and the drag jokes. Those never get old. The kid did help with that, some, almost as much as being knocked up had. But man is it weird to have everyone you meet at a new job immediately assume you're going to be getting naked and nasty on stage before the end of the day. Plus, I had meant to ask Murphy to check out the internet leads for me. I mean, all those people I'd talked to had been answering their phones. What were they getting paid for, if not to answer questions? By the time Mols showed up for Maggie, I was a little bit irritable. Amateur assassination attempts will do that to a person, what can I say?

I was on edge, anyway, when someone knocked on the doorframe of Arturo's office and came in. My brain caught up with my reflexes just in time to realise that an assassin probably wouldn't bother to knock, and I dropped Arturo's photo album on the desk with a loud *thunk*.

My visitor jumped. "Eek!"

...In my experience, assassins also tend not to go *eeek*. "Inari?"

"Harry! Empty night, you almost gave me a heart attack." Inari bent down to scoop up the notch-eared puppy, which she'd appropriated from me earlier and was attached to her jeans with a length of pink yarn looped around his neck. He bore the cuddling with a little doggy smile and proceeded to slobber his happy puppy-drool all over her face.

"Sorry," I apologised. "If you're looking for Arturo, he and your sister went down to the set."

"Oh! No, looking for you, actually."

"Hi." Molly appeared behind Inari with a short wave. "Why so tense, O Jedi Master?"

The cavalry. I felt some of the tension leave my shoulders even before I unloaded the kid. "Long story, Padawan."

"The story of how you're working on a porno?" Molly asked brightly.

"Inari." Molly took the sling from my unresisting fingers and hitched it around professionally on her already-broad shoulders.

"I didn't realise it was a secret." Inari dimpled winsomely, more at Molly than at me. Crap again.

"I'm not acting. And you're not watching," I told Molly sternly. "You are taking the kid and the dog and staying inside until morning."

"Aww, he's your puppy? When did you get a puppy, Harry? A fuzzy, fluffy little puppy."

Puppies apparently got kiddie-proof Molly where babies got police officers, because she was reaching halfway into Inari's admittedly modest tits to scratch the wriggling fuzzball. At sixteen, Molly was already taller than eighteen-year-old Inari, not to mention more chesty. From the absence of visible piercings, fishnets with extra holes, and entirely superfluous buckles, I assumed she'd been home to borrow her mother's minivan for this errand, which made sense. Molly had started leaving on the heavy eye-makeup in the month since I'd taken her on as my apprentice, though. I had a bet going with myself about how long it would take her to pull out a witch's hat, just to piss off her parents.

"I did not get a puppy. He stowed away in the Beetle yesterday."

Molly's nose wrinkled in confusion. "In the Beetle? How?"

"It's a—"

"—long story?"

I gave Molly a flat look and tried to ignore Inari's obvious amusement. Not that the girl ever seemed to stop smiling. She was good at it, but I did have to restrain a certain urge to go all Susan Sto-Helit on her perky ass.

"Anyway, I'm just hanging onto him until I can find him a home." Now, there was an idea. "Your folks ever think about getting a dog? I hear they're great for teaching responsibility and stuff."

"Nah, they just set the Jawas up to look after each other as they get older. I'm passing it on to Daniel." The puppy was licking at Molly's fingers now. "You should keep him. Shouldn't she, Inari?"

"Absolutely! He's such an adorable little fella," Inari seconded.

"And this way, Maggie will have a friend. See? She likes him already."

Maggie was indeed burbling and giggling as the puppy washed her pudgy, reaching baby hand with an already-familiar expression of riveted curiosity. Triple crap.

"Maggie would like piranha if she hadn't seen them before," I maintained. Truth.

"Ooh, you should name him Minty! Or Libbett," Inari said.


Inari gave Molly the side-eye, patting the wide bun over one ear protectively. "Was that a joke about my hair?"

"No, Aunt Harry is a fan in the original sense. You know, 'fanatic'. She even reads the books," Molly added in a stage-whisper.
"Only some of them. And only because I can't get a television to work right," I put in defensively.

"You should show her how to do that with her hair, though. It looks awesome," Molly went right on over me.

"Really? I've never tried it before," Inari preened.

"Yeah, I didn't think it was actually possible to get hair to do that. Maybe I should grow mine out. What do you think?"

"Okay!" I interrupted before my apprentice could get any chattier with the probable succubus. "Fine. I will call him Mouse. Because he's small. And quiet," I added pointedly.

I was hit with cheery grins of teenage approval from both barrels. I had definitely been had.

I cleared my throat. "Mols, can you still work a computer?"

"Most of the time. Why?"

I fished a piece of paper out of my duster pocket. "I need you to look up some stuff on the webernet."

"It's the internet or it's the web, Harry—Harry! is this for your porn case?"

I made a throat-cutting gesture, glancing at Inari, who wasn't supposed to know I was anything but a production assistant. "Ix-nay."

Molly rolled her eyes. "You want me to go look at porn sites on my parents' computer? They'll kill me!"

"Can you say adult film instead?" I winced.

"I think you're missing the point. They. Will. Kill. Me."

"It's called being sneaky, grasshopper. It's a very important skill." I beamed sunnily at her. Payback's a bitch. "Baby bag's in the trunk. Get gone; I want you inside before dark."

Once Molly had taken the Scamp and vamoosed, I really had no excuse not to follow Inari into the studio proper. After that, we all spent the evening busy with, er, work. I kept an eye on Trixie throughout the night, at least while she was upright, and amused myself by coming up with bad noir one-liners. Trix.

I also tracked the probably-Raiths, Inari and Lara. I had very little doubt about Lara: it had been about one kid ago since I'd last gotten any, and I'm no more above admiring a well-assembled specimen of the human form, male or female, than anyone else; but my libido doesn't usually sit on my brain that hard unless I'm already sitting on something else. Inari, though, seemed like any other girl her age. She had the same coltish grace I remembered Elaine having when we were teens—I've always been too angular and awkward. Even now, with ten years to get used to my full height, I still felt like my elbows were sticking out everywhere.

Lara had named Inari her sister, and Inari hadn't corrected me. Arturo acted like he'd known them both for a while. They and Thomas all had the same perfect, creamy skin, the same blue-black hair. Inari was pretty enough, but her looks weren't anywhere near Lara's shocking loveliness or Thomas' sheer magnetism. Maybe she just didn't have it turned on.
I had finally gotten past most of the hello-are-you-a-porn-star? misunderstandings, although not the awkwardness. Stars and stones, not the awkwardness. I would be in no danger of unintended soulgazes tonight. The people were about as nice as any group this large could be while not on drugs, with a couple notable exceptions, and the allowance that everybody was in a hurry to finish the job under a tight deadline.

For my part, I did what Joan told me to, and the rest of the time I hung back as far from the cameras as I could. Nothing strange happened. Trixie stomped off the set about three times; I overheard part of a cellphone conversation Inari had; we ate round, tofu-embedded cheese-bread (look, I refuse to call it pizza if bean curd is involved). When I called the Carpenters, Molly reported everyone was home safe. Nobody got cursed. It was all very unsupernatural until Thomas crashed the party, got both of us shot by one of his sisters and me concussed by the other, which I could have lived with if she hadn't broken my blasting rod in the process.

Somewhere in between entropy curses and Black Court vampires, I managed to pull enough of Lara Romany-née-Raith's bacon out of the fire to merit the Hospitality of Château Raith. It was about the last place I wanted to be. What I wanted to do was kick the whole Raith clan out of the Beetle while it was still moving and speed back to the Carpenters and Maggie. I knew it would be a stupid thing to do; there was nothing to say more of the Mavrettes wouldn't jump me between Château Raith and the Carpenters', or weren't waiting in ambush outside my apartment. And I was tapped out.

I didn't like leaving Thomas with Lara at all, but it sounded like a wounded incubus went into automatic soul-sucking mode, and I didn't dare touch him. Instead I told Lara I'd wait with Inari until she brought her creepy love-slave doctor. I found myself agreeing with Lord Raith and hoping he hadn't had all his medical training sucked out through his dick.

Inari didn't look good. She was leaning heavily on me, delivering the very necessary directions in a weak monotone only when prodded. I recognised the signs of shock.

The room we ended up in was less bedroom than the parlour of a suite. The decoration was a little impersonal and a lot decadent, not at all what I'd expected from artsy Inari; but then Lara had said they had houses all over the world. Maybe she didn't spend much time here.

Entire bolts of silk draped the walls, camouflaging any other doors or windows the room might have behind swathes of warm reds, purples, and pinks. The furniture was all rich-looking velvets and suedes, deep and overstuffed. There were a few wooden end tables and a coffee table—its film of teenage clutter was the only real sign of habitation—matching the hints of dark, polished wood peeking out on the arms and backs of the furniture. The rug was deep, and deep in hue, a rose so dark it was almost grey.

I steered Inari to the couch nearest the door and guided her down. She let me, but kept a death-grip on my duster so I couldn't pull away. Her breathing was too fast, skirting hyperventilation, and she'd started trembling back in the lushly appointed hallway. I shushed her like I would Maggie, put my arm back around her shoulders and pushed her head between her knees, cupping my free hand over her mouth in lieu of a paper bag.

The couch was sinfully comfortable. I'd been expecting a more Victorian theme, fainting couches and damascened upholstery with ornately carved wood, you know: impressive as hell, but not really comfortable. This was the kind of furniture, though, that makes you want to sink into it and just wallow and never get up, that you can pass out on without destroying your back, or stretch out on with someone else without risking having extra body parts stick out or someone sliding off. I routinely slept on a mattress that wasn't as comfortable as that couch, never mind as long. Even just sitting on it, I found myself being drawn into it and enveloped. I'd bet the plum-coloured suede was
just as soft, were I to touch it with my bare skin.

I rubbed calming circles on Inari's back as best I could over Lara's robe-turned-sling and continued making soothing noises. Inari responded to them better than Maggie usually did. After a few minutes, her breathing evened out. I let her sit up, my hand still moving on her back, slow and steady.

"W-what was that?" Inari asked, her eyes still wide and frightened. They were grey, like Thomas' and Lara's. "Who were those people?"

"Don't worry about it right now," I told her. "You're safe here. They can't hurt you anymore."

"Oh..." Inari buried her face in my shoulder, flinging her unwounded arm around me and sobbing uncontrollably.

I was just glad I'd stopped nursing: the last thing I needed on top of the night I'd had was to be leaking bodily fluids all over my shirt in a vampire stronghold. I was also glad I'd already had the crash course in Things Crying Loudly On Me, because otherwise this might have been kind of awkward.

I just kept rubbing Inari's back, reminding myself every minute or so that she didn't need burping. In all the excitement, some of Inari's hair had started coming out of the Princess Leia buns and it was catching my fingers. I brushed it out of the way, relieved to see that her sobs were trailing off now. Poor kid. I guess this sort of thing is tough to deal with, even when it's in the family. I wondered whether—

Something wet and burning dragged itself across my neck, just below my jaw. My head jerked back reflexively, reacting to anything that close to the vulnerable air- and blood-carrying vessels there as a threat. My heart was suddenly pounding, to the point where I couldn't be sure if the burning sensation was heat or cold.

Inari licked me again, a long, sensuous stroke that ended with a chaste kiss to the sensitive skin behind my ear and made me shiver. Heat uncoiled between my legs, like a dragon roused, sudden and powerful. Also, filled with a terrible resolve.

I was lost before I even knew what hit me.

The desire was raw, more direct than what I'd felt from Lara. Pure need. I've always been a sucker for need. I opened my lips and let Inari drink from me because she needed it, because I needed her to. She was already half in my lap; I drew her in closer, caressing the lithe curve of her back in a manner not designed to be soothing at all.

We toppled sideways on the couch; it was as welcoming as I'd predicted. Inari pressed me down into it, our breasts squashing pleasantly between us. Her lips burned me like ice, sapping the molten fire of my passion and replacing it with a feeling like a brisk winter wind off the lake, cold so encompassing it went beyond discomfort. The heat of my arousal was replaced with an empty, drumming ache, like I'd been fucked open and left unfinished.

The door banged open about a half-second after Inari screamed. I was still in a fog; all I saw were Inari's eyes, as greusomely, beautifully opalescent as Shakespeare ever imagined one second and cloudy grey the next.

Inari yelped again. I rolled up on one arm, my heart pounding for entirely different reasons now. Lara was rushing over to Inari, who had fallen on her bad wrist. As I watched, blisters formed on her lips. Inari looked from me to her sister and back to me; I was quick to drop her gaze.
"Lara?" she asked in a small voice. "What...? My mouth."

Lara shot me a look that was part frustration, part chagrin, and part murder. Inari started hyperventilating again, drawing her sister's attention from the very confused wizard still sprawled all over the couch.


It finally registered that there was someone else in the room. He was an attractive man with light brown skin and blue eyes that could have been striking if they were just a little more focussed. I waited until Lara had steered them to a no doubt equally comfortable but less roomy and subconsciously suggestive arm chair on the other side of the room to stand up.

"What's happening?" Inari was asking. "Those things, and you, and Thomas—"

"Shh, sweetling," Lara crooned. "I'll explain everything. Very soon, I think. For now, let the doctor take care of your arm and your mouth. Everything's going to be all right."

There was an odd, almost bitter twist to Lara's lips when she said that. She stroked Inari's hair, once, gently, and turned her attention on me.

Lara had located some clothes as well as (in the same place as?) Doctor Bruce, and she'd taken the time to wash her face; but her hair was the same mess it had been in earlier and she was still barefoot. Unsurprisingly, Lara Raith did not look any less dangerous or sexy in jeans and a sweater than she had ripping the head off a Black Court vampire in her lingerie. I felt turned on, turned around, battered, dirty, and plain in comparison.

"Come with me, wizard," Lara ordered in clipped tones.

I waited until we were back out in the hall. "What was that in there?"

It was a bit of a risk, taking the hard line when I had harmed a member of the house where I was currently a guest, but Inari had pretty obviously been on top and instigating, which was also a no-no in this situation. The way Lara crossed her arms told me she knew this.

"I must beg your pardon, Wizard Dresden. She didn't know what she was doing."

"Yeah, I kind of got that," I said. "Real interesting, if you ask me."

Lara turned on her heel and started walking down the wood-panelled hallway, bare feet silent on the tiled floor. I didn't have much of a choice but to trail along after.

"We do not burden the young until it is necessary. I told you of the Hunger; Inari's is waking," Lara said, not looking at me.

I raised my eyebrows. "So you guys don't start off all, life-sucking kinkoids."

Lara's eyes slashed angrily at me, then away. "No."

"Aren't we chatty?" I muttered. "Okay, but will you tell me what happened to her mouth? Despite the very justifiable circumstances, it wasn't my intention to hurt anybody. I wouldn't want to do it again, you know, by accident."

One corner of Lara's mouth curled up in an expression almost entirely devoid of humour. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a
"Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

"Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

I twitched a little when I recognised the passage; the White Court had cased my apartment. Could they know I was holding one of the Swords of the Cross, too? I was still more than a little nervous about being responsible for it; I didn't have the best track record with them. If all the hairs hadn't already been standing up on the back of my neck, that would have done it.

"That's from the Bible." There: a nice, noncommittal response.

"First Corinthians, chapter thirteen," Lara said. She was rubbing circles with her thumb on her left palm, as though easing a cramp. "The power is not simply metaphorical. The last time you were bedded, you were both in love. None of the White Court can touch you."

I felt myself turn bright red. Finally, an upside to my complete lack of a sex life. Not that I had the time or energy for a sex life. There were some interesting implications buried in all that, though, depending on how literal Lara was being. She had said *touch*, not *feed*.

Lara stopped in front of a door. It was in a different wing from Inari's room. "You can sleep here for the night."

I thought about it. If Lara was telling the truth, it should be as safe as I had any right to expect. Tired as I was, I still missed the Scamp's weight. I wanted to call and check up on her, but no way was I doing it here where I risked one, eavesdroppers and two, drawing attention to my daughter and one of my best safe-houses, not to mention friends.

Of course, that may have been wishful thinking: if the White Court had been watching me, it wouldn't have been very hard at all to connect me to the Carpenters. I felt guilty about putting Michael and his family in more danger; sometimes I wondered if Maggie's presence constituted the same kind of loophole I did when I dragged Michael out on a case he hadn't been paged for. But there's only so far you can protect people from their own choices, especially with the volunteering types. I learned that one the hard way. Sometimes, it seemed like that was the only way I learned things.

"Okay. Thanks," I said. I was always telling folks to stay behind a threshold when bad shit was going down, and this was a well-established one, even if I did feel like the cockroach with the penthouse suite in the motel.
I dragged in shortly after dawn, having had my world turned upside down, again. Mister shot past me like a bullet from a gun, and I followed the swirl of lights down the trap door, into my lab.


I was also dressed like a slut.

I rapped my knuckles on a work table. "Let's focus. Did you find Mavra?"

"No, seriously. That ensemble shows way more taste and thigh than I thought you were capable of. Although you might want to consider shaving your legs."

I ran a hand through my still-damp hair. "Mavra's goon-squad jumped me in the middle of some very literal White Court in-fighting. We called truce long enough to avoid getting dismembered. I had to borrow some clothes."

If you used the word 'clothes' loosely. Not that they were anything like loose. Lara's offer of hospitality had extended to providing clean apparel, but apparently not to controlling her sense of humour. Or maybe it had been Thomas. Before dropping a frigging A-bomb on me out of my family tree, he'd handed off something I'd only identified as a skirt after comparison with the top, and a silk halter-top that looked more like a silk handkerchief. Thank god and Hawk for my duster. I wrapped it around myself more securely, wishing I'd thought to grab my flannel robe before coming down. It was cold in my lab.

"Did you get laid? I'm so happy for you, boss. Tell me everything!" Bob said eagerly.

"I didn't get laid, Bob. Apparently I'm poison."

Bob rolled his eyes. "Only you could spend the night in a house full of sex vampires and not get any. I'm telling you, it's just not fair."

"Suck it up," I told him. It was probably best not to mention that I wasn't wearing any underwear. Raith-juices or corpse-juices. Yeuch. The leather miniskirt was bad enough. "Where's Mavra?"

"Well, you see, Harry, it's a funny thing really—"

"Is this the kind of funny thing that ends with me complimenting you and you telling me what I want to know, or the kind of funny thing that ends with you at the bottom of a two-hundred foot well for a dozen centuries?" I asked dangerously.

"The Black Court have got really sneaky this past century!"

"Bob! You've had twice as much time as I gave you. You could have located every vampire in Illinois by now."

"You know, Harry, that's really sweet of you. Are you sure you didn't get laid?"

"Bob!" I shouted. "Out! Back in Mister. Find Mavra. Be back by noon. Or I will boil your skull and turn it into a jigsaw puzzle for the Scamp."

"But I'm tired and it's raining and I don't know if—"

I picked up Bob's skull and stared him straight in the eye-flames. "My daughter is not safe while these bastards are in town. I am going to destroy them, and if you keep getting in my way, I am
going to destroy you, too. Got. It?"

Bob gulped. "You know, it's amazing how your tits don't detract at all from the impact of your threats."

I raised my hand and looked around for a clear space on the floor. The orange flame-spill swirled upstairs immediately. Mister was already pawing at the door by the time I cleared the sub-basement.

That left me alone with my thoughts, for a change. No baby, no apprentice underfoot, no helpful friends or neighbours hanging around.

There had been a time when alone with my thoughts had been pretty much my default setting. I hadn't been that isolated in—hell's bells—almost two years. It was actually pretty incredible how many people had become part of my life, once I decided to let them in. Not that they'd given me much choice. I had a circle of friends who had stood by me through supernatural clusterfuck and single motherhood. I even had a family, still growing, albeit haphazardly and backwards.

I was accustomed to those other presences in my life now. And instead of making me weaker, more vulnerable, I found they gave me strength. I had something to protect now, something personal and vital. I had the knowledge that I wasn't alone. And yeah, I was scared. I lost sleep; I worried. But it wasn't like I wasn't used to that. I acclimated to fear at a fairly young age, and I've learned to use it instead of letting it drive me.

My instinctive reaction to fear has always been to go and thump whatever's scaring me anyway—just look at my strategy regarding Mavra and her scourge. Not to mention my new load of maternal instincts, which were about as confrontational as you can get.

I'd been right, all these years, about family: it did make you crazy. Something was threatening my daughter, and something else was threatening my brother. I hadn't even finished dealing with the fact that I had a brother, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let him go and get killed on me before I had a chance to.

The next thing I did was call Michael. It didn't occur to me until the phone was already ringing on the other end that it was an hour after dawn on a Saturday morning and the Carpenters might not be up yet. Oops.

"Carpenter residence, this is Michael," Michael said. He didn't sound like I'd caught him abed.

"Hey, Michael. It's Harry," I said. "Sorry if I woke you up."

"It's fine; I was just making coffee. You didn't call last night; we were getting worried," Michael said, gentle reproof in his voice.

I hitched my duster around myself more tightly, as though Michael could see me from halfway across town. "Yeah, sorry. Things got a little hairy and I had to fort up someplace I didn't trust the phone lines. You guys have any trouble?"

"There was something outside last night, but it didn't try to get in. From what Molly told us, I thought we'd all be better off staying inside."

I nodded. "Good call. I'm going to take care of it today." If Bob ever came back with the intel instead of canvassing every sorority in town, or whatever he'd been doing yesterday. "Do you think you guys can look after the Scamp for a while longer?"

Michael paused. "Of course we will, Harry. But you know I'm here if you need my help. Whatever it
is, you don't have to face it by yourself."

It was tempting. Boy, was it tempting. They didn't call Michael the Fist of God for nothing, after all. He'd be with me as soon as I said Black Court, and that wasn't even mentioning the fact that Mavra had as big a mad-on for Michael as for me. He'd wiped out some of her fledges a score of years ago and come out alive on the other side. Murphy had no problem working with him; and when it came to experience in supernatural mayhem, he blew Marcone, Murphy, and me all out of the water.

But he also had a family. And if I screwed this up and got killed, he was the person I trusted to look after my family, my daughter. I was already dragging Eb into this; I wasn't prepared to risk mother, grandfather, and godfather on one throw of the dice.

And, you know. If the Almighty wanted Michael on the scene, he'd show up no matter what I did either way. So let it be on god's head and not mine.

"Yeah," I said, letting out a pent-up breath. "Thanks, but I think I've got it covered. Just keep an eye out on your end."

"All right, Harry," Michael said reluctantly. "God go with you."

"Better than some other things I could think of," I agreed heartily. "Can you put Molly on?"

Molly did have to be dragged out of bed. She announced her presence with a groan into the mouthpiece.

"Good morning, grasshopper," I carolled at her, just to be obnoxious. I'd picked up coffee along with breakfast on my way home and, due to the power of suggestion no doubt, had started brewing a pot of my own during my conversation with Michael. "What've you got for me?"

"Wh—huh?" Molly asked blearily.

I controlled my impatience. "Did you look at those websites I gave you?" I elucidated.

"Uh—let me just," Molly said. I heard rustling, footsteps, and then a door closing as she moved around on the other end. "Sorry. Didn't want the parents interrupting. Um, looks like your friend's from Greece. His family used to have money, but the tabs say he fled the country to slide out from under some serious debts. He's been doing porn for a long time—"

"Okay, that's another of those words you're not allowed to use, in case I hadn't made that clear."

"—and he's pretty good at it. He's like the vegan-organic lobby of the adult film world: likes everything natural. He's worth millions. Not lots of millions. Like four or five maybe."

I looked at the receiver askance. "What do you mean he's pretty good at it?"

"That's one of those things you don't like me to talk about. Anyway," Molly continued, sounding much more cheerful and awake now, "he married three porn—sorry, adult film actresses, not all at once. Ended badly all three times."

Molly told me some other things, mostly stuff I'd already suspected or picked up. Maggie was still asleep. I told Molly to sit tight with the Scamp and to do her magical homework. And to stop making that face.

Then I called my answering service. Occasionally, I wondered what they made of my messages; but I flat-out refuse to believe I am the weirdest noise Chicago's got. There were a couple calls from
Molly and one from Michael. Whups.

There was also a message that had to be from Marcone, just a time and place, one of a series of preserved woods that ran a little west of the city proper in a long line. Being sneaky, were we? I finished my coffee and went to grab Murphy. She was going to bitch me out for skipping the workout this morning. I wondered if pleading head injury would be too counter-productive.

"Good morning, Murphy," I greeted her arrival at the CPD HQ parking lot.

"Say what you mean, Harry: good morning Murphy's bike." Murphy was looking pretty chipper herself, pulling off her helmet and unstraddling her Harley.

"Guilty," I admitted. "Feel like going for a ride?"

"To the hospital?" Murphy suggested.

I'll admit, she looked better than I did. But, morning of hand-to-hand combat practice or not, I was willing to be Murphy hadn't taken as many hits. "Just got a little roughed up last night."

"Wouldn't happen so much if you came to the gym more." Murphy brushed her hair out of her eyes, giving me second look. "You sure that's it?"

"There's some other stuff; it's not related. We can have a big, girly clambake about it after this is all over."

Murphy glared at me. "So I take it this isn't a social visit."

"Sorry," I said. "Business. We need to go talk to a guy."

Murphy's expression did not soften as she tossed me a bulky, candy-red helmet. I used it to muffle my shit-eating grin.

The important thing to remember about motorcycles is that they are basically giant vibrators. I'm not proud; I can admit it. Guys, this is why your girlfriend likes your bike so much. I don't know why guys like motorcycles. Perhaps it's the fact you're playing road roulette whenever you get on one. Or maybe they like getting their balls jiggled, too; I've never asked.

In any event, most of my morning's bad mood had evaporated by the time we got to the meet. I tried to hold onto that feeling, because a conversation with Marcone did not give me the warm and fuzzies at the best of times, and Murphy, when she took her helmet off again, was looking positively grim. Charged up, but grim. If I wasn't careful, this was going to end with her drop-kicking Marcone—which, usually, great; but I kind of really needed to put Mavra down.

There was a trail leading back off into the trees. Murphy and I glanced at each other. I shrugged; for lack of a better option, we started down it.

It was a little late in the year for park-goers, and Murphy and I didn't encounter anyone until we came around a bend and Sigrun Gard popped out of possibly actually nowhere to stand by the side of the path. Somehow her sharp, blue eyes fit this forest setting much better than her heathered grey suit. She wasn't wearing a coat.

"Miss Dresden," Gard said.

"Ms Gard," I returned the greeting once I'd managed to unswallow my tongue. "You're in on this?" I was about half-surprised.
"It was left to my discretion." There was an odd look on Gard's face. She turned to Murphy. "Lieutenant Murphy. I am pleased to finally make your acquaintance. You have a reputation as a warrior and a leader of men."

"Ms Gard," Murphy replied, noncommittal and I think a bit nonplussed. She covered it well, though. They shook hands.

"Follow me," Gard instructed, and about-faced into the underbrush.

It was actually a narrow footpath. It didn't seem to lead anywhere in particular; we found Marcone at a slight widening in the path where, at some point in the dim past, someone had dumped a few medium-sized boulders. Presumably because they couldn't be bothered to lug them any further. This was by no means Marcone's usual MO; I wondered first how many gunmen he had hidden in the trees—I hadn't caught sight of any yet, and not for lack of looking—and second what kind of allies he'd expected me to bring to this little party. Well, I wasn't expecting Bigfoot to put in a surprise appearance, but you never knew.

It was also something like neutral ground, public but not exposed. I had no illusions that Marcone had chosen the park as a spot where he could manage unintended fall-out, but as far as venues for assassination went, it wasn't ideal. I kept telling myself that.

Hendricks was visible, which was a good sign. If he hadn't been, I'd have known he was up a tree somewhere with a rifle and a hat made out of shrubbery. As it was, he was standing talking to Marcone, both of them in suits with shined shoes, like someone had put the wrong backdrop behind them. He looked up and his scowl passed over Gard, lingered for a moment on me like he was sticking in a pin, and locked on Murphy.

"What are you playing at, Dresden?" Hendricks asked me, shifting his massive shoulders so he was standing between us and Marcone.

"Down, Cujo," I told him. "She's one of my Merry Men."

"Which one?" Marcone asked.

He stepped around Hendricks, although on my side and not Murphy's. Gard was watching all of us.

"Little John," I answered promptly. It's funny because Little John wasn't actually little, see?

Murphy kicked my shin without taking her eyes off Marcone.

"I see it's not just me." Marcone smiled one of his blander, harder to read smiles.

"Sorry, Marcone; you don't get special treatment," I said.

"How disappointing." Marcone didn't bother to look disappointed. "Shall we get to business?"

I blew out my breath, refocusing. "That's what we're here for. I've got some new intel."

"Location?" Marcone asked.

I shook my head. "Not yet. I'll have it by noon." At least I'd better. I nodded at Hendricks and Gard. "You guys know the score?"

"I've looked over Mister Marcone's notes," Gard said. "There were some important details missing."

"Yeah," Hendricks agreed. "The specific ones."
"I'm working on it. First, a few ground rules. One, I'm in charge, not Skippy. This is my gig and my world, so I'm giving the orders."

Cujo cast an unhappy look at Marcone, who inclined his head at me. "Understood, Miss Dresden," Marcone said, cool and polite.

"Two, if you break the law, I will not stop Lieutenant Murphy from arresting your mafioso asses. Period." I nodded at Murphy. Grudgingly, she nodded back. "Three, what happens on the vampire hunt stays on the vampire hunt. I don't want to hear about any of this after we're done."

Marcone's eyebrows rose. "A trifle inconsistent."

"Tough luck." I crossed my arms. "You're criminals; she's a cop. I trust her more than I trust you."

The corners of Marcone's mouth tightened minutely, but he didn't argue. "Your terms are acceptable. You said you had new information."

"Yeah, unfortunately most of it's bad. The good news is that last night there were at least four Black Court vampires in town; I know 'cause I got jumped by three of them. Now there are at least two Black Court vampires in town."

It was Gard's turn to look surprised. "You took out two by yourself?"

I grimaced. "I had some help."

"Will they be joining us as well?" Marcone asked.

I shook my head. "Let's just say that it was...a very circumstantial alliance."

"You said there were four," Hendricks pointed out.

"Number four's the head honcho. That's the bad news. Her name is Mavra, and she's old. Survived the Dracula craze, I'm pretty sure. And she knows magic."

"How much?" Gard asked.

"She was pulling some seriously nasty binding spells last time she was in town, three years ago. Plus she's good at veils. And," I added grimly, "last night she did some long-range mental communications."

Gard's eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared. Murphy looked between her and me. "Which is why we're hitting them during the day, when they're asleep. Correct?"

"If this Mavra is so old, she may not be compelled to repose by the sun," Gard said. This would have surprised me more if my life were ever, you know, easy. I tried to look like I'd known that already. "Were you planning for one of us to block her power?"

I surveyed six-foot-plus of amazonian blonde, wondering not for the first time just how human she was. "We can talk about that; there are going to be three of us when my driver gets here."

"Ah. Your mentor," Marcone said, sounding enlightened.

Murphy looked sharply between us. Damn Marcone, couldn't he go five minutes without being a jackass? I glared at him.

Marcone met my eyes calmly. "I've assembled a Black Court-specific arsenal, per your advice."
"Oh. That's another thing," I said, reminded. "Staking these guys is a lot harder than it looks on Buffy. Cutting their heads off might be simpler, or articles of faith, if you've got 'em."

I explained faith magic just to get everybody on the same page—it's not the cross, it's your belief in the cross; so if you don't believe in it, it won't do diddly. I can use my mother's pentacle amulet, because I believe in magic and that's what the pentacle symbolises. I had, in fact, torched one of the vampires last night using this method. Murphy might have been able to work it—with her badge or with a cross, I wouldn't have been surprised by either—but I was less certain about Marcone and Hendricks; and I had no idea how it would work for Gard, whatever she was. Gard knew enough magic to have other ways of defending herself, though.

We confabbed for a while longer. Murphy and Marcone were reluctantly persuaded to swap disappearance stats. The only places that stood out were the unfortunate neighbourhoods where disappearances were always up. Well, police response time would be slow, if that's where we were going. Give us enough time to get clear.

I grew shorter as I outlined the situation. I had to keep suppressing images of what would happen to Maggie if Mavra got her hands on her. The images got all mixed up with half-lucid memories of my capture by Red Court vampires three years ago, echoes of the past two nights' nightmares. I clenched my jaw and shoved it all back down along with a sharp kick to my subconscious, who can be a real bitch. The time for fear would come later, when I could channel it into barbecuing these freaks.

"We hit them as soon as I know where they are, so get ready."

"You said you were meeting your informant at noon," Marcone said. "How confident are you that he'll have the information we need?"

I smiled toothily, my dander up again just like that. "Very."

"Then we'll reconvene at your apartment. Say, twelve thirty?" Marcone proposed smoothly, fixing me with his eyes. They seemed brighter out here in the forest, the colour of leaves not yet turned.

I squinted back at him. "Fine. But I wouldn't touch the door if I were you. And I know getting me a evicted is your new favourite past-time, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't show up looking like you're about to haul me away in cement shoes."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Marcone demurred. I snorted.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the meeting broke up without anyone's face getting introduced to a tree. Beside me, Murphy was a tense, brooding presence.

"Talk to me, Murph," I said when we came back out into the almost empty parking lot. I perched sideways on her motorcycle, putting us more or less on a level.

Murphy ran a hand through her short, blonde hair. "What is there to say? I don't like this. I don't like him, and I don't trust him. This goes against all of my instincts as a cop."

"You talking about Marcone, or you talking about the raid?"

"Both. It bothers me, handling problems outside the law. I know rationally that this is the responsible thing to do, but it still bothers me." She hesitated. "There are going to be people around. Innocent people."

I glanced down at my empty hands. "Yeah." I looked up at her again. "I don't have an easy answer
for that one. You remember when the Velvet Room burned down a few years back? That was me. Both times. I was never sure how many of those kids were dead already."

That hung in the air for a long moment, both of us digesting it. Murphy's gaze was turned inward.

"It sucks," I said bluntly, "like a jet engine."

Silence.

"Anyone Mavra's got is going to die anyway if we don't do this, aren't they?"

That was Murphy all right—no shrinking from the facts. Murphy is good people. I wished she didn't have to deal with stuff like this.

"Yeah," I said.

Murphy's face hardened. I stood up, shaking it off.

"Hey, can you drop me at the studio? We're about due—oooh. Oooh. Fuck." I was struck suddenly by the weight of a half-dozen pieces falling into place.

Murphy eyed me askance. "What is this, method acting?"

"What time is it?" My brain was working furiously.

"Ten-thirty. Harry, what's going on?"

"I need to get to the nearest Target," I said. "Chop chop. No time to lose, Little John."

We rolled into the studio a little less than an hour later, Murphy looking around like she expected someone to jump out at her. It would have been funny if it weren't so close to the truth. I'd explained my theory to her in the store, and Murphy had gone out front to call SI on her cellphone and browbeat one of her minions into pulling the information I needed.

They called her back as we were pulling into the parking lot, and I went on inside. I conscripted Jake-the-friendly-porn-star, explaining what I was trying to do as we went. I really hoped I was right about what was going on, because this deflection was only good as long as no one smudged the lines.

Murphy caught up with us in a corner of the sound stage, just as Jake was letting slip a big, juicy clue. I caught her eye and shook my head minutely. She was doing something kind of funny with her face, but since she didn't do anything else to draw attention to herself, I ignored it.

"Are you sure?" I asked before Jake could ask me what I was looking at.

He shrugged. "I'm not gonna testify to it in federal court or anything. I mean, city court, sure."

"'Scuse me, sorry," someone said from over by the door.

I muffled a groan; so much for that.

"It's all right," I heard Murphy say, sounding a little strained. "Harry, you got a minute?"

I waved her in. "Just one more thing. Is Lara here today?"
Jake looked even more confused. "Sure."

"Thanks for the help," I said. "Catch up with you later."

The interruption turned out to be Bobby the Built. He glanced from me to Murphy and gave Murphy as wide a berth as he could following her in, his big mouth clamped firmly shut. I felt kind of bad, but I didn't have time to make nice. I got to my feet and drew Murphy over to one side.

"Murphy," I cut across her as she started to speak. "I need you to get on the line with your people and find out whether anything changes if Arturo gets married again. I gotta keep an eye on things in here."

Murphy gave me a look but no sass and went off to find a less wizardly part of the building to call from. I went to keep an eye on the coffee and doughnuts.

I was munching away happily in the green room, waiting for either the malocchio or Murphy, whichever showed up first, when someone showed up who wasn't on my list.

It was Trixie Vixen. And she was pointing a gun at me.

She wasn't doing a very good job of it. Personally, I would have been shocked if she could have hit the broad side of a barn without the recoil knocking her off of those heels. And talk about blowback—given what she was wearing, her entire body would be covered in gunpowder residue. Firing a gun is a lot more messy than most people think on the trigger side of things, even if it's the kind of dirt you can only see with a microscope.

Still, I've been shot more than once and it was an experience I didn't want to repeat if I could help it. Trixie didn't actively want me dead, or she'd have done more than hiss at me by now. And the longer she kept it up, the more my suspicions were confirmed: someone had set Trixie up with a ritual—probably whoever was on the other end of that cellphone call—so they could take out the future Mrs Genosa Number Four, so...what? Jealousy, revenge, business—I needed more facts.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Eleven forty-three. Rituals are the paint-by-the-numbers end of the magical spectrum. They require a very specific set-up of materials, sigils, chants, timing, sometimes even place. Magic requires a certain amount of mental clarity and belief, and that sort of stuff helps convince what Molly and the Alphas call 'n00bs'. I had a good idea that this one struck a little before noon or midnight, but without the police reports—which I'd so cleverly not asked for before I sent Murphy off again—I had no idea how much time I had. Even without the tinny death-shriek of Trixie's cellphone, I could feel the malocchio gathering, and it was going to be a doozy.

Part of me was terrified. Something had changed; there was way too much power involved for me to flat-out stop it. Whoever else was involved, they weren't dicking around anymore.

Then it was like a switch flipped and whole thing just made me mad, all of a sudden. I didn't know why someone was targeting these women, whether they were out to ruin Arturo's personal life or his business, but none of them deserved it. Trixie and her back-up dancers had been flailing around like complete amateurs, making a hash of things and hurting innocent bystanders. It was all way too Spartacus, or like a particularly gruesome retelling of Cinderella. Kill all the eligible girls at the ball and try the shoe on their corpses afterwards.

And the next one in line had two kids at home. I didn't know if I could even redirect the kind of power that was building, but a part of me was eager to try shunting it over to Trixie and let her eat her own curse. This shallow, stupid, criminally petty woman who couldn't even muster enough common humanity to take the time to identify the person she wanted to kill. The world would be a
better place if I made a frozen turkey fall on her head. That would be breaking the First Law of Magic, but I was having a real hard time caring. I had to do something, send it somewhere, and Trixie deserved it a hell of a lot more than Emma did.

There was movement in the doorway. I looked away quickly, trying to keep my face from betraying me. I shouldn't have worried; Trixie was so worked up, I don't think she even remembered the room had a ceiling, let alone a door. Or at least, that was what I got from the confused and terrified look on her face when Murphy tackled her.

Tackle really isn't a nuanced enough word. Murphy had been studying aikido since she was eleven, which was only six years longer than she'd been a cop. She had Trixie disarmed, on the floor, and in a joint lock before I'd finished ducking and covering.

I bolted for the sound stage like a bat out of hell, ignoring the questions Murphy was shouting after me. Emma was standing just outside the door, gawping in confusion. I grabbed her and dragged her along behind me. Black magic pressed so thickly in the air I found myself working my jaw to try and equalise the pressure in my ears. When I arrived, my spell was in disarray. The candles had been knocked over and extinguished, the circle broken, and worst of all the mirror smashed.

There was no time to waste. I righted the candles and arranged them in a circle on a clear space on the floor, lighting them with two hasty words to close it, having put the three biggest pieces of mirror I could find inside. Then I yanked out the chalk line Jake and I had been using, tied it in a big loop, and closed that circle around the first. Emma yelped and took a step back. The malocchio came howling down with all the deadly focus of an icepick to the back of the head, right where Trixie had boasted it would go.

I lunged blindly for a hold on Emma and got her by the ankle with my left hand, knocking her off balance. Shit, shit!

Like I had with Inari last night, I drew the noxious flood of black magic into myself and pushed it out again. It hurt worse this time. Before, the curse had felt stinking, clinging, vile. Now it seared its way through me like salt sea water over open wounds, as cold and as blinding dark. I wasn't screaming this time because the pressure rolled me flat, a huge weight just over my heart.

At the same time, my whole body was screaming because, whatever its nature, the energy involved was immense. The last time I'd got hold of power like this, I'd been channelling a thunder storm, and that was how it felt. It was like someone had dropped me down the Marianas Trench strapped to a school of electric eels.

I don't know whether the thump I felt was just hitting the floor or my heart starting to beat again, but the world came back around me and I found I could breathe once more. I was raw and exhausted, and there was still a weight pressing down on my chest. The only light was from the circle of candles around the fragments of mirror. Sparks danced across my vision, but didn't illuminate anything, any more than the crowd of itching and tickling and slimy sensations meant things were touching me. Or the wetness in the corners of my eyes meant I was crying.

Someone groaned, and I realised the pressure I felt was Emma, who'd fallen on top of me, and not the wounds of black magic or the phantom effects of my wordless redirection of it. A second later it dawned on me that we were both alive. Hell's bells.

"Harry!" Oh, good, it was Murphy. I wouldn't have to get up to look for her. "Oh, god. Are you all right?"

"Mmng," I greeted her articulately. She sounded kind of echoey.
Murphy's face came into view, transforming from concerned to irritated with the flickering candle light. No, wait, that wasn't the candles. I squinted up at her; she looked kind of echoey, too. "Christ, Dresden, what have you done this time?"

I grunted again. "Tell you...when you get her off of me. Emma, are you okay?" I didn't think Emma was okay. Sorting through the myriad nonsense-sensations that came from pouring magic directly through my brain without an insulating spell, I could feel her breathing shallowly and too fast. "Check and see if she's hurt, Murph."

Emma's ankle was hurt, although it was hard to tell how badly. Once she was no longer lying on my diaphragm, I managed to sit up and ascertain that all my parts were attached.

"What'd you do with Trixie?" I asked Murphy.

I was trying to decide if standing up would fall into the 'good idea' or 'bad idea' column. My head still wasn't right, like I was looking at everything through a veil of dark energy, although the blacklight effect was fading a little. Through a glass, darkly. I wanted to get outside, into some nice, direct sunlight.

"Called it in; they should be here soon. I left her with Jake—eugh, really, Harry?"

Standing up had not been a good idea. I didn't reply because I was busy making sure I didn't have anything else in my stomach. I could both smell and taste peanut butter, though; an odd mercy, but I'd take what I could get.

"Stars, I need to get out of here," I moaned. "I'll explain everything, but. Outside." A horrible thought occurred to me. "Actually, we should get everybody outside."

Murphy pursed her lips. "Fine, but you're going to have to help me with her."

I had Murphy blow the candles out and pulled out my pentacle amulet. The light of my faith didn't show as brightly as it might have, but it shone, and some of the dark miasma seemed to lift from around us.

It dissipated even further when we got outside. Approaching sirens were just beginning to be audible in the distance.

A lot of people were coming out on their own. Most of them were either limping or visibly banged up; I winced. As I watched, about five separate people pulled out cellphones, pushed a button, frowned in confusion, punched the same button repeatedly, and swore. I assumed they were swearing. The more industrious ones pried off the panel in back and started poking around. I don't know a lot about cellphones, but I didn't think it would do them much good.

Arturo homed in on me while I was still blinking the sun out of my eyes. "Emma! Are you all right?"

"Twisted her ankle," Murphy supplied from under Emma's other arm. "Maybe broken."

Arturo's face grew even more strained. "I am so sorry. Here," he said. He gestured Bobby over to come take care of her. "I'll be back soon. I need to talk to Harry."

Murphy and I followed Arturo out into the parking lot, out of earshot of the rest of the crew. Arturo threw an uncertain look at Murphy. I sat heavily on the hood of someone's car and made introductions, trying not to jump at the odd incongruous bell-tone amid the sirens or bright flash of neon light. The peanut butter taste had metamorphosed into something sickly sweet, and I was suddenly thirsty.
So, if you've ever wondered why I—and most other sane human practitioners—speak spells aloud, this is why. You use your mind—your will and emotions—to shape and direct magical energy, ergo that energy is going through you. Words are a way of manipulating thought, sort of like tongs. Wizards don't cast spells in weird languages like Sanskrit or Tocharian A just to be pretentious: the less familiar you are with the words you're using, the longer the tongs—the thicker the insulation between you and the magic you're pouring through your brain. Otherwise you'd end up feeling geckos running up and down your legs and seeing furry, six-winged butterflies out the corners of your eyes every time you cast a spell.

"Arturo, this is Lieutenant Karrin Murphy, head of Chicago PD's Special Investigations. Murph, this is Arturo Genosa. This is his production."

"I am very grateful for your assistance, lieutenant." Arturo shook her hand in both of his, although I noticed he didn't do his European cheek-kissing thing. "So often, the law overlooks people such as ourselves simply because of what we do for a living."

Murphy reclaimed her hand. "Just doing my job. Speaking of which, Harry, what happened back there? After you took off, I called in for someone to pick up that woman who was holding a gun on you and then I lost my connexion and the lights all went out. I heard a lot of thumping and yelling, so I figured I had better follow you in case you needed backup. Then I found you and that other woman collapsed on the floor. Was that the curse?"

"Again?" Arturo looked about a hundred years older than he had half an hour ago. "But no one is dead?"

And there was the cheek-kissing again. "Yeah. Trixie's in on it, but she's not alone. She tried to hold me up so I couldn't interfere with the curse. Murphy here saved all our bacon; she took care of Trixie, and I redirected the curse." I sighed. "Unfortunately, your ex had delusions of Mata Hari. She messed up my counter-charm, and I had to fix it on the fly. What I meant to do, you see, was bounce the whole curse back on the sender. But it was, er, a little more intense than I was expecting this time around. I think—" I cut myself off. "Anyway, I managed to deflect a lot of it, but there was some overflow. So you should, um, make sure everybody's out of the building."

What I'd actually done was a little more complicated. Trixie had broken the mirror, and there was no way it was going to reflect the malocchio perfectly—there was going to be spillover. Kind of a lot, judging by how all the studio's fuses had just blown out. And as potent as the curse had been, I hadn't thought even the incidental bleed-off would do me or Emma much good.

Well, if you can't judo your opponent's force back around onto her curse-invoking head, the next best thing is to disperse it. Look at it another way: all those lines I'd drawn pointing in towards the mirror focus also pointed away. Except. Trixie had broken the lines too, dispelling the magical coherence I'd invested them with. Luckily, I'd still had the chalk line itself, which would still have been able to provide a metaphysical link back no matter how Trixie had smeared the lines around. Broken was actually better for spreading things out, although I had definitely been flying by the seat of my pants. But it probably hadn't been very good for the building. It hadn't been especially good for the people inside it. That had been the point of spreading out the spell—diluting it, if you will. A bunch of little accidents happened to a lot of people, instead of one big, bad thing happening to just one person, i.e. death.

Actually, given the kind of power we were talking about, I wasn't sure but what Arturo would have lost a couple walls anyway if my original plan had worked. It might not have blacked out the whole studio, though. But it was definitely Trixie's fault, not mine.
Chapter 3

We escaped Arturo when the emergency vehicles started arriving. The hallucinatory aftereffects of wordless spellwork had mostly worn off by then, leaving me feeling like a piece of burnt toast. Murphy and I would have to move if we wanted to beat Marcone back to my place. I held on grimly against the siren call of sleep. Although I had to admit becoming roadkill would simplify my day tremendously.

I was right about Marcone. A full-sized white van, the kind without windows in the back, pulled in next to us about ten seconds after Murphy turned the engine off. I slumped for a moment, my helmet clicking against hers.

Murphy asked, "Did that cat just look both ways before crossing the street?"

The doors of the van thumped open and shut, and I heard feet crunching on the gravel. I pulled off my helmet and stood up, creaking. Stars and stones, when did I get old? I ought to have had another century or two before I started disintegrating.

"That's Bob. Aaand...that's Marcone?"

Well, it was nice to know that Marcone did sometimes hear what I said. Last winter, my landlady sold the old boardinghouse my apartment is in. To a retired cop. Except there's only so retired a certain type of cop gets, and Detective Lieutenant Washington was definitely not retired enough not to notice Gentleman Johnny Marcone flashing his Rolex all over the front step.

Marcone was not wearing a Rolex. Nor was he wearing a suit. He was wearing grey camouflage pants and a leather jacket over a black tee-shirt, topped off with an honest-to-goodness baseball cap. White Sox, in case you're interested. The brim was frayed and all curved in. I had trouble imagining Marcone as one of those compulsive hat-squeezers. Maybe he'd replaced it with compulsively neat tie-knotting: the manly art of auto-asphyxiation was a mystery to me, but I'd noticed he switched it up.

Behind him, I could see Hendricks and Gard were dressed down, too. Any more leather and my landlord would think I'd joined a motorcycle gang instead of the mob. I wasn't sure I was giving Caroline Baxingdale, the new second-floor tenants' daughter, the right idea. She was at an impressionable age. I had to admit, though, that the old place was looking better these days, since Washington stepped up the maintenance and Mr Baxingdale had taken over the garden in the back yard. And okay, maybe I was more interested in some of his fresh herbs than the fresh vegetables, but boy did I know my herbs.

I looked around furtively while I hustled everybody down the stairs to my basement apartment, but no concerned neighbours or nosy thirteen-year-olds were in evidence. I did spot Mister, who made a bee-line for me from around the corner of the building as soon as he caught my eye. Or rather, Bob did, since he was in, heh, possession.

Everybody but me reached for a concealed weapon when they saw Mister's thirty pounds streaking for me. I would have rolled my eyes, if I'd had the energy. Bending down and picking him up almost overtaxed my resources. It seemed like the safest way, though.

"What is that?" Gard asked.

"My cat. Jeez, folks." I disabled the wards and unlocked the door, conscious of Gard's attention on
me as I did so. Hell's bells, I was going to have to rework them now, wasn't I? Just to be a dick, I made a point of not inviting her in. Instead, I dropped Mister, from whom Bob immediately decamped, and waited by the door for everyone to come in so I could lock the door and put the wards back up. Because I'm a swell gal, I also muttered the pseudo-Latin phrase that lights my candles.

"That was not a simple feline," Gard observed.

Mister, glaring around at all these unauthorised presences, gave me a speaking look and sauntered into my room to take it over, an expression of supreme entitlement on his whiskery face.

"My source," I said.

I grabbed my staff from the gift popcorn tin by the door and walked over to the throw rug Bob had just disappeared through. How had it come to this? John Marcone and two of his people inside my home, inside my defences. Seeing things I didn't even show to most of my friends and visibly judging the cardboard boxes of client files lined up along my walls and bookshelves. Tough luck. If he didn't like it, he shouldn't have had my building condemned. All I wanted was to follow Mister and curl up with him and Maggie on my crappy twin bed, safe and warm, with a fire in the hearth and the covers up around us. It seemed like years since I'd had enough sleep.

Well, wizard up, Dresden. There's only one way to get there. I flipped up the fringey faux-Navajo job that concealed the trap door to my lab, then crouched down and popped the magical child-lock on the deadbolt and opened it. The look I cast around at my putative assault force had much in common with Mister's.

I said, "Be back up in a minute," and descended into the sub-basement, aka my lab.

I only lit the two candles on either side of Bob's skull, careful not to accidentally set his bonsai on fire. I wasn't sure how Bob kept it alive down here, but his wheedling last year when I told him I was going to toss it had almost reached the ultrasonic, and I'd given in even though it had come from Marcone. I was mostly glad he was taking an interest in something other than porn.

"You find her?" I asked once I'd swung the trap door shut after me.

"Yeah, I found her," Bob said.

"Good. Hold that thought."

I thumped my staff on the floor, having to focus a little more than I was used to. Well, earth-magic wasn't my best area anyway. I waited until the staff quivered in my hand before I started rapping out my message. Only after I'd received the reply did I open the trap door again. Then I scooped up Bob, some paper, a couple pens, and a map of Chicago and climbed the step-ladder to rejoin my guests. No time to waste.

Someone had stirred the fire up and thrown on a couple logs while I was downstairs, and it was now blazing cheerily behind the grate. With all the extra bodies, the room was warming up faster than normal. Instead of sitting down, Murphy and Marcone's people were eyeing one another suspiciously. I recognised the belligerent thrust of Murphy's jaw and sighed internally.

"Okay, everybody gather 'round," I said, kicking the trapdoor shut.

I dumped map, pen, and papers down on the coffee table, then set down Bob a bit more carefully. His eye-lights winked back to life inside their sockets, curiosity apparently winning out over fatigue.
"Bob, meet everyone. Everyone, Bob."

"Harry, is that human?" Murphy asked.

"The skull, yes. But Bob's a spirit. Don't worry; whoever belonged to the skull was done using it several centuries ago."

Murphy did not look reassured.

"Wow, Harry. You throwing a party?" Bob asked.

Marcone, for one, was paying way too close attention to Bob. Hell's bells. I was definitely going to have to rework my wards.

"Yeah, for Mavra," I said. "So dish. You have my permission to leave the skull for long enough to show us."

Murphy and Hendricks both jumped a little when Bob came swirling out, like a tongue of flame had split off from the hearth and drifted out into thin air. Marcone's eyes widened momentarily, and Gard leaned in to whisper something in his ear.

Bob was his normal, which was to say hideously embarrassing and irreplaceably useful, self. The only good thing about that was that everybody was so busy focussing on him they didn't have the attention to spare for tearing into one another. Myself included. Once he got started on actual business and stopped trying to hit on everyone—including, god help me, Cujo—every other sentence, Marcone and Murphy made a good job of grilling him for intel, including a couple things I never would have thought to ask about.

I rode herd and kept my mouth shut for once, not liking to let on how much of this was news to me too. Look, I spent most of my time worrying about Red Court vampires. The ones who had put a price on my head, inflicted a fate worse than death on the man I loved, and were trying annihilate my kind on one hand and subjugate the rest of the human race on the other. Excuse me for having priorities.

My staff twitched beside me, causing me to jump and everyone else in the room to freeze. Tense much?

But crap, I'd lost track of time. I grabbed Bob, once again inside the shelter of the skull, and ducked into the bedroom, cramming him into my open sock drawer and slamming it shut.

"Sorry," I apologised sotto voce. "But I don't want to chance Eb seeing you."

"Couldn't you at least have picked the lingerie drawer if you had to stuff me somewhere like a mere inanimate object?" Bob whined.

"My lingerie isn't that exciting anyway," I consoled him. It was true.

Everyone was staring at me when I came back out. I squared my shoulders and walked past them to the door.

"Don't worry," I said lamely. "It's just Friar Tuck. Um, don't mention Bob."

Gard's expression was, believe it or not, even more disturbingly thoughtful than Marcone's. But then, she probably knew a lot more about the White Council and its rules. There was no doubt in my mind that Marcone would get filled in later, though. What a mess.
I dropped the wards again and opened the door. My grandfather was waiting outside, staff in hand.

Ebenezar McCoy wasn't a tall man, but he was as solid and strong as an old oak stump. The colour and sparsity of his remaining hair were his primary concessions to the passing of two centuries and change. He had a workman's hands and dark, snapping eyes. Except for the carvings on his staff, he might have been a farmer.

"Well, Hess, we going to stand here all day?"

"Sorry," I said. "Come on in, sir."

"Sir?" I heard Murphy choke.

"Yes, I was surprised, too," Marcone admitted. Jerk. He stood up and came around to shake Eb's hand while I locked up again. "It's a pleasure to meet you again, Wizard McCoy."

Eb grunted. "Marcone."

Eb and Marcone had met before, when we'd stumbled up to my old teacher's stoop at dawn, myself having just vanquished a faerie ne'er-do-well and then for an encore given birth in the middle of a snowy forest, and Marcone having invited himself along for the ride. Maddeningly, Eb hadn't seemed to understand my manifold and completely justified problems with Marcone, or my reluctance to let him help with the baby-minding—Maggie had been in her screaming phase. And while Marcone deserved sleeplessness and perpetual migraine, she was my child, and Marcone was trouble. He was not getting his hands on me, or any part of me, any more than Lasciel was.

"And this is Lieutenant Murphy. Murph, Ebenezar was my mentor." I trusted her to infer the good one, you know, the one I didn't turn to charcoal.

There was more hand-shaking. Eb said, "I've heard of you, girl."

"Good things," I mouthed over his shoulder to head off that dangerous expression on Murphy's face.

"Heard of you, too," Murphy said.

"Good things," I repeated aloud.

Eb looked between Murphy and Marcone, ignoring me. "How'd Hess get the two of you hitched up together?"

"Dire need," I said before anyone else could open their mouths. "Glad you could make it, sir."

"Maybe you can help us convince Nutsy and Trigger here we can do this without levelling the whole block," Murphy said, with a jerk of her chin at Marcone and Hendricks, who'd rolled up to loom over Marcone's shoulder.

"I was thinking more Skippy, Sis, and Tagalong myself," I said to Murphy.

"Focus, Robinhood."

Eb stumped over to the coffee table, where the map and Bob's sketches of the building were spread out. He noticed Gard, who was watching the by-play like a hawk—which is to say not missing much, and not amused.

"Who're you?" Eb asked bluntly.
"Ms Gard is a contractor of mine," Marcone filled in, pseudo-helpfully.

"I work for MonOc Securities. I of course know you by reputation, Wizard McCoy."

"I've run into your boss a time or two," Eb admitted. "I see you've got the talent, Hess. Got a plan?"

Why does no one ever believe I know what I'm doing? Well, okay, mostly I have no clue what I'm doing, but I'm fantastic at ad libbing. Otherwise I'd have been dead years ago, see. Well, not killing me was the least the world could do in exchange for getting me into these insane situations in the first place.

Everybody else seemed very insistent on the point of having a plan, though, so what's a girl to do? It mostly seemed like common sense to me. The other problem I had with plans was that I was almost always working from a position of informational disadvantage, on top of all my other disadvantages, and flexibility was way more important. Also, it seemed like most plans got blown to hell pretty quickly.

In my defence, it turned out I was right.

— — —

My hand. Stars and stones, my hand. Lasciel's shadow had come awake in my head with a howl. He, or she, or whatever the fallen angel was deciding to be this week, didn't have much choice but to help me hold off the pain and shock at that point. I was a hell of a lot more stable walking out of there than I by rights ought to have been.

The vampires were dead. Re-dead. Whatever. Mavra was dead. We'd saved a half-dozen kids and gotten out alive. Hoo-ray.

Eb and Hendricks were waiting for us outside, Hendricks having been left to keep a lookout for Eb while he tried to block Mavra's magic. Both of them stared at the blackened ruin of my hand.

"Miss Dresden needs medical attention at once," Marcone barked.

Hendricks snapped into action immediately, taking a few prudent steps away from all the wizards before pulling out his phone. I dug in my heels.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Marcone." Hand myself over to Marcone, injured and vulnerable? I might as well have let Mavra's goons barbecue me.

"Don't be ridiculous; you need to see a doctor."

Eb was watching the two of us. I could tell by his face that he agreed with Marcone about the medical treatment and me being a pig-headed idiot—or did he not say that part out loud?—but he was holding off throwing his weight in on either side.

"You get the kids to...to Saint Mary of the Angels, I guess. Father Forthill will know what to do. I can look after myself. Our business is done. See you in the obits." I bared my teeth and looked the fucker straight in the eye.

"Don't be a stubborn fool." Aha, I knew that was in here somewhere. "If you're worried about disrupting the hospital, there are other alternatives. Can you not for once take the sensible option?"

"She said she's not going with you," Murphy pitched in on my behalf, bless her. Then she turned to me, dropping Marcone from her attention like a hot brick. Yowch. "Are you sure you want to leave the kids with him?"
"Yeah," I said wearily.

"Harry—" Marcone started again.

"Leave it, boy." Eb was taking his cues from Murphy, apparently.

Marcone's eyes flashed, but he controlled himself. "Perhaps she will be more willing to listen to you. If you will excuse me, I have certain arrangements to make."

Marcone inclined his head politely to the three of us and turned on his heel. It looked odd in the street clothes. I allowed myself to be steered into Eb's ancient truck. Lasciel was talking to me again, and either the shock was catching up with me or he was pushing me towards unconsciousness. Someone eased my staff from my fingers. I don't remember anything else, except for the vague sensation of motion. The next clear memory I have is of the generically classic garden/temple/gazebo setup with marble benches and fluted columns where I usually encountered Lasciel.

Lasciel was a man today, tall but not quite as tall as me, with honey brown hair. He was skinny enough that it made his movements look a little awkward, even though they weren't especially. Mostly, he wore a toga, I guess because my subconscious really is that cliché. Sometimes he wore reading glasses and sports jackets with jeans. Sometimes he was an athletic woman with appealing curves and golden hair. I guess it depended on what flavour of temptation he thought would get him the farthest on any given day. Mostly he was the gangly fellow with the shy face, though.

I had spent the better part of two years trying to bleach Lasciel out of my brain. To no avail, alas, except for developing a relationship with some of the small-time practitioners in Chicago. I'd tried what seemed like dozens of purification rituals and spiritual cleansings. Unwelcome guest aside, my soul had never looked better.

"I don't have time for this nonsense," I said, crossing my arms under my breasts.

My whole arms. I uncrossed them quickly and glared at Lasciel.

Lasciel's smile was endearingly crooked. "Time is an illusion here. Actually, it's an illusion everywhere else, too. You need rest, dear hostess."

"Then why are you bothering me?" I asked pointedly.

"I want what I have always wanted: to help you."

I made a rude sound. "Try again. What you want is my immortal soul. I'm kind of attached, thanks all the same."

"As you are attached to your arm?"

My jaw clamped shut. Lasciel closed the distance between us and cradled my left hand in both off his.

"Take up the coin," he urged. "You would not call me to you in battle, but I beg you do so now. I can heal even this injury, if you will but let me. You can be whole again."


Lasciel let my hand fall, confusion furrowing his brow. "I do not understand your resistance, dear hostess."
"Think about it," I advised, rather snippishly. "I'm going to wake up now."

"You need rest," Lasciel argued.

"I need to stop a curse-happy sorcerer," I disagreed.

"You have already pushed yourself too far, dear hostess. I will not let you." Lasciel's expression was hard.

"Won't let?"

Lasciel didn't waver. "You are weary; I can hold you in unconsciousness until you no longer endanger yourself."

"Like hell," I said and made the effort of will necessary to waking from a dream.

Nothing happened.

"Dammit," I growled. "I've been tolerant so far—"

One of Lasciel's eyebrows shot up in irony. "You have tried to excise me any way you could."

"—but if you push your luck, you're going to spend the next three hundred and fifty years gagged in a back corner of my brain," I bullied on. "You should know by now that my subconscious can be a real bitch: I wouldn't expect to enjoy my stay if I were you."

"I have endured worse," Lasciel said. He crossed his arms. "But if you die foolishly, this part of me dies with you, and my true self will remain imprisoned in the vaults of the church, perhaps forever."

I clamped down abruptly on the anger that had been mounting into a stream of shouted abuse, speaking of harpies. My lips stretched into a something that might loosely have been described as a grin and when I spoke, it was with almost saccharine amiability. "Haven't you been paying attention, sweetheart? Whoever was helping Trixie with that ritual has got to be targeting me next. Now, tell me again how time is an illusion and you're going to keep me under indefinitely."

"Then call the coin," he urged. "You do not know how close you came to death this morning. Call the coin and you may yet survive this night."

"Not gonna happen."

"You would rather die?" Lasciel exclaimed. "I refuse to believe it; I have seen how you fight for survival."

"Try me."

Lasciel regarded me, his expression grown shrewd. "I might. We are safe inside your wards which, if I am not mistaken, sheltered you from the Judas Curse."

"Which would have nailed me as soon as I stepped outside if it weren't for Shiro." I stood a little straighter. "And those were my emergency wards. Which aren't running. And don't last forever anyway."

Lasciel was starting to look worried. It was, probably deliberately, an adorable expression on him. I stared him down. Eventually, his eyes settled on mine.

"Is there nothing I can do?" His concern was even more touching. I stomped on my treacherous girl-
"So far, I've got a lot of suspicions and zero facts. I need to talk with Murphy."

Lasciel took my deceptively whole-looking left hand again and turned it over, bending to press a kiss to the palm. I jerked it away, startled.

Lasciel gave me a sad, crooked smile. "As you will, dear hostess."

I opened my eyes. It was dark, but a familiar darkness, that of my bedroom ceiling, stirred by the slow turning and soft glow of Maggie's magical mobile. Gingerly, I got to my feet and stumbled from my bed to the door in much my usual fashion. There wasn't a lot of getting lost between the two.

"Murph," I said when I found her sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee in hand. "Talk to me about what your people found on Genosa."

At first, all Murphy wanted to do was mother hen me, but I managed to convince her I was good to talk shop. She insisted on fetching me coffee and painkillers; I didn't stop her. I'm pretty good at ignoring pain, but this was an all-new threshold. I could tell, not by pain edging through the scarily effective mental discipline Lasciel had coughed up, but the completeness of the lack of any sensation from the bandaged lump on my left side. I was glad they'd wrapped it up; I didn't think I could really deal with it right now.

I had been out for almost a whole eight hours. Ebenezar was apparently out somewhere putting together something of his own to help my hand. Take that, you. While she was stirring the requisite quarter-cup of sugar into my mug of the nectar of life, Murphy told me she'd called Michael and let him know the un-dead were re-dead but I was hurt, and could they hold onto Maggie for the night? This suited me, as I was no more ready to deal with all that kindness and support than I was to deal with the ruin of my hand. Also, I had a curse to not die from. Like I'd told Lasciel, I suspected a number of things about Arturo's case and who was pulling off the malocchio, but I kept getting ahead of my facts. Old Nick Christian would have had a thing or two to say about that.

I was pretty certain I was dealing with a ritual curse, and that it was being directed at the future Mrs Genosa Number Four. Ex-Mrs-Genosa Number Three was definitely in on it, but she obviously wasn't doing it alone. Exes One and Two? Three is the usual number: with three people working together, you can pull off just about any ritual, even if you're just copying out of a book you found in someone's attic. Judging by the way the curse had hit this morning, at least one of them knew what she was doing, though. And at least one person had died in that curse, I'd bet. Just not at Genosa's studio.

I was getting some pretty strong indicators of Raith involvement, too, what with Lara swanning up and down the set in lacy undergarments and our mutual brother pulling me in on a favour. With an apparently ongoing sidegame of indirect filicide between him and Papa Raith. And I thought my side of the family had problems.

According to Murphy's intelligence, my wild-ass guessing had been right on the first count: the first two victims had died at thirteen minutes before noon, which fit the timing of the last two mornings' curses, and yesterday night's attempt on Inari could well have taken place at thirteen minutes to midnight—I hadn't been looking at my watch. The selection—bracketing—of targets I'd had from Trixie's own botox-inflated lips, but made a lot more sense once Murphy confirmed that Arturo had in fact applied for a fourth marriage licence for next week, and that there was no pre-nup attached. I guess the ex-wives had gotten nervous about what would happen to their trust fund if Arturo kicked the bucket.
Murphy continued her report, and I listened with half an ear while I thought. Someone had to have told the Gold-Diggers of 2004 their stake was in danger. Someone had to have given them the ritual. I had no concrete evidence of who that someone was, but the White Court was involved and the only other supernatural player kicking up a fuss in the last few days had been Mavra. I didn't really think this was Mavra's bag, although she did have a record for inter-Court shenanigans. But why would the White Court want the woman Arturo was marrying dead?

No. The woman Arturo was *in love with*.

Someone was also buying up adult film independents, quietly building a monopoly. The White Court was supposed to be very good at quiet. And Arturo, in love again, had just struck out on his own.

Murphy was in the middle of asking me why the hell I'd let myself get dragged into this mess in the first place when Eb got back. A thought struck me. Did Eb know about Thomas? For that matter, did Thomas know about Eb? Right now, Murphy knew about neither.

And then the phone rang. It never rains but it pours.

"Hello?"

"Harry! Oh my god, you have to help. That Raith guy just got kidnapped or something, Inari's really freaking out."

My heart rate went from ninety to two hundred between one end of that sentence and the other. "Molly, calm down. You're washing out the line. Now, what happened?"

"He was on the other side of the restaurant and some creepy dude in a suit came up behind him. Inari says it was one of their dad's guys, and after they left, we found his phone on the floor. Harry," Molly said in a voice so small the static almost drowned it out, "I think he had a gun."

Slowly, painfully, my brain caught up with the conversation. "Wait, where are you? What are you doing out?"

"Inari says the studio got fried this morning, so once everyone got patched up, they all went out to celebrate, or I guess maybe drown their sorrows." I winced guiltily. "I got a text from Inari asking if I wanted to come along. Since Lieutenant Murphy said it was all clear, I said yes. But then this happened, and you said before you were working for Thomas or whatever, so I thought I should call and tell you. I was going to try Lieutenant Murphy if you didn't pick up. And then dad."

I felt keenly the inability to both hold my phone and pinch the bridge of my nose at the same time. It would at least block out the riveted stares both Murphy and Eb were directing my way. Molly had even less instinct for self-preservation than I did. How was that possible?

"You did the right thing. Uh, is Inari's sister Lara there?"

"Y-yeah. You want me to put her on?"

"Not really," I said.

Molly choked on a giggle-like sound. Still a bit close to hysteria, but I'd take what I could get. "Gimme a sec."

"Hello, Harry." Lara Raith sounded like a phone-sex hotline, which was plain unfair. Phone sex operators and those sultry radio announcers are supposed to be five foot two and two hundred fifty pounds, because you're just not supposed to have it all in one package.
"Lara Raith," I enunciated for the benefit of my other listeners. "Your father provided Arturo's ex-wives with a ritual entropy curse, and they've been killing the women around him, hoping they'll hit Maid Marion. Then the Phony King of England can get Robinhood in hand and put the squeeze to the good people of Nottingham."

Murphy buried her face in her hands.

"Excuse me?" Lara said.

"Speaking of hangings, where's Thomas?"

"You're talking nonsense." There was a clipped edge of irritation in Lara's voice.

"I may have overextended the metaphor," I admitted. "But I'm talking the straightest deal you're going to get all year. I want Thomas, alive; and I'll hand you all the White Court in exchange."

There was a stunned silence all around.

"I would be very interested to hear how you planned to do that," Lara said.

"I'm going to take your father out."

I lost Lara's reply because Eb wrapped his fist around the receiver end and jerked it down.

"Not with magic you're not."

I blinked at him. "First Law doesn't usually apply to vampires."

Ebenezar grimaced. He looked up, searching my face for...something. He'd taken my soul's measure years before, when I was an angry girl. Well, I was an angry wizard now, with family on the line.

"It's got nothing to do with that." Eb spoke low and fast. "He's protected, by something big. Magic slides off him like water off a duck. I've gone up against him three times; your mother spent her death curse on him. He's still here."

I froze. There seemed to be a high-pitched ringing in my ears. "I thought my mother," your daughter, "died in childbirth," I hissed.

"She did. As the result of a ritual entropy curse."

When I tugged the phone away and put it back to my ear, I pulled no harder than I needed to. The bakelite creaked in my grip.

"That's the deal. If you don't like it, think about who's going to be in charge afterwards if you don't take it." I had no idea who it was going to be, but it was a pretty safe bet that as long as the answer was not Lara, Lara wouldn't be a fan. Maybe Thomas wanted the gig.

"If father has decided to take action on the matter in question, I am hardly capable of stopping him."

Translation: Papa Raith can eat me for breakfast, with Thomas thrown in like hashbrowns. Inari and Molly must still have been right there. Mustn't shock the kiddies.

"Just get me to Thomas; I'll take care of the rest."

"As simply as that?"
"There's usually some manner of commotion and things flying about," I admitted genteelly. "You might want to hold onto your hat."

"And a firsthand view would be quite the feather in it," Lara mused.

"Plus it gives you the opportunity to stab me in the back if things go south," I said drily.

"Of course. You understand me rather well." Lara sounded more pleased than ashamed.

"Yeah, I'm going to have to take a bath when all this is over."

"You try my patience." Lara no longer sounded pleased. Point to me. Murphy kicked me in the ankle. Ow, I mouthed at her, hastily putting my foot back down before I fell over.

"I'm just getting warmed up. I also want you to back off Inari. Tell her the truth and then respect her decision. If nothing else, it's one less player to keep tabs on."

"True," Lara said very neutrally. "If I did not know it was impossible, I would say my brother had you in thrall."

"Ew." I shuddered. "Emphatically no."

"Then why?"

"Tit for tat. Thomas has helped me out in the past; it's the way you play the game."

A beat, where I could hear the sounds of a busy restaurant in the background. "Yes. It is the way I play the game. But not, I think, the way you do."

Damn clever opponents. I deliberately didn't look at Eb or Murphy, who had been watching our three-way show intently. If it were just her, I wouldn't have worried; but whatever else Eb was to me, he was still a wizard of the White Council. Which was at war with all vampires, great and small.

"Ask yourself what else Thomas had to do with wizards." This is why I don't do subtlety more often: I suck at it.


"Enough?" I asked.

"Almost. You still have not told me how you intend to accomplish this remarkable feat."

A beatific grin stretched my face. "I hardly need to do anything at all. And neither do you. What do you say?"

"I am not currently in possession of the information you seek." Shades of Marcone, great.

"You can get it." Or else she wouldn't have opened her mouth. "What I just gave you is worth at least that much on its own."

"Very well. In fact, I believe I can. Perhaps it was fate."

I clamped my jaw on the impulse to point out I would just as soon have her as a corpse as an ally. "How much time do you need?" I asked instead. Much more productive. Gold star, Harry. And once I ended this conversation, I could kick Eb in the nuts for being such a closed-mouthed sonuvabitch.
"Half an hour, maybe a little more. Meet me at my family's home north of town."

"It's a date," I said. "Pass me back to Molly?"

"Harry?" Molly asked. "What's going on? Are you guys going to find Inari's brother?"

"That's the plan. Listen, I want you to go home now."

"But—" Molly protested.

"Ah! No buts, grasshopper. I am not explaining to your parents how I let you get yourself eaten by a nest of soul-sucking vampires. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah." She hung up.

I glowered dubiously at the receiver. "That's it: Maggie is never allowed to become a teenager."

"Apprentice trouble, Hess?" Eb asked mildly.

"You are about to have apprentice trouble like you won't even believe, you secretive old—goddammit, sir, don't you laugh at me!"

Eb tamped the corners of his mouth down and cleared his throat, but his eyes were still twinkling. "Sorry, sorry. But—you ain't seen nothing yet."

I maintained my scowl; it was an uphill battle, but I fought for it valiantly. I had my pride, after all.

"You want to fill us in, Harry?" Murphy interrupted.
Chapter 4

The Blue Beetle was still in CPD HQ's parking lot, so we were on Murphy's bike with my staff sticking way up out of a shotgun holster when we started down Château Raith's wooded drive. We turned in just behind a white sports car that looked so modern I was surprised my mere presence on the same road hadn't killed it already. The driver was apparently suicidal.

Murphy skidded to a stop with what in a fairer world would have been a spray of gravel. Alas for melodrama, the circular driveway leading up to Château Raith was paved in concrete. I regarded the ostentatious façade, buffered by a rose garden, all the colour leached out of the sanguinary scarlet blooms by the night, with disfavour. The waist-high gargoyles bracketing the path up to the front door didn't add a lot on the way of welcoming ambience either.

We had barely enough time to exchange a wary look before Lara Raith unfolded herself from the driver's side of the white car. For people who prided themselves on a light touch, that was kind of literal. I was surprised the roses weren't white, too. Paint the roses red!

"Good evening, wizard," Lara said.

She wearing almost more clothes than I'd ever seen on her, a long, full skirt and a white long-sleeved blouse with embroidered roses that picked up the colour of the skirt like sprays of blood. Her high-heeled boots didn't quite put her eye-to-eye with me.


"While you seem to be taking fashion tips from the Shadow."

I dropped my bright red loaner-helmet for the perfectly legitimate purpose of retrieving my staff. My hair was coming out of the braid I'd put it in this morning, but there wasn't anything I could do about it now. "As a matter of fact, I do know what darkness lurks in the hearts of men. Or whatever."

The other occupants of the car got out, evidently having had to fight their way out of the back seat. There were two of them, and the first zipped around to help the second. A combination of ducking and keeping her face to the gleaming paint job did nothing to prevent me from recognising my wayward apprentice.

"Molly. Fancy meeting you here."

Inari, now out of the car and standing close by for moral support, nodded. Molly didn't quite have the trick of looking at people without looking them in the eye yet; Inari didn't even try. Fair skin like that really showed a blush, although it was cut off by the sobering black fabric of a sling. Molly's brow wrinkled as she looked from me to Inari and back again.

"I think you overshot a little. We're going to have a little talk about how to tell when Aunt Harry is using humourous exaggeration and when she isn't," I said, which was as close as I could get to saying congratulations, you've just made yourself a hostage in a White Court stronghold under the circumstances.
"Don't blame her," Inari burst out, almost meeting my eye. "I asked her if she'd help us."

"I didn't want to leave you alone," Molly disagreed.

"And Thomas is in trouble, isn't he?" Inari directed this to Lara. "If he's in trouble, I want to help."

"Then hurry, sweetling. I'll deal with Miss Dresden."

"Come on," Molly agreed, linking their arms and drawing her away towards the house. She cast an uncertain look back over her shoulder at me, then disappeared inside.

I rounded on Lara before she could get me with my dignity down. "What are they doing in there anyway?"

"You'll see soon enough, wizard," Lara said with a little too much equanimity for my comfort.

She opened the trunk of her thematically pale car and took out a rapier. I wondered if she usually kept a sword in the trunk, or if—stars and stones, was it only last night?—had made her paranoid. I was wearing my own swordstick, although not for sword-fighting, partially as a result of the same fracas, during which my blasting rod had been broken. I didn't use it a lot because I'm only slightly better at earth-magic than fencing.

Lara wrapped her waist in a coordinating carmine sash and slipped the sheathed rapier through it. Murphy raised an eyebrow.

"If she can fence in those boots, she's really not human," Murphy said.

Lara smirked. "And who would you be?"

"Lieutenant Karrin Murphy, Chicago PD."

Lara froze. She recovered herself a second later, but she had definitely not been expecting that. Generally speaking, calling in mortal authorities was a big no-no, which was part of why I'd made Murphy promise not bring down the wolves on my cases unless I gave her the go-ahead.

"In her off-duty persona, she hunts vampires," I offered to, you know, decrease the tension. "You didn't think I was going to show up without any backup, did you?"

"You may not be quite as foolish as I gave you credit for, but I think I will still reserve judgement."

"Then let's get judging. Snap-snap. Off with their heads!" I suggested, having officially switched Disney movies.

Lara politely decided to ignore that last outburst. "All in due course. I told you I would have to find out where my father has taken dear Thomas. Ah." Lara turned to stare at the side of the building about five seconds before anything rounded the corner. Murphy's hand drifted down next to her gun and I shook out my shield bracelet, somewhat the worse for wear. But Lara didn't break for cover. Movement resolved itself into Inari and Molly returning. Molly was pushing a wheelchair; presumably, there was some sort of delivery ramp around back. A figure huddled in the chair, long silver hair falling over its face in a curtain; but I recognised the purple and blue streaks in it with a shock.

"I thought she was dead." So had Thomas, the last time I talked to him. He'd been so weakened from the throw-down with Mavra's hit-squad and Lara shooting him and all that that the only way for him to survive had been to feed on someone. Lara had told me that he was beyond control, that
whomever he fed upon would die. And they'd sent him Justine.

"Who is she?" asked Murphy.

"Thomas'...lover," Lara said. Yes, she had been the one to pass along that message. I wondered if it was poisoning the well. Maybe only if Thomas loved her back. I wondered if he did.

"Do you think she can find him?" I asked.

Lara regarded the approaching trio calmly. "If there's enough of her left. He took almost everything; he was consumed by his Hunger, and she by him. It should not have been possible for him to tear himself away."

"You didn't tell him, did you?" I accused.

Lara's sensuous lips pursed into a grim line. "It would do no good. See, I too retain some tender sentiments. I would shield my brother from the harsh reality of his actions."

I snorted. "At least until you want something from him."

"But," Murphy said, still confused, "didn't he save her life?"

"She still breathes; I am not sure I would call that life."

I had to admit Justine didn't look good. There had always been a palpable vitality about her, beyond her extraordinary beauty. On the one occasion I had encountered her after a separation from Thomas' narcotic presence, she'd been downright volatile. The night before, she'd blackmailed me into hauling Thomas' ass out of the fire—although none of us had anticipated it being so, er, literal, and in the event I had been the haulee and not the hauler.

Now she looked small, almost insubstantial, like she was in the process of evaporating. Her face was slack and deeply tired. I found no hint of recognition, or even awareness, in her eyes.

"But tell me, how did you know how I intended to use her?" Lara asked me, sheering once more off dangerous topics as our apprentices crossed back into hearing range.

"Logic," I admitted. "At least partially. But I also remembered that when Bianca grabbed her a few years back, Thomas knew where she was. Makes sense that it'd work both ways."

"It is one of the reasons we do not usually keep anyone for so long," Lara concurred. Kind of ominously, I thought, or maybe that was just in my head.

I gave Molly a speaking look, which she elected not to notice. Dammit, what had happened to hanging on Cool Aunt Harry's every word? If I wasn't going to get hero worship and implicit obedience, this master gig was going to be rough. Master? Mistress? I decided that since wizard was a unisex term, master could be too. Later, Harry.

I hunkered down in front of Justine—or at least, I started to. Thor's hammer slammed into my shoulder and I went over like a ninepin, bouncing my head off the concrete.

When my vision cleared, I caught flashes of motion out of the corner of my eye, but there was no sign of Justine, Molly, or Inari. I caught a glimpse of the shooter on the front porch, one of Lord Raith's bodyguards—I rated them just below Nicodemus' goons on the creep-o-meter, what with coming in matched sets and the vacant hostility, but losing points for still having their tongues.
Prudently, I rolled onto my stomach, putting one of the gargoyles between me and the guy with the shotgun. Lara had ducked behind her car; good idea, since both barrels were tracking her. I didn't see Murphy until I heard her gun go off.

Someone gasped and the bodyguard jerked, his shot going wild and clipping the car. Just to be thorough, Murphy kept shooting until he fell over. The air off to one side of me rippled, then with the suddenness of a soap bubble popping, Molly and Inari were standing there, Justine in the wheelchair between them.

I noticed the blood dripping onto the concrete as I pushed myself to my feet. My eyes swept up to Molly's face, which was pale and twisting with pain. Shit.

"Molly! Where are you hit?"

"J-just grazed, I think," Molly stammered.

She touched her arm; her fingers came away bloody. Inari's eyes went wide. "Are you all right?"

I glanced over my shoulder at Murphy. All the colour drained from her face as she realised the girls were almost directly in her line of fire. "I didn't see them."

"Veil," I told her. "Kid's got talent."

That got a flash of a smile from Molly. She was right: it was just a graze.

"Less sense than god gave little green apples," I continued, "but talent."

"Remind you of anyone you know?" Molly's voice wavered a little.

"Hell's bells, I hope not," I said firmly.

"Harry," Murphy said quietly. My head snapped up, and I saw Lara talking into a cellphone. Crap.

"Mols, we need to get you out of here. Maybe you can—shit." I rubbed my forehead, thinking furiously.

"Can you ride a motorcycle?" Murphy asked.

"She barely has her driver's licence," I told her at the same time as Molly said, "Yeah, sure."

I looked at Molly helplessly. She shrugged, then hissed. "It's another one of those things you don't want me to tell you about."

"Fine. Get going. Go home this time; I mean it."

"Yes, Aunt Harry," Molly said in a—heh—mollifyingly chastened tone. She reached for Inari, who latched onto her hand with a white-knuckled grip. "Come on; let's blow this pop stand."

Murphy passed Molly the keys. Distracted, Lara noticed what was happening too slowly to stop it. I stepped in front of her, buying the girls enough time to get away. I wasn't sure how fast she could run, but as long as I was in her face, I was probably going to take priority over even a perceived threat to everybody's darling girl. Oh, goody.

"I trust you were going to explain that," Lara said.

"She'll be safe with Molly. Her house is probably one of the safest places in Chicago, especially if
you're talking vampires."

"Your apprentice, I presume. Clever of you to plant her on me; and now you also have a hostage."

I rolled my eyes. "Molly's about as ready to be in the line of fire as Inari is. She wasn't supposed to get anywhere near this mess."

"Perhaps." Lara looked past me again towards something I couldn't see. "In any event, we have run out of time. My father's guards will deliver you to him; I will take care of Justine."

"That wasn't the deal."

"The deal was that I would find Thomas, and you would neutralise my father. For your sake, I hope you weren't bluffing." Lara stepped around me, kicking something out of her way and under her car. "Kneel, and place your hands on your head."

I turned and saw more Doublemint guards closing in on us, looking like a Lady Gaga show at an NRA convention. With a click, Murphy finished reloading her gun. She looked at me, waiting for my cue.

"Put your gun away, Murph. They're playing right into our hands."

There weren't actually that many Doublemint guards, maybe four pairs total including the dead guy. Once we'd been handcuffed, they shoved us into the back seat of a car and two of them piled into the front. I heard Murphy mutter something that sounded like Christ, Harry, tell Jesus to give back the wheel.

They took us down a gravel road, deeper into the sculpted, tree-dotted grounds. Lord Raith was waiting for us by a modest two-storey house—probably where they kept their dogs or hamsters or whatever it was sophisticated rich folks had. Peacocks? Tonight, Raith was dressed in basic black, the colour of choice for burglars, emo poets, dark rituals, and wizards with a tendency to accumulate horrific stains. The look of pure delight on his face when Murphy and I were hauled out of the car was sickening.

"Harriet." Raith's mouth caressed the word. I barely kept from launching myself at his throat. Harriet. Seriously. As if I didn't already have enough reasons to hate the guy. "Dear Harriet; what a wonderful surprise. You look so much like your mother."

"Don't you talk about my mother," I snapped.

"I'm sorry, did I strike a nerve?" Raith circled me, the effect not made nearly awkward enough by the guard holding my cuffed hands behind my back just like his female counterpart was doing with the shorter Murphy. Raith put a hand on the man's shoulder and leaned up to whisper in my ear.

"Don't you want to know how she screamed and begged to be taken? Seeing you brings it all back. Your mother was wild, Harriet, the most abandoned whore I'd had in decades. I fed well on her, oh, yes. She could never give enough." He chuckled, a throaty, sexy sound. "You yearn for it, too—a master's hand. Such a shame I must kill you so quickly."

I'd gone stiff as a board as soon as Raith started talking, locked between fury and animal arousal. The urge seized me to turn and kiss him, sexual need tangled inextricably with a desire to burn his poisonous tongue out. With an effort of will, I ignored both.

"But you're going to have to," I said, staring steadfastly straight ahead. "Since you couldn't manage
the rest of it anyway."

Raith seized me by the neck, only to let go almost immediately with a sharp hiss. It was my turn to smile.

"Ah, ah. Watch your fingers," I told him.

"You are protected," he accused. Well, well; it looked like Lara wasn't telling dear old dad everything. That was the best news I'd had all day. Wasn't that depressing?

"And so are you. Which really makes me wonder. I mean, you're supposed to be this big noise, but that's all I hear. Noise. Your buddies the Reds must be all over you to throw in on their side of the war. Wizards have tried to kill you before; frankly, I'm kind of insulted you're not interested in killing us back. And I mean there's being indirect and then there's letting an overbred lapdog like Trixie Vixen yap at you. You must really be losing your touch."

Raith looked like he was having some tongue-burning fantasies of his own. I licked my lips and pressed on before he relocated his vocal chords.

"You know what I think? I think someone slipped saltpeter in your coffee. When mom threw her death-curse at you, she knew where to aim." I felt my lips curl upwards. "I'll admit, it was a low blow."

"I would not say such things if I were were you." Raith was so furious he'd forgotten to look sexy.

"And when I say you are a coward, that is only because you are the slimiest weakling ever to crawl the earth!" I crowed.

Raith punched me in the stomach, where my skin was covered and my duster, with all its protective charms, was hanging open. I guess he wasn't a big Princess Bride fan.

I'd have thrown up, except I hadn't eaten anything since the last time I threw up. The guard kept hold of my cuffed hands while I doubled over trying to catch my breath, and my abused shoulders, which remembered being shot at various times, added their own protests to those of my diaphragm, stomach, and ribs.

"If she speaks again, kill the spare."

At some signal I didn't see, I was dragged upright and pushed along through a stretch of trees to a cave. Yeah, I was pretty sure those ribs were cracked. I tried not to breathe too deeply or stumble too much.

When we reached it, the cave turned out not to be so much a cave as a tunnel. There was light filtering out from somewhere up ahead. I tried to lag behind, but Mr Doublemint wasn't having any, and the only sign I could get of Murphy was the sound of her footsteps. Well, if Raith forgot about her, so much the better.

We came at length to a large space which, I decided, was also not a cave. Caves don't have floor cushions and mood lighting. Well, in my experience they have more mood lack-of-lighting, if you see what I mean. Of course, the mood in question was generally black magic. I'd categorise what Raith had going as more Mid-East sybarite. There was—I kid you not—a throne at one end of the room, predictably at the highest point of the sloping floor, with a piddly little stool on one side and a pit on the other. Again, very subtle.

Raith paused a moment and looked from me to Murphy to a spot across the underground hall. It took
me a second to see past the silk throw pillows and decipher the set-up. What I was seeing wasn't Thomas lounging naked on the floor with a woman kneeling next to him: it was Thomas tied down inside a thaumaturgical triangle (paint-by-numbers magic, I tell you) inside a larger circle with Madge no-longer-Genosa burning incense and preparing to sacrifice him in order to kill me.

I took note of the layout while Raith was instructing Ms Doublemint to chain Murphy to the wall. Murphy didn't look happy, and I didn't blame her. I also didn't speak: these goons were seriously thrallled up and Raith had taken the safety off.

"There should be just enough time," Raith murmured. "Bring her," he added a little more loudly. "There's been a change in plans."

Bring me where? The Doublemints each took one of my shoulders and frog-marched me in the direction of the ritual set-up. Okay, that was more or less where I needed to go, but why were they taking me there? I got a good look at Madge on the way over; she was working the ancient priestess look—white robe, red trim. Sexy, but she was already starting on the crazy-eyes.

I also got a good look at Thomas. And, first of all, I really never needed to see my brother naked. But naked and beat up was just not okay on an entirely different level. I still had my force ring and my shield bracelet—everything except my staff and blasting rod, actually. My sword cane was even still hanging from my gun belt. The Doublemints hadn't even bothered to frisk us. But the ring and the bracelet were the things I could use without my hands free. Pointing the ring in the right direction with my hands cuffed might have been awkward, but not impossible.

"Aren't we missing someone?" I asked.

"If you meant that twittering idiot Lucille, I sacrificed her for the curse this morning," Madge said, with all the emotion of somebody discussing recipes for clam chowder.

"She had the poor taste to target my daughter when she was guiding the spell last night," Raith expanded. "All the way down please."

"Hey!" My legs were suddenly kicked out from under me. I fell to my knees, then had my face forcibly introduced to the smooth but cold and, oh yes, hard stone floor. A foot planted itself between my shoulder blades; it didn't have to press very hard to leapfrog what my ribs were comfortable with.

"I very nearly felt obligated to you for saving her, Harriet," Raith's voice continued from directly above me. Oh, the symbolism. I wondered if someone was taking pictures. "But now that you've delivered yourself so neatly into my hands, I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

There were metallic clinks and clicking noises, accompanied by muffled sounds of protest. I was starting to get a bad feeling about this, like maybe I'd really bitten off more than I could chew, this time.

"You could start by moving your foot," I suggested.

"Oh, and don't forget to gag her," Raith ordered. "I only find insolence amusing when I will have the leisure of breaking the user of it."

I was definitely getting a bad feeling about this. The Doublemints paused in my limited field of vision while Madge removed something from Thomas' mouth. One of them had him by the shoulders while the other was holding his feet in one hand and a gun up against the family jewels with the other. Guys and their junk. Although to be fair I suppose if someone stuck a gun up my
crotch I'd be inclined to pay attention, too.

Thomas was twitching minutely, like he was trying to hold still and couldn't. It dawned on me that his eyes were rolling in pain and not panic. One of the Double-mints shifted his grip and I saw a weal rise on Thomas' pale skin. They were burning him. True love. Man, these guys were rising on the creep-o-meter all the time.

"It's okay, Thomas," I called to him, my diction slightly impaired by the way my face was smushed into the, I say again, very hard stone floor. They couldn't have pinned me on some of those cushions? Or even a rug? "I'm here to rescue you."

Thomas blinked at me, breathing shallowly. "Oh, is that what that looks like?"

I glared at him.

"Usually," Murphy said. I could not move enough to glare at Murphy.

There was more out-of-sight clanking, and then I was being grabbed some more. My ribs were somewhat grateful, but my shoulders objected to being yanked around again. Madge handed Mr Doublemint a ball gag.

"You have got to be—angkf! Hnnf!" The thing was still wet. Yuck-o.

I started struggling, but the Doublemints just picked me up like they had Thomas, one on each end, and shackled me inside the triangle. First my feet, then my right hand, then my left. They weren't especially careful with my left hand, but that was okay; the pain on that side all stopped at my elbow.

About this time somebody noticed I was armed and took away my swordstick and gun belt. Dammit, I was getting tired of replacing guns. That left me stretched out, half-spread-eagled with a big rock sticking into the middle of my back preventing me from moving and, because of the ribs, from breathing as well.

Lord Raith looked down at me, his expression viciously triumphant. "Madge, dear," he said, "your new target is Margaret Dresden."

My brain whited out. That son of a bitch. That son of a bitch. I was going de-ball him literally and shove his gonads down his throat. I must have triggered my force ring at him, because a bunch of pillows flew across the room; but Raith just stood there, watching me with hungry eyes. Impervious. Not for fucking long, goddamn you.

Raith hitched his trousers up and crouched just outside the circle. I felt a hum in the air around me as Madge closed the thaumaturgical triangle I was now inside. Next was the outer circle, for focus. She lit some candles and started to chant near my head.

"I was going to sacrifice Thomas to kill you, Harriet," Raith said with exaggerated nonchalance, "and track down the child later, just to be sure. But this is more efficient. Not to mention poetic, don't you think? Using the death of the mother to kill the child. Thomas, well—he was responsible for all the deaths. He intended to elope with that harlot Trixie, abandoning his family to live on Genosa's money. And if he flees in disgrace instead, well. We may never see him again."

I expressed my feelings about this scenario using manual, non-verbal communication.

Raith smiled at me almost fondly. "Your mother's binding will die with her blood; less than one score years and ten—the blinking of an eye to such a being as myself. A mere momentary inconvenience. And my revenge will be so complete."
"What's going on?" Thomas asked the room at large.

Murphy enlightened him. "Raith killed Harry's mom. She was a wizard and put some kind of curse on Raith. It did something to his power, or possibly to his dick; it was unclear."

"Our," Thomas corrected her, his voice surprisingly hard.

"What?"

"Our mother." He laughed blackly, out of nowhere. It was an unreassuring sound. I rolled my aching head, but Madge's robe-draped curves blocked him from my sight. "But what could she have—? I wonder. Oh, that's too good."

"God, you two are related," Murphy complained.

"Sorry, but. Father's power is his dick. It's how we feed. Sex."

"And your mom cut him off? But wait," Murphy sounded confused. "Doesn't that mean he's been running on fumes for thirty years?"

Raith cocked his head to listen to this conversation. "Excuse me, but this will never do."

"Our demons make little demand of us so long as we don't call on them. We hunger, but starvation would take a while."

I could see, barely, out the very tops of my eyes, Raith sauntering up to where Murphy was chained to the wall. She tried to kangaroo kick him, but Raith dodged and seized her thighs. He pried them open—and——

I looked away, flushed red. If my blood-pressure got any higher, I was going to blow the top off my head. I fought the anger down, trying to think. Flyaway strands of hair were sticking to my face and neck. I rolled my head, trying to scratch. A young man much more in keeping with the décor than anyone except Madge was suddenly sitting next to me, stroking my good hand.

"Oh, not you again," I complained, mostly in my head. I was still gagged, the cock-sucking parasite.

"How do you get yourself into these messes?" Lasciel asked me.

"Do you mind? I'm trying to formulate a plan here," I told him.

"You know, it's still not too late."

I made a rude noise the ball gag didn't interfere with at all. "Are you kidding? If this is what clean living gets me, can you imagine how much deliberate vice would suck?"

"One can only be so dead, dear hostess," Lasciel reminded me.

"Damn, but you're a pessimist." I found a flaw in his logic. "Couldn't call the thing from in here anyway."

"But you can; that is why I am here. If you—"

"No," I cut Lasciel off. "Stop being such a worry-wart. We're not quite out of life-lines yet."

The upside to being gagged was that no one knew I was talking to thin air. The only one around was Madge anyway, and she couldn't stop the chant unless she wanted to eat one hell of a lot of
feedback, and after this morning, she'd be wary of that. A ritual like this, it would probably kill her. Of course, it would probably kill me, too. More cheery thoughts.

"And what of your daughter?"

The thunder of my pulse momentarily drowned out everything else. "I've told you to stay the hell away from my daughter. You don't even mention her."

"But you do not risk death alone this night. Once your heart's blood had been tasted, she will perish as well. Blood of your blood, by your blood slain. It is powerful magic, and your knightly friend is not prepared to counter it. If you die, this family you prize beyond all reason will die with you. Please, I seek only to aid you. I am no brute or slave-driver like Ursiel. Together we could achieve such marvellous things. These paltry bonds could never hold you, and with the strength of your hands you could rend the flesh of him who has threatened what is yours."

I was tempted. Boy, was I tempted. I could almost taste Raith's pale blood in my mouth with a savagery that had nothing to do with Lasciel. Right at that moment, I wasn't concerned with survival. I had never wanted anything with more passion than I wanted to kill Lord Raith. I would use anything I could get my hands on to accomplish that goal. So what if I never saw Maggie again? She'd be alive. She'd be safe. And so what if I spent the rest of my life on the run, waiting for Michael and Sanya to show up and turn me into Julienne fries? I was just as certain to end up dead if I just lay here.

I didn't know whether Lasciel understood the wild jumble of my familial instincts and neuroses; he had sure figured out it was an on-switch. The strength of my response frightened me, but fear has a funny way of short-circuiting back to anger in my brain. It leads to me doing stupid things, like punching Wardens of the White Council in the face or talking back to Faerie Queens. I didn't need a whole lot of revving to get that engine going.

But there are lines; there are things you simply don't do. Just because you want something doesn't make it right. That was what Raith didn't understand; it was something he and Lasciel had in common. Want, take, have has never really been my M.O. I mean, look at where I was living. I hadn't really been joking earlier, with Lasciel. There are always consequences to anything you do, and even when you stick as close as you can to doing the right things, they're not always good ones. Start making the wrong choices deliberately and, well, I'd seen where that led. In this case, it led to Maggie growing up without a mother, another orphaned generation. I'd sworn once no child of mine would grow up like that. I'd sworn it again the first time I held her in my arms.

Sure, she'd be loved; I had no doubt of that. I wished I could have given her half the family that Michael and Charity would. And maybe she'd be a wizard; maybe Eb would take her in the way he had me. Maybe he'd never tell her who he was to her. Maybe she'd never know any more about her mother than I did about mine. Or maybe she'd be just an ordinary girl. It might not be a bad life.

But all that assumed that I was going to die here, period, if I didn't take up Lasciel's coin. That there was no other way out. That I was giving up.

I wasn't that desperate.

Yet.

But I was getting there.

Then the gun went off. I craned my head around as best I could. The rock digging into my spine dug a little harder, setting off the battered torso symphony. Murphy's thighs were wrapped around Lord
Raith; she had her gun up against his chest, and she was riding him down while she emptied her clip into him at point-blank range.

Raith was a pulpy mess of slightly pinkish blood, but he wasn't down for the count. He stopped spasming and rolled Murphy before she could disentangle herself. It was one of the worst positions to be in, pinned by a heavier opponent. Murphy was good, but Raith was a lot stronger than a normal person, with the additional advantages of size and weight.

So it was a good thing Thomas came out of nowhere just then and kicked him in the nuts.

I had just enough time to wonder how they'd gotten out of their shackles before the Doublemints rushed in and blocked my view. I thought Murphy had gotten out from under Raith, but I couldn't be sure. The next thing I saw clearly was something whipping the Doublemints' weapons out of their hands and through the air in the direction of the throne and the pit beyond it.

All at once, I understood what had happened to Thomas' and Murphy's shackles. The cavalry was here.

"A family reunion; how touching," Lord Raith said. "Blackstaff McCoy. Come to try your luck again? I have to say, this is the most inept assassination attempt I've ever had to suffer thr—"

Even without seeing it, I recognised the crack of Ebenezar's shotgun. "I reckon I'll just have to step it up a notch."

I had a hard time keeping track of the fight, since people were always running—or in some cases, flying—in and out of the small sections of cave I could see. Madge's chanting was growing louder and louder. I tried to draw attention to myself with some vociferous shouting, but everyone was too wrapped up in what they were doing and the gag muffled me too well.

An evil wind blew up inside the circle, the underlying taint of black magic suddenly choking. Where before I had been cold, now I was chilled. My sweat turned clammy, and all the short hairs on my body stood up, from my ankles to the back of my neck. Madge switched over to English. I really wished she hadn't.

"While here we wait, O hunter of the shadows! We who yearn for your shadow to fall upon our enemy! We who cry out in need for your strength, O Lord of Slowest Terror! May your right arm come to us! Send unto us your captain of destruction! Mastercraftsman of death! Let now our need become the traveller's road, the vessel for He Who Walks Behind!"

Mother. Fuck.

This was not my day. I banged my head against the stone floor, but gently, because I was already contused enough. I shouldn't have been surprised. All this day needed to be complete now was for the fucking faeries to show up. He Who Walks Be-fucking-hind. Hell's stars and bellstones.

He Who Walks Behind is a supernatural hitman, the sort of thing demons tell their kids about to scare them into eating their vegetables. And, of course, we had a history. Justin DuMorne, my late, unlamented first mentor in wizardry, had sicced him on me when I'd run away. I got out of that one by the skin of my teeth.

But, you see, the thing about beating a summoned creature like a demon in the mortal world is that the most you can do is basically un-summon it. It's still, you know, out there. It can be re-summoned. Like Madge was doing now. The dark wind overhead was coalescing into a dark storm, literally crackling with power. I kept an eye on it, uncomfortably aware that if I tried to redirect that I'd blow
my left hand clean off. Wait, what was I thinking? I wasn't going to have the chance. I was dead before He Who Walks Behind got all the way here. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Madge raised a silver bowl and what was really obviously a sacrificial knife. "See here our offering to flow into your strength! Flesh and blood, taken unwilling from one who yearns to live! Bless this plea for help! Accept this offering of power! Make known to us your hand that we might dispatch him against our mutual foe—Margaret Dresden!"

"Hess!" Eb shouted.

Hey, finally someone remembered I was here. Madge's knife came plunging down at me. Lasciel's illusory grip on my good hand was so tight it hurt. His blue eyes bore into mine, terrified and pleading. I lay helpless inside the triangle.

Correction: I lay on the triangle.

I could swear my heart stopped with the abrupt resurgence of hope in my breast. Energy couldn't pass the boundaries of the triangle, any more than it could a circle. But not all of me was inside the triangle.

I threw all of my fear and anger into my slagged shield bracelet and shaped a plane of pure will between Madge's knife and my heart. The knife skittered out of her grasp, out of the circle, breaking it. Good news, bad news; my life was so ambiguous lately. Madge was vulnerable, but if she managed to get that knife into me the malocchio would find Maggie in an instant.

I wasn't sure how long I could hold the shield. Being mostly inside the screen of the thaumaturgic triangle was having some really wonky effects on my energy flow—disrupted chakra points or whatever, I guess.

Eb shouted something and I felt the shackle on my right hand crack open; probably the others, too. I didn't immediately test this hypothesis because the miniature storm directly over my head coalesced into horribly familiar features. Its eyes looked through me, and I wished I were as good at earth magic as Eb was so I could make the ground open up and swallow me. His presence beat at me like waves crashing on a dyke made of sand.

Then the face of He Who Walks Behind fixed itself on Madge and swooped down, passing inches from my head. You can bet I held onto my motherfucking shield like a toddler hugging a safety blanket. I was still gasping and trembling when Thomas dove in and yanked me to my feet.

"Hell's bells, watch it!" I objected, except it came out more as a muffled series of nasal sounds. I jerked my left hand back, more out of reflex than actual pain, and ripped out the gag with my right.

"Keep moving; we have to get out of here," Thomas told me.

Thomas looked pretty rough. In addition to a number of bruises and marks from what looked like a thin cane—I supposed they had to work with what they had on hand—the Doublemints' hands had left burns all over his chest, arms, and legs. He was holding what looked like Eb's double-barrelled shotgun in his free hand, tracking Raith with it and occasionally squeezing out a shot. He'd slung the ammo belt across his chest, bandoleer-style. Ram-boner.

Raith should have been starting to look a little cornered at this point. I could see one grey-suited lump on the floor over past Murphy and no sign of the other Doublemint. Hiding behind that screen in the corner, maybe; but from a fading shriek I'd heard earlier, I guessed it was more likely down the oubliette. Hopefully not out to fetch reinforcements.
Raith, I found, just looked pissed. Something zipped by my ear towards his face. He dodged that one, and the three that came after him next, but the self-propelled shot was making some hits. Eb was directing it from somewhere behind Thomas and me. I tracked the arcs and realised he must have been using magic to impart the initial thrust and letting physics take it from there. Curiously, Eb wielded my unsheathed swordcane; his own staff was nowhere in sight. He was holding his left arm in tight to his body.

Murphy shot Raith with my revolver, adding to the barrage. He staggered and stumbled, but didn't drop. We'd have the upper hand, I thought, except he was closest to the exit tunnel.

"I hope you've got a plan, girl," Eb growled.

"This is the plan," I told him.

"We can't keep this up forever."

I smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "Neither can he. Feeling a little tapped out, Raith?"

"Don't worry; I have plenty left for what I need to do. You mortals are all so fragile."

"Yeah, but there are four of us." I brushed hair out of my face.

"There will be fewer before I am dead," Raith promised.

"I don't need to kill you," I purred. "How deep do you think that pit over there is? I bet the four of us could grab you and drop you in. Climbing all the way back up sounds pretty strenuous for a guy on a diet. Not to mention digging your way out from under several tons of rock at the finish line. You're the only thing in here that's immune to magic," I reminded him.

Raith's nostrils flared in outrage. "You dare."

"I'll dare more than that, you gigantic ball of slime. You attacked my family; you get no quarter. I'm going to bury you."

"Harry," Thomas breathed, low and strained. I took a deep breath; I was shaking.

"Family! A foolish outgrowth of the instinct to propagate," Raith sneered.

"I'd watch how much deeper I dig myself if I were you," I warned.

Raith met my eyes, daring me. I looked past him. "You women are all alike in the end, obsessed with your brooding."

"Harsh," I said. "And here I thought you were such a family man. Didn't you think that, Thomas?"

"Somehow it passed me by," Thomas muttered, still eyeing me warily.

"Oh, but our father is very fond of his family," a new voice cut in.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our surprise guest," I said in my best Larry Fowler imitation. It fell a little flat.

Lara Raith stepped into the cavern. The heels of her boots clicked loudly on the water-smoothed stone. I wondered if she'd taken them off to walk the long passage down, or if it was simply that no one had heard her over the noise of the brawl.
Raith spun to face her, his hands for one brief, telling second open and empty at his sides. "Lara, your brother and Genosa's doe have foolishly brought the White Council down on themselves. Do be a dear and call the guards; we must prepare to deal with the wizards if they come in force."

He had balls for trying it, but I knew enough about the Raith family dynamic by now to know that even if she'd just wandered in with no clue what was going on, finding her father three-quarters pinned like this would have been an opportunity she couldn't help but seize.

"Not just yet, father."

Raith's face...lightened, growing almost luminescent. "I will not repeat myself."

Lara ignored him and surveyed the cavern, her eyes landing at last on me. "You staged this for my benefit, wizard."

I spread my arms, palms sort of out. "Ta da!"

"Your little playlet would have had a much different ending if I had simply dispatched the guards instead of coming myself," she observed.

"Two things. First, if you'd really meant for us to die, you would have disarmed us. Second, I found Thomas." I jerked my thumb at the slightly crazed-looking naked gunman standing next to me. Murphy was right; we were definitely related.

"Yes, my first idea was correct. Once I knew in which direction he lay, the Deeps were the logical place to look." She smiled at me, magnetically. "Imagine my surprise at finding you and my darling father here as well. It was only prudent to watch and see what was going on."

I snorted rudely.

"You have fulfilled your end of the bargain, wizard. At one stroke, you have delivered the White Court into my hands and used me to remove a dangerous enemy." Lara turned back to her father once more. She stepped forward; he stepped back. Lara smiled.

"I'm just lucky, I guess," I said deprecatingly.

"No, wizard." Lara began circling her father, outside the halo of birdshot Eb still held suspended. The small clicks of her heels were as regular as a metronome. "Do not think I will underestimate you again. But satisfy my curiosity: how did you know?"

"I knew my mom knew him; and I knew she'd make it count. So I thought of the worst thing you could do to a man like that. She left him weak and exposed for anyone who bothered to look. The emperor has no clothes."

Lara came around in front of her father and stopped.

"Even if you and the wizard succeed in killing me," Raith spat, "you'll be scraping to some Skavis or Malvora before the year is out."

Lara smiled gently. The colour was draining from her eyes. "Whoever said I was going to kill you?"

"If you don't feel like it, I'd be more than happy to," I offered. "In fact, I think I might insist."

Lara didn't look at me, attention wholly fixed upon her father. "Both of us have what we agreed upon, wizard. I would think carefully before I changed the terms of our deal."
"And I'd think twice before getting in my way. You won't be the first vampire I've killed today. I want him to burn."

Then Lara did look up at me, just a glance across Lord Raith's tense form. The quirk twisting one corner of her plush lips promised a well to sink my anger into and an embrace to take away my pain. "Oh, he will, wizard. He will."

"Harry," Thomas hissed. "Harry, let's get out of here."

Lara's clothes were falling away, and if I'd thought Lord Raith was glowing, she was incandescent. Also, apparently Raiths either wore clothes or underwear, not both. There was, just let me say, a lot of skin to glow.

Thomas dragged me away; I let him. Murphy and Eb were ahead of us; Eb hung back now to guard our rear, the shot pellets trailing him like a second shadow. So we were the only ones to see it when Madge's corpse—I was thankful I at least hadn't seen how she died—sat up. Her features were no longer her own, and long spikes erupted from her once-lovely flesh.

"I am returned, mortal girl," and the voice was the voice of He Who Walks Behind that I still heard in my nightmares, even if it had to share billing with some others now, "and I remember thee. Thou and I, we have unfinished business between us."

The spikes all turned to smoke and the spirit leaked out through Madge's torn skin. What was left of her deflated like one of those skin-suits from MIB. Which are even more sick-making once you've seen a Red Court vampire's flesh mask, let me tell you. Just, yuck.

Eb's expression when I looked at him was serious, but he didn't ask me any questions. We all hauled ass out; I leant Thomas my duster for decency's sake. I could see by the expression on his face that I was going to have trouble getting it back. Showboat.

Eb had his ancient truck parked around back—and by back, I mean through approximately ten miles of woods. Okay, not actually that far, but it felt like it. Eight-hour nap or not, it had been a long day, and I'd gone through more than just some calories. Everyone was very quiet as we walked; no one was looking at me.
At Michael's, I didn't even wait to be invited over the threshold before I ran inside and scooped up Maggie. She grumbled sleepily at me, then settled down. I nearly wept. Nearly. My cheeks were not at all damp when Michael, Charity, Molly, Inari, Daniel, and the idiot puppy I'd been bullied into adopting all caught up with me.

"It's fine," I said. "It's over; it's all over. It's safe now."

I finally extricated myself from the Carpenters, god knows how. Molly was making blackmail-face at me, which was rich considering she was still all gothed up. I bet I'd be hearing about that the next time I came by.

I told Inari it would probably be okay to go home tomorrow, and then we had to go outside so I could demonstrate that yes, Thomas was fine; but he agreed with me she should probably call Lara before showing up. Tomorrow. Molly followed, and by followed I mean was attached limpet-like to Inari's hand. I bet I'd be hearing about that soon, too. Well, if you were going to pick someone to cure a vampire, the daughter of the wielder of the Sword of Love was probably a good choice.

Murphy reclaimed her bike. I sort of expected her to split off and for Thomas to disappear somewhere and eat someone. Instead, we all drove down to my apartment and got drunk on Eb's homebrewed scotch, which lost nothing by being made in Missouri. He didn't get the name McCoy because his parents watched too much Star Trek, that was for sure. Even Thomas, epicure that he was, declared himself impressed.

I got drunk, too. "Screw it," I said. "Maggie is officially weaned."

Murphy snorted; Thomas looked uncomfortable. Eb poured another round. We all said more than we probably should have, but it had been a night for blowing secrets wide open. Justine was alive. Thomas was my brother. Ebenezar was our grandfather. And one more.

Murphy had helped me drag Maggie's cradle into the middle of the living room so I didn't have to let her out of my sight. I'd have held her, except my ribs were having none of it. Eb and I were sitting on the couch, watching her sleep, nicely mellowed by scotch and fatigue. I'd been trying to blow loose strands of hair out of my eyes, since one hand was non-functional and the other was holding the glass., but Eb smoothed them away tenderly. Bastard. What did he think I was, some kind of girl? Murphy was curled up kitten-like in a chair across the room, almost as cute as the Scamp. Thomas was in the bathroom.

"Raithe called you Blackstaff," I said. It wasn't quite a question.

"Caught that, did you?" Eb shook his head; mine spun in sympathy.

"Migh' just be a nickname," I stumbled on, "but. You didn' bring y'r staff."

Eb considered his used-to-be-a-scented-candle-holder tumbler. "You don't want to know, Hess."

"Alwuss wanna know," I pointed out sagaciously.

He cracked a smile at me. "You're tant, girl."
"Mm," I agreed. "But curious."

"Your mother was one liked to go 'round pushing the Laws of Magic to the limit." Eb's speech thickened when he drank, I was discovering. Not with slurring, but with accent. "No' enough accounting for th' grey, she said. Things slipped through the cracks. Well," Eb drained his glass and poured each of us another. I leaned into him, tucking my feet up under me. Eb continued, "the Senior Council, no' that the pure scunner pass it around, already know tha'. Have since the beginning. So one wizard is given leeway to break the Laws when they're used agin us. T' kill and enthral, invade the thoughts of others and change their forms. Reach beyond the borders of life, swim against the currents o' time. Seek knowledge and power from beyond the Outer Gates."


"Me too. I pure hate it."

I groaned and settled back against him. "You're lucky I'm drunk."

Thomas came back from the bathroom. I wasn't sure if he was actually swaying, or if that was just my head.

"Your sock drawer is talking," he informed me, then collapsed in a fit of giggles.

"Scuse me, I'd better go have a word with it," I said. "Can't do that in front've Eb."

I had already wobbled my way back into my room and opened the drawer before I noticed Eb had followed me. "Shit."

"You are having a party!" Bob complained. "And you didn't invite me. I'm hurt."

"You're blowing our cover," I corrected. "Three years I hid you righ' under his nose, and now—pbbt!"

"Hess, is that wha' I think it is?" Eb asked.

"This is Bob the Skull." I twisted him around and held him up under my chin. "What was that? The sound of Harry breaking the rules again? Let us all faint."

Eb rubbed his forehead. "At least tell me you don't keep it in yer sock drawer."

"No, no. I keep him in my lab. I put him in the sock drawer so you wouldn't see him."

Eb processed this airtight piece of logic. "Just put it back in the drawer."

"Hey!"

"Okay."

Eb put his good arm around my shoulders and guided me back out into my living room. He almost tripped over a box of client files. "Do yourself a favour, Hess. Anybody ever mentions the name Kemmler, drop that thing down a well."

Thomas had taken possession of the couch in our absence, and had in turn been conquered by Mister. I plopped down on the floor between the couch and Maggie's cradle. Thomas was wearing clothes he'd borrowed from me, too long and—on anyone else anyway—too tight. His usual wardrobe seemed to consist of things that came just as close to cutting off his circulation, though, so it was all good. I had gotten back my duster directly after he discovered the dirty diaper pocket. I
drank a toast to Maggie.

"Just ignore the sock drawer," I told Thomas.

Thomas made a noncommittal noise and kept scratching Mister's ears, not opening his eyes. I marvelled that he could breathe with thirty pounds of Mister on top of him. Mister had been trolling us, as Billy the werewolf would say, for scotch all night, possibly because of the reappearance of Mouse the notch-eared puppy. It had been pretty hilarious, especially when he finally scored some. He'd sniffed, sneezed one of those cat-sneezes, and then proceeded to forget which order his feet went in. Murphy declared he was a lightweight and cut him off.

All of us were hungover the next morning, except for Maggie and Mouse. The puppy, at least, was quiet; Maggie had no such mercy.

I put coffee on, although my little pot was going to have to pull a double shift considering the crowd. Eb remembered the palliative he'd come up with yesterday, a bracelet of chunky white stones, and exchanged it for a mug. I still hadn't let myself feel the damage, and I was kind of afraid to. The bracelet also silenced the drum line in my head.

I cooked up eggs and toast for breakfast, for those brave enough to put anything into their sour stomachs. I was better about groceries than I had been before Maggie; it helped that the faerie housekeeping usually brought stuff. Sometimes random stuff—where did they find marmite?—but, you know. Food. Calories.

The coffee was a hit all around, and the hangovers gave everyone an excuse to pretend none of last night's over-sharing had happened. I counted it as a victory when no one threw up in my bathroom. Both Bob and Billy contested that this meant it was not in fact a proper blow-out; well, call me old-fashioned, but anytime somebody decides not to puke in my apartment, I'm okay with it.

Murphy essayed a smile at Mouse while she nibbled on her toast. I remembered the conversation we'd had last night.

"I couldn't stop him," Murphy had said quietly. "I couldn't stop myself."

"S'how it works," I told her. "S'magic, sort of."

"So...you could? Is that why you didn't...?"

And then I got it. The last time I'd been with anyone, it had been Hawk, and then nine months later Maggie had happened. We'd conceived a child in love, and the mark of that must have been more profound than I ever suspected. Raith had reached into me, but he hadn't got hold of much. At the time I'd assumed it was my mother's binding, limiting his power; but I guess it was something else.

"Naw. It's the, the...remember the love thing?"

Murphy sighed. "I was married twice, y'know."

"Nn—I mean how I told you it was poison t' the Whites. That's why the Doublemint guards burned Thomas. You've both got to be in love when you, y'know—"

"Have sex?" Murphy supplied wistfully.

I made a face. "And they can't touch you, unless you..."
"Have hot, crazed, meaningless monkey sex?"

"Or whatever," I finished.

"Oh."

"So all it means is that I haven't had any in even longer than you." I eyed my empty glass with disfavour.

"God, it was good sex though." Murphy sighed.

"Mm-hm," I agreed, hijacked by memory.

In the cold light of day—well, flickering candle-light of my subterranean habitation—everyone but Thomas looked pretty seedy. Thomas just looked artfully tousled and slightly broody. Not like he'd been declaiming slurred protestations of fraternal devotion into my...stomach?...seven hours ago. I wasn't sure what Ebenezer thought of his newly-acquired grandson. I thought Thomas probably had a lot of programming regarding paternal figures to work through before he went anywhere near that relationship.

Murphy ate a lot of pain-killers before she braved the Harley again, what with the vibrating and the rumbling. Brave woman. Eb drove me up to Police HQ to, finally, retrieve the Blue Beetle from the lot. At a quiet request from Thomas, I asked Eb to look after Maggie while I provided moral support back at Château Raith.

The reception was much more civilised this time around. Thomas and I both showed up in shades and refused lunch. Lara returned my staff and the pentacle necklace, twin to my own, our mother had given him. She and Thomas had what seemed to pass for a warm and gooshy brother-sister moment (not like that—it involved her disinheriting him and promising to either watch over or hold hostage the woman he loved). Lara and I had the kind of civil exchange of pseudo-threats you'd think I'd have with Marcone but can never quite seem to manage.

Eb decamped after lunch. Things weren't exactly right between us, but it would come. I hoped.

At this point maximum delay had been reached, and I found myself swamped in Carpenters. Again. Was I sure I wanted a family? I thought back to the scotch and the almost-dying and my sock drawer. Okay. I thought I could deal with that kind of family.

The kids were all sent outside to play in my building's courtyard under the supervision of Molly and Daniel. Molly was still defiantly wearing the facial piercings. I don't really see how I could be blamed for that, considering a) I didn't even have my ears pierced, and b) she'd had most of that way before I became a semi-regular fixture in the Carpenters' lives. Nonetheless, I was in the middle of a really unpleasant conversation with Michael and Charity, held hostage by the examination and bandaging of my ribs and hand, when I saw something that made my blood run cold.

Michael recognised it, too. "Harry—"

"I know," I said.

We stared down at the melted, skewbald mess of my hand, where there was a patch of undamaged skin in the shape of Lasciel's sigil. Right where he'd kissed my palm.

Thomas leaned in to see what was so interesting. Charity frowned at him.

There were already enough people in the Thomas Is Your Brother?! Club, so I'd explained him by
saying he was crashing here to give me a hand as a thank-you for saving his ass in some non-specific way and was temporarily without residence. I wasn't sure if his being Inari's brother was a point in his favour with them or not. Since Michael at least had already met Thomas and knew he was a soul-sucking sex-vampire, probably not.

Thomas was hovering and doing a bad job of not interrupting me while I tried to fill Michael and Charity in in the least alarming way possible. He finally got fed up with them both giving him the side-eye and tried to make me touch him to prove he couldn't touch me. This lead to the revelation of his last night's burns and him sitting with his shirt off while Charity donned surgical gloves to smear goop on him. Ha. See how he liked it.

"Hi, Harry."

I made a pathetic mewling noise. Mrs. Baxingdale glanced up from slipping her car keys into her purse to look at me more closely. "Are you all right? What happened to your hand?"

I waved away her concern. "It's not my hand, it's my head."

Sonal Baxingdale was one of my upstairs neighbours, a friendly but generally quiet woman who grilled a mean hamburger. She was only a few inches taller than Murphy but lots curvier—not quite plump, but definitely maternal. Middle-forties, with the distinctive bone structure that comes out of some regions of India and straight black hair about as long as mine, although hers was always neater. Especially now. Her husband was a blond-haired, green-eyed EMT. One of their daughters was in the Air Force; the other was about Daniel Carpenter's age.

Mrs Baxingdale crossed her arms and gave me a Look. "You were partying."

"I haven't seen anybody about this yet." I waved my bandaged hand. "A friend of mine brought me something called Bhang. He told me it was a homeopathic painkiller." I was going to be an only child again as soon as I got my hands on Thomas. I'd foolishly assumed that if Thomas was drinking something called Bhang, it was because we shared a low taste in humour. Turns out they make it out of the same variety of cannabis that hashish come from. Decadent, drug-happy freaking sex-vampires.

Mrs Baxingdale's expression became much more sympathetic. "Oh, you poor child. That's a horrible thing to do to an unsuspecting person."

I winced. "Tell me about it."

"But what happened to your hand?"

"Work-related," I said shortly. "Don't worry; I've got an appointment for this afternoon."

"Your cop friend make it for you?" she asked knowingly.

"No," I lied. I was possibly undercut by Murphy choosing that moment to pull up next to us in the little gravel parking lot.

Things settled down again. Thomas' suitcase moved into my living room, wedged in among the boxes, and I got on with finding a new office. I found one, eventually. It was on the sixth floor of a brick building over a mile from Mac's, with a way into Undertown on the same block. I didn't like it. Thomas bought a cake to celebrate the removal of the boxes from my cramped apartment, though. And then ate half of it in one night. I had new insight into how Murphy felt about my metabolism.
I kept trying to convince Molly to steal us one of the super-comfy couches from her girlfriend's house. Seriously. I bet they wouldn't even miss it. I mean, I was getting enough grief out of that relationship. Just one little perk would have been nice. I'd had to have a _sex_ talk—not _the_ sex talk, although Molly was too damned curious about certain, er, specialised mechanics by far, but the sex-and-magic talk.

Obviously, you can do both. But magic is about control and sex is, uh, not so much. Tea-totalling succubus issues aside. Elaine and I had learned the magical basics way before puberty, so we'd rolled happily right along into experimentation when the urge presented itself (something I was not planning to share with my apprentice), without major negative consequences. Molly could be patient for a year or two. Someone had told me that that was a virtue, once.

---

I heard from Murphy a couple weeks before I finally found a replacement office. I was in a bad mood because I'd just finished arranging for my answering service to forward my calls to my home number. Since I didn't have a work number anymore. All my business cards were useless, too. I was wound up to bitch, but Murphy beat me to it.

"Do you have any of that scotch left?"

"Some; why?" I asked.

"My little sister is getting married," Murphy said.

"I thought we knew that."

"To my ex-husband."

_Oh._

"I don't suppose it's the dead one?"

Murphy choked on a laugh. "God, Harry."

"I don't think I'm supposed to mix booze with all the happy pills; but tell you what, I'll guzzle ice cream and you can guzzle the scotch."

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Marcone showed up again, perhaps inevitably, I'm assuming about ten minutes after he found out Thomas was living in.

"I did him a favour, and now he's giving me a hand. Also, I'm anticipating anything you might say and it's not funny. Or clever."

The corners of Marcone's mouth quirked upwards. "Then may I ask how serious the damage was?"

"No."

"You know, my organisation has an excellent schedule of benefits. I believe I could even locate a brochure somewhere about my person."

"And you don't want anything at all in return."

Marcone's avuncular mask didn't crack, but then by now I didn't expect it to. "I don't deny that I think such an arrangement would be to both our benefits. I'm a business man, Miss Dresden."
"You're criminal slime, Marcone."

Like I said: back to normal.

Chapter End Notes

But seriously, folks, booze and cats don't mix. /psa

End Notes

Hello, darlings. If you're reading this whole series at once, this is a reminder to take a break. Eat, sleep, feed your cats, and take care of your puppies. :)

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