A Series of Firsts (but Really Seconds)

by Moyra

Summary

There is a child (a boy, a man, an aberration) walking the streets of Chicago. There is a monster (a wizard, a warden, a knight) trying to save the world. There is Harry (and Bob) living and breathing and laughing. Again.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The first time Toot-toot flutters his tiny perfect wings in Chicago, he is alone. Red Nose and Meg O’Aspens are still in Nevernever, Leo Tender refuses to leave New York and the rest of his kin are scattered here and there, revelling in mischief and chaos as few of the faeries do. Toot-toot, however, is incredibly, horribly, gut-wrenchingly bored. He flits from one house to another, from a brightly lit window to a snow covered porch and drags his sharp, sharp, sharp spear behind.

There is a shaggy mangy beast sleeping on one of the windowsills, and Toot-toot lifts his weapon, bares his teeth and prepares for glorious battle. But just as he nears the enemy he hears bells, and clanking, and his Name. Someone is summoning him! Him! Who? He fumes, and rages, but lowers his spear, and goes to answer the call. If only to punish whoever it is for daring to interrupt him.

He streaks towards the call, furious and disappointed. The streets flash all around him, but Toot-toot ignores the alluring smells and sounds and feelings. He has a.. A someone to kill.

He lands among the trees, in a small clearing. There is a dish on the ground and he thinks it might have milk and bread on it. Despite his anger he can’t help but devour the offering, turning to face his summoner only after there is nothing left on the cold plastic.

He turns, and he blinks.

It is… a child, he thinks. A human child? No, no, it doesn’t feel like a human. Or a child. Toot-toot grips his spear and lifts back into the air. He is confused. He is curious. The not-human-child feels strange. Like darkness, and light, like fire, and ice. For a second Toot-toot thinks he can catch a whiff of Winter in its scent, but no. It must be all the snow around. Screwing with his head like that.

Toot-toot sneers.

“You flea-infested, rotting, ugly mongrel! How dare you summon me? I will rip out your nostrils and strangle you with them!”

The threats are as familiar to him as flight and air. But the not-human-child is not afraid and after a minute Toot-toot runs out of steam. He settles on one of the roots not covered by white and peers up into its face.

“You should be scared. Why aren’t you scared?” He mutters petulantly and crosses his wings.

“I’m terrified,” says the not-human-child drily and smiles. “I want to make a deal with you, Toot-toot.”

A deal. Well! He likes deals. Deals often lead to tasty things. To blood and carnage and mayhem. Toot-toot almost nods, but stops himself at the last minute. He didn’t even check the circle! He berates himself as he tries to shoot past the not-human-child. But it has not made a mistake and there is a barrier surrounding Toot-toot. Satisfied, he hovers over the dish and waits for the not-human-child to continue.

“I need to find someone. Find him and I will give you two whole pizzas.”

Pizzas! Toot-toot loves pizzas! How did the not-human-child know that? No, not important, not important. He is going to get pizzas!

“His name is Justin DuMorne. He is a wizard and former warden of the White Council.” The not-human-child’s smile changes, becomes sharper, colder, harder. “He has something of mine and I would like it back. You should have no problems locating him in the city.”

DuMorne, DuMorne, DuMorne. Toot-toot commits the name to his memory and bobs in the air, excited.

“I find him, and I get two pizzas?” He check, just in case.


“Alright then.” Toot-toot pauses and gathers his magic before rattling off. “I promise, I promise, I promise!”

He feels the deal leashing the two of them together and the circle breaking at the same time. Not waiting any longer Toot-toot flexes his wings and rockets off back toward the city. His mind is already set on the new task.

The promise of pizza spurs him on and in a few hours he has the rough estimate of DuMorne’s location. North, west, left and straight again. And there he is. Toot-toot waits for a bit, but the wizard gives no indication of moving anywhere else in the near future, so Toot-toot nods to himself, shakes his spear at DuMorne and turns to fly back the way he came. But as he leaves the wizard behind, Toot-toot realizes he doesn’t know how to reach the not-human-child again. And he didn’t even ask its name! Stupid, stupid!

In dismay, he flits from street to street, trying to come up with a plan of action. But then he feels something tugging at him, at his magic, and it’s not the call of his Name, it’s not that strong, but he recognizes the mish-mash aura of the not-human-child. Toot-toot grins and whisks away in the direction of his summoner. His clever, clever summoner.

The not-human-child is waiting for him in the same clearing from which it summoned Toot-toot in the first place. There are two flat boxes near its feet that have the picture of Toot-toot’s favorite food on them. He dives and swoops down to its face. The not-human-child calmly smiles and offers Toot-toot its arm as a perch. Well, if it insists…

“What do I call you, flea-bag?” Asks the not-human-child.

“I have, I have!”

Toot-toot tells it the location, and almost bursting with excitement and anticipation jumps from its arm down on his reward. Distantly, he hears the not-human-child chuckle, but Toot-toot is too busy enjoying the food of gods to pay any attention to his strange summoner. In a few minutes the first pizza is gone and he settles on the second box in contentment.

With some surprise he sees that the not-human-child is still in the clearing. It seems almost… fond as it gazes down on Toot-toot.

A second passes and he smiles at it.

“What do I call you, flea-bag?”

The not-human-child snorts.

“Call me Harry.”
Harry. Harry, Harry, Harryyy. Toot-toot sing-songs the name in his mind and decides that he likes it. He hopes Harry will summon him again. He really likes pizza.

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Justin DuMorne has been in Chicago for a week, following a lead on one of the less easily obtained artefacts before he notices his little stalker. The boy looks to be around 8, perhaps 7, years old, with short black hair. His light jacket is in no way suited for the weather and Justin entertains the thought of calling the police and giving them the kid. Homeless, from the looks of it.

But then the boy looks at him and slides deeper in the shadows. His whole body is hidden in the dark, barring his face. His face illuminated by his softly glowing eyes.

_The boy has magic_, thinks Justin.

It was only last week that he started thinking of looking for an apprentice. Perhaps it is fate.

Justin hums in thought and slowly, ever so slowly, steps closer to the boy. It wouldn’t do to spook the child now.

Now that he is barely a few feet from the boy, the magic Justin feels is staggeringly powerful. And somewhat strange. The wizard pauses, for a second unsure, and that is when the child strikes.

Pale translucent chains snake around Justin’s limbs, pinning them to his body. He is jerked deeper into the shadows and brought to his knees before the boy. No, not the boy, thinks the wizard in panic. No boys, no children have eyes like that. What he thought was young magic manifesting in glowing eyes has a faint inhuman taint, now that he is close enough to feel it.

_Is he possessed?_

“Justin Zacharius DuMorne.”

His Name rings loud and clear and the wizard pales. Whoever this creature is, it knows his name. It _knows_ his _Name_. Justin struggles, tries to draw his own magic to cast a spell, a shield, something to protect himself. But the chains not only restrict his body, but his magic as well.

The boy lifts his hand and places the middle finger between the wizard’s eyes. The next second Justin’s world explodes into pain. Distantly, he hears someone screaming, and begging, and moaning, but he is in no shape to seek the source.

Justin is not sure how long he kneels. Perhaps seconds. Perhaps minutes. Feels like hours.

Finally, he comes to, lying on the ground before the boy. He twitches and realizes that he is no longer bound by chains.

“Get up.”

The boy’s voice is cold. But the Will in it slices through Justin like a scalpel. He feels his own body move, get to the knees, climb to his feet. The boy offers his hand and Justin sees himself gently taking it and leading his small attacker back to his car.

Inside, Justin is screaming. Outside, he is smiling.
His driver glances at the boy, but he is too well trained and says absolutely nothing as they get in the car and take off towards the hotel Justin is staying in.

The wizard makes the last effort to gather his magic, to fight off the mind control. The very idea of being put under a thrall shaking something deep inside his soul. There is a very real, very hysterical voice shouting at him from the abyss that is his subconsciousness, but Justin pays it no mind. Magic slips between his metaphysical fingers, but he tries and tries and tries again.

They arrive at the hotel and Justin leads the boy up the stairs, waving off the curious concierge. They climb up to the third floor, and the boy still hasn’t let go of his hand. Or his mind. Justin wonders what they look like to anyone else. A child and his parent, perhaps? Or a predator and his prey? Though, undoubtedly, with the actual roles reversed.

A minute later they step into his hotel suite and Justin thinks this is where he is going to die. Though why he is so sure of that fact he cannot say.

Justin sinks to his knees and freezes. The boy leaves him in a small kitchenette as he explores the rooms. Clearly, he is looking for something. What, Justin doesn’t know. He watches as the child gets more and more agitated, as his bags and suitcases are opened and discarded. Finally, the boy stops, takes a deep breath, and Justin feels a small gathering of magic. He tries to move again, to do something, but all that’s left to him is watching.

In the next second all the veils he put in the room several days before are violently ripped apart. The boy smiles and turns toward the skull on one of the bedside tables.

As he approaches, the skull’s eyes light up with dark red fire.

“Master? What’s goin…” The skull trails off. “Oh, stars. What have you done to him? What have you done to yourself?”

Before it can say anything else, the boy rolls up the sleeve of his flimsy jacket and reaches for the skull. His next words are loud and satisfied.

“Do your thing, Bob.”

From his spot Justin cannot see what’s happening as clearly as he’d like. There is a whisper of more magic, then a blast of light, some smoke. And the skull eyes turn bright orange. Its voice changes as well, becoming almost chipper. Gleeful.

“Heya, boss. Sure took you a long time, eh?” It shakes on the table, producing strange, rattling sounds. It’s… laughing? Never before, since he had grabbed the skull from that raid all those years ago, has Justin seen it behave like this.

“Har-har.” The boy picks up the skull and cradles it close to his chest. “You alright? Nothing missing?”

“Nah. You did the spell perfectly.” The skull rolls his eyes up and murmurs, “I’m fine. Truly.”

The boy relaxes and Justin only now realizes how tense he was before. Once more, the wizard tries to break the control and, once more, he fails.

The skull laughs again.

“Oh, boss, the Tsepnoy Pyos spell? Really? What, normal thralls are too mundane, or somethin’?”
“You know me, Bob. Never the easy way.”

The boy steps towards Justin and the wizard feels his body shake again.

“I could kill you right now,” says the boy and tilts his head. “I could kill you for everything you would have put me through… For what you would have planned. Make you pay.”

Justin doesn’t understand. The magic swirling around the boy stings his own, batters his mind, and doesn’t let him concentrate.

“You could.” The skull’s voice is strangely gentle. “But it would be simpler to just stick to the plan.”

“Right. Yeah. Infirmo.”

And Justin knows no more.

He wakes up in the morning. His suit is tidy and his bags are in order. For a second Justin wonders why that surprises him before the thought slips from his mind. He stumbles into the kitchenette and makes himself a cup of coffee, rubbing at his forehead. He is supposed to be meeting the artefact owner in the afternoon, but… But what? No, nevermind. He needs to wake up properly, prepare for the meeting. At least, get rid of the headache nestling in his temples.

Not for the first time he wishes he had perfect memory. Or at least an artefact that he could use instead of trying to find the recipe for the lesser healing potion manually. There was something like that, wasn’t there? Justin thinks he might have heard rumours of Kemmler having a spirit of intellect bound to him.

A pity everything was destroyed in the raid.
Leanansidhe stumbles across the little walled up house entirely by accident. She’s never been in this part of Nevernever before but her hounds were getting antsy around the Court and she needed to take them for a walk.

The house itself is rather small, she notices, and completely normal at first glance. Well, she amends, normal for Nevernever. She doubts three chimneys and what looked like a line of smoking cauldrons out front would go well in the mortal world. Interested despite herself she takes a step forward.

Her hounds bark and twist behind her and suddenly Lea realizes how quiet it’s gotten since she walked out of the woods and approached the low stone walls surrounding the house and the little garden beside it. She can barely hear herself breathe. A second of hesitation proves to be a second too long as just as she makes to walk away she feels the wards fall around her. They feel like a blanket, soft and warm, but she can no longer move.

A frown snakes its way on her face. She tries to turn, to look at her hounds who have gotten suspiciously quiet as well, but the wards tighten around her even further and she stills.

“Oh! You’re trespassing!” She flinches as someone chirps just behind her head. “Not a good thing to do around here.”

Lea waits silently.

“The puppies are nice, though. Maybe, he will let me have a taste, after…”

The owner of a high-pitched voice flies over her shoulder and loops around the stone wall. Lea keeps her surprise off her face. It is a dew drop faerie. Male, pale. A mane of light purple hair. No taller than her arm, but for his kin such size usually means power. Remarkable.

Lea tests the wards’ boundaries and tries to smile. Her lips twitch but the rest of her face remains impassive. She is not used to being the one caught in a trap but she supposes it is a fitting punishment for her arrogance. Really, she never thought hubris would be her undoing.

The faerie sniffs, watches Lea for a couple of seconds, and then flies off towards the house. She waits. She can hardly do anything else. The magic of the wards holds her in place and she supposes her darling hounds are in the same predicament. She looks inward but even now she feels naught but surprise and a slight disappointment in herself. How easily she was trapped. It should gall her. It should frighten her. It intrigues her instead. She is powerful, she knows she is, and while these are Wylde Lands, not governed by either Court, this is Nevernever, this is still her home. And yet…

She hears a small yelp of indignation and the faerie rockets out of the house. He glares at her, opens his mouth, and then stops. She can hear steps just behind the half-closed door and the faerie shivers. A second later he flies upwards and settles on the roof from where he continues watching Leanansidhe. Silently this time.

She, in turn, watches the door. A second, a breath, and it opens fully.

A child, she thinks, her surprise growing in leaps and bounds. A human child. Ten, a year or two older, perhaps, a mere boy but human nonetheless. There is something familiar in the arch of his
nose, the depth of his eyes. The way his mouth crinkles at the corners as if he is just a moment away from sharing a joke with her.

The boy steps on the porch and squints at her, his smile widening.

“Leanansidhe.” He murmurs softly. “Whatever brings you here?”

She forgets the wards and tries to answer, eyeing the boy in interest. A moment later the child waves his hand and she can speak again. She swallows. She is not so sure the child is human anymore.

“‘Tis a nice weather for a walk.” She says as soon as she gathers her wits. “I was merely exploring the area.”

“Were you now?” The boy asks contemplatively and comes closer. He really is familiar, maddeningly so, thinks Lea. But she is sure she has never met him before in her life. “Well, I suppose there’s no harm in taking a walk. Your dogs look like they enjoy the exercise at least.”

“Quite.” She says and tries to move her hand. The wards hold steady. She still cannot find it in herself to be scared.

“Your word then, that as long as you are here you will not harm the residents of the house. Swear it thrice and I’ll let you go.”

The boy hops on the low stone fence and watches her as she contemplates her options.

“And if I refuse?” She finally asks.

He shrugs and doesn’t answer. That is an answer enough for her. She takes a deep breath and recites the oath three times. As the last syllable falls from her lips she feels the wards release her and hears her hounds shifting behind her. She turns around and checks on them, ignoring the boy for a moment. The dogs are fine as far as she can see. A little rattled, maybe, but no worse for the wear. And yet she can still feel the wards on the very edge of her senses. A reminder.

“Would you like a cup of tea before you leave?” The boy asks and smiles fully when she faces him again. The offer is unexpected but Lea’s biggest flaw has always been her curiosity. She agrees and follows him into the house.

Two hours later she is pleasantly full as the tea apparently came with a side of various desserts. She didn’t ask and the boy didn’t offer an explanation. Two hours later she is still sitting in the house engaged in the conversation that has been going in loops and spirals so twisted she struggles not to get lost and sipping a cup of something floral and spicy. Two hours later she is no closer to understanding what the boy is than she was before. Two hours later and she still doesn’t know the boy’s name.

“...it really is quite a calming hobby. Growing things and then chopping them into tiny pieces to use in potions has an underappreciated charm to it.” The boy muses and bites into a small pastry he holds in one hand.

“I’ve never seen the appeal myself.” Lea answers after a beat.

“No, I don’t suppose you would.” The boy says and looks at her as if he knows her better than she knows herself.

It is not the first time, she realizes. He made remarks like these throughout the whole conversation, never revealing anything truly important about himself but leaving her wrong-footed every time.
“In fact…” The boy stands up and regards her for a moment. “I’ll be back in second, don’t go anywhere.”

And he leaves. Lea blinks and leans back in her chair. The kitchen they’ve been sitting in is small but homely. Dark wood interspaced with modern human appliances used for cooking. Clay pots full of flowers on the only windowsill. A table and two chairs. A woolen web of strings hanging from the ceiling near the window like a hammock. For the faerie, she guesses.

She sighs. And rubs her temples while no one can see her. Her hounds are playing with the faerie outside, have been for the last two hours, and from the sound of it having the time of their canine lives. They pass the window sometimes, dogs chasing faerie, faerie chasing dogs. Lea takes another sip. The tea is surprisingly savory. She must remember to ask for the recipe.

“I’ve got a bag of the blend you can take with you.” She didn’t hear the boy return but as he speaks he is already sitting back in his seat. He is holding something in his hands and it takes Lea a moment to place the object. When she does she cannot hold back the gasp and has to set the tea on the table lest she spill it.

“Is that..?” She cannot tear her gaze away. It is a small knife, silver metal with a bone-white handle. The blade curves slightly and when the sun falls on it the metal glows. And in the glow she can see words. She cannot read them but she knows their meaning. Everyone in the Court of Winter does. Brittle is the fire that feeds on ice.

“It is.” The boy answers, satisfied with her reaction. She takes a moment to get herself under control. “The Blade of Ice, used to kill the first Queen of Summer eons ago. Lost ever since, of course.”

“Of course.” She echoes faintly. The Blade is now lying on the table and she has never seen anything as beautiful.

“Would make a fine gift, don’t you think?” She snaps her gaze upwards and the boy is grinning. He seems openly delighted about something. “Tell you what, you promise to come visit every now and then and the Blade is yours. I have no use for it.”

His words keep ringing in her ears long after he falls silent. That is… She doesn’t know what to think. She doesn’t really know what to do, either. Her gaze is drawn back to the Blade almost against her will. She should be asking questions, she knows. But she is afraid, for the first time this afternoon, she is afraid. Not of the boy, no, though she probably should be, especially now. No, she is afraid her questions might make him retract the offer. The gift, really, for all he made it sound like a fair exchange.

Her hands itch with the desire to hold the Blade. To have it in her possession. To use it.

“I promise.” Her lips part and she exhales softly. “I promise. I promise.”

“Wonderful.” The boy slides the Blade across the table and gingerly she takes it. It feels right in her hands. It feels powerful.

The boy hums and a wave of magic washes over her. She would have flinched but the magic doesn’t feel malevolent. If anything, it feels protective. Safe. She opens her mouth to ask but closes it again as she meets the boy’s gaze. It is soft. Dangerously soft, she thinks and licks her suddenly dry lips.

Suddenly, she knows who the boy reminds her of. Her hand creeps to her neck where she touches the necklace her dearest friend gave her so many years ago. She knows the boy’s name too now. But… She looks into his eyes one more time. And keeps her questions caged inside. There will be
time to ask, she thinks faintly and caresses the Blade. A moment later she takes off the amulet and offers it to the boy. He takes it.

*Your mother asked me to give it to you,* she doesn’t say.

*I know,* he doesn’t answer.

*I couldn’t find you,* she doesn’t say.

*I know,* he doesn’t answer.

*I am your godmother,* she doesn’t say.

*I know,* he doesn’t answer.

They sit in silence, sipping at tea and looking out of the window. The hounds are barking outside excited about some thing or another. The boy watches her but the regard doesn’t bother her.

“You!” The peace is broken as the faerie flies into the room and shrieks right into Lea’s ear. She leans away.

“Yes, Toot?” The boy answers calmly. The faerie lands on the table and hops in place several times before finally stilling.

“Harry, can we keep the puppies? Please, please, please?”

The boy laughs and shakes his head.

“Sorry, Toot, no can do. They are Lea’s dogs. Not strays.”

The faerie wilts and takes a few second to glare balefully at Lea. She finds it somewhat charming.

“Rest assured, I will be visiting… Harry quite often in the future.” She says, pausing at the boy’s name. “I will make sure to bring my hounds with me if it pleases you so much.”

The boy grins at her in approval and the faerie careens out of the house with a happy yell. An excitable little thing, Lea thinks. Wherever did the boy find him?

“Too and I go way back.” The boy says. “He helped me find someone I’ve been looking for and we’ve been friends ever since. Thank you for indulging him.”

He is sincere, Lea realizes. He truly counts the faerie among his friends. How curious.

“I see.” Lea didn’t, not really, but it was not her place to say so. Regretfully, she adds, “I should be going.”

The boy nods as if he was expecting it and stands up to lead her outside.

The day is slowly turning into evening and the woods around the house are dark with promise. The Blade pulses in her hand, the magic throbs in her veins, and she smiles. The boy sits down on the porch as she steps past the stone walls surrounding the house. For a moment Leanansidhe hesitates. What should she say?


“You as well, Harry. Till we meet again.” She breathes out and calls her hounds to her. A moment
later she is the woods. Her godson watches her leave and doesn’t blink until she is out of his sight. Then he stands up and disappears back into the house. He doesn’t close the door.

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
Chapter 3

The monastery is awash in excitement. The celebration is planned for after their newest Guardians are born, but already Brother Wang can feel the air sing with joy. The sky has been clear and cloudless all morning and the snow around their home is dazzlingly bright. Abbot Choden says it is a good sign. Wang is inclined to believe him. He walks the winding path between the main monastery building and the small temple nestled behind a circle of pines and enjoys the way sunshine licks his skin.

_It is going to be a good day_, he thinks.

He reaches the temple just as the sun hides behind the first cloud the day has seen since the previous evening. Wang squints at the sky but the cloud is solitary and not very dark. It must have been hiding between the mountain peaks before a gust of wind dislodged it.

“Brother Wang?” The voice behind him is politely inquisitive.

“Brother Kalsang,” Wang murmurs as he turns to the speaker. He is older than Wang, though not by much, and of a higher rank besides. “How is Guardian Kunchen doing?”

Kalsang regards him for a long moment then gestures for Wang to follow him.

“As well as can be expected. The labor itself is almost over. You may join us if you wish.”

Wang nods and they walk into the temple shadows falling around them. The only source of light is several candles set in wall holders around the room. The floor is draped in cloth but Wang can still feel stone under his feet. Further in, a pair of monks are crouching on the floor over a large dog. Guardian Kunchen does indeed look to be in fine health as she tries to push out the last of her litter.

“Strange.” One of the monks remarks, not paying any attention to Wang and Kalsang. Instead he is looking in a large basket already overflowing with puppies. Guardian Kunchen whines a little and shudders as the nearest monk strokes her flank.

“What is it?” Kalsang asks sharply.

The monks both turn to glance at him and then return their gazes to the Guardian.

“There were only supposed to be five new Guardians. Instead, there are six. And the last one…” The monk is interrupted as with a growl Guarding Kunchen finally pushes the last puppy out and tiredly relaxes on the floor. The puppy is unusually large, even by Foo Dogs standards, and Wang can see why the Guardian was having so much trouble. It is male, Wang realizes.

The puppy blindly noses at the monk that picks him up and tries to put him in the basket with the others. A second later he growls, and though the sound itself is hardly threatening, the magic accompanying it worries Wang.

The monk holding the puppy stills and slowly takes him out of the basket. For a second they just stare at the new born Guardian not sure what to do. But then the puppy yawns, slides off the palm, lands on his mother, and goes right to sleep.
“Well.” Says Brother Kalsang after a moment of thought. “That is indeed strange and unexpected.”

“Is there something wrong?” Normally, Wang has almost no contact with their youngest Guardians. He brings the monastery news from the outside, of the White Council, of the Courts, and doesn’t spend a lot of time at home. Not as much as he would like to, at least. As such, he is unsure as to what Kalsang is referring to.

The monks watch as the puppy sleeps. There is magic leaking out of him with every breath he takes but there is no ill intent in it.

“The young Guardian has already picked a human, it seems. Had done so, before he was even born.” Kalsang finally answers. “It is not wrong, per se, but it hasn’t happened in a very long time. Centuries in the very least.”

Wang raises his brows in surprise. He doesn’t understand the Guardian speech. Not like the older and elder monks who have quietly left with a basket of puppies while he was speaking to Kalsang. To sanctify the newest Guardians one must do so right after they are born. At least, that is what Wang has been told.

“And who is it? Which brother was picked?” He asks.

Kalsang hesitates.

“It is not… one of us.” He says. “I… The Guardian told us the name but it is not one I recognize.”

“Oh?” Wang wonders who it might be. And why. But then again, these matters are not for him to contemplate. Not yet. Not for a few more years.

“I believe I will have a task for you soon, Brother Wang.” Kalsang says after a pause. “The Guardian has made his choice, that is plain to see, but he will require assistance in finding his chosen. As it is not one of us, you will have a better chance of finding that human.”

“Of course.” Wang replies. “I will be happy to help our newest Guardian.”

The air inside the temple is getting colder now that the other monks have left. Guardian Kunchen has curled up around her son and both of them pay no more attention to their surroundings. Quietly, both Wang and Kalsang stand up and exit the temple without bothering them further. The news of the birth has already reached the main building and Wang can see his brothers preparing to start the celebrations.

“He also said that he was late,” Kalsang says absentmindedly as he watches a young apprentice hurry across the yard with a bucket of spring water.

“Late?” Wang inquires.

“Yes. The question is, late for what?” Kalsang’s voice is calm but Wang can hear a trace of worry.

Wang has no answer to give to his brother. There is a gong ringing from high above the monastery. The celebrations have started.
Two months later Brother Wang stands in O’Hare airport and tries to figure out where to go from there. Their newest Guardian is sitting at his feet, his dark grey coat contrasting with a bright red leash he insists on wearing. His head already reaches Wang’s knee.

Get him to Chicago, Kalsang said. He will lead you from there.

The Guardian yawns and lazily scratches at his ear.

“Well.” Wang murmurs. “I don’t suppose you can show me the way to your chosen?”

Even despite everything he still feels a little bit silly talking to a dog that he can’t understand. Wang knows that in a few years, a decade at most, he would have learned the skill. But apparently, the Guardian was not willing to wait this long.

He was born before his time, Kalsang told him before they left. His soul was too impatient to meet his human. Who are we to stop him?

The Guardian stands up and looks expectantly at Wang. The monk grimaces but picks up the leash the puppy is offering him. That is so… undignified. Truly, a Guardian on a leash. He would never have to suffer so if he had picked one of Wang’s brothers as his chosen.

The Guardian huffs and with a quiet bark starts leading Wang to the airport’s exit. The building itself is fairly crowded despite it being the middle of the night and even Wang feels a little bit claustrophobic. He welcomes the fresh air outside and after a short pause hails a cab. The Guardian lolls his tongue out and Wang thinks he approves.

He has never been to Chicago before and he cannot say he regrets it. The city is… too urban for his tastes. The air, though relatively clear, still smells fairly unpleasant.

The taxi driver doesn’t bat an eye when Wang starts asking the Guardian for directions. The monk wonders if unflappability is the trait shared by all taxists all around the world or if he is just lucky like that.

The driver attempts to strike a conversation but Wang is not particularly in the mood to indulge the man’s curiosity. He has his hands full trying to decipher the Guardian’s barks.

He starts to feel a little bit queasy but then he always does on moving vehicles. He much prefers his own feet as a method of transportation. Finally, the car comes to a stop near a darkened alley and Wang sighs in relief. He pays the driver and watches as the car’s tail lights disappear around the corner.

The Guardian nudges him in the knee and Wang snaps out of his thoughts. Right. He hopes the Guardian’s chosen is not a… a… a vagrant of some sort though from the looks of the alley the puppy is leading him into, a vagrant might be too weak a word.

The alley is in night’s domain. Any street lamps that might have been there at one point or another are long since broken. Aside from the light spilling into the alley from the street outside the darkness is near complete.

Wang swallows but the Guardian is already trotting off into the shadows and he has no choice but to follow. His steps are nearly silent but for the occasional splash when his feet encounter a puddle of water. Left over from the morning rain, he thinks, and tries to step a bit more carefully.

“Honorable Guardian?” He calls uncertainty when he realizes he can no longer see the puppy.
There is a sudden sound ahead of him, cut off at the end. It is loud and high and seems almost a scream. Wang flinches and calls again, disregarding caution.

“Guardian? Where are you?”

The worry grows in his chest in leaps and bounds. If something happens to the Guardian… Wang shies away from the thought and glances around as he almost runs further into the alley.

He can no longer hear the street and city outside, Wang realizes suddenly. The thought makes him stop in his tracks and turn around. He cannot see the exit. In fact, he can no longer see anything. The darkness is so absolute Wang is not sure he can see the shadows surrounding him.

Something brushes against his leg and he startles, pressing his lips together to keep any sounds inside. Wang takes a step back and that’s when he hears a bark. Closing his eyes for a second, he turns and starts running.

One foot in front of another, he thinks. As long as he can still feel concrete under his feet he is still in the city. Wang clenches his teeth and regrets the fact he has no aptitude for the magical arts. One foot in front of… He trips.

It is indeed concrete he lands on, though some parts of it are sticky.

“You’re a long way from home, Brother.”

Wang stills and tries to calm his breathing as he raises his head. A quiet murmur of the same voice and the oppressing darkness retreats, leaving Wang in a circle of flickering light. The speaker is a young teenage boy. A boy who holds the Guardian in his arms, Wang sees. The puppy is happily licking the boy’s chin, taking no notice of the blood that oozes from the graze just above his eyebrow. The teenager is grinning a bit too sharply for Wang’s taste and his fingers are tightly woven into the Guardian’s fur. There is blood on his hands, too. Wang swallows. That is… That is not who he imagined the Guardian’s chosen to be.

“No need to look so scared.” The boy rolls his eyes and ducks his head a little, giving the Guardian better access. “You’re perfectly safe. Well, as long as you remain in the light. Really, didn’t your Mom ever tell you to stay away from the dark?”

In the corner of his eye Wang notices shadows that dance on the border between the darkness and the light. They seem alive. Alive and hungry. He lowers his gaze and blinks at the bodies behind the boy. He cannot see any wounds but he is certain they are far past the point of no return. There are small circular marks burnt into their foreheads, no larger than a coin. He blinks and realizes he cannot see their faces. Just the marks.

“Hey. Hey!” The boy snaps his fingers right before his eyes and Wang flinches away. “Don’t look there, it’ll be a pain getting you back. C’mon, I’ll get you out.”

The boy tucks the Guardian under one arm and grabs Wang by the hand. The darkness falls around them once more but before Wang can draw another breath they are already standing outside, on the street.

“Here we go.” The boy says satisfied. There is not a speck of blood on him now. A little hysterically Wang wonders if there ever was. “Do you want me to call you a taxi? Or walk you to wherever you’re staying?”

Wang looks back but the buildings behind him have closed ranks. There is no alley. There is no
darkness. No more than in a large city at night.

“Alright there, Brother?” Asks the boy.

“I… Yes,” Wang finally finds his voice. “Yes, I am.”

He pauses and takes a moment to gather his thoughts. He looks at the Guardian who seems perfectly content to spend eternity in the boy’s arms. He looks at the small limb still clutching his own hand. He sighs.

“I am.” He repeats. “Are you..?”

He is not sure what his next question is going to be. The boy takes the decision out of his hands.

“I’m Harry. Harry Dresden. Nice to meet you.” The boy grins at him and finally releases his hold on Wang. “Thanks for bringing Mouse to me. Wasn’t expecting to see him so soon.”

“You’re welcome,” answers Wang on reflex. Mouse? The boy must mean the Guardian, but Mouse?

“So…” Dresden drawls before gently setting the Guardian on the ground and grabbing the leash. “I’m really grateful. So, can I do anything for you? Taxi? A place to stay? Though, gotta warn you, I live on the other side, so a hotel is the best I can do for you.”

“I… No. No, thank you.” Wang’s mind is still reeling a little. Mouse. Guardian Mouse. Honorable Guardian Mouse. “I was to bring the Guardian to his chosen. That’s all.”

That’s all, Wang realizes. The thought brings a rush of unexpected relief with it and he carefully doesn’t thinks why. The blood. The shadows. He swallows again.

“Oh. Alright then?” Dresden’s words come out as a question and Wang nods. “Great. Then, I’ve still got some, er, business to take care of, so if you don’t mind..?”

Wang shakes his head and bids the boy goodbye. Dresden still stays long enough to make sure Wang safely makes it into a taxi and then waves as the car drives away. The last thing Wang sees is the Guardian excitedly jumping and running around Dresden as the boy laughs.

The street lamps pass by in two twin streams of light. It is comforting, he thinks. And after telling the driver to take him to the airport Wang leans his head against the window and just breathes. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out...

But, really, Mouse?!

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
Over the years Lea has come to regard the little house in the woods as a welcome respite from the intricacies of navigating the Court. The Queen is paying her more attention than usual and Lea has started harboring some thoughts that might see her… forcibly removed from the Queen’s favor. But Mab has been acting unusual. And Lea isn’t one to distrust her instincts.

She has been… snooping, for lack of another word, in the Queen’s affairs for the last few months. The constant caution has made her more tired that she’d like and she hopes a little time away with her godson will remedy that.

The wards caress her skin when she steps past the tree line and walks towards the open entrance door. It’s been a while since her last visit and she relishes the thought of seeing her godson.

He has been so busy lately, flitting in and out of his domain in the Wylde Lands. Lea wonders when he will make an official claim for the land. With how much magic he invested in it, she thinks the moment will come sooner rather than later.

She makes her way inside the house and turns towards the kitchen, expecting Harry to already be inside and waiting for her. But something makes her stop and listen. Some note out of place. It is too silent. The house is never silent, whether it be filled with Harry’s voice, the chattering of the bound spirit, Toot-Toot’s shrieks and taunts, or, more recently, his beast’s happy barking.

“Harry?” She calls into the house. Her voice reverberates through the small hallway and comes back to her dripping in worry. She frowns.

Hesitation holds her still while she waits for an answer and hears nothing. Turning away from the kitchen, Lea starts walking further into the house. There are three other rooms, she knows. Harry’s bedroom, which she has never had reason to visit. The living room with the three-chimney fireplace alongside a pair of decadently soft armchairs that Lea has coveted since the moment she sat on one of them. And the library.

All three rooms are conspicuously empty.

Lea spends a few moments in thought. Another call to her godson yields no results. Pursing her lips she returns to the hallway near the entrance and opens a narrow door leading to the basement level.

And, oh, now there are the sounds she was missing. She can hear the spirit of intellect even if she is not close enough to discern what is being said. Though judging by his voice, Harry has done something to vex him again.

Sparing a glance for the candles lining the stairs, Lea takes her time coming down. She has been on the lower level of the house only once before and found it to be a bit too dark for her tastes. Still, Lea is quite impressed by the little lab Harry managed to nestle into the corner of the basement. The walls are lined with shelves upon shelves of ingredients, while the center of the room remains bare. If one were to ignore the owner of the house, of course.

As she comes into the room proper Lea clears her throat.

“Lea!” Harry turns to her, a bright smile stealing across his face. At the sight of him Lea’s thoughts
Harry’s hair is matted with blood, some of it escaping the black strands to paint crimson shadows onto his skin. There are bruises dotted on his naked arms and what looks to be a blade wound in his side.

“Harry!” Lea exclaims. “What happened to you?”

“His own idiocy happened to him,” grumbles a low voice to her left. Lea flicks a glance at Bob and raises an eyebrow in question. “He decided to poke a dragon. The dragon poked back.”

“It wasn’t a dragon, Bob. No matter what it looked like,” Harry’s voice is quietly amused as he steps closer to Lea. “I appreciate the concern, really, I do, but you know as well as I do, that I had no choice in the matter. It needed to be done.”

Whatever you say, Boss,” the skull’s eyes flare bright orange for a second and then he goes to sleep, apparently finished with the conversation altogether. Harry winces a little but doesn’t call him back out.

“What needed to be done?” Lea examines her godson, looking for more injuries. She finds none.

“Nothing important, godmother.” Harry waves his hand and spreads his arms wide. “I’d hug you, but, er, don’t want to get blood on your dress.”

For a moment Lea says nothing. She looks at her godson and remembers the boy she met years ago, the boy who reminded her of his mother in the beginning. But when she looks at him now she doesn’t see Margaret LeFay. She sees herself.

Lea steps forward and gathers her godson in her arms. She expects him to freeze and gently extricate himself from her embrace. Instead he sags forward with a quiet sigh and winds his own arms around her.

They stay like that for a long minute before her godson huffs and steps back.

“So-o-o,” he says and carefully doesn’t look at the red spots he left on her dress. “Give me a moment to… You know. And then I’m all yours.”

“Ah, darling, you shouldn’t make such promises lightly,” Lea chides him but turns to go back upstairs now that she knows he is alright.

“Sure, sure,” Harry picks up the skull containing his spirit and starts walking back, towards a metal sink hidden behind one of the shelves. There is a small pile of ash colored coins glinting on the table nearby. “I’ll join you in a moment. Don’t drink all the tea by yourself.”

Lea smiles but doesn’t reply.

Half an hour later there is no trace of blood on Harry as he sits across from her in the kitchen. He really has grown, Lea thinks. Not even two decades old and already he is taller than her and liable to grow even more.

“Hey, Lea?” Harry’s voice is quiet but settled in a way it wasn’t when she found him in the basement.

“Yes, Harry?”
“You still have the… gift I gave you when we’d just met?”

Lea blinks in surprise but nods nevertheless. “Would you like me to show you? I always carry it with me lest it falls in less reputable hands.” She says after a pause.

“Nah,” Harry shakes his head. “Just wanted to make sure.”

“How?”

Her godson chews on his lower lip and looks out of the window. Lea tells herself patience is a virtue. They sit in silence until Lea’s tea is almost cold, but in the end Harry sighs and turns back to her with a grimace.

“There are rumors,” he says.

“Rumors?” She inquires.

“Yeah.” His eyes flit around the room as he continues. His voice is tired. “There is something rotten in the state of Winter. You might have to use it. Soon. Not just on those poor shmucks you’ve been hunting for sport.”

She opens her mouth to ask him to elaborate but an icy throbbing deep inside her chest stops her in her tracks. She asks another question instead.

“Why have you gifted me this, Harry?”

Strange, Lea thinks in a rare moment of clarity, how easily fear rouses the beast inside us. How easily it morphs into furor and breeds delusions. And how easily our actions can make these delusions into reality.

“I am disappointed, my dear child.” The voice above her is colder than winter and more brittle than ice. “So many terrible things are done for love. Devotion. Loyalty. Who are you loyal to, Leanansidhe?”

My queen, she thinks and struggles to remember how to breathe. Only that’s not quite true now, is it? Not since… not since what?

There is a hand petting her hair, fingers catching in bloody tangles.

“Were you led astray? Or were you the one… leading?” The voice is quiet. Contemplative. And yet it grates on Lea’s mind. There is something she keeps forgetting. Isn’t there? The pain muddling her mind drags her thoughts into confused snarls.

“Who was it, Leanansidhe? Who stole you from me? Who filled your mind with such treasonous notions? Tell me their name and you may rest. No more pain. No more confusion. Tell me the name!”

She can taste blood on her breath when it finally comes but she is not afraid. She hasn’t been afraid in years, she thinks. Not since… not since what?
There is something inside her. There is something inside the Queen. Some things are similar. Some things are not equal. The voice huffs above her and her head is rent apart. Again. And again. She screams. She screams for a long time. And in her screams she hears what she is forgetting.

“They have gifted me this, Harry? Truth, please, no more diversions, no more pretty words, no matter how much I like how they glitter.”

A pause.

“Because some doors were opened long before I got here. Because some doors when opened cannot be closed again. Because the Queen’s blood will fall, for it is weak. Because the Queen will follow.”

A shock.

“What? What does that mean?”

A rueful smile.

“I cannot interfere. Not in this. Not this early.”

A hand stroking her cheek.

“Long live the Queen.”

Lea raises her head and stares into the pitch black eyes of her Queen. There is madness there, the pupils long since covered with tar. But there is also something else. Someone else.

“Long live the Queen,” Lea whispers and lurches forward with a pained cry. She has only seconds to gather her broken and bleeding body, weak from the weeks of torture at the hands of the one she was supposed to serve above all else. Her head throbs painfully, crimson running in rivulets along her neck. She ignores the agony of moving her muscles. She has only moments to act before the Winter Queen overcomes her surprise and reinforces the magic holding her down and pliant if not quite obeisant. Lea wishes the Court had believed her when she told them there was something not quite right with Mab.

“Foolish child,” sneers her Queen. “Nothing you can…”

Lea lifts her arm and magic arches between two women. It falls short of reaching the Queen and Mab laughs in derision. Lea tries again, gathering the slivers of her Will around her like a shield and turning it into a battering ram. She is too weak for finesse. Her magic splashes and bursts on Mab’s hand, but before she can retaliate Lea pushes through and slides the Blade of Ice into the Queen’s heart. Into Winter’s heart, she thinks and feels the air around her pulse with anticipation.

For a long second there is silence. The Queen stares at her uncomprehending. If Lea concentrates she can see the being that slithered its way into her Queen and made its home in the shards of her heart. For all Mab is the Queen of Air and Darkness, the parasyte is far far darker than Lea had imagined. Darker and older. It glares at her with eyes made of stars and black holes, raging and vengeful. Not all doors can be closed, Lea thinks. But if you cannot close the door… You must destroy it. Before whatever is on the other side, on the outer side, destroys you.

And then there are screams. And magic. And Winter bleeding into her through her grip on the Blade. And voices singing inside the chambers of her mind. And a crown of ice settling on her head.

The palace around her is full of panicking faeries, the Court driven into frenzy with Mab’s death. In
contrast, Lea is strangely calm. She walks to the raised aisle in the center, a body of snow and darkness dissolving behind her. Her wounds are gone, her mind is clear and free of Mab’s magic. She sits on the throne and as the Winter wraps around her like a mantle Lea smiles.

_The Queen is dead. Long live the Queen._

“Long live the Queen,” her Court echoes.

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Father.”

Nicodemus feels the noose around his neck shift and tighten in response to his agitated state. The rough fibers are leaving red scratches on his skin but he pays it no mind. His thoughts are weaving around another problem entirely.

“Father?”

He sends tendrils of his Will around the building they are holed up inside and shudders. Five Fallen left. Including him and his daughter. And still no clue as to who is picking them off one by one. And why. The basement he stands in feels stifling in comparison to the hotel suites he’s more accustomed to. But Nicodemus is nothing if not adaptable. The Romans could attest to that.

“Father! Are you listening to me?” Deirdre’s voice shakes him out of his thoughts.

“Yes. Yes, of course.” He says and turns back to her.

“I’ve got news from the Winter Court.”

“Oh? And what has our illustrious Winter Queen done now?” Nicodemus hopes Mab’s latest machinations can provide sufficient distraction from their current predicament.

“Died.” Deirdre’s voice is dry and a touch disbelieving.

For a second he thinks he misheard. Mab might be younger than he but she is, was if he is to trust his daughter’s word, one of the most powerful beings he ever had the pleasure of meeting in his life. Strong and skillful enough to block Anduriel’s eye. And unlike Fae Ladies, who tended to get themselves killed every few centuries or so, Fae Queens are a far sturdier sort.

“Died,” he repeats slowly.

His daughter nods. “Rumors are she got infected with something. She and her children.”

“Infected.” It seems he can do naught but repeat Deirdre’s words in the face of such news. Nicodemus takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out. “Who killed her? And who’s on the throne, then?”

“Leanansidhe. To both questions.”

He blinks. While he never personally dealt with that particular Fae, he does know of her, if only by reputation. Ruthless but best friends with a human witch. Prone to hunting anyone who crosses her with a pack of humans-turned-hounds but endlessly fascinated by the mortal artists, be it painters, musicians, or writers. Deadly but not fond of heedless slaughter.

“How did she manage that, I wonder…” he murmurs and fixes his gaze on the only window in the room. It is boarded up but the evening sun still finds a way through the cracks. Nicodemus eyes the dust motes dancing in the beams of sunlight and resists the urge to sneeze.

“She had the Blade of Ice.” Deirdre steps to stand beside him and sighs. “No one is quite sure where
she got it though. You know it’s been lost for bloody millenia.”

‘Hidden. Not lost.’ Whispers a voice in his mind and Nicodemus nods, distracted.

Plans are already vying for attention in his mind but Nicodemus knows he cannot commit to a single one of them until he can ensure he will not fall in the interim.

“They say Mab was driven mad with paranoia. Turned on her subjects. Until she got to Leanansidhe, the Winter Court was slowly disintegrating unter the pressure. Now… Now, though, with the addition of the Blade of Ice there is a possibility of a serious imbalance of power between the Courts.”

His daughter is right. And that opens a delicious opportunity of introducing even more chaos in the mix that undoubtedly followed in the wake of the power shift. Perhaps, he could…

There is a crash upstairs.

“What was that?” Deirdre whispers in alarm.

Nicodemus shushes her as he feels Anduriel slither its way along the shadows on the wall. He waits.

Another crash. And another. And a shout.

He tenses when he recognizes the voice as one of the Order’s most recent members. He feels rather than sees Deirdre trembling beside him. Whether from anxiety or excitement he cannot be sure.

‘It is dark,’ Anduriel susurrates in his mind. Nicodemus shivers even as he tenses further, hands curling into fists. ‘I cannot see. I cannot…’ Its voice trails off into silence.

Nicodemus steps away from the door upstairs and reaches for the comforting power of hellfire. And as the air fills with the smell of sulphur and brimstone, the basement goes completely dark.

He curses under his breath. “Deirdre, shift. Now!”

In the next second he hears his daughter’s flesh rip and following a barely formed instinct bathes the ceiling in hellfire. The shadows hiss and sizzle as they retreat, leaving blackened concrete in their wake. But hellfire is not enough to banish them completely.

Nicodemus spares a look for any possible escape route and curses again. The rolling and undulating mass of dark and shadows has blocked both the door to the stairs and the window outside. The hatch leading to the sewers is near the stairs and thus blocked as well.

His next moment of indecision is broken by his daughter. Deirdre screams, words nearly indecipherable in their volume. She is calling for him, Nicodemus realizes. He has no time to respond as he is busy trying to fend off the darkness creeping towards him with such inevitability that it makes something primal inside him wake up and take notice. Deirdre’s hair is splashing against the walls and against the shadows clinging to her legs, but it is not enough to stop the attack. Her claws pass through the darkness without dealing any damage.

“Father! Help!” She tries one more time and turns her gaze to him. There is shock in her eyes. There is fear. There is startled acceptance. There is pain. The shadows are up to her waist now and her skin flickers between red and pale pink. She swallows another scream and out of a corner of his eye Nicodemus sees the floor underneath her already drenched in dark blood.

There is another crash upstairs but he doesn’t have much hope for the others coming to their aid. No,
it’s far more likely most of them are already dead.

He is backed into the corner and feels death breathing over his shoulder. Anduriel is suspiciously quiet and once Nicodemus tries to call the Fallen he gets no answer. In fact, aside from hellfire he cannot summon any powers available to him through Anduriel. Beside him Deirdre spasms and her hair lists to the floor before suddenly whipping past him and impacting the wall near the window.

There is a sharp crack, followed by wooden creaking and the whole wall comes down, leaving a relatively open hole at the level of Nicodemus’ head. The shadows are shocked into a temporary retreat and Nicodemus doesn’t hesitate.

He blasts hellfire into the room, vaults over the fallen bricks and remains of the wooden supports, and bolts through the hole. The fresh air bites his face with cold but Nicodemus welcomes the feeling. He spares a look over his shoulder, but his escape route is already closing with shifting shadows. The last thing he sees before the hole is closed up completely is the bright silver of Deirdre’s hair, lying motionlessly on the rubble.

He runs.

*****

Deirdre wakes up to a quiet murmur of voices. There are two, the thought flits through her mind, weightless and intangible. She cannot make herself open her eyes. She is not sure she even should. Her whole body feels heavy and sluggish. Deirdre tries to move her hand but only one of her fingers makes a valiant effort to follow her orders.

“Don’t try to move,” the voice is male. She doesn’t recognize it. “Not that you could, not really, but you know, better safe than sorry. We don’t want your limbs spontaneously combusting.”

“Or blowing up,” adds a second voice. Also male, but less defined than the first.

“Or that,” agrees the first voice.

Deirdre opens her eyes. She rides out the pain brought by the too bright light and squints, trying to look around without moving her head. The magic she faintly feels on her skin doesn’t strike her as benevolent in any way. There is a low ceiling right above where she’s laying. If she concentrates she can see shelves at the edges of her vision. The rest is a painfully dark blur.

She grits her teeth and reaches deep inside herself, looking for the phantom well of power that comes with being a host of an angel. She is prepared to summon her other form or, failing that, use her hellfire to defend herself. But instead of the deeply familiar warmth of a Fallen, there is nothing but terrifying emptiness.

Before she can succumb to panic, a shadow falls on her face and she fights not to flinch in surprise. The man is tall, taller than her by far, and his slightly rueful grin is a bit sharp around the edges, but still attractive enough that she wouldn’t hesitate at returning it in other circumstances. However, the illusion of innocence is completely shattered by the shadows curling around his shoulders and his arms like weird affectionate snakes.

“Who…” She manages to get one word past her parched throat before she pauses. The events leading to her current predicament are hazy but slowly trickling back into her memories.
“No one you would know, sweetcheeks,” the note of amusement in the man’s voice strikes her as slightly ominous.

“Oh, just get on with it, boss. We don’t have all day,” she still cannot pinpoint the source of the second voice. It sounds annoyed.

The shadows shift in response to it and slowly drift past Deirdre, piling on top of something to her left.

“Hey! Quit it!” The annoyance in the second voice gives way to exasperation. “Harry, tell them to stop!”

“They’re just being friendly,” the man’s eyes are tracking something she cannot see. For a second Deirdre strains her body, telling it to get up and use his moment of inattention, but her limbs barely twitch. “You know they like you, Bob.”

“And you know it takes ages to cleanse my aura after they start with their kissy routine,” the second voice grumbles, but there’s not much heat behind it.

The man claps his hands and turns back to her. “Anyways! I’ve gotten real sick and tired of smoking you lot out of whatever hovel you pick as your hiding spot. So, Here’s what’s going to happen. You tell us where your dear old daddy might be holed up next and I’ll let you slip quietly on your next great adventure. You stay stubborn and, well, I’ll have to get creative.”

“Oh, the horrors,” intones the second voice. Deirdre really wishes she could see him. Or at least turn her head so she could try and look for him. “She’s quaking in her boots. I can see it. Terrified, isn’t she.”

“Bob, you’re killing the mood here. Zip it.” The man pauses. “Or did you want to get in onto the action?”

“You serious?” The excitement in the second voice is almost palpable. “Oh, boy. Do I ever.”

“Alright,” the man shrugs and moves a couple of steps away from Deirdre. “Knock yourself out. You know what I’m looking for.”

He waves his hand and the shadows come back, floating on the air with a barely perceptible chittering sound.

“Nothing personal,” he says to Deirdre once the shadows gather behind his back and sink out of her view. Then he pauses. “Well, no. It is personal. It is very very personal, and I’m enjoying every minute of it, but you wouldn’t really understand why, so… Doesn’t matter.”

Deirdre takes a deep breath, and she isn’t sure what she should say, but she can at least try to stall for time. But before she can form even one syllable her view is obscured by a brightly lit mass of color and that is when the pain strikes. It starts in her head and makes its way down to her feet in a slow progression of increasing agony.

She thinks she’s screaming but she can no longer feel her throat. She can feel something foreign settling in her bones, in her blood, in her limbs, in her fingers. In her head. In her mind. And in her memories.

“Now that’s what I call a treasure trove,” the voice she hears sounds suspiciously like hers but Deirdre is too far gone to understand why that would be a cause of concern. “Might take some time, but I should be able to copy everything around here and add it to my database. Give me an hour.
Two tops.”

“And the Fallen? Any traces?” The man’s voice is distant and getting weaker with every word. Deirdre can no longer see him. She can no longer see anything.

“Not that I can see. Seems you did a clean job in separating the two while leaving the host alive.”

“Great. I’ll leave you to it then. Holler if you need anything.”

The world around her pulses and throbs until the agony drives spikes in her temples and Deirdre drifts away on the waves of pain, her mind blanking at last.

She doesn’t wake up.

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
Lara knows her family. She knows the taste of her father’s cruelty. She knows the smell of her sisters’ innocence. The sounds of her brothers’ deaths. The touch of her own pain. The ache of her own loyalty.

And that’s why it doesn’t take her long to realize that her only remaining brother is acting strange. At first, she chalks it up to the new human Thomas’s taken under his wing. Jessica, Jasmine, or something like that. The pet is young and pretty and sweet, and well worth the time he seems to be investing in her. But… But something still feels off to Lara.

She has lost so many siblings already. She doesn’t want to lose Thomas as well.

So she waits, watches, and diverts their father’s attention to other matters. Like the way other Houses have been obviously plotting something. Like the way he has been driving away any potential allies with his paranoia. Naturally, she does all of this without drawing any of his ire and suspicions to herself. She is concerned, not suicidal.

Thomas though… Lara knows she cannot protect him forever. Nor does she really want to. She hopes she won’t need to.

Her brother is rarely at the estate now. He has a flat in Chicago, she knows, but before meeting his human he didn’t spend all that much time there. And when Thomas is actually at home, he is uncharacteristically quiet. Watchful. Pensive. A silent presence at her side during meetings.

Maybe, she muses, he is finally growing up. As unlikely as it seems. A girl can hope. Lara waits as much as she can afford to, but a few weeks later her father is starting to pay attention, and that is never a good thing when it comes to his sons.

Feeling anxious irritation creeping on her mind, she slips reports of House Skavis encroaching on their territory on Lord Raith’s desk, ensures she has an alibi just in case, and follows Thomas into city proper one chipper morning.

She is not particularly surprised when her brother doesn’t immediately drive to his pet or even his flat. Instead, she shadows him into one of the shabbiest parts of Chicago. Even in the sunlight, it looks far beneath any members of House Raith and not for the first time Lara wonders what the hell Thomas is doing.

They stop at one of the street corners, near a small overgrown public garden, and Lara waits until Thomas is almost out of her sight, hidden by trees, before stepping out of her Rolls Royce and locking it. The buildings around the garden block almost all of the sunshine and the shadows look deep and cold. Lara shivers and carefully makes her way after her brother.

She still hopes he is simply meeting his pet for a spot of outdoors sex, but has trouble believing that is actually the case. She stumbles on an uneven path and takes her eyes off Thomas for a moment, righting herself. When she looks back up, she is alone. Thomas is nowhere to be found and, somewhat to her alarm, Lara can no longer hear him either.

She stops and extends her senses. Despite the fact she fed just this morning, the only sounds Lara can hear are those coming from the street behind her. But even those are muted and distorted. In front —
there is only silence. The dichotomy feels almost magical in nature. She frowns but she cannot turn back now. If Thomas is in trouble, it’s liable to spill onto the rest of House Raith. If Thomas is in trouble, he might need help.

She should have taken a gun with her.

Lara takes a step forward but then there’s a loud rustling to her left and she stills again. The bushes off the path shake for a second and a moment later a beast leaps out of them right in front of Lara. She stifles a cry and jumps back, but before she can panic, the beast promptly sits down, its tongue lolling out of it mouth, and pants.

It is a dog, Lara realizes as soon as her heart rate calms down. A very large dog, admittedly, but a dog nonetheless. Shaggy dark grey fur, marked black at the tips of its ears and its wagging tail. Its head comes up almost to her chest. There are leaves and small branches caught in its fur, and the dog takes a moment to shake them off before turning and looking at her over its shoulder.

“Do you…” Lara pauses and leans forward just a bit. “Do you want me to follow you?”

The dog nods and paws at the ground once, twice, before barking quietly. So, not a dog, then, Lara thinks. Or not just a dog. It barks again and wags its tail even harder.

“Well, if you insist…” Lara murmurs as she finally starts following the dog. She chooses to disregard the imprudence of following the biggest dog this city has probably ever seen into darkened and, frankly, forbidding garden. Which really should have ended at least a minute ago, Lara realizes as they walk off the path and further into what now looks like a forest.

She really, really, really, should have taken a gun with her.

Lara glances back but the path behind them starts slowly disappearing into thin air as soon as they walk further into the woods. She has a feeling she won’t be able to easily find her way back now. If she dies here, she will haunt Thomas to the end of his little miserable life. Him and his pet.

The dog barks and bounds ahead of her, clearing the last line of trees and jumping over a low stone fence. He turns and looks at her expectantly. Behind him Lara can see the back of a small house.

“Oh no. I’m not jumping that, dog. I’m wearing heels, for God’s sake,” she snaps at the animal. “They are already dirty as all hell, I don’t want them broken as well.”

“Then you shouldn’t have followed Mouse,” replies a shrill voice to her left. As she turns in surprise and a smidgen of fear, the dog barks once more and lopes towards the house, vanishing behind the corner.

There is a male dew drop fairy hovering just a few feet away from her. Lara stares for a second at the spear he’s clutching in his unexpectedly big hand and suppresses the urge to laugh. Scared by a dew drop fairy. Really, Lara, she berates herself. What’s next? Mice? Cockroaches?

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“Where am I?” Lara asks the fairy.

“Za Lord’s house,” the fairy sniffs. “You’re the Pale Hunter’s sister. You’re invited inside.”

With those words the fairy rises into the air and shoots off into the forest, where he joins a dozen of other, smaller dew drop fairies sitting on the branches. All of them have weapons in their hands. One of them is clutching a plastic fork, but to each their own. Well, she supposes it would be rude to
decline such an invitation. But she is still not jumping over the fence. It must have a proper gate somewhere.

A minute later she is standing on the porch and considering knocking on the front door. But before she can decide the door creaks and opens without her even touching it. There’s no one behind it, but Lara can hear a quiet murmur of voices further in the house. She shrugs and steps inside. She has already done plenty of idiotic things today, what’s one more?

She bypasses what looks like a small kitchen and a couple of closed doors before stopping on a threshold of a living room.

“Lara?” Thomas’ incredulous voice is a balm to her nerves. It is also fuel to her anger.

“Thomas.” She says mildly while looking around the room. “Care to explain yourself?”

Her brother is sitting straight in an armchair, his mouth open in surprise. He doesn’t look harmed. Or even distressed in any way. If anything he looks far more comfortable than she has ever seen him be back at the mansion. Opposite him is another armchair, but despite her expectations (or rather hopes) the one occupying it is not Thomas’ pet. It is another man, tall and lanky with a mop of dark hair on top. Handsome. But not Thomas’ type. The fireplace in the middle is not lit but the light from the windows is more than enough to see the sharp angles of the man’s face. Definitely older than Thomas’ female pet though.

“What?” Her brother shakes his head. “No, wait, Lara. What are you doing here? How did you even…”

Curious. Thomas was obviously the Pale Hunter the fairy referred to. Did that make the other man Zed Lord?

“I believe I was invited.” Lara shifts and inclines her head ever so slightly towards the other man.

“You were?” Thomas’ voice comes up in pitch and alarm.

“Well,” the man stretches and slumps even further into the chair. The smirk twisting mouth promises all sorts of things. “I couldn’t just leave her wandering the woods now, could I. She was lost the moment she followed you onto the path. Had Mouse not found her who knows what could have happened?”

“Harry…” Thomas groans and makes a face. Lara is intimately familiar with that face. Her brother has been making it since he could walk every time she does something he finds exasperating.

“Brother, won’t you introduce me to your friend?” A pity the room has only two armchairs. Her feet could really use a rest after the trek through the forest. She shoots a pointed look at her brother.

“Right.” Thomas clears his throat and vacates his seat. Lara doesn’t hesitate to take his place and smiles at the other man. Whoever he is, she doubts that he’s merely Thomas’ new pet. “Harry, this is Lara Raith, my sister. Lara, this is Harry Dresden, my… friend.”

“A pleasure,” Harry waves a hand at her, not even bothering to get up for proper introduction.

“I’m sure,” Lara replies.

Thomas looks between the two and rolls his eyes before adding, “No, Lara, I’m not sleeping with
him. And no, don’t even try to make him sleep with you. Or feed on him. Or, really, do anything
with him. A fair warning.”

“Why, Thomas,” Harry presses his hand to his mouth and pretends he is shocked. “Look at you,
defending my virtue like that. My very knight in shining Armani.”

Lara suppresses a smile and leans back to observe the ensuing bickering between the two but doesn’t
take any part in it herself. As they snap at each other, though without any heat beneath the words,
Thomas gravitates closer to Harry and stops just shy of touching the man’s shoulders with his hips.
Curiouser and curiouser.

“Would you like a glass of wine, Lara?” She is roused from her contemplation by Harry’s voice. “I
think I have a bottle or two stashed somewhere in the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” Lara smiles and nods. She thinks about adding a touch of her allure to the words, but
Thomas didn’t look like he was kidding when he warned her off. Best to hold off on that for now,
she thinks.

“Great,” Harry tips his face up and looks at her brother. “Thomas, fetch.”

Thomas swats him on the head or rather tries to as Harry evades with a laugh. And a few grumbles
later her brother leaves the room, presumably heading towards the kitchen. Lara is officially
impressed.

She says as much.

Harry winks at her and finally stands up from his chair, moving instead to lean on the fireplace
mantel. Despite the summer that invaded Chicago just a month prior, the room is rather chilly, now
that Lara is relaxed enough to pay attention. But then again, she doubts they are in Chicago anymore.

“Ignis,” Harry murmurs under his breath and lights up the fireplace with a wave of his hand. A
practitioner then. Even more interesting. And dangerous. The last time a Raith tangled with a magic
user things went south pretty quickly, Lara remembers.

“That’s better,” Harry nods to himself but doesn’t move back to the chair. Instead he turns to look at
her still leaning onto the mantel. His eyes gleam in the light cast by the fire and for a second Lara
swears she can see the shadows behind his back move. But then he smiles and shifts and looks
perfectly normal once more. “I hope Mouse didn’t give you too much trouble. He can be a bit too
enthusiastic when meeting new people.”

“No,” Lara answers. “He was the perfect gentleman.”

Harry snorts and opens his mouth to say something else before being interrupted by Thomas.

“Red or white?” Her brother is holding two dusty bottles with barely legible labels and a couple of
wine glasses. Lara squints but cannot read the names of the wines. “And Harry, why are there ten
bottles of vodka in your kitchen closet but only two bottles of wine?”

“Blame Toot,” Harry shrugs. “He says vodka makes pizza taste even better.”

Lara makes no comment instead pointing at the red wine in Thomas’ hands and waiting until he
pours her a glass. She takes a sip and blinks in surprise. It is… good. But not anything she has ever
had the pleasure of tasting before.

“What is it?” She cannot help but ask.
“Fairy wine,” Harry answers. “It was a gift from my godmother.”

“I… see.” Lara doesn’t but shelves the questions for another day. Preferably, when she can corner her brother alone and shake every answer out of him. There might be rope involved.

Thomas plops down on the other armchair and pours himself a glass as well. He doesn’t offer any to the other man, Lara notes.

“No,” Harry says, his smile widening with every word. “Let’s talk politics. Did you know, Lara, that your father is under an entropy curse? How would you like to take his place?”

While Thomas tries to get his cough under control and wipe the wine off his shirt, Lara leans forward and matches Harry’s smile.

“I’m all ears,” she practically purrs.

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The call comes just as John settles down in his office to deal with paperwork. No doubt Nathan would have some words to say about extending the work day way past midnight, but needs must. And when those needs include a tangle of embezzlement, gambling debts, and plain old stealing by several of his people, John really cannot afford to go to bed at anything resembling reasonable time.

He lets the phone ring for a long moment before sighing and picking up the receiver. Night time means no secretary to screen his calls, but hopefully it’s not something liable to multiply the mound of paperwork on his table. He waits a moment and then realizes the ringing hasn’t stopped. Ah. His personal cell then. He must be more tired than he thought. John briefly closes his eyes, bids farewell to work and any hope of sleep, and fishes the bulky cell phone from the inside of his desk.

“Mr. Crane?” The voice is hesitant and vaguely familiar. “This is Dr. Preston from St. Luke medical center.”

John grips the phone hard and holds his breath. Did something happen to…

“You are listed as an emergency contact for one of our Jane Does. I’m happy to inform you that she woke up an hour ago. The girl is stable and has…”

He feels his heart thud against his chest once, twice, before letting out the breath he was holding and refocusing on the phone call. A minute later the doctor moves from medical details and on to more mundane things.

“While the visiting hours are long over, we are prepared to make an exception in your case, all things considered, Mr. Crane. Should you wish to, I’m sure the girl will be happy to see you. She is a tad disoriented right now, but a familiar face should help.”

“I…” John pauses and considers the news. “I do not believe that would be a good idea.”

“Are you sure? You have been a regular visitor to the facility and…” the doctor says, confused.

“I am,” John interrupts with an internal sigh. Now that the girl is awake, seeing him is the last thing she needs. He will need to have her parents contacted, though.

“Alright,” the doctor clears her throat before continuing, “then, there is another matter I wished to discuss with you. There was someone in the girl’s room, a man, just before she woke up. We’re not certain how the intruder bypassed our security but he was caught on one of the cameras from the hallway. I understand the matter is quite sensitive, so we’ve put off calling the police. For now.”

“An intruder?” John asks sharply. “What did he do?”

“We’re not sure,” the doctor’s voice is apologetic. “According to cameras he just stood in the room for a few minutes before leaving quite abruptly. He wasn’t on any of the other cameras and none of our guards have seen him.”

For a moment John is motionless, his brain churning with possibilities.

“I will be there in three hours.” He finally says and hangs up. He might make it in two if he can get
Nathan to surrender the driver’s seat.

Two and a half hours later John steps out of a car in front of the hospital. The suit he is wearing, even wrinkled, is still recognizable as something tailored rather than bought, but John didn’t want to waste time going back home and changing into something more casual. The entrance is lit brightly enough to hurt John’s eyes as he walks inside, Nathan a solid presence at his back. John blinks, trying to clear the spots from his sight.

“Mr. Crane!” There is a woman waving at him from the hallway to the left. He recognizes the voice as the one that called him. Now that he can also see her, John remembers hiring her to monitor Amanda’s condition and not ask too many questions. By now John is certain she realizes who he is, despite the assumed name, but her performance is good enough he doesn’t feel the need to address the issue. Yet.

“Dr. Preston,” he greets as he approaches. “I need to see that tape.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” the doctor is a bit flustered but trying to maintain the calm facade of professionalism. “Are you sure you do not wish to visit the girl while you’re here?”

“No,” John shakes his head. “Now, the tape.”

The doctor opens her mouth to say something else before clearly thinking better of it and turning on her heel. She gestures for John to follow her and ignores Nathan completely. Smart woman.

The security room is small and cramped, the monitors gleaming in the low light. The guard vacates his seat and his donut as soon as he sees John and the doctor. Grimacing, he wipes his hands on the trousers. John curls his lips in disdain and shoots an irritated look at Preston instead.

“Will, we’re here to see the tape with the intruder,” the doctor hurriedly says to the guard.

“Right,” he replies, “just a moment, ma’am.”

The guard fumbles for a second before ejecting the tape from the nearest video recorder and shoving in another. One of the screens blinks before clearing and showing a black and white picture of a hallway John knows quite well.

“In silence they watch as the intruder stands at Amanda’s bed for a whole minute, not doing anything. Then he bends down slightly, waves both his hands over the bed, and straightens back up. After another minute of stillness the man seems to nod to himself, says something the camera doesn’t pick up, and turns to exit the room.
For a couple of seconds the intruder’s face is visible on the camera’s grainy feed and John cannot
tear his gaze away from the man’s eyes. His brightly glowing eyes.

“That must be a trick of light,” John hears the doctor’s voice at his side but pays it no attention.

“Mr. Hendricks,” he says instead. “I want this man found.”

*****

Six months later the man is still not found. Nathan has followed dead end after dead end but none of
the leads he managed to scrounge up have yielded any significant results. Not even a name. At least,
they can be reasonably sure that the man resides in Chicago. Probably. Most likely. John doesn’t
show his disappointment.

Amanda Beckitt on the other hand was pronounced healthy and ready to move out of the hospital
months ago. John has kept watch from afar but to his relief there were absolutely no problems on that
front. Well, if one discounted the parents. Helen and Greg Beckitt rushed to the hospital the moment
they were informed but the damage done by years of believing their daughter dead has taken its toll.
John doubts the mother in particular will ever recover.

Calling the parents so soon might have been a mistake on his part, but what’s done is done. All he
can do now is make sure Amanda’s return to the land of the living continues to go as smoothly as her
body’s recovery from its coma. That means therapy and job security at the very least for the whole
family. And making sure the paper trail doesn’t have his name on it. He had enough lawsuits from
the Beckitts to last him a lifetime. He doesn’t need another one.

John sighs and turns away from the paperwork he can swear is multiplying by the second on his
desk. He can faintly hear his secretary bustling about in the next room, but is soon distracted by the
city outside his office’s window.

It is not yet evening but the street lights are already on, bathing the streets in soft yellow. Their glow
reminds him of the mystery man he’s been looking for these months. The most Nathan has been able
to find, armed with the man’s printed grainy image, were a few hushed whispers but nothing
concrete. John has practically no doubts that Amanda owes her miraculous recovery to her nightly
visitor. It was too much of a coincidence to pretend otherwise.

The latest lead Nathan unearthed is a homeless man who allegedly saw the man in the company of
Lara Romany and Thomas Raith, members of a fairly affluent family that have properties all over the
city. As far as leads go this one sounds promising, but so did the last three.

By now it is a matter of principle. Finding one man in his city should not be this hard. Glowing eyes
or no.

The papers behind his back rustle in a draft of cool air. No use postponing the inevitable. That
paperwork is not going to sign itself. With another sigh John swivels his chair back to the table and
stills a moment later.

The very man he has just been contemplating is standing smack dab in the middle of his office. John
blinks and resists the urge to reach for a weapon.

“So,” says the man with a smirk spreading across his lips. “I hear you’ve been looking for me.”
Ever so slowly John shifts in his chair and puts his hands on the armrests, incidentally moving them closer to a gun hidden underneath the table.

“I have,” he says slowly. “Mr…?”

“Dresden,” the man’s voice is amused even as his eyes track John’s movements. “Harry Dresden.”

“Mr. Dresden,” John repeats. “You are a hard man to find.”

Dresden shrugs and drags the visitor’s chair closer to John’s desk before sprawling in it in the way none of his previous visitors ever managed.

“Well, you found me. Yay, bully for you,” Dresden says after a pause. “What did you want?”

“Answers to a few questions,” John replies. For some reason Dresden is avoiding looking directly into his eyes. It could be a sign of insecurity and nervousness, but somehow John doesn’t think that is the case.

“Shoot,” Dresden pairs the word with a finger gun. John allows himself to arch a brow.

“Half a year ago you were at St. Luke medical center,” he starts before being interrupted by Dresden groaning and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I knew that would come back to bite me in the ass,” he murmurs. “Look. I was just doing a favor for a… friend,” he makes a face at the last word as if he wants to use another but can’t quite make himself. “I admit the timing could use a little work, but timing… is not my strong suit.”

“You healed Amanda Beckitt,” John barrels through any confusion he might feel and goes right to the heart of his conundrum.

“Less healed, more… recalled,” Dresden waves his hand in the air in a complicated gesture the meaning of which John doesn’t quite get. “She is fine now, right? Physically, I mean?”

John regards his unexpected visitor for a long moment before nodding.

“Good,” Dresden relaxes back into his chair and smiles. “That’s good.”

His eyes are brown, John notes. He frowns slightly and considers offering Dresden something to drink but before he can call his secretary the man is speaking again.

“You have any other questions, Marcone?” he asks.

“Just one,” John finally gives in to his own instincts and gets up from his chair, walking around his desk, and stopping just a few steps away from Dresden making him crane his head to keep John in his sights. “Who or what are you, Mr. Dresden?”

For a moment Dresden’s face scrunches up in confusion before it changes to deliberation.


“On?” John prompts.

“On whether you believe in magic.”

The last word rings in John’s head long after Dresden stopped speaking. He had his suspicions from the moment he saw the video at the hospital, of course. But to have them confirmed so readily makes
him hesitate. He closes his eyes for a second and sees Amanda, healthy and walking again.

“Say I do,” he finally says.

Dresden’s smirk widens and changes into a smile. And for just a moment John lets himself be distracted.

“I am… a practitioner of sorts,” Dresden says as he raises one hand up. “Of magic,” he adds.

John doesn’t reply, too busy watching small lights dancing across Dresden’s fingertips. They remind him of street lights outside. Dresden twitches his fingers and the lights dim for a moment before flaring up again and disappearing in a shower of bright sparks.

And as he raises his gaze to meet Dresden’s eyes for the first time this evening, John feels dark hunger rear its head deep inside him. Dresden watches him with hooded eyes for a long moment before he sighs and his eyes brighten. And then John is falling.

There is darkness pressing around him from all sides. The ground under his feet heaves with every breath he takes, but he knows it won’t make him fall. He takes a step, then another and another, leaving softly glowing footprints behind. He can hear quiet growls on the very edge of his senses but he doesn’t feel like he is in any danger.

There is a puff of warm breath above him and as he raises his head the darkness clears. He is standing among the blackened ruins of what once upon a time had been a great city. He doesn’t recognize it, though he feels he should.

He is standing in the middle of a cracked road and there is a black dragon with familiar brown eyes towering over him. As soon as he meets its gaze, the giant beast takes a step, shadows curling around its wings, and winds its tail around him.

It is clutching something in its talons, but before he can figure out what it is, there is a loud screech coming from the overcast sky and the dragon snaps its head upwards. The black creature flying at them from above makes his eyes bleed but he cannot close them.

The dragon roars, lets out a gust of flame, hot enough for him to feel even though it’s not aimed at him, and the creature falls to ground in a heap of burning tentacles and sizzling eye holes.

He feels the dragon’s tail draw closer around him but feels no fear. It will not kill him.

John blinks and fights hard not to stagger.

“A word of advice,” he hears Dresden say through ringing ears, “don’t look human practitioners in the eyes. It will trigger a soulgaze, which can be… unpleasant.”

“I will keep that in mind,” John manages to reply in a steady voice. He wouldn’t call the experience unpleasant though. Unexpected, yes. Even enlightening, if he were to take the name at face value.

“Awesome,” Dresden stands up. “Now, I hate to cut and run, but I have to see a dog about a couple of signatures, so if you have no more questions?”

John has. Of course he has questions. But he can also recognize the dismissal when he hears one and he is not willing to alienate Dresden at this juncture. Not after what he saw when he looked into his eyes. He wonders what Dresden saw when he looked into John’s.

“None pressing,” he replies. “But if I have any in the future?”
Dresden regards him for a moment, then shrugs, and steps to the desk. He picks a pen and piece of blank paper from the pile of John’s paperwork and scribbles something on it.

“Here, my phone number,” he hands the paper to John. “Can’t promise I’ll always pick up but that’s what voicemail is for.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dresden,” John slips the number in his jacket and after a short pause adds, “May I ask who was the friend you owed a favor to?”

“Ah. Well. He was a criminal scumbag that kept saving my life, eventually even at the cost of his own,” Dresden presses his lips together and grimaces. “He is dead though, and of no concern to you.”

“I see.” John thinks he can hear a trace of guilt in Dresden’s voice.

“Right. See you around, Marcone.” Before he can reply, Dresden waves his hand at John and slips through the door and out of the office.

When later John reviews the feed from the office security cameras he is not surprised to find absolutely no sign of Dresden’s presence anywhere on the video. His secretary hasn’t seen him either.

Magic is real, John thinks to himself after returning to his office and memorizing Dresden’s number. Now the question is: how can he use that?

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
(I can't believe it took me seven chapters to get to Marcone. Phew.)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Lea first assumed the throne of Winter she expected there to be a few dissenting murmurs, a couple of assassination attempts, and the general rearranging of her new court. She expected having to deal with Mother Winter and the fact that she killed her daughter and took her place. She expected having to find a new Winter Lady before the imbalance between the Courts could get too hazardous.

What she didn’t expect is how natural the sheer power of Winter would feel coursing in her veins.

She wonders if Mab felt the same when her mother stepped down and passed the Winter crown to her. It is so very easy to get lost in that euphoric feeling of power that Lea has to make an effort to remind herself that hubris is what led Mab to her death. Well, that and a dark parasyte, but she is not prone to letting other creatures take a ride in her body. Arrogance, on the other hand, she’s been known to suffer from.

Still. Her rule so far has been surprisingly pleasant. The pinched expression on Titania’s face the last time they met and she realized she couldn’t intimidate Lea — doubly so.

And as she settles in her new role and on her new throne more firmly, Lea finds herself… content. Even if she barely has time for her hounds anymore. Truly, if anything, she can classify her whole court as her new hounds now. They are certainly nosy enough, she thinks as she resists the urge to shift in place while listening to one of the Sidhe drone on about something petty and yet liable to induce a bloody revolt if she doesn’t address it soon. Her throne room is full of faerie supplicants, come either to pay their respects to the new queen or air their grievances at their neighbours.

Lea nods, smiles, and promises nothing, while committing the faces to memory. She loves politics, any Sidhe does, but some Faeries’ machinations leave much to be desired. Too simple. No finesse or challenge at all. As the audience continues, she considers how to best weave the web of power and influence amid the Winter Court, so it serves her interests and not her enemies’.

With a wave of her hand, she releases the latest courtier from his bow and directs him to one of her hand-picked advisors. The border dispute he has been waxing poetic about is not something she is willing to deal with personally, but the Sidhe is happy enough to be heard at all.

“Royalty suits you, Lea,” the voice that echoes through the throne room a second later brings a smile to her face.

“Harry,” she replies and watches as her godson walks closer, her Court parting before him with wary looks. With a start, Lea realizes that Harry has never been to the Winter Palace before. At least not to her knowledge.

When her godson reaches the dais, that her throne is sitting on, he sketches a shallow bow and straightens back without waiting for her permission. Lea lets her smile turn indulgent and beckons him even closer, caressing his cheek with a pale hand, when he acquiesces.

“‘Tis a pleasant surprise,” she murmurs and glances at the Sidhe milling behind him. After a moment of thought she dismisses her Court, ignoring their puzzled whispers, and waits silently until they file out of the room. A beat later she continues, “I did not expect to see you here. But you are welcome nonetheless.”
“You might want to tell that to your people,” Harry pulls away and drifts a few feet closer to one of the stone tables dotted around the throne room. He spends a moment perusing the map of Winter engraved on the surface before turning back to Lea and winking. “I think at least half of them wanted to kill me the moment I called you Lea.”

“And the other half?” She asks amused.

“Sleep with me probably. It’s always death or sex with your lot.” Harry replies and hops to sit onto the table. “I don’t suppose you know any Fae that’s partial to, I don’t know, chocolate fondue parties? Instead of blood and spit?”

Lea regards her godson for a second before hiding a mischievous smile behind her hand.

“Would peaches do?” She says to him. “If you’re looking for a playmate, there is a rather old… fellow that has a certain fascination for the fruit. Charming in his own way. Always eager to meet new people who might share his pastimes. Why, you are practically neighbours, my dear. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind a friendly visit.”

Harry raises his eyebrows and looks at her in surprise.

“Who?” He asks and then goes on without giving Lea a chance to reply. “Wait, you’re not talking about… Hell’s bells, Lea. I’m not looking for a playmate,” at the last word he almost grimaces. “And if I were, I doubt a Goblin King of all people would fit the bill.”

“If you insist,” Lea pouts. “But if you ever change your mind…” She trails off.

“A-a-and I’m going to forget this conversation ever happened,” Harry rolls his eyes and adds under his breath. “Fucking Goblin King, seriously. Do I look like a Sarah or something?”

He shoots her an annoyed look and Lea smiles at him.

“Anyways,” Harry says, “that’s not why I’m here. No offence, but Winter Palace is not my favorite place in the world.” He slides off the table and walks back to the throne, fishing a roll of papers out of his coat. “Its ruler, on the other hand, is very fond of me. I hope.” He holds out the papers to Lea and, curious, she takes them and smoothes them over in her lap.

“What is this?” Lea asks her godson, her gaze already trailing over small print.

“Something I’d like you to sign,” he watches as Lea skims through the papers, shuffling them in her hands.

“Oh,” she says and raises her gaze after reaching the last page. “You’re finally making the claim then.”

“I am,” Harry nods.

“And my signature is the last thing you need to make it official, it seems,” she states.

“It is,” he nods again.

Lea stares at the other signatures on the documents and wonders what Harry must have done to persuade the Lord of the White Vampire Court and the High Guardian of the Foo Dog Temple to sign him onto the Accords. On second thought, that beast of his looks suspiciously like one of the Temple dogs, Lea realizes. Well, that just solves one mystery but raises another.
“I must admit,” Lea starts after a short pause, “while this is far from a surprise, I did hope to persuade you to take your place beside me. As the Winter Knight. You are more than powerful enough to withstand the mantle of Winter and remain unchanged. Unlike the ingrate holding it now.”

“Yeah, no,” Harry’s voice sours and something cold flashes through his eyes. “Never going to happen. Not even for you, Lea. Find someone else.”

“As you wish,” Lea stands up and steps closer to her godson. As she stops near the table, she puts the papers on the stone surface and with a flick of her hand summons a pen. Several moments later she steps away and Harry picks up the signed documents with a satisfied look.

“Thanks,” he says as the papers disappear back under his coat.

“Of course,” she replies. “Do the borders of your hold mirror those of your wards?”

“Hm? Ah, yeah,” Harry replies with a shrug. “Just, I also doubled the perimeter last month, so it’s a bit bigger than you’re probably used to. I needed to properly link it to the Ways to Chicago, so that I can monitor them easier. I blocked a couple of them, just as a precaution, but I don’t think they’ve been used in more than a few centuries. It shouldn’t be much of a problem. The wards are stronger, too.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Lea remembers the feel of Harry’s magic on her skin and suppresses a shiver. “Should I call you a Lord now, godson?”

“What?” Harry’s eyes widen and then narrow. “Of course not. I may be a Freeholding Lord now, but you’re my godmother. If I ever get so swollen headed as to tell you to call me by a title, you have my permission to take me down a notch or two. I even promise not to resist too hard.”

Lea hums but doesn’t answer. Her godson may not like the sound of his new title, but it will no doubt come in handy in the years to come. There are already all sorts of rumors about the new being that made a large patch of Wylde Lands his new home. She has a feeling it won’t be long before Lord Dresden will find himself surrounded by his own court.

No wonder he refused the offer of Knighthood from her, Lea thinks. She would too in his position.

Now that she is this close to him, Lea notices small scratches crisscrossing her godson’s hands. She knows he is more powerful than his appearance suggests, but that doesn’t quell the small sliver of worry nesting in her heart.

Harry catches her look and to her surprise the tips of his ears slowly redden. Her curiosity piqued, Lea cannot resist such a blatant invitation.

“Whatever did you tangle with this time, dear godson?” She asks.

Harry mumbles something under his breath.

“What was that?” Lea curls her lips and leans closer, trailing her fingers over the barely healed scratches. “And why haven’t you healed these?”

“I got a cat, alright?” Harry groans and snatches his hands away. “He is just a kitten still and a bit… shy at the moment. That translates to hostile. And these aren’t really bothering me or anything, so why waste time?”

“Why indeed,” Lea murmurs and after a moment of deliberation captures Harry’s hands between her own. A tug on her power and a cold brush of Will leave behind clear skin and Lea squeezes once
before releasing her godson and taking a step back. “There now. All better.”

“...Thanks,” Harry sighs and thrusts his hands in the pockets of his coat.

With another smile Lea glides back to her throne, sits on the cleverly hidden pillows, and claps twice. At the sound her Court starts to trickle back into the throne room. As Harry so cleverly pointed out earlier, half of the Faerie are eyeing the puzzling mortal with murder in their eyes. The other half are more subtle, but no less dangerous. The looks they are giving her godson are a bit too obvious for her tastes, though.

“No, that that’s done with, would you like to stay for the feast, darling? I’m sure you will be able to charm my Court in no time! And while you said you’re not looking for a playmate, perhaps someone more… transitory would suffice?” She delights in the red spreading across Harry’s cheeks as much as in his embarrassed spluttering. Really, her godson needs to let himself enjoy the simple pleasures of life more. She is fairly sure he has no one to warm his bed at night. Or at day. That cannot be healthy.

“It’s fine, Lea,” Harry backs away with a cough. “I’m fine. Rain check? Anyway, I’ll see you later. Have fun queendoming the hell out of your court.”

Lea waves her goodbyes and watches as Harry slips through the throne room doors with a whirl of his black coat. After a long moment, there is a ripple of whispers amidst her Court and a minute later a brave soul steps forward to kneel before her.

“My Queen,” the Sidhe says, hesitation clear in his voice. “May we know who that mortal was?”

“You may,” she replies and lets them steam in their own speculations for a minute. “Lord Harry Dresden, the newest Freeholding Lord under the Unseelie Accords and my dearest godson.”

Her Court exchange mystified glances among themselves, but no one questions her further. Instead, a new petitioner steps closer to her throne and after a bow begins regaling her with the woes of living near a clan of bridge trolls. Just as well. The sooner she can end the audience, the more time she will have to lavish on her hounds.

Perhaps, she should pay the visit to the Erlking after all. Or invite him to visit her at the Palace. If she times it right, she might even lure Harry here at the same time… Lea leans her chin on her hand and hides another smile.

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
The first time John calls Dresden is a test. Will he pick up the phone? Remain as… cordial as he was during their first meeting? Answer John’s questions? And if he does will John be able to trust his words?

The last is something John spends a lot of time ruminating on before deciding to approach the matter as he would his business affairs.

Trust but verify.

He prepares a list of questions. The whos, the whats, the whys. John does his homework and sends Nathan and a few other loyal men to look for other practitioners in Chicago. They return with enough information to make him reconsider the amount of money he was originally going to allocate for the venture. Obviously, he was thinking too small.

He concentrates his efforts on the magical portion of the new world he finds himself in, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t try to find out more about the man himself. Yet, in spite of knowing Dresden’s name and phone number, the information is barely any less sparse than before.

John traces the name and finds an old birth certificate, the copy of which he places in a safe at his house. But no school or college diploma. No address. And while information on Harry Dresden’s father is easy enough to obtain, his mother — he can find nothing about besides her name and a few barely there whispers connecting her to the head of Raith family. The phone number Dresden gave him belongs to Chicago’s registry but doesn’t actually link to any of the properties on the city grounds.

Still, when he does amass enough information and no longer feels like he is standing on an edge of a cliff, with the ravine of the unknown below his feet, John makes the call.

“You reached casa Dresden,” he hears a high male voice say after the phone rings three times. “If you want to petition Za Lord, come in person and join the queue, ya lazy bum. If you’re one of the pale Hunters, no, he will not sleep with you. Stop calling. Where did you even get this number from? If you’re one of those telemarketer people, tell me your address. You will know true bliss as I come and personally skewer you with your own spine.”

John blinks and spends a few seconds digesting the… greeting? He expected Dresden to answer his call, not whoever is still babbling into the phone about guts and glory. John clears his throat and, as soon as the speaker draws a breath, interrupts him.

“Good evening. This is John Marcone. I would like to speak with Mr. Dresden, if he’s available.” It doesn’t hurt to be polite, especially considering everything he managed to gather after meeting Dresden.

“Marcone?” The voice on the other end of the line is suspicious but not otherwise hostile. Good. “Oh, right. Chicago’s-mortal-not-lord. Wait a second.” A pause and then a loud scream. “Ha-a-a-rry! Phone!” Then a click, a muffled curse, and offended meowing. John didn’t take Dresden for a cat person, but to each their own he supposes.

“Hello?” Dresden’s voice is a little breathless, but not annoyed and John allows himself to relax just
a touch.

“Mr. Dresden,” he says. “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything important.”

“Nah,” Dresden laughs a bit. “I was just explaining to my cat that some areas of the house are off limits even to him.”

“I see,” John smiles imagining the picture Dresden must have made just moments before.

“So, what did you need, Marcone?” Dresden asks.

“Same thing as last time,” he says. “Answers to a few questions. If you can spare the time, of course,” he adds.

“Sure. What do you want to know?” There is a sound of clinking glass and more meowing, even more offended this time. “Hush, Mister, go play with Mouse or something. Toot! Hey, Toot, could you feed Mister? Thanks!” A pause. “Sorry about that. So. Questions?”

“Yes,” John clears his throat and prepares to take notes. Then he starts on the list.

An hour later he puts down the phone and leans back in his chair. The call was more informative than he could have ever hoped and the list of questions he compiled beforehand seemed to grow with every answer. The picture Dresden painted before him was as exquisitely beautiful as it was dangerous. But as far as he could tell, all of his answers were truthful. Some, perhaps, a bit lacking in context, but that he can remedy at a later date.

Dresden did reiterate his offer of information, after all.

It occurs to John to question Dresden’s motives, but at this point in time he is useful regardless of any hidden agenda the magic user might have. Best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, John believes the saying goes.

He stores the information he received into folders to be sorted later and etches the most relevant points into his memory. It is nothing too exciting so far, just a general overview on how magic works, the approximate number of magic practitioners residing in Chicago (some of them, John is pleased to note, his people have already found), the largest non-human factions present on Earth.

And while John expected something like this, it is still somewhat of a shock to learn that there are other planes of existence besides Earth. That hell might be real. That demons and fallen angels might walk the Earth.

Learning about faeries, vampires, and werewolves kind of pales in comparison.

It takes almost a month before John calls Dresden again. Then a week. Two weeks. Three days. Dresden is not always there to answer, but if the matter is pressing enough, his housemate that answered the phone the first time John called is happy enough to pass on a message.

John considers looking for a full time magical consultant that might be amenable to working for him but finds no one suitable in Chicago and for the time being he is unwilling to look outside his city. Though Nathan does bring him contacts for an European security firm that might have someone for hire. The fact that it is headed by a one-eyed Scandinavian-looking man suggests the firm is far more than it appears at first glance.

“Would you be willing to work for me full time?” John asks once, after Dresden finishes filling him in on the differences between the Faerie Courts. “With fair compensation for your time, of course.”
The silence that follows would be something to be concerned about if John hadn’t learned by now that any personal questions make Dresden hesitate. Apparently, the man truly values his privacy. Enough not to answer John’s questions sometimes. Or snark them off completely. But John is nothing if not persistent.

“Gotta be honest here, Johnny,” Dresden finally says. “You couldn’t afford me even if I wanted to start wearing your colors.”

When, after a moment of thought, John quotes a number, Dresden splutters, tries to say something, and ends up laughing instead.

“Nah,” he murmurs after calming down. “I have other… responsibilities that take up most of my time.”

“A pity,” John says with a sigh. He resolves to repeat his offer again in a few months.

Some revelations, however, are less benign that he would prefer.

“Bianca St. Claire is a vampire,” John says flatly, gripping the phone enough to make it creak in protest. “A fucking vampire.”

“I… probably should have mentioned this sooner, huh?” Dresden sounds a bit apologetic.

“Yes. Yes, you really should have,” John pinches the bridge of his nose and tries to will the approaching headache away. “My men visit her brothel, Mr. Dresden.”

“Well, it’s not like she would risk feeding on them,” is the reply he gets. “I mean, she does try to keep a low profile. Mostly. I think. It helps that she doesn’t sparkle in the sunlight.”


“Woah, cowboy, hold your horses,” Dresden says with a huff. “First of all, you can’t just go and kill Bianca. Not unless you want to start a war with the whole damn Red Court. And you don’t want to start a war with the whole damn Red Court. Trust me on this. Not until you have a sure way of nailing down the Red King. And any upstart that will undoubtedly take his place.” For a second he is silent. “You might be able to drive them off from Chicago, if you get enough firepower, don’t involve any wizards, and find a way to make their exile permanent.”

John feels relief cooling his anger to a simmering focus. For a moment he was afraid Dresden would refuse to help. But if he is talking, he is at least willing to consider the matter seriously.

“What kind of firepower?” John asks after a moment.

The next two hours are spend discussing the merits of napalm, acid, and contained sunshine when applied to Red Court vampires.

“Why shouldn’t I involve practitioners?” John asks after persuading Dresden to provide him with pieces of cloth hiding sunlight in their folds. For a price, naturally. He takes a moment to pat himself on the back. Dresden might have refused outright employment, but that doesn’t mean John cannot change his mind. Eventually.

“Wizards. I said you shouldn’t involve wizards,” Dresden corrects him.

“What is the difference?”
“Practitioners are a broad term used to describe most human magic users. Wizards are… a bit more complicated.”

“Which one are you then, Mr. Dresden?” John asks curiously.

“I’m not a wizard, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” Dresden replies and pauses for a moment. “Wizards are a pretty exclusive bunch, actually, and not very friendly to those they consider below themselves. Most of them, anyway.”

“They are organized then.” A ruling body perhaps? Singled out for their magical prowess? If so, how powerful must they be to exclude Dresden from their ranks? John doesn’t realize he is voicing the questions out loud until he hears Dresden let out a quiet laugh.

“Aw, I’m flattered, John, really. Why, I had no idea you thought so highly of my humble self!” Dresden teases, smile still lingering in his voice. “But to answer your question: I’m not a wizard, because I didn’t want to go down that path. That title is as much a privilege as it is a shackles. Also, I take offense at some of their rules and Laws.”

John hears the emphasis Dresden puts on the last word and that answers most of his questions.

“If you have to call me something, you can call me a… mage. Yeah, a mage would work,” Dresden meanwhile continues. “Or a Master of Magic. Thaumaturge works as well. Though that’s a bit too long for casual conversations. Magus? A Wise Man? The most powerful and handsome magic user to ever live?”

“I think I will stick with your first suggestion, Mr. Dresden,” John says, amused. “Though I would very much like you to explain the wizards in more detail at a later date. After my men are no longer in danger of becoming empty bloodless husks.”

“You could just order them to avoid the Velvet Room altogether, you know,” Dresden mutters a bit petulantly. “And, hey! Anyone who calls me a mage gets to call me Harry. I was getting a bit tired of being Mr. Dresdened all the time.”

“Harry, then,” John bares his teeth and makes sure his voice remains as pleasantly calm as ever. “Now, I might be able to keep them from returning to Chicago by mundane means after we drive them off,” he blithely ignores Dresden’s somewhat startled exclamation of ‘we?’ “But I imagine the Red Court could easily come back through the Nevernever.”

“Yeah, no,” Harry says and the confidence in his voice eases another worry in John’s mind. “That’s not going to be a problem.”

“Why?”

“Johnny, where do you think I live?” The questions seems nonsensical at first, but then John starts to slowly smile as he understands what Harry is hinting at. “No Red vampire is going to be able to use the Ways to sneak into Chicago. That I can promise you.”

“Good,” John exhales. “Now, anything else you can tell me about fighting vampires?”

The conversation continues deep into the night, but by the end of it, John has a fairly plausible plan of attack. Had Bianca been of any other Court, he might have let her operate in peace. But if his plans for Chicago are ever to come to fruition, he cannot tolerate the presence of the Red Court in his city. Bianca has to go.

Dead or alive, depends entirely on her.
Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
When he first stepped into the chamber intended for the meetings between the signatories of the Unseelie Accords, Ebenezar McCoy was almost too young to appreciate the heavy wards it was swathed in. He was, however, old enough to appreciate the drinks served throughout all the monotonous minutiae. Neutrality needed every little bit of help it could get and it showed.

But as he steps inside the chamber now, the wards are the farthest thing from his mind. The reports the Council’s been getting these past years of the changes in Winter politics, starting with Mab’s erratic behaviour and ending in a bloody power change, the appearance of a previously unknown new Freeholding Lord that is apparently affiliated with Winter in some way… All of these have been a cause of concern, to put it lightly.

The meeting hasn’t started yet, but already Eb can see the clusters of political allies situated around the giant round table.

The Faerie Courts, though radiating thinly veiled hostility to each other, nevertheless remain in close proximity, so no real change there. The chairs nearby are occupied by the Dragon Ferrovax and a bleak looking fellow that represents the “little folk”. Both of their votes usually align with the Faerie Queens but unlike the previous times the little folk’s spokesman is sitting farther away, next to an unoccupied chair on the Winter Queen’s side.

The Vampire Courts are as divided as ever, the spaces between filled with dour faces and near silent whispering. The Red Court representative is looking a little under the weather though, and Eb files that away as something to investigate at a later time.

The Denarians are missing, but if what Eb heard about the troubles they’ve been experiencing recently is true (if one could call the loss of almost all the members and the leader’s disappearing act mere troubles), that is not so surprising.

The Archive’s seat is also empty. Seeing as the current title holder is barely what, one? Two years old? Eb hopes she won’t have to deal with all the politics until the girl is at least of legal drinking age. The giant white dog sitting next to a calm monk catches Eb’s eyes and lolls a tongue out. The wizard has to remind himself that it is not a simple animal and whispering good boy would be entirely inappropriate.

The other side of the table is occupied by Donar Vadderung and an old Svartalf that glares at anyone paying him too much attention.

Eb sighs and slowly walks towards his own assigned seat. If his information is right the empty seat near Leanansidhe belongs to the Accords’ newest signatory, but the Freeholding Lord himself is still not here. The Council has received a copy of the documents which described the new Hold’s borders, and the debates on whether the man’s claim to Chicago Ways meant he was preparing to claim the city itself were still continuing when Eb left for the meeting. And whether Harry Dresden is his real name or just a pseudonym.

His own intuition is telling him the situation is a fair bit more complicated than the Merlin believes it to be. Even if one ignored the fact that the Accords get (or lose) members every half a millenia at best, and even then it is usually preceded by conflict on a scale no one wants to see in their lifetime,
there has never before been a member vouched by a Winter Queen since the Accords’ founding
days. Or by a Foo Dog Temple. Let alone both of them simultaneously.

The meeting is scheduled to start in five minutes and already Eb can feel the headache creeping its
way to his temples. He slumps a little in an uncomfortably lumpy chair and starts mentally preparing
his response the next time Arthur insists on him being the Council’s representative. A show of force,
his ass. More like an opportunity to saddle him with even more responsibilities.

With a sigh, he leans back and for the millionth time tries to understand why the hell he agreed to a
seat on the Council in the first place. Instead of dealing with politics he could be relaxing back home
with a shot of something… soothing. And much more palatable than whatever they are going to be
discussing today. Even if the appointment of new neutral grounds and miniscule adjustments to the
Accords Laws are objectively matters of importance. Urgh. He hates politics.

But as Eb imagines all of the unrealized possibilities, he stiffens, the back of his neck prickling in
warning. Ever so slowly he turns his head and meets sharp brown eyes gaze to gaze.

It seems the missing Freeholding Lord has finally arrived. He is younger than Eb imagined.

He hadn’t seen the man walking inside the chamber, but Dresden is already sitting a short distance
from the Winter Queen, deep in conversation with the little folk’s representative. Looks like he got
brownies, pixies, and sprites on his side then. As Dresden talks, he moves his eyes away just in time
to avoid a Soulgaze and Eb has to resist the urge to slump. He feels as if a weight lifted off his
shoulders, one he hadn’t even noticed rested there. Dresden looks human enough but with a presence
like this, Eb can’t help but doubt. It would explain why he never came to the Council’s attention,
however.

While he surreptitiously looks the man over, the meeting finally starts. And as it progresses, Eb
realizes that unlike the Merlin’s speculations, Dresden is not as allied to Winter as he first seems.
Though for all Leanansidhe huffs in exaggerated irritation when the man votes not to her liking, there
is no true malice or even anger in her eyes. Amusement, perhaps, if Eb has to take a guess.

A few times throughout the meeting, he also checks on the Foo Dog Guardian, but the beast is much
harder to read than the Faerie Queen. Annoying, but not surprising. What is surprising, however, is
that Dresden seems to understand the dog easily when it barks at him from the other side of the table.

Eb thought only the Temple’s monks were capable of understanding the Guardians’ speech.
Apparently, Dresden is a man of many talents.

Several long and tedious hours later he climbs off the chair with a barely suppressed groan and
stretches out his tired limbs. For all that these meeting are essential for the peace (or at least the
illusion of one) between all the magical heavy hitters on Earth, Eb really hates being forced to attend
them.

“Wizard McCoy,” the voice that greets him as he turns to leave stops him in his tracks. He holds still
as he feels a subtle weave of magic settle underneath his feet, but, recognizing the intent behind it,
makes no move to retaliate.

“Your majesty,” he greets the Winter Queen. “What can I do for you?”

Leanansidhe doesn’t answer, smiling at him with a hint of mischief. More Fae mind games. Eb
prepares to politely excuse himself before the Queen can snare him in one of her schemes. But before
he can open his mouth, Leanansidhe shifts, half turns to the left, and her smile grows.
“Harry!” She calls. “I don’t believe you’ve had the pleasure of meeting the White Council’s representative yet. Come, join us, darling.”

For a moment Eb freezees. He didn’t plan on interacting with Dresden. Hell, first contact should be handled by the politician side of the Council. Definitely not him. He braces his shoulders and forces a smile on his face.

“Wizard McCoy,” Dresden’s voice is quiet as he walks up to them. “Lea.”

“Lord Dresden,” Eb says, filing away the familiar way Dresden addressed the Winter Queen. Are they lovers? Dresden certainly doesn’t protest when Leanansidhe kisses his cheek in greeting. “Congratulations on your title.”

Now that he is close enough to see the stubble on the man’s face, Eb frowns. For a second, he feels like he’s met Dresden before. Must be one of those faces, he tells himself. Eb is reasonably sure he would have remembered had he actually encountered Dresden prior to the meeting. If not the man’s face, then his magic, coiled heavy and deep beneath Dresden’s skin.

“Thanks,” Dresden nods. And then, facing the Winter Queen, begins talking about the last vote they took before the meeting’s conclusion. The subclause pertaining to overlapping areas of influence among the Signatories. Eb makes sure to interject a comment here and there, not wanting to appear rude, but as soon as he can get away with it, carefully extracts himself from the conversation, murmuring polite excuses, and quietly slips away.

The last thing he hears is Leanansidhe’s tinkling laugh.

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“Really, Lea?” Harry mutters as they watch McCoy’s retreating back. “That was about as subtle as a brick to the face.”

“My dear, I was only trying to help,” Lea says in response. “He is your family, after all.”

“Yeah, why don’t you shout it a little louder,” her godson grouches. “I don’t think Vadderung heard you. Or the vamps.”

Lea laughs and doesn’t point out the ward of silence she placed around herself before even approaching Harry’s grandfather.

“Seriously though,” Harry flicks his gaze around the chamber. “If I wanted our relation to be known, I would have done something already.”

“But why don’t you?” Lea asks curiously. From the way he listened when she talked about his mother, she thought Harry would take the first opportunity to get closer to his only remaining family.


Lea hums but doesn’t prod him to continue. He seems to be trying to convince himself as much as her.

“Nevermind,” he finally says and firms his voice. “There’s something I need to discuss with you
anyways, so…”

“Leanansidhe,” the voice that interrupts their discussion is warm and pleasant. Nevertheless, Lea can hear the barbs hidden underneath. “And Lord Dresden. A pleasure to finally meet you."

“Titania,” she greets with an easy smile.

“Your majesty,” if the interruption bothers Harry, he doesn’t show it.

“I merely wished to offer my congratulations as well,” Titania dips her head and looks at Harry from under her lashes. Lea has to suppress an entirely inappropriate flash of jealousy. “Young Leanansidhe must be very fond of you to sponsor you. How highly she must value you.”

“Indeed. Very astute of you,” Harry replies, his voice still calm and even. “I applaud your observation skills. As sharp as a needle, one might say.”

“Oh?” Titania’s voice loses some of its warmth. “Careful, mortal. A compliment should not have so many teeth.”

“Advice we all can learn from,” Lea interferes and shoots Harry a warning glance. He ignores her.

“Some more than others,” her godson says. And before the Summer Queen can do more than purse her lips, continues. “Still, words are not reason enough to take offense.”

“No,” says Titania after a pause, “and yet I find myself curious as to their root.”

Harry’s smile is sudden and sharp enough that even Lea is taken aback for a moment.

“I want you to imagine,” he starts, “what might have happened had your sister remained in power for another year. For another decade. Imagine, if you will, what would have happened had she managed to conceal her… condition for a little longer. And then I want you to imagine certain gates. And what lies beyond. It does not make for a pretty picture, does it? Your majesty?”

Lea remembers Mab’s eyes, just before the very end, empty and dark with madness, and she represses a shudder.

“Who are you, Lord Dresden?” asks Titania, a tightness to her eyes not many would notice.

“Not your enemy,” Harry says, “but not your friend either. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I left a kettle on. Better go make sure my house hasn’t burned down while I’ve been gone.”

And with a short goodbye he strides out of the chamber without looking back at the Faerie Queens. They are the last people left in the room, Lea notes, aside from the silent and motionless servants provided by the this year’s neutral party. The way they line up at the walls they might as well be made of stone, Lea thinks.

“He is not what I expected,” Titania says as she too turns to leave.

“You are not the first to say that, I believe,” Lea replies as she falls in step at the Summer Queen’s side.

They exit the chamber in silence, but before they can part, Titania sighs and makes an abortive gesture with her hand, raising it to her chest, but just leaving it there. Her fingertips rest right over her heart.

“My sister…” Titania’s voice is quiet, but it lacks the hostility Lea sensed earlier. She speaks slowly,
choosing each word with care. “Your protege was right. I should have noticed my sister’s affliction much sooner. It was negligent of me to dismiss the matter so easily.”

“She was your sister,” Lea replies and leaves it at that. A few minutes later she is stepping off the Ways and into her palace.

She can scarcely imagine the fictitious future Harry spoke of and the implication it held. If it ever came to pass, if she didn’t manage to topple Mab… If Harry didn’t give her the Blade of Ice. If he didn’t warn her.

There is a thought taking root in Lea’s mind, too fanciful to consider seriously but demanding her attention nonetheless. Something she needs time and space to reflect on.

Something that might provide answers to questions that plagued her ever since she stumbled across Harry’s little house.

Something that seems like a very possible conclusion to a series of what ifs that keep churning in her head.

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr.
It's possible I might not be able to post a new chapter next week, as I've been swamped with work and don't have much time for writing. But no worries! I'm still weirdly invested in this story (and still pretty enthusiastic about it), so as soon I can get back to it, I will!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nathan likes to think of himself as a pretty reasonable man. Calm and steady under pressure. Reliable. Boss says go and deal with the bookkeeper snitching to the police? He goes and deals with the idiot. Boss says go and disappear the drug dealers not following the Boss’s rules? He goes and disappears them. Boss says go and find the man no one can find? Well… He tries, not his fault the guy is as slippery as a bar of wet soap.

But even Nathan has to draw a line at go no one knows where and find no one knows what. Now that he thinks about it, his grandma loved that fairy tale. Go I Know Not Whither and Fetch I Know Not What. Classic. Though Nathan doubts that he is going to get a castle and a kingdom at the end.

“So,” he says dubiously to the small greenish creature, grinning at him with all of its sixty six pointy teeth, “let me get it straight. You don’t have it. You don’t have it. You don’t know anyone who might have it. But you do suspect someone of knowing someone who might, might, know where to find someone who, again, might have it. And you want a fucking golden bar in exchange for a name.”

He’s been on the task for a week now. Ever since Dresden tipped the boss on a possible way of dealing with the bloodsuckers. Figures they won’t be scared away with guns.

“Yeesss,” the creature’s words sound off, possibly due to the forked tongue Nathan has been ignoring for the last five minutes. “One small bar. One small name. Fair and square, human.” Its grin widens. “I also accept dollars, Euros, and pounds, but it will cost you ten percent more. Gold is traditional.”

Practically growling under his breath, Nathan nods and writes off a check, pen almost ripping the paper in places. The additional ten percent charge is not making his mood lighter. At least, it’s a small bar. A hundred grams. Barely bigger than his lighter. He hopes the lead will be worth it.

The only thing he knows about the object he’s looking for is its name. He is not going to even attempt to pronounce it, but the rough translation amounts to a cursed doll. Chinese in origin, brought to the States ages ago and floating among the more risky practitioners ever since. No one quite knows what it looks like, aside from it being a doll of some kind. No one quite knows how it works, aside from it, obviously, being cursed. As far as Dresden knew it gets rid of one’s enemies. And, luckily enough, Nathan supposes, it last resurfaced in Chicago a couple of years ago.

His people scoured every inch of the city, looking for any trace of the doll, but so far the little greedy bastard is the only one to offer anything more substantial than centuries old fairy tales.

At this point, Nathan will take anything he can get.

One name leads to another. And another. And another. A few days later, feeling a few brain cells lighter and several thousands dollars poorer (even if it’s Boss’ money, it’s a matter of principle for Nathan at this point), he knocks on the hotel door of someone he was assured held the item he’s looking for.

The man that opens the door has bags under his eyes and a tired slant to his mouth, but his suit is sharp and expensive, not a hint of dust on the fabric. Nathan notes the way his fingers shake as they come to rest on the doorframe. And the way his irises are a great deal too large to be normal.
“Mr. DuMorne?” he asks.

“Yes?” The word is accompanied by a raised eyebrow and Nathan can already tell this is going to go great.

“Nathan Hendricks. We spoke on the phone. I’m here about the doll,” he says tonelessly.

After several moments of scrutiny DuMorne nods and gestures Nathan inside. The suite is spacious and fairly luxurious, but not quite top of the line, as far as Nathan can tell. The short entrance hall gives way to a sitting area, decorated in warm greens and browns. Most of the furniture, however, has been taken over by books and stacks of cardboard parcels. His last informant did tell him that DuMorne was an antique dealer, specializing in the occult. Those must be the goods, Nathan supposes.

DuMorne frees one of the chairs from its burdens and grimaces, when one of the books slips his hand and falls to the floor. He leaves it there.

“Take a seat, Mr. Hendricks,” DuMorne picks up a glass of wine, standing on a nearby table, and takes a sip. He doesn’t offer a drink to Nathan. “I assume you’ve come prepared.”

Nathan taps a finger against a suitcase he brought with him. He doesn’t open it and DuMorne doesn’t ask him to. With the kind of money the man demanded, there’s no need to.

DuMorne nods, places the glass back on the table, and leaves the room, heading to the ensuite bedroom. Nathan takes the moment to shift in his seat and hope he won’t have to use the less… scrupulous methods to persuade the man to part with the item. Dry cleaning is hell on his clothes.

Almost a minute passes before DuMorne emerges from the bedroom with a small bundle in his hands. He carefully sets it on the table and goes back to his drink.

“May I?” Nathan asks and after receiving a nod from DuMorne, unwraps the bundle. Inside is a narrow wooden box. No locks, no latches. A string of Chinese characters engraved on the lid. Hesitating for a second, Nathan steels himself and opens it.

The doll is old. Small porcelain face, painted white, is cracked in places, but still pretty, framed as it is by black strands of hair. The dress is frilly and looks like something out of Victorian England, for all that the doll itself is supposed to be from another continent entirely. The doll looks completely ordinary. Until it opens its eyes and looks right at him. Nathan slams the box shut and grunts as the impact reverberates up his arm.

“I assume it passes your inspection?” DuMorne’s voice is amused and just a touch condescending.

Nathan nods and keeps his mouth shut. He rises, leaving the money suitcase at the foot of the chair, and wraps the doll back into the heavy cloth.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Hendricks. Pass along my regards to your master,” DuMorne says. “You can see yourself out now.”

Nathan nods again, not really listening, his attention glued to the bundle in his arms, and exits the suite without a backward glance. He got what he needed. Teaching DuMorne a lesson in manners will just be waste of his time.

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The doll box doesn’t look like something that contains the means to deal with the Red Court, John thinks an hour later. It looks ordinary. Plain even. In fact, the last time one of his Chinese business partners gifted him a box of tea, it looked exactly like this. Maybe a bit flatter. All it is missing now is a golden bow on the top, he muses.

The doll box is laying on the table in John’s office. The building itself is empty, bar John himself, sitting at his desk, and Nathan, lurking near the doors. All the staff have been encouraged to head home early.

“Any complications?” John asks, eyeing the box curiously but not making any move to open it. Better safe than sorry. He has already called Harry and the mage promised to be there in just ten minutes. Sometimes the mechanics of magical travel make John’s mind hurt, but he cannot deny how useful it is.

“None to my knowledge,” Nathan replies. “Though I wouldn’t trust that DuMorne guy not to somehow screw us over. I don’t know. He seemed… not all there. Either he was high as fuck, or not fully human.”

John hums and leans back in his chair. Nathan had kept him updated the whole time he’d been looking for the doll, and John is still not completely sure all that effort was worth it. But he is running out of options and just gunning the Red Court out of his city won’t be enough. Though he does take pride in the fact that he managed to force a substantial number of Reds to leave the city by harassing them with more mundane things. Buying out the buildings they resided in, relocating their possible food sources, setting the police on anyone suspected of being a Red vampire by painting them as rapists and drug dealers. Which wasn’t far from the truth, considering the aphrodisiac and addictive qualities of their saliva.

The presence of Red Court in Chicago is diminished. But John wants it gone completely.

There is a gust of cold wind and a moment later the air tears in the middle of John’s office. The gateway ripples, stabilizes, widens a bit, and then Harry is stepping through.

John hasn’t seen the man since Harry gave him a dozen handkerchiefs containing sunshine inside to use in an emergency several months ago, and he can’t help but think that the mage looks too damn tired. Pale. And skinny. Gaunt even. John can practically see the ribs under the black T-shirt and that can’t be healthy.

“I know, I know,” Harry catches his gaze and grins. “A little more and I’d look like a White Walker. Don’t worry, it’s just a little side effect that’s gonna go away in a week. Give or take. I just overdid it a little.”

“Allow me to at least order something to eat for you,” John says after a pause. And then without waiting for an answer. “Italian? Chinese?”

Harry sinks into the visitors chair with a visible sigh and flaps his hand at John.

“What’s faster. I’m not going to say no to a pizza either,” Harry says before reaching into the pocket of his coat and pulling out a pair of gloves. “Now, you said you’ve found the doll?”

John nods, gestures at the box on the table, and while Harry examines the lid, picks up the phone and orders them a late dinner. After another look at Harry, he doubles the order, figuring he might persuade the man to take the leftovers with him.
“Hmm,” Harry trails a gloved finger along whatever is written on the box. “Odd.”

“What is it?” John asks, noting the way Nathan still hovers in the back, clearly curious but unwilling to come closer to the box.

“Might be wrong, but these look like names,” Harry says. “Victims, maybe. Or previous owners. Hard to say.”

The mage picks up the box, places it in his lap, and then raises his arm, drawing a circle in the air. John feels static on his skin, before the floor under Harry lights up, casting a warm blue glow on his face. A protection of sorts, John assumes.

“Now that’s done, let’s see…” Harry opens the box and blinks down at the doll. The doll blinks back up at him. “Well, hello, there, beautiful.”

None of them expect the doll to respond, but the second later the porcelain mouth opens, showing a row of perfectly white teeth and a similarly white tongue, and the doll says, “Hello, handsome.”

It’s voice is brittle and quiet, and John has to fight the urge to recoil.

“I don’t suppose you could tell us how you work?” Harry asks after a pause.

“Are you with the shackled wizard?” The doll says rolling her eyes first to the left, then to the right. “He tastes bad. Rotten and rotting.”

“No,” Harry says though it sounds more like a question. John makes a note to tell him about DuMorne later. Perhaps, Harry might have some insight into the antique dealer that would be useful for the future.

“Good,” the doll smiles. “Then you may name your wish and I will name my price.”

“We wish to expel any and all Red Court vampires from Chicago,” Harry says with a quick glance at John.

The doll smiles wider and snaps her teeth, before raising her arm and rubbing her stomach through the dress.

“Ambitious. I like it,” she says and falls silent, eyes rolling in their sockets. Almost a minute later she speaks again. “Blood for blood. That is my price.”

“You want my blood?” Harry asks in alarm, the circle of magic brightening under him.

“No, no, silly. I like you,” after a second John realizes that the shrill sound escaping the doll is laughter. “No. I want vampire blood. Feed me a vampire, red and dead, and I will make them leave.”

John is about to agree, plans to capture one of the bloodsuckers running through his mind, when Harry narrows his eyes and asks, “Why? What will vampire blood give you?”

“Oh, oh, I really like you!” the doll exclaims. “Pretty face, pretty brain.” And then after a pause and another smile. “I’m hungry. And I can’t sleep when I’m hungry. The filthy wizard didn’t feed me, no, no, not at all. I’m stuck. My wings are clipped. But when I sleep, I dream. Oh, how I dream…”

“Are you dreams harmful to others?” Harry persists.

“No, no, no,” the doll chants, smile dimming for a moment.
“Will you drive the Red Court from the city without harming anyone else?” Harry asks.

“Yes, yes, yes,” the doll says, peering up at the mage. “Do we have a deal?”

Harry raises his head and waits until John nods at him.

“Yes. Yes, we have a deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Betaed by glymr!

Alright, so I still don't have much free time (work is being... work) which means I can't promise I'll be able to go back to weekly updates. But! Even if I can't manage to post a chapter every week, I'm reasonably sure I should be able to update every two weeks.
Bianca St. Claire hates Chicago. She hates the way the air smells in the evening when she steps out on the streets after hours spent indoors. She hates the way she gets woken up by cars screaming past the house she claimed as hers. She hates that she cannot escape the noise even behind soundproof walls. She hates humans, bustling about the city like hamsters in a cage. She hates that she loved Chicago when she first saw it.

Bianca hates.

And yet she cannot leave.

She will not leave.

Not when leaving will mean all of her efforts to establish a foothold in the city, both for her and for the Red Court, have been for nothing.

Still, the thought persists, growing roots and seeding doubt in her mind. She does her best to stamp it out, drowning it in blood, in power, in magic. Until she almost convinces herself the idea has never even crossed her mind.

Until one day she starts getting reports of some human mongrels trying to drive her and hers out of Chicago. It is not the first time humans noticed the Red Court’s presence in their vicinity. It is not even the first time the bloodbags tried to do something about it. It is, however, the first time they are proving to be such a nuisance about it. And that’s not counting the slew of bad luck that’s been plaguing her and her people for the last week.

The bloody vampire that’s currently standing before her and trying to hide small bite marks on his arms behind his back is not helping her mood improve. Neither does the smell wafting off the vampire’s clothes. She wrinkles her nose and makes a note to send for the maids as soon as their conversation is finished. She won’t be able to work in her office otherwise.

“Let’s go over it again, Kyle. In a bit more detail this time,” Bianca drawls after the vampire starts fidgeting in place. “You returned to your home to find the police idling near the building. Having just finished your meal, you had no chance to clean up and so attempted to sneak past them. And then…” she trails off and raises her brow, prompting the vampire to continue.

“...and then I literally stumbled into one of the officers that, apparently, really liked his privacy when having a smoke,” Kyle fidgets and looks away. “He saw the blood on my shirt and drew a gun on me.”

“And then you attacked him,” Bianca says flatly.

“And then I tried to attack him,” corrected Kyle. “But…”

“Well?” Bianca asks.

“But there was a sewer hatch between us, and I didn’t notice that it was open, so. I fell.”

“Into the sewers,” says Bianca, her tone still a little bit disbelieving. “Alright. What then?”
“And then it turned out the sewers under my home housed a mass of surprisingly aggressive rats. I think they had some other blood in them, because their bites haven’t healed yet. Well, that, and their eyes were too red to be natural. By the time I got rid of them, the policeman called for backup and they were poking flashlights into the hatch,” Kyle scratches at his arm and continues after a beat. “I… decided it was time for a strategic retreat.”

Bianca nods, “And why were the police there in the first place?” She asks.

“I don’t know,” Kyle shrugs. “Could be one of those reports that somebody’s been slipping under their door lately.”

“Could be,” Bianca repeats slowly. “Still, you won’t be going back there again. Send someone to retrieve your things. Good thing your sister is out of state right now.”

Kyle winces. “It… won’t be necessary, Madam. When I climbed out of the sewers not far from home, I almost got run over by a firetruck. It seems while I was dealing with rats, my apartment caught fire. There’s nothing left.”

“That’s…” Bianca blinks. “That’s unfortunate.”

“Yes, well,” Kyle says, “at least I escaped with clothes on my back and relatively in one piece. That’s more than I can some for some of the others. We’ve been losing people to freaky coincidences all week.”

“I’m aware,” Bianca bites out.

“At the rate we’re going, we’ll be down to twenty, fifteen people in another week.”

“I’m aware, Kyle,” Bianca says again, suppressing her irritation.

“If something’s not done…”

“Enough!” The last thread of Bianca’s patience snaps at the reminder and she bares her teeth. “You will find out who’s been hindering us on the human side of things. Quiet!” She snaps at Kyle when he tries to interject. “Do as you’re told. Unless you want me to send you back to grovel at the Red King’s feet.”

“Sorry, Madam,” Kyle murmurs.

“Get out of my sight,” Bianca sends him away with a wave of her hand, and as soon as he leaves, collapses in the chair.

The situation is a bit more dire than Kyle knows. Contrary to his prediction, their numbers have already dwindled to a dozen, give or take a few weaklings not worthy of being called Red Court vampire. Kyle and his sister had been the last of her independent lieutenants. All the rest of the survivors have fallen back to her house, not willing to risk going out into the city unless explicitly ordered to if it meant possibly not coming back.

Bianca sighs and rubs at her temples. It began with a broken heel almost eight days ago. A minor inconvenience for Bianca, but it was just a start. A broken heel, a spilled cup of coffee, a ripped blouse, a missed meeting… Things piled up. She chalked it up to bad luck and a bad day. But as time passed, she started receiving reports from her people that proved it was something more than simple bad luck. It started small, little things, easy to ignore. A lost key, a bloodstain someone forgot to clean, a run in with the local thugs who proved to be a bit more hardy than anyone expected. After the first body was left practically on her doorstep, however, Bianca was more inclined to believe it
was a something more than a simple bad week. Now she is practically sure it is a curse of some kind.

The fact she has been feeling weaker and weaker ever since the incidents started, seems to support her theory.

The question is: who would dare?

Not the wizards, surely. The spineless cowards would never do anything that might constitute a declaration of war. The Fae? But she knows of no offense she might have done to cause one of them to curse her and hers. Other Vampire Courts? Possible, she supposes, but again, she cannot fathom why. The local White Court is too engaged in their own power plays to move onto her. Mavra would have surely warned her if the Black Court decided to attack her. The Church? Unlikely. Bianca doubts the fanatics would resort to curses.

She stands up and starts to pace, ignoring the stink left behind after Kyle left. As she discards the possible perpetrators one by one, Bianca’s frown becomes deeper and deeper.

She stops before the window and gazes into the black night that fell onto the city several hours ago. There is a child laughing somewhere outside, happy and bright, and Bianca huffs in disgust. She is hungry but has no time for a proper meal. Still, she might sent for something young and soft later.

Bianca turns away from the window and makes two steps towards her desk before freezing in place and whirling back to the glass, eyes wide and mouth half open in a snarl. The childish laughter cuts off for a second and then resumes, closer and louder than before.

There should be no children in the area, and certainly not so deep into the night. Bianca tenses and exterts her Will into the grounds before her house. She spends several long seconds searching for the source of the laughter, before it stops again, the sound echoing just under her window. A moment later her office is plunged into darkness, as the lightbulbs in the overhead lamps explode and shower the floor in glass.

She steps back, falling into a half crouch and gathering her magic for an assault she is sure will be coming any second now. But as the clock ticks away in her mind, there is no attack.

Slowly, taking care not to make a sound, Bianca straightens up and moves closer to the phone sitting on the desk. Her steps are mere whispers in the stillness of her office and she allows her muscles to unclench just a touch, before reaching for the button hiding just to the left of the phone.

Bianca intends to call her guards to her, whichever of them managed to survive the last week at least, but before she can touch it, she hears it again. A child’s laughter, this time inside her office and far too close to her for comfort.

She rears back, turns around, and, just like Mavra taught her, pushes her magic out in a wide arc, whipping it from side to side to cut in half whoever managed to sneak up on her. But there is nothing.

“Missed me!” A voice sing songs behind her and Bianca startles, losing connection to the magic whip and letting it dissolve. In a flash she forms it again and slashes at the same time as she turns, but to her ire she hits nothing again.

“Third time’s the charm!” The voice belongs to a young girl, Bianca realizes as she swings her magic whip again, and this time she manages to catch a blur in the corner of her eye. This time her whip finds the target, coils around it, and… dissipates.

“Who are you?” Bianca forces past her suddenly numb lips. “What do you want?”
“We-e-e-ell,” the girl stretches out the word and then dissolves into giggling. Bianca narrows her eyes and dares a step closer to the exit, calling on her magic once more. “That’s a secret!”

Bianca lunges towards the door and throws a half-formed spell at where the childish voice is coming from. The laughter starts up again and the door swings closed just before she reaches it. Bianca swallows a curse and turns to the window.

“No, now, now,” the girl chides, “we’ve just started playing. You don’t get to leave in the middle of the game. No, you don’t, no, you don’t.”

In the faint moonlight coming from the window, Bianca finally sees the owner of the voice. Her eyes widen and for a moment she stops to stare. Instead of a girl, there is a small doll sitting on top of her desk and swinging its legs back and forth. Its face is hidden by a curtain of black hair, but Bianca can feel its gaze following her every move. The doll doesn’t feel malicious to her senses, but the magic wafting off of it smells old. Heady. Intoxicating.

Bianca sways in place, almost stepping closer to the doll, before coming to her senses and practically leaping in her haste to get out of her office and away from whatever this creature is. She almost makes it to the window, prepared to jump out. Almost.

“No, you don’t,” the doll repeats and a moment later a porcelain hand closes on Bianca’s leg and her whole body goes numb. She tries to move, but instead of escaping, she moves back a step. And then another. And another, until she is sitting at her chair, the doll cradled in her lap.

The laughter starts up again, but Bianca’s mind is too sluggish to process the sound properly. She watches as her hand lifts and presses the button near the phone. She frowns at the vampires bursting in her office half a minute later, Kyle peeking through the doorway, and hears herself speaking. And then feels magic slipping from under her skin, mingling with the doll’s, and spreading to the vampires gathered in the middle of the room. The magic burrows into them and Bianca sees their eyes go blank, pupils blown wide.

“Madam?” Bianca hears from the doorway. She raises her hand and beckons, ignoring the surprised shouts as her magic drags Kyle to join the others. A moment later, his eyes, too, go blank.

She stands up and slowly walks around her vampires, the doll humming happily in her hands.

“Oh!” It suddenly exclaims. “I know! It’s so dark in here, how about we brighten the place up a little? What do you think?” It giggles again and squirms in her arms, until Bianca gently sets it on the floor. “You just stand here, alright? I really enjoyed playing with you, you see. I think I will remember you when I go to sleep and dream. So I wanted to add a little personal touch in the end. I’m sure the pretty one won’t mind. Now, let’s see…”

The doll hops from place to place, singing a wordless tune under its breath. And wherever one of its legs touches the floor, a bright red flower blooms until soon the whole room is full of flickering red petals.

And when the doll cheerfully waves at her and vaults over the windowsill, disappearing into the night, Bianca smiles and waves back. She is still smiling when the flowers start licking her skin. She is still smiling when the vampires before her crumble onto the floor, twitch, and still.

She is still smiling when she dies.
Betaed by glymr.

End Notes

Welp. Seems Dresden Files fandom is sucking me back under again. Let's see how long I'll make it this time. Betaed by glymr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!