Summary

When Harry met Johnny Marcone, he wasn't really thinking about the money. Well, okay, maybe he was. Just a little.

Notes

Love all, trust a few. ~William Shakespeare
April: Turning Point

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the Kudos!! I was surprised at how many I received!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Mister Dresden, I am quite eager to establish a positive working relationship, here. If it's the money, I can offer you more. Let's say double your usual fee." He steepled his hands in front of him as he talked, half-turning towards me. My God, I kept expecting him to tell me to go out there and win one for the Gipper. "How does that sound?"

"It isn't the money, John," I told him.

It was only partly true, and anyone could have seen the lie. I’ve always been a horrible liar. "This just isn't going to work." I couldn't leave the case now, not a case like this. Not when magic had been used like - well, like that - and not Murphy was counting on me. And I definitely couldn't be paid to be “sick.” Just the idea made me feel slimy. I won’t say the money wasn't tempting, because it was; I had bills to pay, just like everyone else, and work wasn't exactly easy to come by. Most of my calls started with “are you for real?”

Hopefully Miss Monica Lost-Husband wouldn't turn tail and leave because I was a few minutes late. I don’t think Mafia crime lords are considered an acceptable excuse.

Marcone was still looking at me, and it would have been so easy to catch his gaze. I could look him in the eye and find out what he was like, but my gut was eating at me, telling me something wasn’t quite right. Instead I rearranged my long legs in the only backseat I’ve known large enough to fit them, and said: "If you don't mind, I do have a scheduled appointment to keep. Some people are actually courteous enough to arrange their business meetings ahead of time instead of forcing people into cars."

Mafia lords make me edgy, okay? Even a wizard has to fear a gun, and there are mortals out there who carry them around like a second set of underwear.

I could feel his eyes narrow on me and on the slight movements I made. I wasn't afraid of the big bad bully and his big bad bully bodyguards exactly. I was incredibly aware of what they could do to me, yes, but not afraid. I also had no intention of proving I was a wizard to him. Mob bosses tended to take those sorts of things the wrong way and I didn’t want to end up with a bullet in me.

"I don't want to trouble you terribly, Mister Dresden; you could consider it a paid vacation."

I felt my lips quirk into a grin - he had no idea of the trouble I could get myself into on a daily basis, paid vacation or not. Aside from that, it simply wasn't an option. No matter how tempting the offer, I couldn’t take it.

There’s nothing quite like the possibility of getting your head chopped off to motivate you to prove yourself innocent in a magical murder. It had certainly kept me obeying the Council’s laws, but I don’t usually talk about that.
Gentleman Johnny didn’t know it, but not working on this case would cause just as much trouble as working on it. Both choices were a dead end - well, hopefully not literally, but they weren't exactly pleasant. So no, a vacation wasn’t exactly on my calendar. I had to find out who did it so I could prove I hadn’t been involved, as strange as that sounds.

I turned to tell him ‘no’ one last time and found myself caught in his eyes for a moment too long. Soulgazing is an awkward experience, and there are few mortals who wish to engage in it once they truly understand what it means. In Marcone's eyes everything was stark and sterile. My body shivered with a cold that wasn't physical, my mouth still half-open but the actual words caught in my throat. The sight of his self gagged me before I could whisper a sound. I don't like killers, and I don't like secrets. Marcone's soul was a well-organized file cabinet of both, crisp and clean and organized, that I felt my own messiness beside him. Yes, I had seen horrible things, but I wasn't the cause of them. Not like him. I was a storm of feeling and wonder and hurt and need next to the ruler-straight guidelines Marcone’s soul followed.

And the secrets – the things I couldn’t see – I knew were worse. As good as wizards were at hiding the truth of what vanilla mortals didn’t want to see, as much as we made the bumps in the night go away without uttering a word, Marcone was better.

It was a tiger’s soul. A burning soul. Passion and hunger held under a control so tight it made my skin ache. Marcone was a ruthless businessman and a killer. A predator and protector. If he had been born a fae, he would have easily been a fae lord. Had he been a wizard, I have no doubt he would have been seated at the high Council - maybe even as the Merlin, if he had the power to back it.

I tore my gaze away as soon as the gaze broke, unable to look at him any longer. Stars, it was usually the mortal who came away reeling from such encounters, but I could see my hands shaking and hear my heart pounding in my ears. "I need to get to my office."

"I think not."

What the hell?

"Mister Dresden, when one is presented with two options, one of which is distasteful and the other unreliable, which should he chose?" He looked as calm and composed as before our soulgaze, and there’s no way of knowing what it is he saw in me, but I’d lost track of the conversation somewhere around ‘I think not.’ I had no idea what he was talking about.

I know I frowned. Did he mean for him or for me? Just how deeply had he seen into me? What options did he mean? There were too many questions. "I have a job to do, and an appointment to keep. I can’t be paid to avoid my job."

"Not only is it bad for business, but it goes against my principles. John. You don't want to make an enemy of me."

"No," he answered, with a smile I didn't like on his lips. I was suddenly very glad that soulgazes only happened once, because it looked like he wanted another round and I wasn’t ready for that. "Quite the opposite really."

A wizard might be able to do many things, but he's still a man. I was reminded of that fact when I felt my eyelids start to droop, and I finally noticed the small little vial of something vaguely dark and powdery in his hand. I hadn't seen him pull it out – stars, for all I knew it was only a distraction and not the drug itself – but I was feeling the effects as my hand darted for the door and attempted to find the handle. It must have been child-locked because it wouldn’t open, and when I lunged across the seat to open Marcone’s I ended up sprawled across his lap. The only thing that kept me from falling
into the footwell and bruising myself on the front seats was Marcone’s hand holding me against his legs.

His door wouldn’t open either.

Slowly I drew my eyes up to his face and saw the handkerchief he held against his mouth with one hand. I slid downwards in the seat until I was sitting in the footwell, my head and shoulders still across his thigh, and wondered if he’d somehow signaled Cujo to breathe an antidote as well so we didn’t crash into a lightpole.

"I could use a consort."

It took a few moments for me to put the words back into context.

Well, crap.

Chapter End Notes

Beginning italics are quoted straight from the book.

Chapter one Dates:

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Second Edit: 1/8/2012
Vanilla mortals joke when they say the eyes are the windows to the soul. For a wizard, it’s the truth. We get good at avoiding direct eye contact; just a second too long and we see someone very differently. That look is called a ‘soulgaze,’ and it is supposedly a gift of magic. It’s a gift I, at least, don’t like very much since taking a peek at someone else’s soul means they get a look at mine. I would have rather let Marcone see me naked than let him see my soul; it would have been less intimate and less invasive. My soul isn’t one that likes getting poked into very much, even by me.

There are other risks to a soulgaze. The things you see will never be able to forget, and the memory would never dull. There is always the chance that you will see something so foul and ugly that it can literally drive you insane, because every time you think of it the memory returns in crystal clear Technicolor, as if it had just occurred.

I don’t think this soulgaze will drive me around the bend, but inside the cold, clean walls of Johnny's mind I had seen something I both did and didn't expect: he was innocent of the murders of Miss Lacy Underthings and Tommy LoveMeMore.

Of course he was innocent; he was no wizard. It was only mildly frustrating; that would have been a neat and tidy close to the case.

My head hurt with fighting sleep, and thinking about the stark shopping mall of Marcone's mind wasn't helping. I started trying to figure out where I was, realizing I wasn’t sprawled across Marcone’s backseat anymore. It was dark, but that could have been the lights. I could have popped the lightbulbs, my magic interfering with the technology while I slept. Or they were just turned off. I couldn't move, but that could have been the drugs. Air-borne drugs are tough; my body finds them harder to reject. And I was just as bad with drugs that made me sleep, even when I took them willingly. I didn’t like the fuzzy feeling they left in my mouth or the way I woke up feeling shaky and weak.

One more thing was certain: I did not like Gentleman Johnny. Morning, noon, or night that man was not getting on my Christmas Card list.

Like a tiger on a hunt, he had scented my fear and gone for what he wanted. I didn’t know why he decided to kidnap me, but it didn't really matter much. The deed was already done, as the saying goes, and now I needed to find a way out.

Yes, I’d like a murder completed by breakfast, one magician tied up in my bedroom, and three large bowls of spring rice, please. Thank you.

Johnny's mind worked with simple goals of what he wanted and how he could get it, and everything was just so organized. I had no idea what that meant. He wasn’t a child, but the comparative simplicity of his mind scared me more than the exploded bits of the victims I’d seen at lunch. They’d just made me sick; his mind made me nervous. I had a feeling John would get along great with Morgan, so long as their ideas agreed. Otherwise they’d probably try to kill each other. They were too similar, too black and white.

The lights flickered on, and hey - I wasn't blind. That was a plus.
I could now see that the room was sparse, having only a single bed, a dresser, and a small window. It obviously wasn’t a guest room. It looked like it’d been converted; there were still marks on the ceiling from where a wall had come down.

"Awake, I see." Apparently Johnny liked to state the obvious.

I guess Miss Monica No-Last-Name had discovered I couldn’t take her case. It’s too bad. It would have been some good money. Honest money.

"Maybe still a bit drifty," Marcone commented, coming into my direct line of sight. "It's a side effect of the chemical, I'm afraid. It's a shame I had to use it, but I couldn't just let you pass up such a good opportunity."

I don't know who he thought he was kidding; we both knew that wasn't why he brought me here. He'd mentioned a 'consort', but I wasn't about to be the one to bring that up. Words like that could be dangerous. He was mafia, not fae, so that was something in my favor, but I’d never been around the mafia type long enough to pick up on their language quirks.

"Since you're still out of sorts, I guess our discussion will have to wait - but I expect you to be thinking about your fees," he told me, walking towards the door again. Apparently he just needed to see if I was still among the living. "Everything, after all, has a price tag." The lights snapped off.

I could practically hear the 'that I can afford' following him out of the room, the clang of the door echoing in my head beside it.

I fell asleep wondering about the cost of freedom.

When I woke up a second time, I was immediately aware of two things. One, my mouth had the slimy aftertaste of cotton that came from being drugged. Mixed with the taste of having thrown up outside Tommy Tomm’s room and not having a toothbrush handy for more than a few hours, I could have been growing mold in my mouth and supporting a colony of tiny insects. Bleh. Two, I had a semi-urgent need to use a bathroom.

I never said they were pleasant things. Or useful.

After a moment of staring at an unfamiliar ceiling (and rolling saliva around my mouth to fade the taste), I remembered that I wasn't in my own room because I had been the victim of kidnapping. My day was not going well, and I needed to leave. And if someone found me snooping around I could treat them to a few minor burns for their trouble. They didn’t have any reason to hold me here, and I even had a reasonable excuse for snooping: it wasn't like there was a toilet immediately apparent.

The windows – well, one window split into two panes, really – let in a bit of light, but were too small for an escape route. While I might have been able to fit my shoulders through the frame if the window was gone, the big metal brace down the middle made such a task inadvisable. Someone had also taken my shoes sometime between the fancy car and the bed, which was a bit disturbing.

I could deal with missing shoes, though it made me feel a bit like a mouse who’d lost a patch of fur. If they’d changed my clothes, I might have insisted on burning the bed just to even the score.

Since the view out the window showed trees and sky clearly, I guessed I was on the second or possibly third floor and not locked in the basement recovering from any number of crimes to my body.

I expected a bit of lightheadedness when I sat up, considering the headache I had, but it never
arrived. I soon discovered I could stand and walk without issue, though the headache troublesome. With a bit of effort I pushed it back and tried moving around. I was a bit stiff from lying still so long and being moved about like so much dead meat, but nothing hurt that I wouldn't have expected from a forced sleep. The cotton mouth I couldn't get rid of without a bathroom or a kitchen. Preferably a bathroom.

I stood by the door and listened carefully, but I couldn't hear anything to indicate guards. I considered Listening - opening my hearing up even further - but I had recently been drugged and the remaining headache was considerable, it was best not to. Listening is an easy skill, but it isn't exactly precise at the best of times; if I wasn't I wasn't focused my hearing might zero in on foxes digging dens outside while I stood around considering the wisdom of opening the door to a hallway.

Not exactly beneficial.

The lock was a simple tumbler mechanism. It would have been easier if it was electric, but I imagine Mister John I-Get-What-I-Want had already discovered a bit about the incompatibility between me and technology. I hope I fried his stupid little phone, or pager, or whatever it was he used to communicate with the criminal underground.

Well, me and tumblers get along just fine too. A simple spell had the knob turning easily in my hand, and probably never usable again. I ask that you don’t ask where I learned such a spell. It was mentally scarring enough the first time. I exited the room as if I had every right to - which I did. I doubted Johnny had invested in getting a magic circle drawn around his entire house, and there certainly wasn’t one in the room he’d stashed me in. He hadn’t warded the walls, either. He wasn’t trying very hard to keep me locked up, at least not in any way that mattered. It could have been lack of experience with anything magical, but the view from the windows said it was almost sunset. He’d had enough time to do some research.

There was no one in the hall, which I didn't question. You don't look a gift horse in the mouth - heck, I'd take any gifts offered, at the moment. Without the cash from my potential customer, I was flat broke until the PD paid up. I had pretty much nothing until I wrapped up this case. I didn’t even have enough change for 99-cent burger.

None. Not even in my bank account.

From that side of things, Marcone’s deal didn’t look too bad. I could take his money, take a few side jobs elsewhere, and return when things cooled down. Except if I did that I would pretty much shoot a bullet straight into any friendship I still had with Murphy, and I could kiss any further PD jobs goodbye. And there was still the fact that Marcone ran the Chicago underground criminal empire. He’d be paying me with money gained from drugs, gun dealing, and prostitution.

And the possibility that the council might decide the world was better off with my head seperated from my body.

No thanks.

I found an actual full-length window not too far from the room, and got a better look outside. The landscape artist who had been hired for this property had kept all the tall trees away from the house. That wouldn’t stop anyone really determined from scaling the walls. If I had to I could make my way out that way, but it wasn’t a preferred option.

If Marcone thought it wasn’t an option at all, however, then he didn’t know everything about wizards and magic yet.
Something wasn’t adding up, though. To be honest, getting down from a second story window wasn’t terribly difficult even for someone without magic, though it took more delicate work and tricky spells than I usually needed and would require more concentration. Something about the offered out, though, rang in my head as too easy – and too easy meant a trap.

I had no objections to springing a trap if it was going to be a battle. Going head to head with monsters and other wizards wasn’t fun, but I had enough power to brute my way through most of my conflicts or run away intact. It was also astonishingly normal for me.

This, however, was not a battle. There wasn’t a pit trap under the window or a gang of goblins in the bushes. I didn’t know what I’d be walking into. I wasn’t exactly on par politically with Marcone. His lawyers probably had a very good reason written up for me being in his house, just in case I snuck out and tried to take him to court for kidnapping and drugging me. They couldn’t throw me back in that room, but Marcone could make me look really bad.

Marcone was too smart to have expected to hold me with a locked door. He was trying to get me another way. I just didn’t know what the window had to do with it, if anything.

I bypassed the exit and made my way downstairs. There had to be more to his plan than just knocking me out, taking my shoes, and putting me to bed. While those plans might not have had anything to do with lawyers and windows, I’ll admit to curiosity. And being pissed. I’m a wizard, we’re meant to be both too curious for our own good and constantly surly. That idea comes from restraining yourself until that slowly building anger we have just explodes in fiery rage, usually when plans don’t work and you need to pull power fast.

I was also confused, as what Marcone wanted seemed to contradict itself. I had seen in his soul the need to set things to rights – to find Tommy Tomm’s murderer, if not Miss Lacy Underthing’s, and exact his own sort of jungle justice. To find a killer who used magical means, you hired a magical detective. That was logical – and people these days were big on logic. Marcone’s mind thrived on it.

So why was he hiring me to take a vacation? What was it that Marcone really wanted me for? He’d said ‘consort’, of that I was certain - but that wasn’t exactly specific. I’d worked with enough fae to know ‘consort’ could mean anything from acquaintance to lover to criminal accomplice. Marcone had seen into my soul and something about it had intrigued him, but he’d been a bit off track from what I expected even before that gaze. It was almost like he was filling a role in a movie, playing for a certain expectation.

He was also a lot younger than the grandfather-figure I had expected, but that’s something else entirely.

I knew where the play-acting came from. I sometimes had to play the typical wizard movie role; my belief that I was a wizard sometimes made people nervous. Acting as a ‘wizard’ could change a nervous client to an agreeable (and paying) client. I don’t think Marcone was trying to calm my nerves, but the act might have been more habit than anything else. Marcone didn’t seem like the type to play to a person’s beliefs or be wary of what others believed. He was more the type to believe you believed and hold his own opinion until he saw proof.

My abilities were useless to him without proof I wasn’t a fruitcake. He wouldn’t have cared enough to ‘talk’ to me if he didn’t think I would find something – me, specifically, and not the police. There were two dead bodies lingering about the morgue in gruesome little ziplock baggies that the police could sift through for evidence, and I was the man Dead Tommy’s boss wanted to set up in a fancy hotel. If he’d kidnapped me because his peek inside me had reaffirmed the belief that I could find the killer, then I needed to be the one investigating that double murder. He should have had me working it.
Unless he knew something and I didn’t.

It was times like these I almost wished I was willing to look deeper into myself, but that was a cluttered place where few dared venture, and I wasn't about to go there myself.

Did Marcone know who was behind the deaths? No. No, I knew he didn't. He wanted to know, though, and he wanted vengeance. He also didn't want the police involved, and he didn’t want me investigating it for them.

So, what, did he want to hire me himself and the police beat him to it?

That seemed a bit too petty, but it was possible. It was an answer that made some sense. Of course, as soon as the possibility occured, I had to avoid being seen by a pair of passing goons. Marcone’s place was a maze. Not a sprawling maze – I could touch both sides of the hallway without having to move – but a maze nonetheless. From what I could tell, it was a patchwork job of remodeling and add-ons that no doubt looked spotless from the outside, but was designed to confuse anyone inside. Every corner seemed like part of a different house.

I knew it was Marcone's private estate, but I’d expected more than a maze with two guards. Maybe not mafia men roaming about, but at least maids, housecleaners, cooks, hired help, or whomever he used to keep the house kept.

After they passed I moved on, wandering through the house and checking rooms, looking for something that might hint either at what Johnny Marcone wanted or what I might be able to use to my advantage, or a bathroom. Barring that, a way out. Yes, I was taking advantage of the fact that Marcone had brought me into his own domain to do a bit of research on the crime lord. Don't get me wrong, I still wanted to leave as soon as I could get my scrawny arse out, but how often would I get the chance to possibly help Murph take down Marcone? The man was a criminal; he had to expect something like this from his victims.

I finally stumbled across a useful room - a study. Hey, ho, filing cabinets. Not a bathroom, but possibly more useful in the long run.

I let out a low whistle when I saw some of the contracts. They made more in an hour just standing next to Marcone than I would make in a month. Maybe two.

The computer must have been in standby mode. It started making odd sounds, a thin trail of smoke curling up from the tower, and I moved more quickly through the files until I found Tommy Tomm's while I hoped the damn thing hadn’t been connected to an alarm somewhere.

The file looked exactly like every other one I'd seen. Marcone’s physical files weren't very detailed, mostly just the contract and a listing of days off. I stuffed Tom's requested vacation schedule into my back pocket, folding it over several times until it fit, and then searched to see if Miss Romantic Music had a file.

She didn't, but Bianca did. That caught my attention. What would a mob boss want with a vampiress? A Red Court vampires, no less. Was he making certain the right kiddies got blood-sucked, or had he noticed a certain number of disappearances tended to end up there, and there were never any investigations into the business? Or was it simply keeping an eye on the competition?

I never found out what was in the file. I’d just barely managed to pull it out and open it before the man of the hour walked in.

Gentleman Johnny Marcone, smug grin on his face, closed the door behind himself and locked us in.
He watched me as I shoved the file back into the cabinet like it was on fire. At the moment, I kind of wished it was.

Chapter End Notes

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I believe I failed to mention last chapter the following: I am working on editing and re-posting this fic, with it arriving for the first time at AO3. If anyone would like to assist the progress of this fic by beta'ing, cheerleading, or pushing, please email: twist.fate.johnny@gmail.com. I have set up this google account with google docs for chapters and a calendar schedule.

You can contribute however much or however little you please - every little bit helps!
April: Day One, Cont.

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to my beta, StraightRhodes, who helped enormously with this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marcone had actually managed to startle me when he came in. I hadn’t been paying attention, which would be bad when my parole officer showed up – and he would as soon as he heard about the murders. I really needed to up my game. In the mean time, there was a crime lord to deal with.

"Your timing is horrid." Marcone didn’t seem to care if his timing was horrid or not; he calmly stood just inside the door and looked me over, from the crease marks the pillow had made on my face to my still shoeless feet. I folded my arms and tried to look as though I hadn’t been rearranging files to my liking.

Standing around and looking like an idiot before your kidnapper: not a good thing. Must remember this.

"I didn't realize that you were awake, Harry," Marcone said with what would, on a normal person, pass for a smile. To me it looked like the grin of a cat who had just snarfed down the neighbor’s pet canary.

"Don't call me that." I leaned back against the cabinet, hoping that it wouldn't buckle under my weight.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't like newly formed acquaintances taking liberties with my name."

"But that is your name, is it not? Harry Dresden - not Harold, or Henry. Harry." His teeth flashed in a smile that brought to mind wild tigers stalking prey.

"Conjure by it at your own risk." I hoped my grin was also giving off impressions of feline predators slinking through the brush, but I don’t think it quite reached his standard.

"I think I'd rather leave that to the experts," he said, green eyes full of trouble. "Why don't you sit down, and we can discuss the details of your contract."

"Why don't you bring me my shoes and my duster, and I'll walk out without killing another poor, innocent computer." The carpet was too soft under my feet; I still had my socks, but the lack of shoes really bothered me. It was distracting.

His gaze turned to the smoking tower, and a small frown appeared between his eyebrows.

I should make a few things clear about Gentleman Johnny: First of all, he was by no means the old, fat, and ugly boss of TV mafia. It was what I expected, to say the least, that John wasn’t anyone’s graying grandfather. Second, he wasn't the young, thin, slick-haired, fedora-wearing smoker like the standard prepackaged costume. He was probably nearing the big 4-oh, hair neatly combed back,
eyes like the money he dealt in, and muscles like an athlete. He was built like a construction worker; his body showed signs of hard labor - probably not the kind found in a gym - but his strength wasn’t obvious and his muscles weren’t bulging out of his shirt. He was taller than average, but even in my socks I had at least three inches more height.

Hey, I'm tall, what can I say?

John Marcone had the look of someone who had the knowledge and experience in dealing with people and in getting what he wanted. He had his own intimidating aura, and he'd probably killed men more important than me over lesser 'crimes' than I had committed in the last few hours. I was surprised then, that he frowned at the computer but didn't immediately turn his fury towards me.

"I take it the computer was mortally offended by your presence?" he asked.

He didn't sound angry either. I had to wonder if he was truly mad or if he was playing at it in order to live up to his own mafia image. The man had tricked me into a soulgaze mere minutes after meeting him, but that didn't tell me much about what he would do. So much about a soul was about interpretation and symbolism, and I’d left my reference books at home. Especially for a soul like Johnny's, it was more about the essence of what he was and not a situation-specific guide.

I gave a shrug in answer to his question and answered: "It happens."

He 'tsked' at me like I was some errant child. "Harry, Harry - you're spoiling my good hospitality. I haven't even offered you a meal yet; I'm sure you're hungry - would you rather discuss your debts in the dining room?"

"I owe you nothing, Marcone, and I'm not about to start. I'm leaving, whether you like it or not."

"You wouldn't have found much of consequence in those files," he said, leaning back against the door and sticking his thumbs in his pockets. He didn’t seem to have noticed, but the move opened his suit jacket and showed the edge of a holster. I didn’t see the tell-tale bump of a gun, though. Maybe I wasn’t enough of a threat to warrant one, or maybe he just didn’t want to put any holes in his new ‘consort’. His voice brought me out of those thoughts quickly enough: "You’ve probably pulled things out of order as well."

"Haven't you heard? Every good wizard likes a little chaos in his life; I thought I should introduce you to the concept."

He smirked at me - the rat bastard. Smirked. I understood that word better when he did it, because on him it wasn’t just a grin. It was like he had something to hold over me, he knew it, and he was waiting patiently for me to put the pieces together.

And damned if that wasn't the truth. "I prefer order and structure," he told me, "and I prefer to have services rendered to me when I have paid for them. There are several things you now owe me for - the payments on your apartment to start with, not to mention the rent to your office, the repairs to that horrifying vehicle you keep, and the numerous fines you have built up with the Chicago PD. Shall I elaborate?"

I could feel myself pale as the list grew longer, and my stomach sank to somewhere around my toes. That was a lot of money. Being a wizard doesn't pay well, especially since I'm not the party-magic kind. The fees for my car repairs alone had been in the thousands. My mechanic is a good guy, and lets me pay him the cash when I have it, but even he had his limits, and I couldn’t expect him to turn down the pay-off. And then there was the rent for both buildings.
Hell's bells, I was going to be evicted if I couldn’t pay up soon. From both apartment and office. Floorspace in this city ain't cheap.

Marcone had at least half of the PD on his payroll, most likely. He hadn’t touched SI much that I was aware of, but he’d committed enough crimes that he was considered a crime lord on the streets – and he wasn’t in jail. If I walked away he could call the PD, claim the money was stolen, and have them on me within a half-hour, tops. Those guys don't really like me much to begin with, and they’d hardly listen to me over Marcone. Even the officers he hadn’t bought thought I was a bit crazy. Someone might be courteous enough to pretend to listen if I got a nice officer, but I didn’t doubt he’d be on Marcone’s payroll somehow.

Long story short: he had me be the balls, and he knew it. I didn't have that kind of money, and he could make sure the portion of Chicago that mattered knew it.

"That's a lot of trouble to go through for one little wizard," I said, weighing my options. I could get out of here and not look back, taking my chances that Marcone wouldn’t chase me out of state. Or I could stick around, see what he wanted, and find a way around whatever obstacle he’d set before me.

Either way, leaving wasn’t going to be easy.

"I think you can make yourself worth the payment," he said. "I've had my men begin moving the items from your apartment into your rooms here."

Stars and stones, the man had gone beyond serious into, well, obsessive. Possessive. Choose your freaking -sessive.

"I've told them to leave the items under the trapdoor alone until you could supervise. They appeared... delicate. Of course, if you choose to remain obstinate, I could have them do it themselves."

"And how long is this vacation going to last?" I asked, angry. Damn, but the man was planning on taking over my life. Limiting my options and making sure I only did what he wanted by putting me on a leash made of money.

I liked my apartment, damn it! If I had to take this damn enforced vacation, the least he could do was let me stay in my own home behind my own thresholds and wards.

He raised one eyebrow in surprise, and I immediately hated that he could do that. I hated his words even more. "I thought you understood; this arrangement will be permanent. As something I require, you won’t be charged for the move itself unless there is trouble in the process."

“That was not your deal. Your deal was that you would pay me to be ‘sick’ or otherwise incapacitated, and I would take - in your words - a paid vacation,” I snarled. “There was no mention of making a permanent move into new housing or any long-term work. Which, by the way, I’m not doing. And I’m not dropping this case.”

“Yes, I’ve come to realize the futility of holding you back on that front. I will allow you to proceed with your work on the case, of course, but as you have elected not to take my generous offer I’m afraid I cannot pay you for your efforts.”

“Then what is going on?” Stars, but the man was frustrating.

He smiled then, and looked just as calm as if we were discussing what to have for dinner. “I have decided to make you a part of my household. It’s a very rare honor, complete with certain...
benefits.”

The way he had paused before the word ‘benefits,’ I was sure I wouldn’t like them.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Marcone: I am not a part of your household. I don’t want any of your benefits, and I don’t want any of your help.”

“It’s too late for that now.” He seemed as pleased as punch with himself, and I wanted to punch the pleased right out of him. “I have paid off your debts with the expectation that I will be compensated for my efforts. That compensation can be monetary, or you can offer up other means of payment. I certainly wouldn’t mind taking payment in trade. According to Mr. Tomm’s information before he left, you wizards are more sensually inclined than myth would have us believe.”

“Wait - Tommy Tomm told you something before he died?” That was different. That could mean something. I’d never expected talking to Marcone to be useful. At least, not for saving my head.

“I am not requesting your assistance and have already expressed my desire for you to leave this particular case alone. Therefore, I have no obligation to relay any information Mr. Tomm did or did not tell me. In fact, I am rather more inclined to discuss your current situation instead.”

“And I’m ‘rather more inclined’ not to.”

He stared at me for a few moments, carefully waiting.

I broke first. “I am not your lapdog.”

“Of course not. You are an investment, Harry.”

"Don’t call me Harry," I snarled. The computer monitor, though it had been shut off, made a popping noise and smoked; the overhead light flickered a few times before dying out. The only light came from the open doorway, and I used that to stalk forward. I must have looked a sight - more pathetic than frightening - but I was angry.

No. No, I was furious.

"Don't you dare ever call me Harry. You don’t have the right," I said, anger making my voice flat and low, near a growl. I probably sounded like a madman.

I didn’t care. I was mad.

I stalked down the halls not caring that I had no where to go.

Well, not yet. I’d figure it out. I was a wizard, after all.

First, I needed a bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

Aprox. Original Post Date: 9/20/2008
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“Conjure by it at your own risk” is a direct quote from Storm Front, Chapter One. Harry is, essentially, quoting himself.
Chapter Notes

Many many thanks to my beta, StraightRhodes, who has helped enormously with this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Marcone’s driveway must have been at least a mile long and was made of rough cement. My socks weren’t going to last the walk, and I didn’t know where I’d be going from there, so I didn’t even make it outside of the house.

I did find a bathroom. A bit of relief, a splash of water on my face, and I was ready to face Marcone without setting something on fire.

It wasn’t hard to find my patiently waiting kidnapper again. It was harder to bite out the question about how much I owed him.

He was prepared, of course. The damn man pulled out an old-fashioned ledger and printed receipts. Paperwork. A book. If the man had been any more prepared, I’d need to start looking for scout badges.

"One of my associates had transferred this to the computer, but I’d rather not risk bringing you near another one," Marcone said. "By the way, I’m adding the cost of a replacement to your bill."

"Not my fault," I countered. "You brought me here, you screwed up your own equipment. I never would have been near the thing if not for you."

"Fair enough," Marcone conceded. "I'll only charge half."

I crossed my arms and flung myself into the only available chair - a sweet little deal with cushions - because, in all honesty, I hadn’t expected him to change his mind. Either he knew magic was death to electronics, he thought I’d done something mundane to kill it, or the cost was too little to fuss over. For some reason, I didn’t feel like he’d given me any breaks.

Marcone set the book on his desk and opened it to the first page, then began speaking without even looking at what was written. "Let's begin with the repairs to your car. Given the condition of the vehicle, I would prefer to buy you something new, but your mechanic was quite insistent that you wanted none other than your Blue Beetle.” Marcone frowned at the name, a clear sign of his disapproval. “I must say, the car didn't look very blue."

I let myself smile. The Beetle really wasn’t very blue anymore. “It was when I bought it.”

He didn’t even crack a smile. Hardass. "The repairs came to four thousand three hundred sixty five dollars and sixteen cents. Hendricks also put twenty dollars worth of fuel in the tank. I would like to have one of my mechanics check the repairs, then have it repainted to at least look as if it is in good condition, but it will take some time to look over the possibilities.” His fingers tapped the ledger a few times, waiting for a response. I didn’t give him the pleasure.

"Next, your offices. You've been renting by the month for an even five hundred a month. You are
approximately four months behind on rent, but have been making partial payments for the past seven. The figure that the owner gave me was two thousand and fifty dollars - if there is a mistake there, I certainly won’t hesitate to look into it, but I doubt much can be done due the fact that your payments have been late for the past twelve months."

Strangely enough, there wasn’t a tell-tale smile lingering about to clue me in to Johnny’s enjoyment. I would have felt better if he was smiling, or smirking, or radiating some kind of pleasure at my situation. Instead I felt like I’d been called into the Principal’s office.

"The rent on your apartment was set up differently. For the amount of space you were getting, and considering where you were living, it was a good deal, but you were still several months behind. You also made partial payments to your landlord, and I can see why she accepted them. The modifications you made to your space make it less desirable for others to live there. She will now need to install basic electric, water heating, air conditioning and heating, and other modern conveniences. You were a less costly tenant, but also a less reliable one.

"The sum she gave me totaled four thousand one hundred and forty dollars."

I slid further down in the chair, and I couldn’t even look at ‘Gentleman Johnny’ anymore. I hadn’t been keeping track of my expenses very well; I lived paycheck to paycheck. When the bills came due and there wasn’t a sizable paycheck to cover them, I did what I could and put off the rest. Tried to scrounge up enough change to keep a roof over my head, kibble in Mister’s bowl, and the debt collectors from knocking on my door. Hell’s bells, but I was in some deep shit.

"Lastly, there is the cost of fines from the Chicago PD. You failed to purchase a city sticker for your car, so that is, immediately, a hundred and twenty dollar fine."

I could almost believe that Marcone was pulling my leg - but I remembered Murphy mentioning something about sticker fines before I did more than open my mouth to call him on it.

Marcone waited for a moment, and when I didn’t he speak went on: "There’s three fines for running through red lights, but two were flagged as an emergency situation and are in the process of being waived, so you’re only being charged for one. You also have a hundred and twenty dollars remaining in fines for parking tickets.

"Grand total, Mister Dresden, adds up to," he paused for a moment, as if doing the calculations, and I winced - both mentally and literally. It was a lot, I knew, and I’d never be able to pay it off before someone started wondering what I was doing living with Marcone. "Ten thousand eight hundred and ninety five dollars, and sixteen cents. So far." He still hadn’t looked at the book. It was open on the desk, but he didn’t need it.

"I never asked you to pay my debts for me.” I never would have asked anyone to do that. I’d made my own messes, I could clean them up. Eventually. If interfering criminal scumbags didn’t stick their noses where they didn’t belong.

"You didn’t, but I have, and I think I can give you a better deal. Fifteen percent per month on late payments is a bit steep, even for the areas you lived and worked in."

Okay, so fees for late payments weren’t that great. They never were. That’s why they called them fees.

"So what’s your big plan?” I asked, dreading the answer.

"My plan?"
"You seem to have everything else planned - why wouldn’t you already have expectations for payments? You must know something of what I can do, or something you want from me. Am I going to keep my business, or is that going to interfere too much? My apartment's apparently no longer mine, so now I'm homeless. I currently owe you a boat-load of money. You've cost me one customer, which means I have less to pay you with. You wouldn't have done all this if you didn't have expectations for payment in return, an idea of what those payments would be, and a desire to free up my schedule."

I'd stood and turned my back to him again, but I could still almost feel him smiling. His gaze gave me shivers. Laying everything out the way he had probably meant he’d already started the mind-games, but unlike magical beings he didn’t have to dodge any rules. He broke the rules and reshaped them to suit his purposes, and anyone who argued found themselves at the bottom of the Lake.

"Of course I expect payment, Mister Dresden. I do believe that is what we are discussing. And while you work on making those payments you are far from homeless. Your home will be here from now on. You've already seen your bedroom upstairs, which will have to serve for now. You may also claim a workroom, since you had one in your apartment. You have your choice of open rooms, although I will expect it to be on the other side of the house. I expect full knowledge of your working hours, and they will be reasonable; I won't have you exhausting yourself.

"I can't expect you to move your place of business so readily, so I have sent men to inspect the security and install further safety measures until a proper move can be arranged and a closer, more suitable office located. We're already looking into a few locations that might be acceptable. Per month, for your room and workroom, I expect a payment of five hundred dollars - much less than what you were paying for your own living space, and here you will even have the benefits of a hot shower and regular meals."

I guess I'll let him discover on his own that water heaters and me don't mix.

"The extra security charges will be added - along with half the cost of the computer you've destroyed - once I know the final cost. All in all, I'm willing to charge you an interest rate of only five percent per month, so long as you make a payment every month. For each month you fail to make a payment, the interest jumps to ten percent until a payment is made."

"And you think I'm just going to sit here and let you do this?"

"What choice do you have?"

I didn’t say it, but I knew the answer. I could run. Marcone might have his fancy lawyers, his bribed officers and his eyes on every aspect of Chicago, but his domain was this city. His ties beyond the city limits couldn’t go far; there were too many other criminals in the underbelly of the world.

But that would mean leaving anyone I knew to suffer. A mob boss couldn’t let something like that slide, and he would get his revenge on the people I knew, getting his “pay” however he felt appropriate. I’d have to hope Murphy could survive, and solve the case alone. I had to hope Morgan believed there was another wizard in Chicago strong enough to kill two people within a locked room, and I wasn’t fleeing out of guilt.

I had to deal with the murders. I had to find the killer. None of this would matter if I was found guilty of breaking the Laws. I could find a way out of Marcone’s trap once I knew I wouldn’t be dead in a few days. Maybe Murphy would have some good ideas.

Or maybe Marcone’s plan wouldn’t be so bad. A few protection spells, some basic ritual cleansing for the home - it was a long shot, but maybe all he wanted was a few simple things I could live with
"You still haven't mentioned how I'm supposed to pay you."

"You'll make your money through work, Mister Dresden," Marcone drawled, "how else? Of course, if you fail to make sufficient funds to cover a payment of - shall we say, six percent? - per month, I'm willing to take payment in trade."

I snorted. "And what will I be trading? Endless purses and love potions? Did you not read the ad?" If I was the sort of reckless wizard who made endless purses, I'd make one for myself and pay him off with that. Six percent wasn't much, but it was probably more than I carried in my wallet. Six percent of a lot was still a lot.

"Of course I have," Marcone answered, his voice slightly scolding, "and I doubt such things would suit my needs. All monies I use must be accounted for, should one of my businesses or myself be audited, and an endless purse would cause my accountants undue stress."

"So what am I trading?"

"Your body, of course."

I swallowed, stared at the wall, and hoped he didn't mean what I thought he meant. "You mean my magic. Spellwork."

"I mean your body."

Okay, so he really meant what I thought he'd meant, and it wasn't too pleasing a thought. I mean, I've nothing against guys like that, but I don't really swing that way. I've never needed to sell myself – although for a few of those early weeks Bob had mentioned it as a viable option for paying the rent. I turned around slowly so I could guage his reaction, but I kept my eyes away from his face. "I think I must be misunderstanding you, because I believe it is illegal to prostitute one's self." Illegal or not, Marcone could make it happen, but I had to voice the protest.

And here I thought the wanted to use me for my wizard skills. Silly me.

"I run most of this city," Marcone said as if it were a statement of fact, and not some underground operation done without the city's consent. "The Chicago PD will look the other way if I have a man I pay well keeping my bed warm at night."

His words echoed my thoughts with unnerving similarity. I didn't even want to think about sharing his bed, so of course I opened my big mouth. "How do you know I'm not more expensive than you can keep?"

"I can afford more than you think." No shit, considering he just paid near eleven thousand dollars just so I would owe him. "I think we can work out a deal based on your efforts and the type of interactions you're willing to engage in, and the quality of such engagements."

"What, no set 'three handjobs or blow me, take your pick'?' Stars and stones, could I not shut my mouth?"

"Well it would certainly depend on the performance. And the interaction. It is, after all, more enjoyable to work towards mutual enjoyment. If I just wanted an empty night and an easy lay, there are a number of working women and men who would have sufficed."

I bit my cheek to keep from speaking again and asking what more he wanted than sex. I needed to
not sound like I was considering sex with Marcone. Stars, I just had to get the subject away from sex. He was watching me closely - he probably could tell something wasn’t right - and leaned back in his chair again. He looked - concerned? confused? frustrated? - stars, I couldn’t tell.

"Honestly, Harry, you act like no one has ever done this before."

"I haven't sold my body for money before, and I'd rather not start now, thank you very much, so if you wouldn't mind showing me the way out - I have a job to do and some cash to earn." I turned towards the door, still not looking him directly in the eye no matter how safe we were from a second soulgaze. I'd never been put into a situation like this before, and I'm not above admitting that I didn't know what to do. I needed to see Bob, and that meant I needed to get out of this room.

Bob is a wealth of information, but he has some pretty wild ideas on right and wrong. I knew what he'd say: "Give it to him good and make it worth the whole she-bang." I wasn't going to do that. But Bob might have some ideas about those two corpses that turned up, and I might be able to focus on the case and work on fixing one of my problems. If nothing else, I could send him out to find some clues.

Because now I really, really needed to solve this case. And not think about sex with Gentleman Johnny Marcone.

I paused when Marcone spoke: "I'll have a contract drawn up with these terms then, and once it's signed and underway, Mr. Farrier will take you to your old apartment to help pack."

"Fine." I reached for the door.

"Are you not going to wait for the contract?"

"I'd rather be in your presence as little as possible right now."

I already had one death sentence looming. I didn't need another.

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Coming home to find your things packed is scarier than you might think. It's an invasion of privacy that grates against your soul and leaves a piece of you in shock.

Someone had touched every pair of boxers and socks, my books and porn (not that I had any – it all went to Bob), the sheets on my bed – all of it. And none of it mattered to these people. Ancient journals filled with magical knowledge ranked as high as last week's jeans. My toothbrush was just another item that needed a convenient pocket.

Thank the stars I didn't have anything truly embarrassing. A few condoms in the nightstand, but that was about it – though I don’t think the package had any visible expiration dates that would put on display how long it'd been since I needed to use one.

Marcone had given me all day to pack the basement supplies myself, but I would need more time. I made certain he knew that, partly because it was true and partly because I needed to do a little digging before I started caving in to his demands.

I firmly shut the trap door before telling Bob to wake up. I set about lighting as many candles as I could to add light and warmth – without a robe, my basement was cold.

Orange lights flickered slowly to life inside a skull I kept on a shelf, next to a collection of porn magazines and romance novels. The jawbone moved in a fairly good imitation of a yawn for something without any skin. “Hey boss,” he greeted, “what’s with all the noise upstairs?”
Of course he'd noticed; how could he not? The only reason he'd 'woken up' so quickly was so he could ask. Bob's like that sometimes: too curious about my personal life and my sex life. I was grateful he hadn't yet asked to watch - not seriously, at least. “A pain in the ass making himself known,” I answered his question, not wanting to go into details. Not thinking about how he wanted to be a more literal pain in my ass. Still not thinking about sex with Marcone. “I have a bigger issue than the movers: two dead bodies, killed by magic. Strong magic.”


“During sex. The hearts exploded.”

“Now there's a killer orgasm.”

“Bob!”

“What? Just stating facts,” the skull said, somehow managing to pout without lips. “Was she hot?” he asked, changing tracks suddenly.

“'Hot?'”

“Yeah – that's the term people are using now, isn't it? You know... appealing, sexy, beautiful...”

“She was a corpse; I wasn't paying attention to how sexy she was.” I was trying not to barf, actually, but there were some things that just didn't need to be said.

“You're no fun.”

“Of course not. Morgan's going to be on my back, insisting I did it, and I need to prove I didn’t. Ideas, Bob – what have we got?”

“With the power going into it, they weren't random killings. It takes a lot of effort to kill two people at once. Anyone you know visiting from out of town?”

“Not that I’m aware of. They wouldn’t tell me if they were, either. I could ask Morgan when he catches wind of this, but I’d rather he stay far away.” And that his sword stayed with him.

“Well if it wasn’t one wizard, then it must have been more than one.”

That was actually a rather disturbing thought. “More than one?”

Bob seemed to shrug, as much as a skull could at least. “Nothing says only one person committed the crime, right?”

“No, but it’d take a lot of work to get the right number of people with the right mindset and the right feeling and the magical talent needed to do something like this. There’s too much hate in it. Whoever killed them - it was personal.”

“Look Boss, either there’s a powerhouse out there in the city you don’t know about or someone got a coven together for a ritual hit. If both choices are out, maybe what you’re dealing with isn’t human.”

There was the slim possibility it wasn’t. Bianca was involved, and she certainly wasn’t human. A demon might have committed a crime like this just for the fun of it a few centuries back. But that was when vanilla mortals didn’t go investigating the strange things that happened. It would have to be a demon smart enough to make it look like something a mortal did, or one stupid enough not to care
what mortals might start looking at more closely.

No demon with that much power was stupid.

“Let’s assume it was a mortal, and a wizard,” I decided. It was the most logical choice. “If it wasn’t, then it would leave behind clues. I haven’t seen any yet.

“Which means either someone new is in town or a lot of small-timers found a way to gather a lot of power.”

Bob was on silent on his shelf, but when I looked over the orange glow to the skull’s eye sockets was thoughtful.

“Any more ideas?”

The teeth rattled a bit before he spoke. “You need more clues, Boss. You don’t have much to go on. Who were these people anyway? Tourists?

I shook my head. “A local criminal’s bodyguard and an escort girl. I don’t know if he was a job or what, though.”

I winced when I heard Mister hiss upstairs, followed by a human yowl. You don’t make a thirty pound cat mad. “Tommy's boss is the one who hired the movers. I think he's more interested in keeping me away from this case than having me solve it, though. He was rather insistent about that.”

“Hiding something?”

“I don't think so...” I tried to think of what I knew of John Marcone, and how he fit into things. I heard something heavy drop on the floor above me, and one of the men let out a string of cursing. I hoped he hadn't managed to break anything of mine, but maybe he had managed to break his own foot. Some of that stuff was heavy, after all.

I had no doubt that Marcone wanted this solved, and that he wanted vengeance. I knew he hadn't done it himself. So what did that leave?

He wasn't the type to be frightened by death or killing – more one to fight back when challenged. He didn't take attacks lying down on his back. The people who stood in his way got killed.

Consort. I couldn't get that word into context.

The idea hit me suddenly, like a ton of bricks. Consort. Wanting my body. A warm bed and mutual enjoyment. “He's courting me.”

Bob burst out laughing.

“It's not funny!” I hissed. “I think he's serious about it!”

“Harry, have you looked at yourself lately? No woman worth her salt would take a second look at you right now, much less any man. I mean, you do know what a razor is, right?”

So what if I had a rather prominent five o'clock shadow? And so what if I was a bit on the scruffy side? It was late - past sunset - and my bathroom was already in boxes. That didn't mean I was wrong.

“The way you look right now, he doesn't want anything more than some down-and-dirty sex. If he even wants that,” Bob said, rolling his eyes. “Clean yourself up and act sexy, and maybe that will
change. Personally, I would think a mob boss had more sense. Every big criminal I’ve heard of went for the trophy wife.”

That made me stop and think. Marcone did have good sense – in bodyguards, at least – and Tommy had been one of his best men. “I'm going at this the wrong way,” I decided. “I'm looking at Marcone too much. The girl – she might have something to do with it. The killer had something against her or she wouldn't have died the same way he did.”

“Maybe she had a disgruntled husband,” Bob offered.

“I don’t think…” I paused to let my thoughts settle into place. “She was one of Bianca's girls. Marcone had a file for Bianca in his office, so it’s possible his men made use of her services. But Marcone owns a few escort services as well - his men could have used one of those instead.”

“Breaking and entering now, Harry?” Bob asked, feigning offense. “I'll make a criminal out of you yet!” He sounded cheerful.

“The door was open,” I huffed.

“Oh – I'm sorry. I guess I should have called you a faery.”

“Just...stop talking now,” I muttered. “I need to think.” Bob glared at me. “One of Bianca's girls meets up with Marcone's bodyguard for some one-on-one fun. Their hearts explode during the final act. I know Marcone didn't do it, and Bianca would rather eat one of her girls instead. She doesn't have the power to work magic like this without help either, even if she was trying to get revenge on someone and Jennifer just got caught in the middle.”

I frowned. “I'm still caught up on the motive. Disgruntled lover is the best I've got. I guess that means that I really one have one option.”

I sighed, and leaned my weight against one of the tables. “I have to talk to Bianca.”

“Madame Bianca,” I greeted, rising from my seat as she finally entered the room. I’d been waiting for more than half an hour - not including the minor hang-up at the gate, and my ride still patiently waiting outside the perimeter. Since I needed some information from her, I didn’t mention the long wait. “We finally meet. The rumors neglected to mention how lovely you are.” Complements always seemed to work well with women.

Her smile was thin, but sincere. “They told me you were a gentleman. I see they were correct. Tell me, do you also work for a certain gentleman competitor of mine?”

Word got around fast. I spared a thought to wonder what Murphy had heard, but I had to keep most of my focus on Bianca. “A passing acquaintance,” I told her. “I just met him today.” Or was it yesterday? I hadn’t slept yet. I’d managed to swing by my office and found a note slipped under the door by my lost-husband case who went by the name of Monica. She’d missed the appointment as well, but had left a chunk of cash, a creepy scorpion husk, and a brief explanation. I’d called her up and given an apology for missing her visit, and was on the case. The drive to her lake house to check out potential leads and clues hadn’t exactly been restful. Calling up and working with Toot isn’t bad; my parole officer showing up and threatening to take off my head was considerably more stressful. Enough time had passed since then that I think I could safely say I’d met Johnny yesterday.

“I see,” she replied, looking me up and down. I was a scruffy, tired wizard, but she still smiled at me. “Do you really think I’m lovely?”
“As beautiful as a star.” And just as deadly if not admired from afar.

“Polite and pretty,” she mumbled. She avoided my gaze like most mortals did - except a certain scumbag - but her reasons were less clear. I don’t know what of me she considered “pretty,” but her own beauty was obvious - and just as obviously on display in the low-cut dress. She made her high-heeled shoes and high-slit dress look good, not the other way around.

“What brings you to The Velvet Room, Mister Dresden?” she asked. “Would you care for an evening of entertainment? My girls are of a higher quality than those Marcone can offer you. I assure you, there’s nothing quite the same.” She smiled at me again, smoothing a wrinkle in her skirt.

I smiled back at her and slipped my hands in my pockets. I clutched the white handkerchief in my right fist - my last bit of folded sunshine. “Perhaps I’ll sample your business another time, Madame. This is merely a visit for discussion.”

She nodded, her face serene. “Well then, what are we to chat about?”

“The murders of Jennifer Stanton and Tommy Tomm.”

It went downhill from there.

Cujo was furious.

My driver’s name was, I think, Farrier, but he looked more like a Terrier. After my ‘chat’ with Bianca, he had bundled me into the car and driven me straight back to the mansion. He hadn’t been willing to stop at a payphone, or even drive through a Burger King.

Then we’d stopped, I’d gotten out of the car, and faced the furious face of Marcone’s number one bodyguard. He at least had the courtesy to wait until we were inside before attempting to tear verbal strips out of my hide.

“You do not,” he practically snarled, showing teeth, “ever go for some bit on the side.”

I gave him a surprised look. “You speak! A whole sentence! Good for you, Cujo!”

I wasn’t all that surprised by the hand that slammed me against the wall. “You need a quick lay, Dresden, when the Boss has time he’ll nail you to the mattress. You’re his now. I find you pulling a stupid stunt like this again, I’ll take you downstairs and neuter you.”

“That would certainly make my job as his new boy-toy a bit difficult.” It probably wasn’t a good idea to bait him, but I was rather more worried about the ‘neutering’ idea.

He had very sharp canine teeth, I noticed. “You won’t need that particular piece of anatomy to please him.”

“You-”

“I am the boss’ guard. You are the bit of trash he wants to pretty up. Make certain you remember that generosity next time you want a good time.”

He just left after that. Walked away.

Which was a shame. I never got to tell him I now had a vampire after me and I didn’t even get laid.
I didn’t trust Marcone’s man to get me where I needed to go. He’d slunk off somewhere when Murphy came into the picture anyways - probably reporting in to his Boss. I called a cab and stayed out of sight until it arrived. I had to stop for a few things, but those were still in the sub-basement and hadn’t been moved to Marcone’s yet.

Then I had the cab driver follow the trace spell I had on Gimpy. The creep had my hair; he was the biggest concern at the moment.

I ended up at Varsity, a club Marcone owned. Even at one-thirty in the morning it was fairly crowded with college-aged students.

And John Marcone. In a booth in the back with Gimpy, Hendricks, and Spike. I ducked out of sight before someone got the bright idea to point me out, and took stock.

I could go in there and do something subtle. I could get the bystanders out of the way and turn the situation to my favor without raising too many suspicions. But spells like that took time, and I had a limited amount of time, patience, and supplies. Marcone hadn’t bothered being subtle when he was tucking me away into his not-very-secret hideout.

Subtle could go find a hole to die in.

I poured power into my talismans and into my ring. I reached into the staff and rod, already wells of stored power, and found the cool strength in the wood and the smouldering fire of the spells.

Then I blew the front door of Varsity off its hinges.

I pointed my rod into the open space and whispered a spell. The jukebox hit the far wall and started to melt. The music squealed in agonized protest, then stopped altogether as something inside finally broke. Lightbulbs exploded one and two at a time, shattering into glass dust and glowing filament, plunging the club into semi-darkness.

People scattered, screaming and shouting in generalized panic. A few left out the fire doors. More froze in an ever-widening circle of silence as they saw me standing in the doorway, blocking the obvious exit.

John stared at me with passionless money-colored eyes. It was a mask; he’d had enough time to hide his surprise and any other emotion associated with me. Mr. Hendricks had his Cujo face on, but it was a quiet simmer compared to his earlier fury. The spikey-haired man next to him was pale and tight-lipped, but it was Gimpy I was focused on. His face showed pure terror.

I planted my staff on the ground and let some weight rest on it. I stared at Gimpy, not letting our eyes meet, until his discomfort obviously increased. “Little pig, little pig, come let me in.” Gimpy jumped at my quiet remark, but none of the others moved. “I think we need to talk, John.”

Marcone’s lips curled up in an indulgent smile. “You had already impressed me,” he said. “If you wanted my attention, you only needed to ask for it. Ladies and Gentlemen,” he continued, switching his attention to the crowd, “it appears Varsity must close early. Please exit out the closest door, and don’t worry about your bills. Harry, if you would allow our customers access to the door?”

I stepped inside and out of the way, never taking my eyes from Gimpy. I was less worried about the others - Marcone was patient; he wouldn’t use my hair against me immediately, and he would have asked for it first. Or waited until I needed a haircut. We waited silently until the club cleared out. Gimpy started sweating while Cujo Hendricks started moving from angry to confused. Both he and Spike looked ready to draw guns, while Marcone was still patiently waiting.
“I want my hair back,” I said as soon as the last college-aged couple had darted out the door.

“Beg pardon?” Marcone said, head tilting to one side. He blinked a few times in apparently honest puzzlement.

“You heard me,” I bit out. “That piece of guttertrash of yours” - my blasting rod was pointed straight at Gimpy - “just jumped me outside a gas station on the other side of town. He cut off a chunk of hair. Since I have a vested interest in my heart not exploding out of my chest, I want it back.”

I think the room actually turned colder with John’s change in mood. Most people had an anger that burned hot - Hendricks certainly did - but Marcone’s fury was cold, his eyes hard, and he turned towards Gimpy with movements as deliberate and powerful as a tiger sighting prey.

Gimpy’s face went from sweaty pale to an even more bloodless grey. His hands were starting to twitch. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

But all three of the other gangsters - and the bartender and the bouncer - were now watching him. “You have proof, Harry? I’d hate to think any of my men attacked someone of my house.”

I hesitated a moment, waiting until the bouncer was back in my line of sight, before answering. “Look at his left wrist,” I said. “He’s got marks on the skin where I grabbed him. I used the blood to follow him here.”

“Mr. Farrier -”

“I left him behind long before that. And I wasn’t about to call for him after what Gimpy here pulled.”

Marcone nodded. “A wise choice, I think. Lawrence, show us your wrist.”

“He’s lying!” Gimpy protested. “I have some marks from my girl. He must have known that. Even you said he’s for real, Boss. He just knows things.”

“But you’re sweaty and pale and protesting way too much over a few simple marks,” I cut in, pieces finally falling into place on the larger puzzle. I stalked closer, doing my best to look imposing and succeeding fairly well. “Whoever killed Tommy and Jennifer knows I’m close. He’s also the one behind the ThreeEye - a potion, vanilla mortals would call it. He must have offered you a sweet deal to turn on your boss like that - you’ve been feeding the Shadowman information and running his errands for him.”

Marcone’s voice was quiet after mine. “Lawrence. Show me your wrist. Don’t make me ask you again.”

“He’s messing with you,” Gimpy protested feebly. “I told you, he’s bad for you.” His voice shook.

“Lawrence.” Gently reproving, like a parent.

It was too late. I saw the desperation in Gimpy’s eyes a moment before he drew his gun - a revolver not so different from my own. I had my left arm halfway up before the first shot went out, and pushed power through the bracelet made of tiny medieval shields on my wrist. Bullets pinged off of a magical shield less than a second later; one made it through before the shield solidified, but only nicked my coat. I’d gotten too close.

Spike had jumped behind another table, a small Uzi-style automatic in his hand, but he hesitated to fire.
Hendricks didn’t wait. He’d shoved Marcone down with savage brute strength, shielding his boss with his own body, and quickly fired three shots. Three very lethal shots.

The bartender and bouncer had ducked and dodged - lucky for them, since I couldn’t control how the bullets ricocheted off my shield. They weren’t bloody though, so I assumed they were okay.

“Boss?” the bartender asked.

Lawrence had dark eyes, like mine. He was staring at me, and I saw him blink slowly. There wasn’t enough of him left for a soulgaze, and soon even that was gone. He’d died with his eyes open.

“I am fine, Jake. Would you mind checking to make certain Lawrence’s actions haven’t drawn any undo attention?”

Marcone’s voice was a bit of background noise. I was a bit stunned, to be honest. I hadn’t expected this. I hadn’t expected anyone to die. I hadn’t expected anyone to die. I might be geared up to kill if necessary, but that was because my weapons barely made a dent on anything with strong magic. They weren’t meant to be used against vanilla mortals. The display with Marcone - it had been a game. Showmanship and posturing. Showing I wasn’t someone he could just walk over. And getting my hair back, but if I’d known Hendricks would just shoot Gimpy I wouldn’t have barged in like I had. I wouldn’t have tried to scare him. I just wanted to leave, get out alive, and possibly start this day over.

“He would have answered more questions alive, Mr. Hendricks,” Marcone was saying. I must have missed part of the conversation somewhere.

“Sorry boss,” Hendricks replied.

Yeah, sorry Johnny. It was inconvenient of the body to die before you could question it.

“It’s all right. Better to err on the side of caution. He had already been revealed as a traitor; as soon as he started shooting, his death was certain. None of the bullets did any damage, did they Harry?”

I was still staring at Gimpy’s face, which was slack in death and very bloody. After a moment, I realized the question was directed at me and answered: “I’m fine.”

He went to inspect the body, blocking my view for a moment, and I shook myself out my stunned trance. Hendricks was staring at me and the bouncer was at my back, but I ignored them both.

“He never was very smart,” Marcone was saying. He had Gimpy’s left arm raised, the sleeve pulled back. “And there’s the evidence he didn’t want to show us. Jake - make sure everyone who needs to know hears about this. I’d rather not have any rumors spreading that sympathize with a backstabber. I’ll also need you and Mr. Roberts to begin an investigation - anyone Lawrence spoke to, any odd behavior, the usual deal. We’ll need to ferret out any other rats.”

“Of course, boss.”

Marcone lowered the arm again, his face in a slight frown that I guessed was thoughtful - if the thoughts were unpleasant. He stood to face me. “I take it you didn’t drop the case as I suggested.”

“When that option meant I’d be dead? No.” I made a quick decision and decided to gamble. I wasn’t very good at gambling, but Marcone had power and freedom in the city that Murphy couldn’t access. If I died - and that was looking more and more likely - then he’d be able to choke out the ThreeEye drug runners faster than the police. He’d be able to stir up enough trouble with the minor practitioners to draw the Council’s gaze, and hopefully get this unknown warlock out of commission. “I have a Doom on me. There are two dead bodies and I’m the only known wizard with enough
power within the city and they already suspect me of being tainted by dark magic.” Cujo’s eyebrows flew up in surprise, but I wasn’t about to go into that story. “If I don’t solve this case, the equivalent of the wizard police is going to show up and cut off my head with his really huge broadsword. Literally.” Marcone’s gaze was hard. Spike was pale, and I could hear the bouncer behind me growling. At some point the bartender had returned and was standing in the open doorway. Well, I guess it didn’t hurt that a few others had overheard my outburst.

“Everyone gets a trial,” the bartender argued, sounding a bit skeptical.

“Vanilla mortals get trials when their crimes go to the police. Wardens don’t have that sort of organization, and trials are rare. They catch you breaking one of the magical Laws, they kill you. But none of that matters if Gimpy down there managed to pass my hair off to whomever was paying him. If he did, then my heart’s going to explode the next time we get a storm.”

“Storm?”

Oh my, the bouncer talked. Well, it was information I had already told Murphy. It would end up in a report somewhere, and John would see it. He’d pass the information on anyways. I might as well take out the middle men. “He’s using the power of the storm to fuel the spell. It’s how someone without power can pull off stupid and illegal stunts.”

John stepped aside and motioned to the body. “Search him for what you need.”

I had to set my staff and rod down, but I was fairly certain the danger had passed. From Marcone and his men, at least.

Unfortunately, not all the danger was gone. “It’s not here,” I announced.

“How close would this man need to be to kill you?”

“Depends on the strength of the storm,” I said. “It’s not something I would run from anyways. If he casts that spell, all the power fueling it has to go somewhere. Someone’s going to die. I’d rather it be me than some innocent bystander.”

“I happen to disagree.”

“Too bad. Your man was the one who created the immediate danger - you don’t get a say in how I handle it.”

“I’d further disagree, but I have a feeling you’re going to act as you please no matter what I say.”

“It’s my life on the line.”

Marcone was silent for a moment.

“Boss,” the bartender said, his voice soft. “Sirens, still several blocks away. No way to tell if they’re for us or not.”

John was still for a moment, then finally nodded. “I believe Varsity has seen its last night for a while. It’s about to have a tragic accident.”

As if that were some sort of signal, everyone started moving and the bouncer began herding me out the door. “Wait a minute,” I protested.

Marcone cut me off. “Don’t worry, Harry. The fire won’t be blamed on you, and your entrance will
be written up as coincidence. We will make certain it is well known that you identified the traitor in our midst.”

“And I killed him!” I snarled. The bartender jumped at that remark, but I didn’t stop. “I don’t want you singing any praises about me - I don’t want any part of whatever this is” -my arm swung to include the Spikey messing with some wires and broken jars, Hendricks’ gun neatly cleaned and on the floor, all of it- “I want to know who’s after me!”

“And you are now chasing him with my blessing,” Marcone said. “Unfortunately I cannot give you any more information than you already have. The man works from Shadows - you were right when you called him the Shadowman. No one’s seen his face. I can tell you Lawrence met with no one after he entered the club.” Which meant if I’d been able to follow him right away instead of waiting for a cab and running to my apartment, I would have found the Shadowman. It was a near miss.

“Should you need information on what we know of ThreeEye, it is in my office - the one we met in the other day. Same filing cabinet, bottom drawer. There is a false back. The files are in there.”

And likely nothing else. Marcone would be careful about putting things in there from now on.

“Now, I do believe it’s best that we vacate the premises before the electrical fire starts.”

I was herded out the door into the misty rain. A cold feeling settled in my gut, and I almost threw up. Marcone didn’t know any more than I did. Gimpy was dead, along with my last living lead. Given the way the mist was trying to become rain, soon I’d be dead as well. If I wasn’t, then the Council would be sending Morgan to shut me up soon enough.

I turned and started to walk away, but thick hand on my shoulder stopped me. “Where?” the one-word wonder asked.

I shrugged. “For a walk. Somewhere.”

He let me go. He followed me, but he let me go.

Whatever.

“We will watch you day and night,” Morgan said in the burning light of the Sells’ house. Maybe if he hadn’t just saved my ass, it would have been more ominous. Instead it was just funny. “We will prove that you are a danger who must be stopped.”

I kept laughing. I fell over on my side, I laughed so much.

Morgan arched an eyebrow and stared at me for a moment before his attention was drawn elsewhere. “Your cavalry has arrived, it seems,” he said, clear disapproval in his tone. “If I was you, Dresden, I’d learn to keep better company.”

“I am keeping better company - ten minutes ago, my ‘company’ wanted to kill me. My company can only get better.”

I couldn’t quite interpret the strange look on his face just then, but he turned away muttering to himself before I could ask.

Marcone didn’t show up personally to save me, no matter what anyone tries to imply. He had sent Hendricks though - and I’ve yet to find out how he knew to bring a trauma doctor with him. They didn’t wait for the ambulance, I guessed because it looked bad for me to be where I was, lying on the ground near passing out a second time, when Marcone’s lawyers were still fancy-footing my way out
I’d dislocated my arm and broken my wrist with the handcuff trick, stopped breathing for a while, and was bloody from wounds I could no longer feel. Jail would not have been a good time.

I got the details of the “Lake House Incident” in place of a get well card from some busy body. The Beckitts were arrested outside the Sells’ home for public nudity; it was only later, after a few interesting details were discovered in the burned building, that they were charged with crimes associated with the ThreeEye drug.

They were being held in Michigan, which I hoped was far enough from Johnny Marcone’s business for him to interfere much.

The Varsity had suffered a mysterious electrical fire, and Marcone didn’t have any trouble collecting the insurance money despite a few college rumors. Most believed he and I had had a lover’s spat. They also thought the lights going out right when I arrived was coincidence, and the first sign of electrical failure. No one even attempted to explain the melted jukebox.

Word was also getting around that I’d been upset over the ThreeEye and Marcone had let me loose with his blessing. The only good side of this was that I didn’t have to worry about car bombs showing up in the Beetle and that I could now tell which nurses he’d bought by how twitchy they were in my company.

Twitchy or not, though, all the nurses and doctors insisted that I was not in any shape to leave, which meant I wasn’t able to leave my suspiciously private room to attend the Council meeting. Somehow they managed to agree to lift the Doom anyways. I had wanted to see Morgan tell his tale to the Council, exposing me as a good guy who only kept bad company - as opposed to before, when he believed me to be the bad company who corrupted the good guys. He never did believe my version - but since it was probably hard enough for him to get it out without me being smug and right there, it was probably for the best. He was honest, and I can respect him for it. We still aren’t friends, and never will be.

Murphy pulled through after nearly 72 hours in critical condition, and whether by luck or Marcone pulling some strings she was placed next door to me. As a get well gift, I had one of the men trying to discreetly check in on me use the last of my cash to buy her flowers, then had them sent to her room with the remaining cuff and chain to her handcuffs.

I wrote a note explaining that the pair had been severed by a magical sword, and thanking her for their use since they had ultimately saved me from being ripped apart by scorpions. I don’t think she believed me. In fact, upon receiving the gift she hauled herself out of bed, brought the flowers back to my room, and threw the flowers - and all of the water in the vase - in my face.

Which, in some strange way, made things okay again. She still didn’t trust me completely, and we weren’t as close as before, but we were okay. It was more than I had hoped for.

Susan came by to visit, and left quicker than I would have liked. I didn’t blame her. Our one attempt at a date - which we both knew to keep from Marcone and his men as much as possible - had been interrupted by a slimy demon with the intent to kill. With Hendricks’ threat still in the back of my mind, I didn’t badger her for another date right away.

I did manage to get a kiss. I told her we could blame it on the drugs if we were caught, and that I wasn’t officially in a relationship with Marcone anyways. It was all in his head; he was just the person who currently held my purse-strings. All I got was a quick kiss before she left, and only time would tell if we could ever get anything more.

Toot-toot and his faerie buddies had earned their reward as well. Every night for a week I sent them...
pizza, and once a week since. If anyone thought it strange that I ordered pizzas to be delivered to the side of a random street when I couldn’t pay my rent, they didn’t choose to comment.

Marcone chose not to comment as well, though he graciously paid for the deliveries (and added them to my loan). He made himself scarce after the Lake House burned, and I only saw him now and again by chance. I guess running the criminal underground took a lot of work, but it didn’t bother me. The less I saw of him the better. He ran from meeting to meeting and occasionally worked from his office downstairs. Though he came back to the house every night from what I could tell, he didn’t attempt to have me pay off the debt in a more immediate manner. Even Hendricks backed off, though from what I could gather this was normal for Cujo.

I used the guest bedroom in his house to sleep in, and had claimed a front room with lots of windows for my workroom. Johnny had both a basement and a cellar, however the cellar was full of wine that was older and more expensive than I cared to even think about. The basement was completely off limits for the time being, since it appeared to be getting remodeled. Or something. From the few glances I got down the stairs, it looked more like a bachelor pad or lounge. I’d definitely seen a pool table and a bar. It wasn’t a workroom either way, so I decided to go for a room with lots of light and lots of space. It wasn’t like someone was going to just come up and peek in, and if Gentleman Johnny wanted an only somewhat legal lead box of depleted uranium displayed openly on the shelf next to the rosemary, thyme, a jar of mouse scampers, and a bit of boxed moonlight, well I wasn’t going to argue with it.

I spent a lot of time in my office once all the mother hens agreed I could be up and about, but things weren’t quite the same as they were before. Every now and then I would see a black car driving past and recognize one of the drivers from my mental checklist of Marcone’s goons. Bob’s collection of porn was more selective and less raunchy - which he complained about very adamantly, but I wasn’t going to put on display something I couldn’t somehow explain to Gentleman Johnny. The romance novels were bad enough. Marcone was true to his word in feeding me three times a day and providing me with hot water, even if that meant I got a packed lunch to eat in my office and the water heater occasionally needed a repair.

Overall, the changes weren’t all that visible. I had a new bed to sleep in that was, however unfairly, more comfortable than my last. My debts weren’t new, but the fact that they were now all due to one person was. If it hadn’t been Gentleman Johnny - if it had been a bank, or someone I actually had a hope of repaying with some dignity in tact - the changes may have even been a good thing. I maybe should have considered some financial help before Johnny stepped in, since being a professional wizard wasn’t a very well-paid profession.

But it was my profession, and I could live with it. My name is Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, and I investigate the strange, the bumps in the night, and the weird. When there’s gnomes in your garden, pixies in your petunias, or even if you’ve just lost your car keys, give me a call. My number’s in the book.
A few notes:
1- Many aspects of Harry’s case with Victor follow the same as they do in Storm Front with only minor changes. These scenes were not rewritten. Some of the scenes in the above chapter were based heavily off of the corresponding scene in Storm Front, and include some direct quotes as well as original and reworked areas to fit with the plot and situation of this work. To give credit where credit is due: if it sounds like something Butcher wrote, it probably is.
2- Storm Front states that $500 would cover a month's worth of rent plus some, however the numbers in this chapter are based on the monthly rent figures found in research; 500 a month would not cover both a place of business (with an active phone line and electric) and a rented basement plus subbasement, so the numbers in this chapter assume Harry meant just the business.
Month 1: April

Four weeks passed, and my first payment was due before I could be considered even remotely ready. Between almost getting killed by a rouge wizard, imitating a storm chaser, trying to solve a murder, and proving I wasn’t the killer to a Warden who hated my guts, I just felt pretty darn good for surviving.

The fact that I couldn’t return to my apartment hadn’t been as monumental a pain as I had dreaded, but I still hated it. Nothing was where I expected it to be, and more than once I turned towards my apartment before I remembered it was no longer mine. But there were also several times where I found myself being tailed by some large football reject in a black car who would simply pick me up and take me back to Marcone’s mansion when I’d finally given up for the day. I didn't mind that so much. Can you blame me? I wasn’t fully recovered, and it was an extra half-hour of sleep when I was lucky if I got two or three hours in a row some nights.

The Sells’ case had been solved in a little less than a week, and after several days in the hospital I had been able to finish the move from my apartment. Getting everything properly set up in Marcone’s mansion had taken longer than I would have liked and had been more costly than was strictly wise. Getting the workplace in order and getting a decent copper circle laid into the floor (a chunk of money that could have gone to pay the loans, but the circle was more important) were tasks made longer by the fact that I was still recovering from my confrontation with the Shadowman. To top it all off, I needed to do laundry.

It wasn’t really a surprise to me that Marcone’s reminder visit came while I was in the laundry room trying not to break the washer.

“It’s the end of the month, Harry,” he drawled out. “Your payment is due tomorrow.”

You know that old saying about sticks and stones, and how words can never hurt?

It lies. A lot.

“I have some money,” I told him, though I can’t say what difference I expected it to make.

“Six percent?”

I winced. He’d set six percent as the minimum payment, which didn’t sound like a lot until you started looking at the numbers. “It'll be late. The PD doesn't work very quickly. My fees are still being processed.”

“It’s been two weeks since the case was solved.”
“Like I said, their turnover isn’t the best.” What did he want, miracles? I wasn't officially on the payroll; I was a consultant. I had to wait for them to submit all the proper paperwork, approve the cost, and then cut me a check. Sometimes it would be a month before I got paid. And I couldn’t start giving them due dates now, after I hadn’t for as long as we’d worked together.

“How much do you have?”

I had to think about that. Miss Monica had given me a good bit of cash for finding her husband, but it hadn't lasted long – between visits to the pub, pizzas for the pixies, the new circle in the floor, and that last hospital bill (which I’d managed to partly pay before Marcone stuck his nose in), the twelve hundred had dwindled down to a rough five hundred. Maybe. It would have been more than enough if I had let Marcone continue to pay for things after I got out of the hospital.

I had been hoping the PD would come through before Marcone started calling in debts, but I hadn’t dared to tell Murphy why I would need a rush on the money. She knew I hadn’t told her everything once again, and it was an added strain to an already shaky trust. I could call her and speed things up as much as possible, but I still wouldn’t get paid in the next three days, much less 24 hours.

“Maybe three hundred,” I finally answered, hoping for a small break because I looked miserable. The washer suddenly stopped, and it took me a few minutes to decide it had finished the load and hadn’t died. I didn’t want Marcone there when it broke down. Hoping for the best, I opened the lid and found my guess was correct. A little more cheerful, I began transferring the clothes into the dryer.

“Less than half, Harry,” Marcone chided, focusing on my debt. “I’m not impressed.”

I bit my lip against asking what would impress, which is probably why I found myself saying: “I don't work to impress you; I work to pay you.”

“There's no reason why the two must be mutually exclusive,” Marcone answered, his voice slow and distracted. I snuck a peak at him when I reached down into the washer to grab another shirt, but he was still watching me. I don’t think there’s anything overly distracting about a man doing laundry, so he must have had something else on his mind. “Six eighty three, seventy one. If I don't get it all tomorrow, I'll be adding to your bill.” If he hadn’t been making money off of me, I might have said he even sounded upset about it.

I slammed the door to the dryer shut and set the timer, moving away from the machine so my magic wouldn’t kill it. Dryers were a bit tricker than washers; usually, the water in the washer would negate most of the magic in my clothes – assuming that I didn't fry it just by being in the same room. Being calm had helped me to keep my magic from accidentally blowing the thing up, but I needed more room for the dryer even at my calmest.

I wasn’t very calm anymore.

“If you'd like to consider your other options...”

“No.”

“Fine. Tomorrow. Six eighty three and seventy one.” Curt and short, his words were clipped, and I couldn’t help but think that he was sending mixed signals. He’d had almost two weeks to offer other forms of payment and try to finagle a lay out of me while I was injured and unable to do most of my PI work. He’s the one who ignored me for all that time. Sure, I’d pretty much ignored him too, but I’d been busy trying to move from my apartment and trying to find work.
No matter what I thought, there was no way I could come up with that much by tomorrow. I didn’t have much hope I could next month, either. The best that I could do was not make a payment this month so that I could make a full payment next month, preventing a second “fine” in the form of raised interest. The payments would be high at the beginning; even if I could keep up until the required amount tapered off, it would be around two years before I was out from under Marcone’s hold. And that was being optimistic, and assuming that I didn’t have any of the higher charges – and that Marcone didn’t find anything else to add to it. That I could pay bills before he discovered them. That the amount I owed him didn’t increase with other payments like room and board - was my required payment even enough to cover it?

“Oh, and I’ve heard back about the extra charges for the security in your office. There will be an addition of seven hundred and forty three dollars and thirty five cents to your loan for the extra measures.”

I nearly let my jaw drop, but managed to save myself from looking a fool just in time. I stopped glaring at the dryer and turned to face him. Hell’s bells, the only new feature I’d noticed was a deadbolt.

“Stars, Marcone, I don’t need that kind of security. I’m a big boy now, I can take care of myself. You should take whatever it is they installed back for a refund.”

“I think not.” Marcone answered, one eyebrow raised and leaning back against the wall. He’d hooked his thumbs in his pockets, but he wasn’t wearing a holster this time. “There are certain additional dangers that may arise as a result of working for me, and you are not sufficiently prepared to handle such situations. While I do believe you can and will handle any magical threat, your history shows very little experience in dealing with the sort of men and women who may now approach you. I will protect what’s mine.”

“One - I’m not yours. Two - why should I have to pay for something you decided I need when I disagree?”

He smiled. It was a slow smile that made his face look a bit younger and about three times more menacing. “We seem to disagree on both points, Harry. I will concede one if you’ll concede the other - I’ll remove the cost of the security upgrades if you’ll admit that you are both mine and a part of my household.”

“I’m not yours.” Even if I was renting a few rooms in his house now, and all appearances pointed to me being welcome in his bed, I had doubts about the ‘household’ bit as well.

The smile slipped a bit. “So long as you owe me, I think there are several who would agree with my point of view.”

“I’m not one of them.”

“Then the charge remains.”

“Fine.” I wasn’t going to belong to anyone. It didn’t matter the cost, that was one thing I would not say. I wasn’t his dog to parade around on a leash.

“In addition to the security fees, I’ve decided to only charge four hundred dollars for the damaged computer. It was an older model, and we were able to replace it with something newer, so the full charge won’t be necessary. The remainder of the bill for your hospital stay has also be added; the hospital has been paid, and will be forwarding all future bills to me. So you are aware, we are working to discover a way you might be added to our insurance policies in order to cover future
costs. Given your presence in my home, I think you can determine the simplest solution.”

I could almost swear that he could hear my teeth grinding, but I won't. Nevermind how much the interest would add, I had no way to keep up with how much the Sells’ case was still costing me. Even when the bastard was dead, he was a thorn in my side.

“By the way, you shouldn't mix your whites with your colors,” Marcone stated. Then he left, ensuring that he had the last word.

The dryer buzzed weakly and stopped tumbling, though I knew it was long before it should have finished. With that in mind, I went and retrieved my clothes before the man holding me hostage found out I was to blame for the machine's untimely death.

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**Month 2: May**

By the time I got paid, Marcone’s due date had long passed. He hadn't mentioned my 'options' again, but I had looked in on the ledger (which the sadistic bastard left unlocked in a drawer in the study) and noticed the large interest added to the loan.

Without a payment, I'd sink fast. I couldn’t keep going forever without paying, and there was probably some clause somewhere that would put me in jail if I tried. Bob had yet to stop laughing over the situation long enough to cough up some advice that didn’t include sexual favors of some sort. I seriously needed to keep a closer watch on the novels I bought him.

When I wanted to find Marcone, it wasn't easy. The bodyguards that trailed me on occasion were mostly silent spectators, though I did overhear one mention the Varsity in passing. I guess being the cause of one business’ remodeling needs meant they would try to keep me away from business operations for a while. Or at least from any potential ‘electrical fires.’ When I finally did find out where he was, he was doing whatever it is crime lord scumbags did for their day jobs in town. I had to call him to ask him (as politely as my gritted teeth could manage, which wasn’t very) to come pick up his payment. I found out quickly his sense of time was different from mine. He’d said “I’ll be home shortly,” but he’d left me waiting around in the study for three hours while he did his thing and intimidated businessmen out of prime real estate.

He probably wasn't even sorry.

“Mister Dresden,” my tormentor greeted, leaning against the door casually. It seemed to be a habit he’d picked up whenever he was around me, though he’d crossed his arms this time instead of sticking his hands in his pockets. He didn’t look rumpled or give any sign that he’d rushed so he wouldn’t be late, either. He didn’t even apologize for keeping me waiting. “I understand that you have something for me?”

I bit my tongue against the irritation of needing to hand my payment over in person, and set the envelope full of cash on his desk. “I want proof of payment.”

“You don't trust me?”

“I know your reputation, and I trust you to know how badly I can curse you if you cheat me.”

Marcone chuckled as if I had made a joke, but I wasn't kidding. That money was hard earned, and I wasn't about to let myself be a slave to his wishes for the rest of my life.

“There's eleven hundred in there – I want proof of payment,” I repeated.
“Six percent is just over nine hundred,” Marcone countered.

“Yes, but it costs 500 a month to stay in this place and another 500 for my office. And that doesn’t include the interest. I should be paying more, but I can’t afford it.” It would take a lifetime to pay off the debts if I didn’t find some way to make more substantial payments. Murph had been great about finding cases fairly steadily — about once a month — but there were never any guarantees on it, and it was never enough. Nothing big or even any time-consuming research. And there was an awful lot of red tape involved when it came to getting paid. Not to mention the tension that had come between us since the Sells’ case. The past few weeks had lessened the strain, but she still didn’t trust me as much as she used to. Which meant that source of income might be drying up soon.

“I see. There should be receipt slips in the top right hand drawer, go ahead and fill one out.”

“You trust me to do that?”

“I trust you to know what will happen if you should try and cheat me,” Marcone drawled mockingly. “The last man who tried didn’t live very long.”

Marcone probably didn’t know I could have cheated him if I really wanted, but magic like that could get me killed. Messing with the mind is a big no-no for a wizard, and the council would have been on my sorry case like flies to honey; Morgan was just looking for a reason to kill me, even without the Doom. Fiddling with Johnny’s memory would have been handing my head to him on a platter. Complete with caviar. The lifting of the Doom meant he wasn’t officially permitted to stalk me and watch for the smallest hint of dark magic, but he still wasn’t a friend - and he was still watching.

I wrote the receipt out, showed it to him, and got his signature. He didn’t try to talk to me, and I didn’t try to talk to him. He seemed distracted at the very least, making me wonder what business I’d pulled him from. I don’t think he was focused on what kind of bar stool he needed to have ordered, nor was he actively trying to trip me into bed.

It didn’t matter. I let the sleeping dog - or in this case tiger - lie, and went on my way.

Almost immediately, I wished I had the money back. Marcone was rich enough, he didn’t need the money I earned. But I couldn’t change what I owed him; I could only hope to earn enough money to make payments before the interest became too much.

**Month 3: June**

Summer months are fairly good to my pocketbook. Tourists love calling on the local wizard just for the novelty of “going to see the wizard;” I don’t enjoy the work much, but there is money to be made. My current case involved some rich man’s daughter who had lost her puppy and wanted the wizard to find him. She had probably found my name in the yellow pages, and wanted an excuse to see magic in action.

I love little kids for that. They trust in magic - real magic - the way adults trust science or religion or whatever the hot topic of the week is. I didn’t need much magic to find her dog, but a little show with a circle and a candle made her face light up. I found the pup, she was delighted, and I was paid.

I had never worried much about being paid before Marcone. I had been happy to make rent when I could and buy food when I needed. Now I was scraping pennies in the hopes that I could buy my own food. His food was free, but I didn’t trust it to not be drugged. He kept something in his pockets that would knock me on my back again at the very least, I was certain.
The case with the dog earned me a hundred bucks easy, and I sent the pleased papa his bill; a good number of cases like that would definitely boost my cash flow. I'd already had one ghost case (faulty electric lines, but I still got paid for looking into it), another investigation into a missing husband (this one had turned up in dead in a back alley, and had ended up in the hands of the homicide detectives), and about twenty calls about birthday parties.

The parties were tempting sources of quick cash, but I wasn’t my father. He was a stage magician while I was more the back-alley detective. I didn’t have the presence for the stage. More to the point, I had a rule about kid’s parties, so I firmly turned down each and every one – even the one that had offered me a good three thousand, and that had been hard. Stars and stones, I wish I had that kind of money to throw around; it would certainly save me trouble.

My father had taught me a few of his tricks when I was younger. Four or five shows paying as well as these parties could very well make Marcone’s loans disappear in less than a month. I would be free, by my own power, and he’d have nothing to say about it. It was very tempting.

But I would have gained a reputation as a party wizard and no officer would take my advice without laughing. More importantly, there were beings who sometimes watched me who wouldn’t think twice about snatching a kid or two from a crowd of them, where they were easily missed. I couldn’t expose kids to that.

“Nine hundred thirty seven and change,” Marcone's voice cut in from the entrance to my new ‘workroom.’ One of the most annoying facts about living in the mafia lord's house was that he had a final say in whether or not I had a door, and apparently my workroom didn't need one. He wanted to be able to check on me when he bothered to care.

The amount had gone up, meaning that I was going to have to make larger payments or those parties would no longer be optional. They’d be required.

“I would prefer it if you didn't ignore me,” Mister Mafia continued when I didn’t answer.

I kept stirring, and began counting under my breath, starting at some random number and not paying much attention to it. Better to let him think I was busy than to let him rattle me.

Tomato soup doesn't require a certain number of stirs. I just wanted to irritate him. He’d made me wait often enough, he could do the same.

I couldn't put him off forever, though, and finally stopped and set aside the spoon. “Did you want something?”

“You have a payment due in two days.”

I didn't have much. I’d be lucky if I made the minimum payment. Being so short on cash, I’d started taking whatever cases came around without retainer fees. This month, I'd only made five hundred. With what I had saved from last month, I could make seven fifty. I needed at least two hundred more, which I might or might not get from the rich father in the next few days, depending on if he gave me a bonus and was prompt with payment.

“You are being quite rude.”

“It will take me a few days to make the payment,” I finally admitted. “I can get you most of it by tomorrow.”

“I might be willing to consider accepting a late payment at no extra charge if you'd join me for dinner and a movie tomorrow evening.”
“I have a case tomorrow.” I’d managed to avoid him most of the time. Just because I lived in the same house didn’t mean I had to live with Marcone.

“All day?”

I couldn’t admit to that. At most, it might take an hour or two.

Apparently silence meant ‘yes,’ and he nodded his head as if he’d expected the answer.

“It has come to my attention that I have been neglecting you since your work with the ThreeEye ring.”

Which meant Cujo had probably mentioned my visit to Bianca’s at some point and Marcone had found it just as irritating as his bodyguard did.

“I assure you this wasn’t completely intentional. I had hoped to give you some time to settle in. I had been using the time to my advantage, since the disruption of business caused by the Varsity’s sudden burning and the discovering of a traitor within our ranks.”

“Is any of that supposed to concern me?” Because I honestly didn’t know. I wasn’t about to start making a fuss about him spending his time elsewhere.

“I didn’t want there to be any... misunderstandings.”

I huffed a bit, and dug around in a box until I found a coffee mug. “I don’t really care who you spend your time with, or what you do with it,” I told him.

There was a pause, and I dusted out the inside of the mug while I waited for him to either answer or abruptly leave again.

“I have been remiss in seeing you,” he finally said. “Since your case will not consume your entire day, I will expect you to keep your evening free. I’ll expect you home by seven, and I will be very disappointed if you make plans for later in the night. I have heard you haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Whatever,” I answered. I poured the soup into a mug and cradled it between my hands, pulling the heat into my body slowly. Marcone’s house wasn’t cold, but a wizard’s lab was typically in his basement, and mine had been a typical lab for longer than I cared to remember. It felt like it should have been freezing.

The conversation ended awkwardly, and eventually Marcone walked away. I waited until I was certain he wouldn’t return before collapsing into a chair.

Bob woke up on his new shelf with a rattle of teeth that meant he was amused. “Harry, you really need to learn how to bargain.”

I rolled my eyes and sipped at my soup, watching out of the corner of my eye for any eavesdroppers. I needn’t have bothered – Bob never came out when others were nearby without my permission – but it made me feel better. “You have a better idea?”

“Flirt more? Bend over and think of the money? I could make a lovely little deal with him for you – just let me negotiate the price of your-”

“No.”

“What’s your problem, anyways? You haven’t gotten laid in years, and, okay, I’ll give you that
Susan’s pretty smokin’ hot, but this guy practically begs for it and you turn him down?”

“I have morals,” I told the skull firmly, not reminding him what a disaster the thing with Susan had turned into. She wasn’t exactly an option with Marcone’s version of new puppy syndrome and Hendricks’ not very subtle threat to my sensitive areas if I went around cheating on my not-a-boyfriend.

“You have denial. And I don’t mean the river.”

I frowned, sipping my soup, and wondered at where Bob got his information from. I had never looked at Marcone that way, and we’d never been friends – Hell, I’d never even met the guy before he saw fit to whisk me away from my life as it had been. And yeah, I thought he would, but I worked very hard not to think about John, me, and silk sheets.

I’d mentioned Susan, but even though she’d been interested I’d made very clear to her that it just wasn’t safe - for many reasons. I liked to think she might wait for me, or be willing to try again once Johnny-boy got over the novelty of having a wizard around.

Bob’s ‘sleep with the mafia man’ ideas didn’t exactly fit, though I had admitted a suspicion that Marcone only goal was to get me in his bed. And I hadn’t been able to get the thought completely out of my head.

“You haven’t been reading those porno comics again, have you?” I asked suspiciously.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because this is beginning to look like the plot from one of those horrible, under-funded, horror-romance films.”

“Really?” Bob asked, eyes brightening for a moment. “Hey, do you think we could get a television in here? I’m sure Johnny wouldn’t mind paying for it.”

“Don’t call him Johnny,” I snapped. “And don’t start asking for favors. We can’t afford a T.V., and I’d probably fry it anyways, considering the magic that I work in here.”

“But Harry -“

“Your porn is only in books. Back in your skull, Bob,” I ordered. I didn’t want to talk anymore. Not to anyone.

The light faded from the skull’s eye sockets with some low grumbles. It didn’t make me feel better that Bob was unhappy; we were both unhappy, and I didn’t know how I could get out with my pride in tact.

Even if I had been willing, I don’t think Marcone would be receptive to trades of that nature. No matter what he said. If I said yes now, he’d start wondering what was wrong with me. Not that I was considering it. No, that was off the table. Permanently.

Dinner with Marcone wasn’t quite what I envisioned.

I hadn’t been sure just what to expect, but considering what he pretended to want from me I had been thinking more along the lines of candlelight, pasta, and the whole valentine’s-day she-bang.

By the way, it was no where near Valentine’s Day.
Instead I got was some good, honest beef stew and cornbread. The homemade stuff, not the crap they try to sell you in stores.

I was confused, and mildly concerned, but didn’t question it. He was the one doing me a favor, so I really didn’t see where I had room to argue. I guess I had been preparing myself for a night of fending off advances and saying ’no’ but being asked anyways. Marcone never asked, and never brought it up. Maybe he really wouldn’t know what to do with me if I said yes. It would have been amusing to see what he would do if I did - but I was too wary of him taking me seriously to even hint at changing my mind.

Quite simply, Marcone was throwing me off. I was still uneasy when it was time for the movie, and not thrilled about being seen in public with Marcone. I didn’t need to worry; he’d rented one to save us the trouble of going out.

Marcone’s taste in movies was odd to say the least. If I had to guess, he’d tried to go for ‘romantic’ and missed by about ten miles. I found myself sitting down beside a gang leader on a couch and calmly waiting for his goons to start up the VCR, unknowingly setting myself up for a night of absolute boredom.

Marcone had realized that my incompatibility with certain technologies wasn’t deliberate, and so had forgone the new-and-common DVD. Luckily, this meant I was less likely to break something and be charged for it.

Unluckily, Marcone had apparently decided that this was snuggle-time, and laid sideways on the large couch, which meant I had to either get up, sit with his feet in my lap (uh, no), or sit on the floor.

I chose the floor. It was hard, but probably more forgiving.

Marcone sighed. “Harry, get up here and lay down.”

“No.”

“I’ll take a hundred dollars off your loan if you get up on the couch and don’t speak during the movie.” He wasn’t quite irritated, if I was judging his tone right. Not yet, anyways. His voice was lighter, and didn’t have that sharp edge. I took an educated guess and decided he was teasing. Mostly, at least.

“I thought you wanted my company.”

“I do, however we are meant to enjoy the movie and each other’s silent company for this part of the evening, and I do believe you are opposed to the other mostly silent activities that are traditional for this sort of outing.”

Kissing. He meant kissing. And probably pawing at me through my clothes. “And I do believe you are right. I’m not the kind of girl who puts out on a first date, Mr. Marcone.”

“I didn’t think you were,” he answered. His fingers brushed my shoulder - by accident or on purpose, I couldn’t tell. “But I do know you’re the type of boy whose mouth could get him into trouble. I’m hoping to cut off insults before they start.”

“Nothing like teaching a boy to be polite.”

“I could teach you a lot of things, Mister Dresden,” Marcone drawled, “but I do believe politeness and obedience are beyond your comprehension.” His tone was still light and joking, despite the words.
“Are they? Huh. It's a wonder I'm not in jail then.”

“Push too far and you might be,” he reminded me, and I knew he wasn’t teasing - not anymore, at least. Something had gotten to him.

You’d think a guy would get tired of lording things over someone, but it never seems to work out that way for me. I'm always the guy getting kicked or shorted or rubbed in the mud, and the bullies never seem to tire of it. Take that crazy mad wizard-wannabe Sells; I poke around doing my job and the guy tries to off me. Granted, he was trying to save his own butt, because I apparently do my job too well, but that's beside the point. At least Marcone wasn’t trying to kill me yet. He wasn’t capable of dark magic anyway.

“I would prefer it if you were up here before the movie started; otherwise you can stay down there and forget the credit.” Yeah, he was irritated. I didn’t know which comment had set him off, but it seemed to me he was awfully touchy for a crime lord.

Grumbling – because, hey, I deserved the privilege – I climbed onto the couch and let him move us around until he was comfortable. I knew I wasn't going to be. I ended up laying face-down on his chest with my body between his legs, one arm wedged between his body and the back of the couch, with my ankles propped up on the opposite arm. He was reclining comfortably with one arm around my shoulders and the other next to his side. Like I said: uncomfortable for me, not so much for him.

I spent most of the movie trying not to let my magic interfere with the set. I couldn't have said much of what it was about afterwards, except that it was some sort of social commentary disguised as a love story, boring and confusing at the same time.

To be honest, I fell asleep about a third of the way through, and woke up to Marcone carding his hand through my hair and watching me instead of the movie. If the movie had been over, I would have left; since it wasn't, I kept my mouth shut. Neither of us was interested in the movie, but he was easier to deal with when I didn’t have to keep up with the banter.

I didn’t stick around to find out if he was truly angry or not, or to make small talk; I locked myself in my room and began pacing, making plans in my head on where I could move to and how soon arrangements could be made. What kind of jobs I could take that had nothing at all to do with magic, and some that did. Marcone had moved me out of convenience, and he’d make it difficult to move out, but he couldn’t force me to stay, and I wasn’t so certain that staying was safe anymore.

Because I hadn't been entirely uncomfortable waking up in his arms, and that, more than anything, scared me.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

Many many thanks to my beta, StraightRhodes, who helped with this chapter!

Also, many wishes for her health; she's been sick. :( 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Month 4: July

For several months, I’d made every serious attempt I could to find cases that needed a wizard’s talents. With the average vanilla mortal turning a blind eye to anything truly magical, however, the credible jobs were few and far between.

I started taking any work that came my way, from lost car keys to ghosts and goblins, for the smallest price I could stomach. Most people were paranoid of the creaks and moans of buildings settling more firmly on their foundations, or looking for the novelty of calling in a wizard for a simple problem, but every twenty dollar job was another twenty dollars in my pocket. Murphy had only been able to get me a few hours at the PD recently - most likely because of the rumors surfacing about myself and Marcone - and she’d made no secret that she was suspicious of both my new home and the fact that I called her daily looking for work.

How she viewed my calls varied by the day, and sometimes by the hour. Sometimes she thought I knew something illegal Marcone had done, sometimes she thought I was desperately seeking help, and sometimes she got a little closer and thought I’d gotten trapped in John’s world. I dreaded when I would need to tell her the truth flat out. It was pretty clear she already knew Marcone was paying my way.

Without the reliability of the PD’s cases, my income took a downward slump. That’s not to say that I didn’t get jobs, or that they didn’t pay well. I did get cases, and some paid okay. I suspected a few were Marcone’s men checking up on me, or feeling sorry for me, but I had nothing to prove it. Others had no connection to Marcone that I could discover, and I was happier about those.

I had one case where a child had been kidnapped, and his scarily rich parents had insisted on everyone, “every detective, cop, consultant, PI, witch and wizard,” working the case. The mother even tried to call up Harry Potter; I guess she wasn’t as confident in Harry Dresden, but I didn't take offense to it. I didn't actually help solve the case – mostly because no one really listened to anything I said – but there was a pair of detectives who did.

They were a strange pair, a call-in from Washington state. Apparently the mother knew a woman who's kid was the smallish partner, and the parents wanted someone they could trust on the team. I had my suspicions they were using magic themselves. The smallish partner was the only one who didn’t ignore me, though, so I kept quiet on what was obviously a secret. He asked for my number afterwards, but I doubted that I would hear from them again.

Whatever. Like life doesn't suck all the time.

Since I spent a good two days “helping” the case, the parents didn't hesitate to pay me for my time –
all my time, plus a generous tip. With the money came the warm feeling of knowing I could rub my
success in Marcone’s face later.

I had taken on several other cases as well, which meant I could save some of the cash. I’d checked
the ledger earlier in the month, and found I needed around eighteen hundred to cover interest, room
and board, and the office rent. I planned on giving Marcone three thousand and watching his jaw
drop when I paid on time.

It would be sweet. A pleasure short lived, considering the way my work was trending, but a pleasure
none-the-less. I’d have a good start on next month’s payment as well, so long as I was careful and
didn’t spend too much. If I could have guaranteed next month’s payment, I would have given
Marcone all of it.

Hell’s bells, maybe I could even afford to by Bob new romances; the books he had were beginning
to look a little worn. Maybe I could even treat myself to some of Mac’s brew. A little comfort could
go a long way, and might serve to make me a better prospect for someone seeking a wizard’s
assistance.

“It’s good to see you again, Harry,” Marcone drawled. He was seated at his desk when I came into
his office, though not obviously busy. Instead of waiting for him to be available at the house, I had
made the trip to one of his businesses in town this time.

His men were doing some fairly obvious last-minute wizard preparations to keep the important
technology safe. One bodyguard had passed me with a laptop case, which I assumed was Marcone’s,
but there was still a few electronics in the room that I could set off. The radio was playing some jazz
station which didn’t fit Marcone’s taste, and the phone looked too new to have that many flashing
lights. Marcone wasn’t acting like anything was wrong though, so maybe it was normal. I didn’t
usually set electronics off that badly. “Are you here to negotiate again, or is something else on your
mind?”

“I’m here to make a payment,” I said, pretending to be interested in one of the bookshelves and the
collection of figurines he had displayed there – tigers, wolves, and jaguars. No bears or lions, though.
I had thought Jungle was another bar he owned, but it had a second, third, and fourth storey, and
Marcone’s office took up the fifth. The lounge downstairs probably wasn’t a public bar, and was
classier than Varsity had been. With no signs or displays, I couldn’t say what Jungle was, except an
office building. At least I hoped it was an office building and not some hotel.

“I assume you have the payment with you?”

I took out a thick envelope – it took some work to get all of the cash inside – and tossed it on his

Marcone was silent as he counted out the bills and marked up a receipt, but he didn’t remark on the
amount or show any signs of surprise or alarm. He didn’t even raise an eyebrow when he passed the
minimum payment and was still counting. It was almost as if he didn’t care at all.

When he held out the receipt, I snatched it from his hand and looked it over carefully. I knew he
wouldn’t be so obvious about cheating me, but I had come to him expecting the chance to gloat a bit
- see him shocked, or maybe even upset that I was actually making payments.

Instead I had nothing. Not a single response to show three thousand dollars as an upsetting figure.

I must have stood there scrutinizing the paper too long, because Marcone interrupted my inspection:
“If that is all, I have another appointment to prepare for. The office doesn’t run itself.”

“And here I thought you had scared all the little men into obeying your every command. What happened - somebody insult your choice in tailor?”

“My choice in lover, actually,” Marcone answered, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the desk. The way his eyes looked me up and down made me feel like he knew 101 different ways to kill me without getting his suit dirty. “Tell me, Harry; would you care to stay and meet the man who insulted yourself, your mother, and all your possible future descendants before I find a suitable place for his relocation, or would you prefer to return to your office and restock your supplies in case another Shadowman makes himself known?”

I stuffed the receipt in my pocket and took a step closer to the door. I hadn’t expected him to make such a fuss about an insult to me, but it was probably part of that new toy shine I still had to him. And it was probably an insult to him, in his mind. “Neither,” I answered. “I have my own appointment to keep.” I would make one if I didn’t. I wasn’t going to stick around while Marcone was doing his criminal mastermind act and offering to let me watch. I didn’t need more secrets to keep from Murphy. I started to leave, but apparently he wasn’t finished yet.

“What, no goodbye kiss for your lover?”

“You aren’t my lover.”

“Not yet,” he agreed, keeping his eyes on me. He had eyes the color of old dollar bills, and it felt like they could see the smallest shiver I made. I told myself I was being silly. “But that could change. I think we both enjoyed our dinner last month; it’s been such a shame you’ve been unavailable for another.”

I’d actually been avoiding him as much as possible while trying not to be obvious, and had been lucky enough to have excuses when I couldn’t escape seeing him. He may have enjoyed that dinner, but I still got goosebumps when I remembered waking up with his arms around me. “You have an appointment,” I reminded him.

“It won’t take long. If you aren’t inclined to stay for the meeting, you could wait downstairs. When I’m finished with Mister Matterson, we could have lunch.”

“I have an appointment.” I needed to find one if I didn’t. I don’t know what he’d do if he discovered I outright lied to him. I had things to do anyways - call Murphy, order pizza for the pixies -

“Dinner, then,” Marcone said, interrupting my thoughts.

The idea of another dinner made my gut clench. I couldn’t reasonably say I was busy all day, though, because he knew I didn’t have that much work. He was the only reason I could see why I didn’t have much work, but I couldn’t find a way to blame him without sounding paranoid. “If I don’t get a case between now and then,” I finally said. Maybe today would be the day Murphy needed something. Even if it was research, I could hole myself up in the library until it closed - by that time, Marcone wouldn’t want dinner.

He nodded his agreement, and leaned back in his chair. “I’m still waiting for that good-bye kiss.”

I almost laughed. “You can keep waiting, scumbag.”

This time, I reached the door and had my hand on the knob when his words stopped me. “You know, Harry,” he said, “any time you’d like to earn some cash, you can stop by my offices. My secretaries will always find an open appointment for you. You seem like you need the money, and it
doesn’t have to be used to pay off your loan. Or you could just stop by to visit. I won’t mind, and you could join me if I have a prior appointment.”

“No thanks.” I slammed the door behind me, cutting off anything else he might say. All right, so I was angry. Who wouldn’t be when faced with someone as insufferable as John Marcone? Man wasn’t even decent enough to let a wizard be smug.

Hendricks was there when I got back to Marcone’s house, looming the dark entryway. I almost went back outside, but he wasn’t alone this time. A man in a suit with cheeks like a squirrel closed the door behind me, staying outside and out of the conversation, and Hendricks’ bulk consumed the narrow space between the wall and a new side table. Convenient.

“Boss was disappointed today,” he said, crowding me against the door. He was almost as tall as I was, and quite a bit bulkier - and it was all muscle.

“Not my fault. I had an appointment.” Johnny wouldn’t have been surprised by me skipping out on lunch; it was too late for dinner, but I don’t think a few hours of disappointment after office hours would have set the caveman off. I didn’t have an excuse for dinner, but I had lost track of time. I hadn’t done that entirely on purpose, either.

Hendricks scowled. “You went to your office and didn’t leave. No one came except for one man to deliver a sub sandwich.”

I swallowed. Marcone - or his looming bodyguard, possibly - had ordered me followed, which meant Marcone’s “disappointment” wasn’t in a missed meal. He knew that I’d sort of lied to him, and he didn’t like it. I hoped I didn’t look guilty. “It was a phone conference. You can check the records if you want.” I’d called Murphy to ask about more work, and she’d given me a bit of a rough time. I’d eventually found out she didn’t have any work for me, after she’d wrangled out of me a promise to meet for breakfast and explanations sometime in the next two weeks.

“You could have taken the call from the office,” Hendricks growled, pulling me back to the immediate problem.

“It’s not my office,” I answered simply.

Hendricks gave me a funny look, somewhere between confused and frustrated. “It’s the Boss’ place. You can take a call there whenever you want.”

Apparently for Hendricks it was that simple. The other side of the equation, however, was that I didn’t want Marcone’s number associated with me, but I didn’t think Hendricks would understand that.

Or maybe he would. Sometimes I think Hendricks only acts stupid. Marcone doesn’t typically employ morons, after all. If that was the case, though, he was a very good actor. “Look, Cujo, it’s been a long day. Can I go inside now, or are you going to drag me downstairs and break my fingers for making a phone call from my office instead of sucking off your boss?”

“Don’t tempt me,” he muttered. “Next time Boss wants lunch, or dinner, or any other meal - go with him.”

I raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m sorry, did you just tell me I had to go and let your boss screw me whenever he feels like it? Because I’m pretty sure that counts as sexual harassment, and I can get a restraining order in place for that.” Okay, technically all he said was that I had to eat with Johnny, but he knew what John wanted and what going to dinners with John in public would look like. No
restraining order would stick - on Hendricks or Marcone. When they pulled out the tricky language, no one else was around. And while they would have a gang of character witnesses on their side, my best witness was dealing with the fact that I had kept secrets from her while on the trail of a killer.

Hendricks echoed the thought when he spoke: “I didn’t say you had to let him screw you. I’m giving you two rules, Dresden. Don’t go screwing or being screwed by anyone but the Boss. That’s rule one, and it’s simple enough that you’ve managed to follow it since that hiccup with Bianca. It’s a simple enough concept that cheating is bad, and enough people have gotten the hint that you’re dating him.

“Now here’s rule two: if the Boss wants to meet up with you to talk, to eat, or for any other non-sexual reason, you don’t say no unless there are lives on the line. Whatever problems you have in bed, I don’t care. You can say no all you want there - that’s the Boss’s problem.

“This is different. When the boss gets distracted and doesn’t watch his back close enough, it affects business. When he needs to reschedule his normal meetings and make new ones in an attempt to keep your messes from taking a bad turn, it affects business. When you are bad for business and the Boss has to compensate, I’m going to be finding you and making certain that payment comes out of your hide.

“So here’s a hint: don’t be bad for business.”

“To the point, aren’t you?” I asked. He sounded a bit like Marcone, talking about business. “Did someone write that script for you? Or am I special? Because I have to say, Hendricks, I’ve never seen you say so much as two words to anyone but Johnny, and here you are arranging private meetings with me that are a lot more intimate than any meeting I’ve had with him. And you’re talking up a storm, up close and personal.”

He was certainly close enough to kiss, though I knew that was no where near his intent. Someone on the outside might have gotten that impression, though. If there had been anyone there to see us. “You got a secret crush, Cujo? You going to kiss me? Turn me around and rape me until I fall in love?”

That had certainly been a running theme in a number of Bob’s romances, and I knew enough about the world John and Hendricks lived in to know it probably - sadly - happened. John had something in the way of morals, though, and a control that could make steel look like tissue paper. He wouldn’t rape me, or drug me until I said yes. If I ever permitted things to go that far, it would be a deliberate choice. Marcone would, however, be patient enough to work slowly at making my life his until it was actually an option.

I couldn’t let it get that far.

It would be easier if John was as straight-forward as Hendricks was, but it’d been several months and still the most sexual action he’d asked for was a kiss - and that hadn’t had a price tag attached.

Hendricks was growling in the silence following my accusations, his body tight with anger - but no lust. He was getting angrier, though, and if I pushed a bit more, he might just hit me. And if he hit me I would have a valid reason to move out. And maybe even a valid reason to avoid Marcone more often. I probably could get that restraining order if he actually threw a punch.

“Or is it someone else you’re crushing on?” I pushed, the thought of moving out again making my mouth move before my brain officially caught on. I realized quickly that I would have to let him land the punch, and it would most definitely hurt. “A certain Gentleman Johnny, perhaps? Because if that’s the case you’re welcome to him.”
The man’s control was almost as iron as his Boss’s, though possibly more impressive because I could actually see him pulling himself back together. “Just watch your step, Dresden,” he said. “I’m watching you.”

He rapped the door next to my head a few times, and the door swung open behind me. I managed not to fall as Hendricks shouldered his way past me. I had hit a nerve - probably more than one - but I didn’t really want to push Cujo’s buttons. His Boss was the one I wanted to rile.

Meeting with Hendricks was almost as exhausting as meeting with Marcone, though more intense and less satisfying. I felt like I’d just run over someone’s pet cat.

I went to find Mister. I needed 30 pounds of live cat crashing into my shins and showing his affection.

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**Month 5: August**

“Bob, we’ve got work to do,” I announced as I walked into my temporary workroom. It was still temporary; I was going to be moving out of it some day. Eventually. Hopefully soon. Another substantial payment like the last and I’d be in good shape to find another apartment. Somewhere farther away. The situation with Marcone was getting worse; I’d canceled another dinner when Murphy had called with this case, which meant Hendricks was probably furious with me again. I fully expected to be slammed into a wall the next time we met.

Apparently cancelling dinner for the case also meant the blue sedan got to follow me again. I had to wonder how bored those men were.

“Bob, come on,” I said, knocking on the skull that sat on a new wood shelf. I lit the old, half-burned candles around it with a small spell. They’d been moved from my old workspace to this one, and I’d need to start replacing them in a few weeks, but they worked well enough with the fading light from the windows. “Work.” I went on to light the remaining candles that sat here and there around the room, providing a little more light. Soon after I started working, the sun would set and I’d only have the candles to see by.

“Really, boss, you pick the worst times to rouse a spirit from his sleep,” Bob answered, yawning, orange lights coming to life within the eye sockets of the white bone.

“Spirits don’t sleep,” I reminded him. Personally, I didn’t see how something could live like that, but I guess it worked. Bob had tried to explain how spirits did something like sleep, but that they were also “awake” while they “slept” - I didn’t get it, and I’d asked him to stop trying to explain. “We’ve got some sort of demon on the loose, going after young women in back alleys.”

“Could be just your normal, run-of-the-mill thug,” Bob commented. “You sure it's a demon?”

“No – but it’s trying to imitate a vampire.”

“Could be a vampire.”

I shook my head – these deaths didn’t have the classic vampire style. “If it is, they aren't going about it any way we'd expect them to. Body still full of blood, though there are puncture wounds on the neck that look like fang piercings; can't be white court or black, because there hasn't been any changes in the body, and it's not walking dead. Besides, all the vampires in Chicago know how to hide a body, and visitors wouldn’t want to draw this much attention to themselves. Not this kind of attention, at least.” That about eliminated all possibilities concerning vampires, as far as I knew.
“Is the bite mark all that links them to anything magickal?” Bob said it funny, with an extra emphasis on the k sound in magic. It was an odd thing to notice, and unimportant, so I pushed it aside.

“Something about the bodies isn’t right,” I said. “It reminds me of something.”

“That’s not much to go on. What about the victims? Certain ghouls have specific tastes, maybe you could narrow the possibilities down that way.”

“All young women under thirty, all found alone. One was a manager who was missed the next morning; the second a secretary who had called in sick, and was missed when she didn’t turn up for her doctor's appointment; the third was a college student, who's roommate reported her missing about a week after she was killed; the fourth an older high school student who missed her curfew.”

“Sounds like the next target would be someone in grade school.”

“The murders didn’t happen in that order.”

“But that’s how they were found, correct?”

I nodded.

“All female, single, and decreasing in age - possibly by some factor of three or seven?”

I’d have to check with Murphy to know for certain. “Why seven?”

“It’s a very symbolic number, even more religiously significant than three in some religions. In the Middle Ages, states of life were measured by sevens: birth to seven years old was considered a child; between seven and fourteen was a young adult the prime age for romance, with most to be married around fourteen, where they became an adult; fourteen to twenty one were the child-bearing years, what might be considered a prime age for both marital and extra-marital affairs depending on the couple. Twenty one to twenty eight was the downward slump, typically beyond marriageable age, when a person began to be considered old. Remember, during this time not many people lived beyond their thirties, and those that did were considered the wise men and women of the time. Not wizards, of course, but the family elders.”

Trust Bob to get sidetracked by thinking about marriage and sex. “And just how many of those fourteen year old girls did you marry?” I asked.

“Harry!” Bob sounded scandalized. “You should know me better than that! I may have slept with my fair share of shepherdesses, but I never stayed long enough for marriage. Girls that age notice when you don’t age right.”

I shook my head. Bob took some getting used to, sometimes. “Aside from the high school student, I think all of the women would fit in the 21 to 28 range. Is it strange that there aren’t any men? For a mortal this would be normal, but for the fae?” A lot of fae didn’t have the same mortal idea of male and female. There was a reason Toot and many of the other fae called sex “sporting” - it didn’t have the emotional ties that mortals gave it. Of course, as progressive as they might seem with sex, they could be very medieval about a lot of other things.

“It’s not very different from how a mortal would look at it, in this case,” Bob said. “It’s more about taste. To them, the difference in taste between a man and a woman is like asking which you prefer: steak or lamb.”

“I don’t even know if they’re actually drinking the blood, but those bite marks are the only thing liking these murders together and it doesn’t make sense.” I shook my head. “Maybe I’m wrong,
maybe it’s not something from our side. Murphy only called me to eliminate the vampire possibility.” The idea bothered me, though. Something about the case just felt like something from the magic side of the coin. The job had been assigned to SI because the case was months old, there wasn’t expected to be any more progress on it, and because of the “vampire” theme. A death hadn’t occurred for several weeks, at least. When Murphy had called, I’d told her the truth: vampires did exist, but that this wasn’t their style.

Why kill a body without taking the food? To a vampire, it was a needless waste.

I bit my lip and pulled out some paper to write down what I knew, and hopefully get an idea of just what, exactly, was going on.

“How is the case coming?”

It wasn’t Murphy asking the question, and I winced. It wasn’t often that Marcone called me at the office; it was far more likely that he would send one of his men to hand off a note, or wait until we were both back at his house. “It’s coming,” I said, pushing aside the picture of a group of college kids at a party. There’d been another death, male this time. A classmate of the girl who’d died a few weeks ago, and an otherwise healthy appearing young man. His name had been James, and he’d been working hard for a degree in business to help his family back home.

Young, and full of potential.

“That doesn’t sound promising.” Marcone’s voice crackled a bit on the line.

“I have a few leads, but it’s going to take some work. I know you wanted another dinner, but I don’t think tonight’s a good idea.” Not while I was seeing James’ face and wondering why he had been the latest target. Wondering why there was such a large gap between his death and the others.

“I realize that you need to make your payments, Harry, and as the one who holds your monetary debt I am pleased to see you working to pay them off. From a business perspective that is a very attractive trait.”

I frowned. “But you’re going to tell me some reason why I shouldn’t be working to find a killer, aren’t you?”

“Of course not. You should work as well as you are able to find any killer and bring him justice,” Marcone drawled. “I just stated that it is a very attractive trait. From a business perspective.”

It was easier to talk to him on the phone, when he wasn’t staring at me and I didn’t have to see those money-green eyes and know I’d seen his soul. “Then why don’t you sound pleased?”

“Because as appealing as the trait is from a business perspective, from a personal perspective I find myself particularly neglected.”

“Right. The boyfriend thing.” I tried to sound like it was no big deal, but it was hard to talk normally when my jaw had locked itself into place.

“The potential lover side of our relationship is one aspect that is lacking, I agree,” John said. He made it sound as if I had been the one to bring it up instead of him. “If you think about it, we’ve known each other for five months now, and we’ve only had one actual date. I may even begin to feel like you’re not interested in me at all.”

“Is there a downside to that?”
“If we do not share an intimate relationship, then there is no need for me to be lenient with you when you are late with your payments, is there? Nor is there any reason for me to notice how hard you work for what money you can pay, and reward the effort—if not the result.”

“You say that like you’ve ever been lenient with me for being late.”

“I have accepted a late payment without fees, you cannot deny that. Considering you’ve only been in my debt for four payments and you failed to even make the first payment, I’d say that’s pretty generous.”

I closed my eyes and used my free hand to rub at my temple. I was getting a headache. “Why is it that all our conversations come down to the money?”

John’s voice was gentle: “Because you haven’t allowed me to attempt anything more. Dinner, Harry. A few nights a week. Give us the chance to get to know each other. I’ve already seen a glimpse of your soul, what else is there to hide from me?”

A small laugh left me before I could catch it. “You really don’t want to know, Johnny,” I told him.

“I think I really do.”

I shook my head. “I have a case to finish. Anything else can wait until after that.”

“And how long is this case predicted to last?”

“Hopefully not much longer—I’m hoping to end this before more dead bodies show up. Look, my payment’s due in two weeks, and I may even get paid soon enough to pay you if I can wrap this up. We can discuss the other stuff after I make that payment.” And I can see how much of his “graciousness” I could afford to lose.

“A disappointing answer,” he stated, “but an acceptable one.”

“You won’t bring it up again before then?”

I could almost see his smile. “Yes, I agree not to bring up the subject of another date, dinner together, or any more intimate relationship between us until your current case is finished and you have made—or failed to make—a payment for debts at the end of the current month.”

“You are such a smartass.”

“I have simply stated the terms of my agreement,” he answered. “I fail to see anything objectionable in them. Unless, of course, you wish to revise the terms and resume the course we began with our date?”

“I’m going to hang up now, scumbag.”

“As you wish. Perhaps we should engage in phone conversations more often, though.”

“And why is that?” I didn’t think I wanted to know the answer. I should have hung up when I had the chance.

“Because you are much calmer and more responsive.”

I hung up.

The next time the phone rang, I didn’t answer.
“A magical virus,” Murphy snorted, just before taking a long sip of her coffee. “Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me there's a big foot.”

“Jury's still out on that one,” I answered, swirling what little was left of my own and catching the eye of the waitress. Free coffee? Heck yeah. I wasn't much of a coffee drinker usually, but whatever good things a man in my position could get for free, he should probably take.

And this coffee was hard earned.

“And you took care of it?”

“As much as I could,” I said honestly. The virus had needed magic in the body in order to take hold, and had spread through the 'vampire' bites in the throat, killing the body as it left. In order to get rid of it, I'd had to isolate it and then pull it out of the body it was in – another college student – before dousing it with distilled water. Pulled the magic right out of the germs, and let the real virus die a quick death. Of course, there was no saying that I'd gotten all of it, and there was a small chance that I'd pulled some of it into myself, and there was the fact that I had never been really good with healing magics to begin with, but the solution had seemed to be simple. Hopefully it was that simple.

There was the fact that I had been around a lot of sick people as well – that is, people with normal colds and flus and such. Wizards don't normally get sick, but when we do we get it bad. I'll be delirious for days if this little runt knocks me down, so I'm hoping for not. Lots of liquids for me, for a while then – and maybe some hearty hamburgers as well, from one of the local fast-food joints.

“That doesn't sound very confident,” Murphy noted.

“I got rid of that strain, but it attaches itself to cold strains and those are always around. My guess is you won’t see any more deaths, but another carrier could pop up. The viruses look like normal colds, then back off, then someone finds themselves walking down a back alley for no reason and keels over. Sometimes there’s other signs too, like bruising or strange marks on the skin that resemble birthmarks or tattoos. The first person to notice the body usually gets close enough to notice that it’s dead, which is close enough for the virus to jump to the new host. The new person carries the virus around on them until it finds someone else with magic to feed on. Which means it’s possible you haven’t found all the bodies yet, or haven’t linked all the bodies to this case because they didn’t fit the profile.”

“This type of thing isn't unusual?”

I frowned. It actually was. “It happens, but not often. The last big strain that I can think of was the black death. A few minor ones pop up now and then, but we try to cut them off before they get too deadly. It's been a while since we had any major signs of a new strain.” I should probably report it to the White Council, so they could keep an eye on the area - and on me, if I got sick. But that would mean dealing with Morgan again, and that wasn’t exactly my idea of fun. If anything more happened, I’d report in. Otherwise I’d hope to save myself the trouble. I didn’t want them snooping around too much anyways, in case they found out that I’d let slip a few secrets to Marcone. Like the fact that a White Council existed.

“The Black Death?” Murphy asked. “You're kidding.”

“I wish I was. A lot of good wizards and witches died.”

Murph shook her head, not quite believing me, and took another sip of her coffee. The waitress finally got around to refilling mine, and left shortly after. For a while, we simply sat and enjoyed the
morning silence. It didn’t last.

“So what’s the deal with Marcone?” Murphy asked. I’d been wondering when we’d get around to that. Murphy and I hadn’t been on good terms lately, and this was going to make things worse.

“I don’t know what you mean.” I could feel her start to slip away, and silently cursed myself for trying to joke my way out of it. Obviously Murph wasn’t in the mood for jokes. “Is it the moving part, the interacting part, or the rumors that I’m his bed-boy.” I tried to keep my tone mostly serious.

“Not too many of us at the station are happy about it,” she added meaningfully.

I sighed. “And I’m one of them. Hell’s bells, Murph, do you think I’d be there if I had another choice? Man’s got me bent over a barrel here.” And would like to have me bent over it with my ass bare, or so he’d have me believe.

“Anything I can do to help?”

God bless Murphy, she was always so sympathetic and sounded so reasonable. He had never taken it upon Himself to bless me, but I hoped He had her. “I wish you could. He’s got everything above-board, though, and I signed the contract, so I’ve got to live with it. I could move, but unless it’s to the slums or I start sponging off of friends on a semi-permanent basis then I might be making things worse.” I’d seriously thought about it, but unless I found someone willing to take in not only myself but also Mister, Bob, all my stuff, and my lab equipment, then I’d still be paying rent to Marcone for keeping all my stuff there. Then I’d be losing money and friends, and giving money to crime was bad enough. It had been a hard realization to come to.

“I’ve basically taken out a large loan, and I have to pay it back. You can look over the contract, but he’s got everything in legal order, unfortunately.”

“You’ve checked?”

“No, but it’s Marcone.” He’d kill the lawyer who let something less than legal wind up in the actual wording.

“You trust him,” she said, her eyes a bit wide and her voice surprised.

“No! Of course not. But - it’s Marcone.” It was the best answer - the only answer - I could give.

“You know what he would do if someone was stupid enough to screw up and mess with his business.”

I felt Murphy’s eyes narrow on me, but I avoided the look. “I realize this has been going on a while,” she said slowly, “but I thought even you would be smart enough to have everything Marcone gave you to sign examined under a microscope.”

“I’m his shiny new toy still,” I said, staring into my coffee. “He’s doing everything he legally can to keep me connected to him, even if I’m not sure it started exactly legally.”

“Harry,” she growled, “if there’s something you’re hiding...”

“I’m not sure, okay, but he paid people off for me and then said I had to pay him back. I think. I didn’t check until after, and it was months ago.”

“Why didn’t you say anything - you could get out of the contract easily if that’s true!”

I shook my head. “He had some sort of clause in there contingent on my signing, I checked. I can’t
tell all my debtors that they can’t have their money anymore.” It had taken me a while to work out all
the fancy language, but I’d found the clause near the end. “They could only actually keep their
payments if I accepted the contract. If I failed to sign or if I back out for any reason, all of my debts
revert and the people he paid must give back the money Marcone paid them. If they can’t pay back
the money, there’s some steep fees.

“No, for now, until I get this paid off, it’s faster and easier to just deal with him for a while. It’s not
like he’s around that much, and he’s been keeping his criminal business away from me.” For the
most part, at least, that’s how it worked. We saw each other on occasion, he made hints and pushed a
bit, I refused and gave him his money, and we went on with the status quo. Except for those
occasions where we had dinner and I slept in his arms (just once, I swear), or he kept his hands on
me in public like some possessive bastard, or asked for goodbye kisses and I almost felt like giving
him one just to shut him up.

She let out a breath, her fingers idly tapping against her mug. “You obviously aren’t going after him
about signing under false pretenses.”

It was a statement, not a question, but I answered anyways. “No. I can’t tell a judge to rescind the
whole thing because I was stupid. I won’t do that.” It would cost too much anyways; I couldn’t
afford a lawyer with the balls to go after Marcone.

“You were stupid. Don’t argue,” she said just as I opened my mouth. “You were. I won’t push if
you answer one question for me, and answer honestly: did you sign this contract under duress? This
is important - take a moment and actually think with what’s left of your brain.”

I took a deep breath, let it out, and did as asked. I knew why she was leaving the false pretense idea
behind: it was hard to prove and hard to fight with. It would essentially come down to my word
against his. There would be clues if I signed under pressure, though, and a trail that could be
followed.

When I had first met John, Hendricks and Spike had herded me into his fancy sedan, and we’d
talked normally enough. then he’d tricked me into looking into his eyes and triggering a soulgaze. He
may or may not have known about that kind of magic, but he knew about it now.

Then he’d drugged me.

That was tricky, because a soulgaze affected people differently, and he may not have been entirely
back to himself when he slipped me that drug. He could claim temporary insanity if the judge
believed me - or claim that I had simply passed out. It had happened with others I had soulgazed
with, and they could be good witnesses for him.

He’d tucked me into bed and left me alone in his house after that. I’d been locked in the bedroom,
but I’d got out easily enough. No substantial effort had been made to keep me on the grounds that
was an actual, visible sign of restraint. I hadn’t been excessively locked up or tied or even held
down. We’d argued some, and I’d felt so sucker punched and angry over all the bills he’d paid on
my behalf that I hadn’t read closely enough to see that the payments were still pending, and would
only proceed if I signed the dotted line. He was mortal, and I should have.

For the fae, transferring a debt from one fae to another was no big deal. If I owed Toot and he
offered that favors to another faery as payment for something, it would be a valid trade. My opinion
wouldn’t matter one bit.

But Marcone wasn’t a fae, and he couldn’t simply assume my debts that way. I’d forgotten that.
In the end, I shook my head and answered Murphy: “No, it wasn’t forced. I was angry, and he was the one who made me angry, but Marcone never actually pressured me into anything. He was even willing to negotiate.”

“But you were angry, so you got stupid.”

“Yeah.”

“Stupid like withholding information from me concerning a case, and stupid like keeping a scorpion that could be cursed.”

“Yeah.”

“Stupid like chasing off after criminals by yourself. Stupid like driving down the highway at ninety. Stupid like trying to tell cops invited in from the outside to back off because you're a wizard. Stupid like -”

“I get the point!” I interrupted. Stars and stones, that list was long – and, I’m sure, not nearly complete. Not to mention the fact that some of those stupid things I’d done more than once. “Do we need to go on?”

“No really, no, but it might make you feel better.”

“Not to mention the fact that you get to feel smug, huh?”

Murphy just grinned.

I sighed, and looked out the window. I couldn't ask her for money; it wasn’t right. Still, though, I found myself saying, “Do you think you could find a few more cases for me? Even a cold case?”

“Would it help?”

“No really,” I admitted. Not for the number of cases she could get away with. And unless I found something to help break the case, my deal with the PD was that I worked cold cases for free. “But I wouldn't be making payments at the last minute any more, so I might be able to save my virtue.”

“He can't demand sexual favors from you, Dresden,” she commented, eyes hard.

“He doesn't. He just makes it difficult for me if I'm not willing to give in. The last time he didn't even want sex, but I felt like he should have.”

“What's the matter?” Murphy asked, not for the first time. “Be honest.”

“I'd be more comfortable if he was just asking for sex. I could understand that.”

“But he's not.”

“No.”

“What does he want?”

“It feels like he's asking for a relationship. I don't think that's quite right, though.” No, more like he was asking for a favorite pet, I think. I couldn't tell Murphy that, though. There's some things that you just don't tell a lady, especially ladies who have only recently had their faith in you tested to the extreme.
“And you want him to ask for sex instead? Why the hell would you want that?”

“I didn’t say I wanted it, I said I could understand it. You don’t have to be a member of the underground to know people pay for sex.”

“And you don’t have to be a snotty, spoiled rich kid to know people buy friendship, either,” she said. “Maybe you’re reading this too much like a bad romantic comedy. Maybe all he wants is a friend. A strange friend who sometimes uses magic and has way too much trivial knowledge to spare. Would you really be surprised if you found out Marcone bought all his friends?”

Six months ago? No. Now I couldn’t see it. Marcone didn’t have friends, unless you counted Hendricks. He had minions and bodyguards - allies, maybe. Not friends. And Marcone himself had called me his lover, asking for kisses and cuddling. He wanted sex, eventually. Probably even expected it. He wanted the whole deal.

“Stop it,” Murphy said. “You’re thinking too much.”

I shrugged a bit. “I’ve been considering going through the classifieds again, and finding another job on the side. The faster I can pay off Marcone, the faster I can get away from him. Because whatever it is Marcone really wants? I don’t think I can give it to him.”

“I still think you’re reading too much into it. Marcone’s scum, but even he wouldn’t be crass enough to buy you - nor is he stupid enough to try it when you meet with the police,” Murphy said. “Cheer up. You’ll find a job or something and work your way through. You usually do,” she added, rolling her eyes, as she stood. “I’ve got to head back to the station and get some work done. I’ll see you around.” Tossing enough on the table to cover the two coffees and a tip, she turned to leave.

Talking about it hadn't been as hard as I thought. Of course, she didn't know all the details – I couldn't have her coming down on Marcone when there really wasn't anything to incriminate him with, and he'd know it was me – but she knew enough to satisfy that little pesky voice in my head letting me know I had to tell someone.

Besides, she already knew I was living with Marcone, and she had to know the reason. Right?

The next time I met up with Marcone, he was making himself up a snack in the kitchen.

Why someone like Marcone was making up his own snack, I didn't ask. It looked far too domestic if you asked me; I almost thought he was going to put on the 'kiss the cook' apron that was hanging in the corner, but he didn't.

I almost dreaded giving him this payment more than the previous one, but I knew that the temporary quiet I had bought with the virus case would end tonight whether I paid Marcone or not. It would be better to make the payment than to have to rely on his good graces. I don’t know how long a businessman like Marcone could stand not being paid what he thought he was due.

“I have a payment,” I said.

“How much?” Marcone asked, not looking up from the sandwich he was making.

“Twelve hundred.” I winced. It covered the six percent, but it wasn't enough to cover the six percent and the added costs for rent that came each month.

“You know Harry, that business of yours isn't doing very well if your payments are this inconsistent.”
“Yeah, well, that's what happens sometimes. I didn't start the business for the money.”

“So you let it pull you under?” he asked, putting the lid back on the mayo and putting the knife into the sink. “Harry, that's just not good sense.”

“I would have made it, eventually,” I bit back.

“Would you? Or would you have had to stoop to doing something you didn't approve of? A birthday party, perhaps? Or maybe an endless purse or two on the side.”

“Shut up.” Just for that, I was throwing out the birthday party proposal that had arrived in my mailbox this morning. The kids could find a clown. Not that I’d been considering it anyways.

“It's not good sense, and it's not good business,” Marcone repeated. “It costs more than it gains. Look at how much time you spent on this last case, and can’t even cover what you need it to? As a businessman, I’m disappointed. As your - what was the term you used? That’s right. Boyfriend. As your boyfriend, I’m appalled.”

“And what would you have me do?” I asked, crossing my arms. “Quit?” Not very likely. It didn’t matter where I lived or what my status with Marcone was, what I did for work was up to me. Marcone couldn’t take those decisions from me.

“You might be willing to take on a client who's more than willing to pay you to see to his needs.”

“I don't want your money, Marcone. Not unless there's no other way.” I really didn’t. I didn’t want to erase the possibility, either, because there was the chance that I might need those opportunities. That I might be willing to give in just a little bit.

“Not even if you were doing good, honest work? No magic involved, or even my company?”

“And what 'work' would that be?” If it didn’t involve kisses, dates, or phone calls, what else could Marcone want?

John jerked his head over his shoulder to the sink. “Dishwasher's off line until we can get the water heater fixed.” He didn't look happy about that, and he had been casting suspicious looks my way for a while, but there had been no way to prove that the circuits hadn't simply overloaded on their own. “Thirty dollars a day for washing.”

“Starting?”

“Now.” He picked up his plate and left the cutting board and lunch-meat out. “Put that away for me, Harry, and I might even be nice enough to write you up a receipt. Feel free to make yourself a sandwich, too. You know you’re welcome to any food in our home.

“Bring your payment by my office in an hour, and I can provide you with proof of payment.”

I glared at the sink until I was more than certain he was gone, and then I took off my duster and rolled up my sleeves.

Better dishes than Marcone's questionable company.

Maybe I could break it again next month.

Chapter End Notes
A few characters from *The Sentinel* tv series appeared near the beginning of the chapter... if you looked very, very closely.

Approx. Original Post Date: 12/13/2008
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The knock came at 9:57 in the morning. I thought it did, at least. Then I realized the second hand on my Batman wind-up alarm clock wasn’t moving and it was still dark out.

I made my way out of the comfort of my covers and answered the bedroom door when the knocking didn’t quit. Since I’d moved into Marcone’s house, no one came looking for me at ‘home.’ Probably because the gates at the end of the driveway discouraged any unexpected visitors, and none of my friends wanted to see John in his natural habitat. I wasn’t entirely surprised it was Hendricks on the other side; aside from Hendricks and Marcone, there were rarely any people in the huge house.

I let out a slow breath and leaned against the doorframe. “Look, it’s way too early in the morning for another threat, okay? I won’t be listening. If it makes you feel better, you can stand in the doorway and growl at the dustbunnies while I sleep.”

“Breakfast,” was all he said.

Considering my previous conversations with Cujo, his short, clipped answer woke me up more than his knocking on my door. “What?”

“Breakfast,” he repeated. “With the Boss.”

“Right,” I said the word slowly, trying to spot any lumps in his skull or any twinkles of pixie dust in his hair. “Did you drink the slow juice this morning, or take any sudden falls?”

He glared at me.

“Your Boss hasn’t been around for breakfast since I moved in,” I told him. “Besides, it’s still dark out. Normal people are sleeping.” I didn’t want to awaken the angry beast, but he was acting strange. Cujo typically only did the tall, broad, and dumb act for bodyguard duty.

His eyes darted to the side just the smallest bit – for barely a moment, Cujo was good - and I let my gaze drift that-a-ways. There was another guard there, looking young and green and every bit the rookie. “Who’s the kid?” I asked. He looked fresh out of high school.

“Not my secret to tell,” Hendricks answered. “He won’t be here long.” His head was turned away, I guessed so Not-My-Secret couldn’t see he’d answered. It made my curiosity spike, but before I could question any further Cujo cut me off with a curt order: “Get dressed.”

I tried to do the showy raise-one-eyebrow move, but I can never tell how well I pull it off. Hendricks must have gotten the point, however, because he scowled at me and mouthed: “Ask the Boss.”

I decided to play along a bit, and got dressed while complaining loudly and frequently. Since the boy down the hall was listening, I kept my complaints generalized and PG.
Eventually, I was escorted downstairs and we met Johnny in the dining room. He was all dressed up in his suit and tie, looking very professional. “Not a jeans and sports jacket day?” I asked, seating myself at the table. I let out a yawn I didn’t have to fake. “Your lug got me out of bed.”

He smiled at me, and looked pretty darn indulgent. I thought he might be playing it up for the audience, but a quick look showed Cujo had already herded the boy out. “It’s kind of you to join me, Harry,” he said. “I know we initially agreed to meet for dinners, but I thought a breakfast to discuss the situation and arrange our schedules would be fair.”

“You certainly didn’t waste any time,” I answered, then quickly changed to a more interesting subject: “Who’s the newbie?”

He shrugged. “Someone we’re keeping an eye on for a while. The details are unimportant.”

“Is he trouble?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the details, but if the kid was in danger I could probably get word to Murphy and sneak him out. John would know it was me, but I wasn’t going to let him ruin some poor kid’s life. “Or does trouble follow him?”

“A bit of both, actually,” Marcone answered. “We’re keeping him out of trouble until his father can take him back, but he is also something of a trouble magnet.”

That could mean a lot of different things, and I wasn’t sure how to take it. John must have seen me struggling, because he kept on: “Don’t worry about the boy, Harry. Mister Hendricks will make certain he is no danger, and he won’t come to any undue harm in our care. Whatever else you might think of me, you know I never bring children into business.”

But I didn’t know that, not really. “You don’t hold hostages either, do you?” I asked, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“If necessary, maybe – but not children. And that boy is still a child.”

Marcone was one of the few people I could look in the eye and not risk a soulgaze, so I did. I put as much of my anger and doubt into that look as I could, but Marcone met it calmly and easily. He didn’t even flinch, and I was the first to look away. “What do you want?” I asked.

“I was hoping to have a pleasant discussion over a meal, and perhaps arrange when we might spend some time together.” He’d laid his hands out on the table, his hands open and relaxed. He was trying to be soothing and I didn’t want his comfort.

“Do I at least get coffee first? Because I need caffeine before I agree to anything.” I just needed something to do with my hands, and perhaps to occupy my mouth before it agreed to something unpleasant by accident. I disliked coffee, but the tea Marcone kept in the house was even worse, and this meal needed something with a little more kick than orange juice.

“Our meal should arrive shortly, but there is coffee ready now.” Marcone was already up and moving, and he set a mug of black liquid in front of me along with a small bowl of sugar without asking. I helped myself as he poured himself a mug from the service.

Apparently, he wanted to get straight to business. “I realize that your work can be unpredictable, so I’m willing to be flexible to a degree. Three nights a week meeting for dinner sounds reasonable, with at least one of those meals being shared in a public location.”

“And if I can’t?”

He took a sip of his coffee, delaying the answer, and stared at me for a moment before speaking:
“You can reschedule any but the dinner out – that may only be rescheduled if there is an immediate
danger to your life or the life of someone you know reasonably well, as reservations will need to be
made in advance and it is very inconsiderate to the business if we cancel at the last moment. You
may also request a lunch instead of one of the two dinners, but not when we are to eat out. If there is
a person in danger whom you are not familiar with, you will contact the proper authorities and join
me as soon as possible. If necessary, I can arrange for a driver to pick you up.

“In exchange for this generosity, I expect the same flexibility for surprises.”

“You make it sound like we’re planning progress reports and analysis meetings,” I said, rolling my
eyes. “This isn’t the way you arrange dates.”

“Typically, no, but this particular date seems reluctant to commit,” he said. “Or perhaps you’re
simply ashamed of me?”

“You’re a criminal scumbag,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee. Even with sugar, it tasted bitter and
heavy. “I’m a wizard PI who works with the police. You have to admit, we’re not the kind of couple
people write books about.”

“Perhaps,” Marcone agreed, “but does that make us any less of a couple?”

“I want to know why you think we’re dating in the first place.” I’d said it. I’d finally said it, and my
fingers gripped the mug dangerously tight as I waited for an answer.

“I saw your soul and I liked you,” Marcone said. “I know you better than I know men and women
I’ve known for years, and I’ve seen you less. Does a person need any more reason than that to fall in
love?”

“Love?” I did not squeak. I swear. Seriously, though, love? No one had even brought up the word
‘like’ before – ‘love’ had never even entered the playing field.

If this was the way he showed his affection, he needed help.

Marcone shook his head. “Don’t let it worry you, Harry. Forget I said anything. We have time to get
to know each other better.”

I didn’t particularly want to get to know him better when I thought it was just about the sex. If
Marcone fancied himself in love – or thought he could fall in love – then I was more than just the
shiny new toy or the favorite pet wizard. He really did want me in that consort role. What that meant
in the criminal world, I had no idea, but traditionally?

Something like a wife, but without the position. Depending on locale, timeframe, and usage, it could
mean anything from second wife to a close friend. Given what Johnny-boy was saying, he was
probably aiming closer for the like-a-wife and further from the just-a-friend.

Most vanilla mortals couldn’t define ‘consort,’ but they could tell you it was a very intimate
relationship that probably had something to do with sex. While sex wasn’t always part of the
equation, the intimate relationship was true.

Right now, I had neither an intimate relationship or a physically intimate relationship with Gentleman
Johnny Marcone, and it was better that way. Less silk sheets and rough skin. Less complicated.

“Breakfast, Harry,” Marcone said quietly.

I pulled my arms off the table so the newbie kid could put my plate down. It had a lot of food on it –
bacon, eggs, sausage, pancakes, biscuits, hash browns, toast, jelly – and Marcone’s plate was just as full.

“Thanks,” I told the kid, setting aside my mug to pick up a fork. “You don’t really expect me to eat all this, do you?” I usually didn’t eat more than a bowl or two of cereal for breakfast.

“Mister Hendricks is a well enough cook,” Marcone told me. “I don’t think you’ll find it too troublesome. Besides, you’re too thin. It wouldn’t hurt you to gain a few pounds.”

“Most people like their dates to be thin and pretty.”

“I prefer mine to be healthy and handsome. Eat, Harry.”

I slowly dug into the pancakes – fluffy, and coated with powdered sugar and syrup, but not perfectly round – and let the conversation die with the excuse that our mouths were full. It would have been awkward anyways; Hendricks and the kid hadn’t left this time, and I could feel them staring at us.

Nothing about this breakfast was normal, and I had to wonder for a moment if I wasn’t the one who’d hit my head or stumbled into a patch of faerie pollen.

Marcone finished before I did, and motioned Hendricks over. I was still chewing a slice of bacon when he opened up a calendar and started filling in dates. “This should hopefully give you an approximation of where I can be reached for the next few weeks, so you won’t have to rely on relaying messages through my secretaries. Are there any days you are unavailable this week?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t make a schedule.”

“You can use this one,” he said, smiling. “Since technology doesn’t seem to agree with you, why don’t I arrange for tickets to a dinner and a show on Thursday evening?”

I stabbed a bit of potato, probably a bit harder than necessary, and my free hand fisted around my napkin on the table. “Sounds fine.”

Suddenly, one of his hands was covering my fisted one. “We can make other arrangements if you don’t like it.”

“I said it’s fine,” I told him. His grip was gentle, but firm. I couldn’t pull away without making a scene.

“You’re not happy.”

“I’m tired,” I said. “Besides, plays aren’t really my thing.”

He frowned for a moment, his thumb idly stroking my wrist and giving me shivers. “Perhaps we could find something more suitably entertaining for our meal. I could call you this afternoon to make arrangements.”

It didn’t really matter; going on a date with Gentleman Johnny was going to look bad no matter where we went. “Just surprise me,” I said.

He smiled and stood up. “I’ll do that, then.” He took the napkin from my fingers and slid the calendar in my hand instead. “My cell number is in the back. You can reach me on that number at anytime.”

Then he had the balls to lean over and kiss my temple. “Have a good day, Harry. I’ll see you later.”
I threw my fork down into what was left of my eggs as he left. I’d stopped being hungry a long time ago.

The kid coughed behind me, and I turned and glared at him. “What?”

He shuffled a bit, and blushed. “Are you really his – you know – partner?”

I rolled my eyes, grabbed my dishes, and walked into the kitchen. I scraped the leftovers into the trash and put the plate in the sink. I’d have to wash everything, but I could do that later. First, I needed to get myself together. I was too full to go back to bed, but I could take a shower and clean up a bit.

It would have been better if the day came with a start-over option.

My first dinner out with Marcone had been at a private art showing, full of silent people staring at pictures that looked like splashes of paint on canvas to my untrained eye. I felt underdressed and uncomfortable, and just tried to keep my head down.

The second dinner had been a trip to a show with horses and sword fights and jousting, where cheering was encouraged and I tried not to kill the strobe lights. John hadn’t had much fun there, I think, but I didn’t stand out the way I had at the art gallery.

So for our third dinner I expected another place where one or the both of us would feel terribly uncomfortable.

What I didn’t expect was to be dropped off outside a Jazz Club in Uptown. Nor did I expect to be ushered in when there was a line waiting outside. I guess John really does like Jazz music.

I didn’t recognize the place; Uptown isn’t where I tend to spend my days and i don’t spend a lot of time in bars or listening to music. The decor was interesting, with what appeared to be some Greek or Roman Goddesses gazing over the dim, cozy booths.

Despite the line outside, the club itself wasn’t crowded - and I recognized the bartender. I gave him a polite nod before I slid into the booth across from Marcone.

“Cozy little place.” I attempted to keep my voice down, since everyone else was being quiet enough to not obscure the music. “Doesn’t exactly strike me as a dinner place, though.”

“Typically, it’s not,” he said. “I asked the management for a special favor. The owner agreed to keep the atmosphere quiet for us, and even offered to keep the number of visitors to a minimum. I was worried the strict guidelines might be a bit much for the usual clientele, however there does not seem to be a problem as of yet.”

“He isn’t worried about driving customers away?”

“He’s being paid well enough - besides, the mystery will add to the appeal. Anyone who saw you come in now wants to be in here just to find out who you are and why you get to be treated special.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, and tried not to let my thoughts drive me to distraction. My customer pool was getting smaller while I was being used to attract business elsewhere. It didn’t seem right. I pushed the uncomfortable feeling under the surface and changed the subject: “I noticed Varsity’s bartender was here.”

“Filling in for the night,” Marcone answered. “The usual bartender had the flu, and I didn’t want to
I shrugged, and looked around. Most of the people in the club were too busy making out in back
corners or watching the musicians to pay much attention to us, though there were a few who I
guessed were Marcone’s men. The music was upbeat enough that some of the couples should have
been up dancing, but no one had taken to the small space provided.

“Something on your mind, Harry?”

I rolled my eyes. “Must you call me that?” I asked. “We’re not that close.”

“We should be, though.”

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll trip the circuits here, and this place will need some sudden repairs?”

John leaned back in the booth, his arm over the back of the seat. He looked casual, open, and
dangerous. His holster was there again, and it wasn’t empty I didn’t think he should be casually
showing it off, then quickly realized no one else would be able to identify the bulge unless they
knew what to look for. The holster and handle matched his shirt and jacket well enough that it could
have just been an odd fold of the cloth or a trick of the dim light. “I trust you to not be angry and
frightened, which I believe was the problem previously.”

“I wasn’t frightened.” Even if it was true - and it was a little bit - I wasn’t going to let Marcone think
it was. That sort of thing happens when your life is on the line, but I’d pushed it back to focus on
staying alive, and I’d survived.

“A man was trying to kill you, and had the means to do so.”

“So?” I asked. “I’ve seen worse - and had more efficient assassins attempt what the Shadowman
failed. Yes, he could have killed me. But he couldn’t have done anything worse than that.” I had
nightmares from after my father had died that made Victor Sells look like a kitten. ‘Uncle’ Justin had
done a lot worse than try to kill me. He’d tried to mess with my head.

Marcone was staring at me, his eyes hard. “I should hope you would let me know if you were in any
danger from these threats.”

“Why should I?”

“I think you know why.”

Right. Because he was protecting his new investment, which was me. And if I died then there would
be no return on what he’d already spent luring me in. He also fancied himself in love with me, which
he hadn’t brought up again but was lurking in the back of my mind like a bad smell. “Look, those
people are either dead and gone or don’t matter anymore. I can take care of myself, Marcone. I’m not
dead yet.”

He stared at me a moment longer, then nodded. “Fair enough, for now. It appears our meal has
arrived.”

It looked more like one meal, to me. A single large plate with ravioli in some sort of sauce, some
light bread, and two small bowls with soup. Two fancy glasses were set on the table and Marcone
inspected the label on a bottle of wine before it was poured.

It felt very posh and people were staring. Now I felt out of place in my duster and jeans. There were
others there who weren’t dressed any fancier than I was, but they weren’t being served dinner by
what looked like the entire club’s staff.

“Only one plate?”

He smiled. “It’s enough to share, don’t you think? Besides, you’ll want room for dessert. Try the soup first; it doesn’t taste as good once it’s cold.”

I picked up the spoon and dipped it into the thin broth.

It was going to be a long night.

I was almost glad when I got the call to go to Minnesota, because that meant I would be outside of Marcone's reach for a while. I didn’t hate the guy, mostly – hated what he did, and hated what he had done. But he had some morals, and he wasn’t pushing very hard. I didn’t have to work as hard to avoid thoughts of sex and Marcone together, as he rarely brought it up. The few times he had mentioned sleeping together, he’d been - I think - teasing me. John was honestly trying to get me to know me, and wasn’t prying about magic or money.

That didn’t mean I actually wanted to be around him and date him. He’d set up a schedule, though, and he expected me to adhere to it. I didn’t think he would dock me or fine me if i didn’t agree to his outings, but I didn’t want to take a lot of chances, either. He could stop being ‘generous’ at any time. He was even trying to keep the intimate acts separate from any payments I received from him, using the excuse of rewarding and tipping my efforts at work. I would find twenty or thirty dollars in my pocket after meals sometimes, or I’d find a fifty in my drawers the next morning. I tried not to expect it, because that meant I was spending time with him in order to earn money - and I didn’t like that feeling.

Whether he was keeping things separate for my sake or for appearances, I didn’t know and didn’t really care. I needed to regroup a bit and get my head out of the water, because life in Johnny's house was getting just a bit too... normal. I was beginning to accept it too much.

We’d never kissed, and he’d only occasionally put his arm around my shoulders or put his hand on my waist or my back. Those small touches didn’t bother me, and that me made me nervous.

The fact that I was borrowing his car while mine was in the shop getting an oil change - and whatever else Marcone felt needed to be done - had nothing to do with my nerves, I swear.

Don’t get me wrong; life with Marcone wasn't easy. I was beginning to notice that getting out of his debt was virtually impossible if I didn’t make changes. I needed to find a way to make up my losses, quick, before the trouble got worse. It wasn’t enough to let cases come to me anymore; I would have to go out and find them.

Before I could start searching, I needed to wrap up my current case. And to do that I needed to get there.

Driving across a state and a half was going to take about nine hours, total. At least, that's what I had first estimated. I hadn't taken into account the fact that Marcone's car was a bit touchy with me behind the wheel. Twice already I'd needed a jump start after stopping for gas, and I still had another half hour (at least, probably closer to an hour) to go.

Hours of driving because someone saw something in a lake, and that someone was a part of the local coven, or whatever they were calling themselves. Since they weren’t magic users and didn’t practice any form of Wicca I could recognize, I imagine they simply liked the name enough to adopt it.
Anyways, the unnamed coven member had convinced his fellow believers that they needed help on this rescue attempt, and that they needed to call in a wizard - and why not? There was one listed in the yellow pages, right?

It was more likely he just wanted to see the man with the balls to put his name in the yellow pages under ‘wizard.’ And how the heck did they get my number all the way out in the boondocks of Minnesota anyways? I didn’t typically need to ask how someone found me; my number isn’t exactly a secret. This wasn’t exactly the suburbs of Chicago, either. I wasn’t going to ask.

I needed the money more than I needed answers.

I also needed to save money where I could, and that started with cutting expenses. By December, I should have the detective business moved into my ‘workshop’ at Marcone’s. I wasn’t willing to move into any of his offices, so moving it back to my current residence was the next best thing. It would take some time to get the phone number switched, and some clients might be put off working by a phone with a lot of background noise when it bothers to connect, but it will save me five hundred a month.

While the business was a necessity, the office was a luxury. I couldn’t afford luxuries any more.

I’m not an accountant, but I could see things weren’t working in my favor. In September alone, the ‘six percent’ I owed was around $950. Tack a grand on that for rent and Marcone’s ‘room and board,’ and I’d need to pay close to two grand to make a difference. Normally, I wouldn’t be able to pay that much, but this job had come as something of a break for me.

Yes, it was a hell of a lot of driving, but the coven had agreed to pay for that time, and they’d provided a nice hotel, provided gas money, and made all the hotel and meal arrangements.

Since I didn’t know anything about the area, I left them to it.

I really needed the job to be something I could make money from, though, because I was running out of options. I would be able to pay the minimum, but Murphy had only needed me for a small consulting question that took a few hours to research, and hadn’t called since. I knew I was going to have to give in, at least some, to Marcone’s ‘courting’ if I wanted to get out of debt sometime in this lifetime. It really seemed like a bad idea, though. I still didn't know what Marcone's ultimate plan was, and I had learned long ago not to build a strong relationship with someone I couldn’t trust. His dinners alone were more time with him than I was comfortable spending.

They’d also been making me more money than I was comfortable admitting. If he’d just been asking for sex, I could have told him no and let him keep the cash. Instead I was going to dinners with him and getting tips for the effort I was putting into my job.

It felt like he was paying my wages, which didn’t sit right. At the end of the month, though, I would give the money back to him and it would be as if I had never touched it.

I wasn’t quite desperate yet, but I still left a note on Marcone’s desk, asking for a few simple tasks to relieve my debt when I returned. Reminding him that I wasn’t opposed to washing dishes. He’d probably leave it to me to bring it up at our next dinner, though. Or spend the day with me and slip some cash in my pocket like some cowboy from one of Bob’s romances.

Maybe I could get a job as a waiter. It might be safer.

I was driving back 'home' the next day mad enough that I would need to check the steering wheel for finger-shaped dents. A few pints of Mac’s home-brew and a punching bag would be necessary to
make me feel better. Even better if I could paste a picture of Marcone’s face on the punching bag.

For some reason, the coven had come to the conclusion that ‘wizard’ was some sort of euphemism for ‘man you pay to have sex with.’

Who in all nine levels of hell would advertise as a prostitute in the yellow pages? Who?

To be fair, there had been a water sprite in the lake. She’d been a fairly nice fae who hadn’t needed any saving; she spent her time tricking boaters and fishermen into minor shipwrecks.

I’ve yet to see a watersprite who liked boats. Or anything with a motor attached, really.

Thankfully the coven still paid good money, even though I wasn’t putting out and I wasn’t putting their sprite in an aquarium. I made certain to have the check cashed before I left state, and I still got to have a good night’s sleep in a classy hotel. Not the best, granted, but nicer than anyone with real magic would have provided.

The t.v. was a bit fuzzy when I left, but the water heater had lasted long enough that I got a steaming hot bath out of the deal, and room service. Although, really, the champagne and strawberries were a bit much after I had already told them I didn’t work those sorts of parties. Or any parties at all. Yes, really.

Considering the circumstances, I wasn’t surprised when the car broke down somewhere between there and Marcone’s on some lonely stretch of highway I couldn’t name. Steam was coming out of the engine and the brakes groaned. That didn't surprise me.

The car hitting me from behind did.

Some days, I just have all the bad luck.

My life was bad. I knew it, Marcone knew it, Murphy knew it, the little old lady down the street probably knew it. She knew almost everything else.

Waking up in a hospital was never fun, especially for a wizard, because the equipment they used could be sketchy at best, and the medicines hardly ever worked like they should. I’d been in one often enough to know which rooms to avoid, when to avoid medicine, and when a few hours of meditation would fool the equipment.

This was not any of those times. I woke up to Marcone's stoic face, Hendricks in the background, and an old man in a white lab coat arguing with them over visiting hours.

“Good Morning, Harry,” Marcone greeted, the first to realize I was awake. The machine next to me was still beeping steadily, apparently unconcerned about the fact that my heart rate was rising.

“Marcone. What happened?” I knew the answer well enough, but it seemed like a good idea to find out what Marcone knew.

“The engine overheated in the car; the coolant has, apparently, been leaking, and the long drive was enough to cause problems. Another car hit you from behind – an old truck, I believe, with a young farmer in it. He was released this morning with no serious injuries,” Marcone answered.

That was good. We need farmers. They provide us with food.

“You, on the other hand, suffered a mild concussion and a few possibly cracked ribs. While the seat
belt saved you from most injuries, the air bag failed to deploy, and you hit the steering wheel. They
haven't been able to get a clear x-ray, but they are certain that you haven't broken anything major, at
least.”

That explained the pain in my chest, then. “That's... good.” Nothing major broken? Good. Marcone
standing in the hospital room? Bad. I wasn’t sure how he’d handle the injuries.

“How soon?”

“How soon?”

“Until what?”

“Until I can get out of here?” I started to sit up, doing my best not to mess with all the things
connected to me in an attempt to monitor various things they couldn't monitor. Getting out sooner
meant fewer questions about that, fewer problems with equipment in the rest of the hospital, fewer
injuries caused by my magical interference – and fewer zeros tagged on the end of that bill. Hey, I'm
a reasonable guy, what can I say?

“You really shouldn't be sitting up,” the doctor protested. “You've had a concussion, and will need to
be monitored at least overnight – preferably a few days, so that we can get a replacement x-ray
machine down here to examine your ribs.”

“Is that really necessary?” I asked, glaring. “I’m fine.” Well, that wasn't strictly true, but it was close
enough that I wasn't going to consider it lying. After all, parts of me did feel fine. I think my hand
came out unscathed. Or my foot.

“The first twenty-four hours after a concussion are crucial. You need to be awakened every two
hours to make certain that you haven't fallen into a coma, and there is still the possibility of damage
to memory and cognitive abilities due to trauma to the brain.” The doctor was getting angry. I didn't
even know his name, and I knew that.

“These are all things that a nurse would be able to look for, is that not correct?” Marcone asked.

I glared at him, but it didn't shut him up. He didn’t even seem to notice.

“Yes,” the doctor answered.

“Then it’s settled. Mr. Dresden will return to our home and a nurse will accompany us to make
certain that he has not suffered any more than we are aware of.”

The doctor went pale, and I could almost see the wheels turning in his head. I don't know how close
I was to good ol' Chicago, because the man obviously didn't recognize a mob boss when he saw one,
but a few glances between myself, Marcone, and the not-so-subtle bodyguard-slash-football-
wannabe had him drawing a few conclusions.

I won't say what those conclusions were, because I'm no mind reader, but from the disapproving
frown on his face I can say with almost certainty that I didn't like them any more than he did.

“Very well. We don't have any available nurses capable of making their way to your listed address at
the current time, so I trust finding one at your local hospital won't be a problem?” His body was still,
and his knuckles were white where he was gripping the clipboard. Maybe he thought we were drug
dealers, looking to cause trouble.

“Of course,” Marcone answered. “Mr. Hendricks, would you mind going with Dr. Thompson and
making certain that the bill is paid?"

The big monkey nodded, and moved towards the doctor, backing the man out of the room by towering over him and looking generally intimidating.

It would have been funny if I hadn't just been hit by a car.

When I finally got back to my rooms, I opened up the small backpack I'd been lugging clothes around in and dug out the envelope full of cash the water-sprite-wanna-be's had paid me. I counted to make certain it was all there – all twelve hundred glorious dollars, not enough, but I wouldn't be able to work for a while and it would keep interest down – and set it aside for Marcone. I still had the money from the jobs Murphy had found for me and what John had not-so-subtly tipped me, but I was learning that cautious wizards should hold some extra cash in reserve.

You know, for emergencies.

I put Bob on the nightstand and threw my clothes into the now-empty hamper. Some maid or another had already made up the bed and changed the sheets on.

Then I checked the hamper again, just to be certain it had been empty. I hadn't done laundry in a few weeks, trying to draw things out a bit to lessen the chance of the washer and dryer spontaneously bursting into flame. I understood the bed being made, since Marcone had probably called ahead to make certain everything was ready for me – it happened sometimes – but the laundry was new.

“You should be resting, not unpacking.” Think of the devil, and all that.

“Needed to take of some things, that's all.” Because I couldn't get away with not saying anything.

“Thanks for taking care of Bob for me.” Because the cops had probably asked some questions about a man carrying around a skull a few centuries old or more – who really knew how old Bob was? - and I needed to say something before he decided to do something I wouldn't like. Finding more ways I owed him, for example.

“You have your reasons for carrying it around, I suppose.”

I tossed the envelope down towards the foot of the bed – towards him. “Twelve hundred. I know it's not going to make much of a dent in the hospital bill, but I... I can work for some of it.” Why was that so hard to say? October was coming up, I could probably lay down a few layers of protection against ghosts and spirits and make a good profit. There were enough superstitious people around the holidays, I probably wouldn't need to worry for a few months. The wards wouldn't be any big deal, and it wasn't like I hadn't worked with them before.

I just didn't want to do it for Marcone. And if I was going to do wards for others, I'd have to ward his place as well, or I wasn't going to be safe myself.

“What did you have in mind?”

That stopped me. I had assumed that he would have something that he wanted, some activity that was almost-courting, almost-taking care of me, falling somewhere in between in a way that would make me uncomfortable and unhappy, and I'd have to offer up the wards as some kind of middle ground.

Well, let's be honest here, the whole situation was making me uncomfortable and unhappy, and there wasn’t any middle ground between us.
“I hadn't really thought about it,” I told him.

He knew I was lying. I knew he knew I was lying. And he knew I knew - well, you know. But he still let it slide. “Why don't you lay down and rest, and let me know when you come up with something.”

I could have said something about having company for dinner. I could have asked about my laundry. I could have mentioned another movie, or offered to lay down those wards I'd been thinking about.

I didn't.

Anyone who calls me a coward will be hexed for it.

Chapter End Notes

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Please note that this is NOT the full chapter that was originally posted; it has been split into two chapters due to length.
Month 7: October

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay!

Many thanks, again, to my beta StraightRhodes. :) You're awesome!

In October, where I've placed Fool Moon, a lot of the scenes are going to sound very familiar. That's because they're practically the same as what happened in the book, with only a few minor changes. I actually wrote them with the pages in front of me, tweaking them as needed and working on my "Harry voice." Please don't sue me; I know that these scenes, essentially, are not mine, and that I'm hitting very close to plagiarism (okay, so the only reason I don't consider it outright plagiarism is because I'm saying it's not mine).

Again, I know that these are not mine. They belong to the author, who is very good at his work. Thank you, Jim; this is in no way meant to be an infringement of your copyright.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I don't often pay attention to the phases of the moon, so I didn't know it was a few days shy of the full moon when I met up with Kim at McAnally's. I didn't know that it was important either. I was more concerned about spending time with a beautiful woman who was also a friend and in no way connected to Marcone. Yes, she was too young for me and I didn't think of her as anything more than a friend, but it's the idea that's important. Remembering how it felt to be out with someone young and beautiful.

I would have felt more like a gentleman if I was paying for the meal, but she was paying as part of the service. It was rare for her to ask me for help and be so insistent on paying - on making it a transaction - but it happened from time to time. Besides, I still had my debts, and I hadn't started talking to John about payment options either. I'd have to do that sometime soon.

“Look, if you don't want to tell me, nevermind,” she said, laughing, as if she hadn't just asked for something that could get her killed. If it hadn't been so serious, I would have given her the information without charge. “I'll still pay for dinner. I know you've been short since... well, since last spring.”

I frowned, knowing it was true, but it wasn't like it was obvious or anything. It shouldn't be common knowledge, at least. Yes, Murph had been reluctant to use me as a consultant for a time, but she'd had mercy on me lately on smaller cases that were mostly research. Our relationship was still strained, but Murph wasn't the type of girl who left a man out on his ass in the cold. At least not when he had once been a trusted friend.

Yeah, that whole trust thing was still a bit strained as well.

She leaned forward, looking me in the face without looking me in the eyes, and put her hand over

I looked away. “You're sure now. This is just to scratch an itch, and you're not going to use it for anything? Anything at all?” I couldn't eat that meal and then not give her the information. I hadn't ever gone back on a deal with anyone human before, and now seemed to be a bad time to start. Marcone would have given me all the steak dinners I wanted, but I'd managed to avoid him a bit since the accident, and I preferred it that way. Mac’s steaks tasted better when the mob wasn’t paying for my meals.

“I just want to know.”

As good as that steak looked right now, I couldn’t do it. “I can't give it to you. I'm sorry.”

“Could you at least tell me why?”

She looked honestly distressed. I wanted to know why, but sticking my nose in too far could get it bit off. “Information like that is dangerous.”

“Are you saying I can't handle it? You don't have to shelter me, Harry, and you know I wouldn't do anything bad with it.” She was practically pleading for it, and I knew she wanted to know. Digging around could get her killed just as easily as knowing.

“It's not the knowledge itself,” I offered, “but what people might do to get it – or to keep you from getting it if you go searching on your own. Can I see it again?”

She handed it over, and I flattened it on the table. It was still the same as when I’d looked at it earlier. Three circles. Two were strong, but still fairly standard and understandable. The third not so much. The third was the dangerous one. She was going to get a lot of people hurt of she started mucking around with that kind of magic.

I had to give her something. “Are you sure you copied it down correctly?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately. “I was careful about that. Why?”

I sighed, and gave into the fact that I was going to do this. Hopefully, it wouldn't come back to haunt me later. “What did I teach you about magic circles?”

She bit her lip before answering. “That they act as a barrier, either to keep something out or to hold it in. Mortal creatures can cross them, though.”

“Right, that's what this outer circle is.”

She nodded eagerly. “I got that, but the second one?”

“The second one wouldn't work alone. You'd need something between the symbols – gems or something – but it basically works as a spell barrier for mortal flesh.”

“What would that do?”

I shrugged, answering as vaguely as I could, because I knew she wasn't going to like what I was going to say about the third. “Act like an invisible wall. Spirits and such could cross it, but nothing of flesh and bone.”

“And the third?”

I got up and retrieved the steaks, giving myself a few minutes. I'd left Kim sitting at the table staring
at the drawing, confused, but I couldn't tell her what it really was.

That was much too dangerous. For both of us.

Placing Kim's meal down in front of her, I sat back down and stared at the drawing again. I knew it was going to haunt my dreams for some time, a little bit of premonition, I guess you could say, or maybe just gut instinct.

No one – and I mean no one – would need to do what that circle did.


“It's...gibberish.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“A mistake. Mess up. Maybe you copied something down wrong, or maybe the person you copied from had made a mistake.”

She glared at me. “Don't treat me like some stupid kid, Harry,” she snapped. “If you don't want to tell me, then don't tell me.”

“I don't want to tell you – and I believe I have already said that.” Hell's bells, I was only trying to treat the girl right, and this was the thanks I got? “It's an attempt at a third wall, I think,” I offered, “but the type of creature it was meant to hold doesn't exist.” Didn't officially exist might have been a more accurate answer. The first two circles could have held in anything but the most powerful creatures of the Nevernever, and that was what the third circle would have kept in. Archangels. Demonic demigods. Creatures that broke the boundaries between spirit and flesh. The White Council liked to pretend they didn't exist in the same sort of way most mortals liked to pretend that magic wasn't real.

I scrunched up the paper and threw it over my shoulder, getting rid of it. “Forget about it. All it's good for is housing a tiger, and then you'd be better off with a cage.” Unfortunately, I didn't have a cage or a circle that could withstand Marcone’s patience and his goons persistence. They’d wait until the circle broke and then make me regret it.

“Harry - “

“No. Kim, trust me on this. I don't want to see you get hurt trying to make something that is practically useless.”

“But you said people were after that knowledge.”

I shrugged, stabbing at the dinner that was now cold and completely unappetizing, even after days of ramen and avoided dates. “People do stupid things all the time. Think they can improve on things, make them better, stronger, useful. And then they end up dead.” Okay, so I was trying to scare her a bit now. Maybe it was working, maybe it wasn't. I could only hope it was. “Look, it's complicated - this type of circle isn't dangerous because of what it is, because what it is is gibberish. It’s dangerous because of what people think you’re trying to do with a circle like that.”

She snorted, and stood. “Right. I guess that's my cue to leave, then. Thanks for nothing.”

“Kim, wait - “

But she was already leaving, ignoring me as she made her way around the tables and columns. She
hadn't gotten what she wanted, and she blamed me for it. That hurt, but I reminded myself that it was the right thing to do.

It certainly didn't feel like the right thing. It felt like a kick to the stomach – and trust me, I've been kicked enough, I know what that feels like. It takes away your appetite and adds a pleasant not quite ready to throw up feeling, makes it hard to breathe for a moment, and jump-starts your heart.

Makes a guy feel like crap.

I wasn't ready for Murphy when she sat down next to me, hardly paying attention to her words as she picked up the scrap of paper and tucked it into her pocket – maybe saying something about litterbugs, maybe saying something about my mopey attitude, I'm not sure.

It wasn't until she mentioned a murder that I began to sit up and take notice. Finally, a real case.

I'd been waiting for Marcone to show up at his own house for almost two hours. The wait was annoying, but I wasn't going to give up.

Some might call it stupidity, but I had a resource in him that I wasn't going to throw away because he was too criminal.

Okay, so that came out wrong. I just didn't think I should be chumming around his house and locked into his loans without getting something from the deal. It only seemed fair that I get to use him as he uses me. Not that we actually used each other, but that's beside the point. We just gathered information from each other. Talked. Ate. Not each other.

“Good evening, Harry,” Marcone greeted when he finally – finally! - arrived. “What can I do for you today?”

“One of your men was found dead,” I stated bluntly. “I'm on the case to find out why.”

“It really was a shame. Chris was a good man.”

Chris? I guessed he meant Spike. I never really had a name for him. “You're not worried?”

Marcone shrugged. “It's been taken care of.”

“No. You should be resting, Harry. You're probably still sore from the accident.” Oh yes, the accident. Marcone had generously decided to pay half the bill as some sort of 'workman's comp' benefit, but it was still eating a hole in my pocket. He'd made some noises about insurance again, and finding a way to list me on his, and scheduling appointments, and finding a doctor who could understand no modern equipment or computer was going to react to me the way it should. Me, he tried to baby. Spike got barely a thought.

“One of your men turns up dead, and the best you can say is that it's been taken care of? Forgive me for not believing you when evidence says otherwise.” It wasn't like John to blow off the death of one of his men. He'd gone much further for Tommy Tomm, and I didn't expect his reaction to Spike to be any different. Hell’s Bells, that's what had gotten me mixed up with Marcone in the first place.

“What evidence?”

I wondered what his angle was. He couldn't have possibly taken out a werewolf on his own,
although I still had to talk to Bob for the details. Murphy wanted that report on her desk by morning, and I didn't want her fired or myself in jail.

Although the jail part probably wouldn't happen since I was falling under the generous 'protection' of Gentleman Johnny Marcone. I was only a consultant, and strictly prohibited from field work. According to Murphy, that order had come from pretty high up. As in, she'd personally gotten a call from the Chief of Police.

That same protection was making things difficult. I had no idea that it had become so bad, but Murphy had tried to warn me. She had told me that there were guys at the PD who didn't like my position. She hadn't said that those same guys were the IA, and that they were riding her ass on keeping me as a consultant. It was too dangerous, they said - and they meant too dangerous for me.

My relationship with Karrin Murphy was built on secrets, and it looked like it was going to be destroyed by them, too.

“Harry, are you sure you should be out of bed?”

“You wanted to know what I was willing to do as credit for the loan,” I said, ignoring his question and changing the subject. “Would some wards on the building work?”

Marcone appeared to think about it. “Twenty dollars for each hour you spend on the wards. Any time you could spend finding a solution to keeping the current electronic security system up and running would be appreciated as well.”

“I didn't realize there was a problem.” I hadn't even noticed that there was a security system, but I wasn't going to tell him that.

“It only exists when you're in proximity to the cameras,” he stated simply. “Let me know of your progress by tomorrow.”

“I have a case, Marcone. I won't be working on this until I've gotten some work done for the murders first.” Not a one of my cases got special treatment unless there were lives on the line.

“I guess that means you won't be getting as much for it, then.”

“What?”

“The longer I have to wait for you to start, Harry, the smaller your pay will be,” Marcone said simply. “In twenty-four hours, you'll only be receiving ten dollars for every hour of work. By the end of the week, only five. Longer than that and we may have to re-negotiate.”

Hell's bells, but the man knew how to make a guy angry. “I'll see what I can do.” I'd never had a client dock pay because of the time spent on the case before, but John was a special case in many regards.

Special in that he had the cash, and I would be the one losing sleep if the wards weren’t up.

He smiled at me with that indulgent look that was slowly becoming familiar. “Why don't you join me for dinner tomorrow night? We've both been busy lately, and I've missed our dinners. We can talk about what you've laid down and what you're planning to do then.”

“Am I going to be paid for that as well?” I asked, wondering how much he'd give me if he said yes. He’d never directly paid me for the meals I ate with him before, only slipped me money later.
I had guessed it was to keep up appearances in public, but he looked faintly surprised – a look I knew was well-rehearsed. “Is not the payment for a business dinner the meal itself?”

Either that was a reference to my (failed) dinner with Kim, or Marcone was really good at pretending to know more than he did. “I thought we could, as you say, negotiate,” I offered instead.

“It has been a trying few days, and you still need your rest,” Marcone nodded. “I understand the need for a break, Harry. If it makes you feel better to think of it this way, however, I'm willing to oblige and offer some paid time off. If you could let Mr. Hendricks know your movie preference, I'll see to it that we have time to view it afterwards.”

That hadn’t been what I was thinking, but he left before I could comment on it.

I hadn’t been using my office much lately, but I could still tell when someone had been in there. It was also obvious that it had been Marcone’s henchmen.

No one else would leave a marriage license on my desk. Fewer would have the nerve to leave one with his name on it.

Laying on top of the license was an envelope with my name on it, so I went ahead and opened it. Honestly, it would have been easier if he’d just talked to me before I went to drop off the report for Murphy, but he’d been somewhat reclusive lately, so maybe this was something better said with paper.

Then again, maybe he was hoping that I wouldn't fry more circuitry when I read it.

It started off by calling me dearest Harry, which pretty much pissed me off. I wasn't the man's dearest anything. It gave a few hints at moving the relationship up a level, getting married in some far-off state, and a few worried mish-mash lines about my health. That wasn't the interesting part, though.

I've heard some interesting news about Harley MacFinn – I believe you may know of him. The Northwest Passage Project might also bear some looking into, if you insist on helping out that woman. I look forward to dinner tonight; perhaps we can talk about options then. I would very much appreciate it if you would consider my proposal serious, as it can help to alleviate much of the strain between us, and help to better your situation.

The rest of it I didn’t much care about, but I'd never heard of MacFinn, and Marcone must have known that himself. If these were hints for the investigation with Murphy, why was he helping me out – and what did he mean by bettering my situation? Did he mean the loan?

Well, I could see how a marriage contract could help that, but it certainly wouldn't 'better my situation' any. It'd probably make it worse. It was bad enough ‘dating’ him.

I sat down and read the letter again. Something in the tone was off – Marcone was emphasizing my health too much, and I noticed on the second reading a line about putting up the wards as soon as possible. The first few lines, while they mostly made me want to puke, also included hints about strengthening the threshold by making a house a home, although Marcone might not have recognized it as such.

He was looking to up the ante on protection.

Well, I couldn't blame the man. One of his men had become hamburger-meat for one of many varieties of werewolf, and that was probably enough to remind a guy of his own mortality. Why
hadn't he come to me himself, though? Why had he insisted it had been “taken care of”? Why hadn't he mentioned anything about our 'dinner' together in the letter? Unless he wanted to separate 'work' from 'pleasure' still. As if anyone really bought the story that he was my devoted boyfriend.

Or maybe it had more to do with the fact that the street cred I had with him was dwindling. The streetwolves had said I was his 'boytoy,' not his partner, and had laughed at any power I might have with him or against them.

I had thought being associated with Marcone would make me sick. He is, after all, a vile man who is easy to hate because of what he is: a crime lord. Instead I found myself angry they weren't taking me seriously, and furious that my position was being questioned.

Now I was more amused than angered by his proposal. I wasn't about to take it seriously – I knew better than that – but it had been an effective way of delivering information. It also made it look on the surface like he was seriously in love with me, with undertones that made me sound like a pampered pet he kept around because I was skilled in bed.

Which was even more of a laugh. Johnny-boy hadn't a clue what bedroom skills I had with other men. More accurately, he was probably aware of all the experience I lacked.

I wasn't too happy with the idea, but decided that having dinner with Marcone was better than having him turn up during a summoning and screwing up any work I might accomplish.

This time, when I made my way into the dining room, he'd had some Asian dish prepared, Japanese wine sitting out, candles lit, and incense meant for relaxation and – ha! - purity burning.

“Are you trying to wine and dine me, or discuss business?” I asked.

“Shouldn't all business include a little of both?” Marcone answered, pulling out a chair apparently meant for me.

“Not when the business is with a scumbag who has more control over my future than I'm comfortable with and has a habit of making people think I'm his personal love-slave. You're not paying me for this, so I don't have to stay.” I didn't sit down.

Marcone had the gall to smile at me – as if I was some puppy that needed placating. “That, at least, is true,” he said. “You don't have to stay. I would hate to confine you against your will.”

And wasn't that a creepy thought? Oh wait, I forgot, he already had. Bastard.

“Why don't you sit down and eat, Harry?”

“Don't call me that,” I snapped immediately. It never helped, but it made me feel better.

The smile never wavered. “Certainly a healthy meal is preferable over soup and ramen.”

I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes and took the seat he offered. There was no sense in letting all that food go to waste, after all, so I helped myself to a bleached-white plate and made a show of helping myself to a lot of everything, filling my plate to the brim in a way I hoped irritated him. “You mentioned an offer?” I asked as he sat down at the table head, just to my right. Unfortunately.

“A proposal, actually.”

“The letter was cryptic.” Well, not really. But the actual meaning was.
“I had thought that you might enjoy a challenge, being a wizard investigator.”

“I’d rather take this food and cut out.”

He put his elbows on the table and stared at me. I squirmed a bit – I didn't like it – but I didn't stop eating. “People are dying, Harry, and you are now on the case to stop that. I would prefer if you were safe at home, resting, but I have discovered how futile it is to try and stop you once one of my men have been killed.”

“That’s not why I took the case.”

“Isn’t it? Yes, you would have taken the case if it had been someone else, but it wasn’t. It was Chris. Someone you know.”

“Get to the point.” He had several, and it grated a bit that they were all true, but it wasn’t why I was there.

“I may be able to help, but, like all things, there is a prince.”

“I think I owe you enough as it is.”

“You won't even hear the offer?”

I put down the fork and shoved the plate away, half the food uneaten, and crossed my arms across my chest. “Fine. I'm listening.”

“The marriage contract is real and legal, it needs only to be signed and notarized. You will still, of course, need to pay off your loan should you, at any point, decide to sever the contract, with everything reverting to our current agreement with a few minor changes. With the contract in place, I'm willing to be generous. No interest, so long as you pay three percent each month. I will require an actual consummation of the marriage within the first two months, and at least once every three months for the first year. I would ask for more, however I do understand how sensitive you are to requirements in that are of the marriage, and so have allowed a more than generous timeframe. I do, however, hope for a healthy relationship, and everything that a healthy relationship implies. The charges for room and board, of course, will be dropped, and my resources will be available for your use.”

“I could move out?” I asked – although, really, I wasn't that interested. 'Consummating' the marriage didn't sound like much fun. For me, at least.

“Of course not. You'd be my husband, and that relationship must be maintained. I would expect a healthy relationship, with meals taken together, a shared bedroom, and quality time together.”

I leaned back, as if considering the deal. It was actually somewhat nice, compared to what I had worked out at the moment. No more added dues, a lower monthly payment, and free housing and food. No more hospital bills, too, if I worked it right.

But there was also a husband that came with it, who would want sex, dates, dinners, and everything else that made marriages 'healthy.'

“Do I really look like that much of a fool?” I asked.

Marcone raised an eyebrow. “I could arrange for a honeymoon in Hawaii, if that's the issue. Texas is, I believe, the only state that openly outlaws sodomy, but that could be worked around if that's what you want. New York, Washington, California...”
“I don't want a honeymoon.” Not with him. With Susan, on the other hand...

“What is it, then? I'm afraid I couldn't pay you to be my husband, as that leads back to the prostitution that you are so against. I would, however, manage expenses incurred after the wedding.”

Didn't that sound nice? It did, actually, if Marcone wasn't a mob boss who owned half of Chicago and the police, too. He didn't look half bad, if you were into that sort of thing. And the potential death that came with it.

“I'd rather not wake up next to a drug-dealing murderer every morning,” I said. “I'm too closely associated with you as it is, and I'm not happy about it. Your offers have blood in the ink, Marcone, and I don't think I can live with that.”

Marcone nodded. “Perhaps, in time, you will change your mind. I must warn you, however, that what I offer may not have the same benefits at a future date.”

“Stars and stones, I hope not. There's not enough money in the world for me to be your guard and lapdog in one.”

“Guard?”

I met Marcone's green eyes with no fear of falling into another soulgaze. We had already taken a peek into the soul of each other, and that was what had landed me in this mess from the start.

I was lucky you couldn't fall into a soulgaze twice. Marcone would have taken advantage of that.

“There's a reason this came up now,” I said boldly, challenging, hoping maybe there was something I could charge him for in this. “You're worried. Dead bodies, strange trails, and you offering assistance. Either you're protecting your investments because you really think I'm going to die, or you're worried for yourself. Frankly, I'd rather assume the latter.” Thoughts of me dying really weren't nice. At all.

“Protecting my investments is how I became successful.”

“And while I'm sure that was part of your, well, 'success,' I doubt I'm worth the effort.” One little wizard wasn't worth all that much in the long run, I didn't think, even if Marcone was trying to marry me.

“Maybe, maybe not. I am a business man; I do what is needed to bring some order to the chaos.”

I snorted. “No, you just make it look efficient and pretty. Doll it up however you like, you're still just a thug – a school yard bully. No more.”

His jaw clenched, and his eyes narrowed. “If I were you, I would take care of how I spoke to the so-called bully in his own house, Mister Dresden. He might stop being nice and simply take what he wants.”

“You could try.”

“And I would succeed.”

I didn't argue the point. Mostly because I didn't know if he would or not. I have a few tricks up my sleeve, so to speak, but so did Marcone. I had learned that the hard way.

“You've seen into me, just as I've seen into you. You know there's no way I'd accept something like
He smirked at me. “I wonder just how well you know your own soul.”

Not well enough, it seemed, but I wasn't about to go poking around in that stew. “I know myself well enough to know that I'm finished with this conversation,” I said, standing.

“Take the food,” Marcone said. “I would hate to find that you went hungry because of me.”

“No thanks. I seem to have lost my appetite.” Again.

I left. I had work to do, and it wasn't going to get done while I was sitting around the dinner table.

After I was far enough away that Marcone wouldn't run into me coming out and doing whatever it is he does, I stopped to breathe for a moment and calm down. I had hardly noticed the tripping beat of my heart or the sweat on the back of my neck, too caught up with wondering just how far Marcone would really go and, I realized too late to do anything about it. I was trying to fall back into the old, familiar role of ‘pulling pigtails’ – something I had done with many of the bigger, meaner boys when I was in school.

If he hadn't been so interested in keeping me alive, he would have killed me.

I was still caught up in wondering if he wanted a bodyguard, lapdog, or some mix of the two. It was probably the mix – that would be the human response. A bodyguard to make the unknown less scary and a collared husband to keep the bedsheets warm without getting in the way. To have both in the same person would be like have a two-for-one special at the corner market.

I hated it, but I understood it. It was how he worked – he was a businessman.

But if he was afraid of what was out there, I had reason to be scared out of my mind as well. It didn't change anything, but it was a hefty reminder of the deep shit that this case was – in more ways than one.

I so did not want to end up like Spike. Or Tommy Tomm, either, for that matter.

Squaring my shoulders, I headed off for my workroom to try and get something – anything – accomplished.

A lot happened in a short amount of time. Between summoning up a demon in Marcone's house (without him knowing), Kim's death, my arrest, my escape, and round one with the Wolf That Ate Death, I wasn't surprised that I woke up alone, in darkness, feeling shitty.

I was rather surprised that I woke up at all, actually.

I didn't actually hurt, which was scarier than I'd really like to admit. There was pain, yes, but it wasn't really a part of me – it didn't hurt like I was used to pain hurting, even though I could see the bandages, bruises, and the ill-fitting clothes I had worn to the PD.

I had a headache as big as the Nevernever, though, so I knew I was still, at least mostly, alive.

I stood outside a halo of light that would have fit better in a movie set than this transitional space between life and someplace else, and thought, hell's bells, why not? My day has already been something that brushed the fringes of hell, so why not push it? I stepped into the circle and saw, coming from the other side... me. A version of me Marcone might have approved of – maybe even
been proud of. He was better groomed, wore the black leather duster I had been wanting to save up for since I started my gig as a PI, and had all-black, custom-made clothes that fit like a dream. He was clean where I was bloody, and had a confident set to his shoulders where I slouched. I could see the sheer strength and knowledge in how he carried himself, and I was a bit envious – just a bit.

He looked me up and down for a long minute, and I almost expected to see him put a cigarette to his mouth and smoke when he finally said: “What does Johnny see in you? Stars and stones, Harry, you look like hell.”

“And you look like me.” Better, more fashionable, and a bit like a mafia king's boytoy, but I didn't say that out loud. I don't think.

He laughed. “I could almost forget how thick you are when you come up with things like that. But you don't get the joke, do you? If I look like Johnny's bedtime playmate, then so do you. I am you.”

I blinked at him for a few minutes. I got the parallel with the looks – although I was sure I hadn't said that bit out loud – but the rest... “How does that work?”

“You're unconscious, you moron,” my double said. “We can finally talk.”

Lightbulb. “Oh. You're Evil Harry, lurking inside Good Harry. Right? And you only come out on nights Marcone tries to sneak into my bed?”

He snorted. “Give me a break – you know you're not that simple, John knows you're not that simple. Even Murph knows you're not that simple. If you were, you'd have been dead long ago. I'm not Evil Harry, I'm just Subconscious Harry. Your inner voice, intuition, instinct, your basic, animal reactions. I make your dreams and your nightmares, fat lot of good it does me when you can't be bothered to remember them in the morning. I come up with the good ideas and pass them along, hoping that you have the brains to listen and keep us alive. We need to work on both of those, by the way – especially the 'listening' part, since I'm hoping the 'keeping us alive' part won't be an issue. I hear that communication is the key to a healthy relationship now-a-days.”

“So, what, does that mean you're Smart Harry?” I asked after a pause.

“In a lot of ways, probably yes,” my double answered. “It's not my job, though, and not why I'm here.”

“I'd say 'I see,' but I really don't. Why are you here, then? Am I going to meet Harry Past, Present, and Future who are going to shove down my throat the ideals of peace, harmony, and good will towards men?”

My double quirked a grin, looking positively criminal. “That's good. The banter thing. I'm not very good at it. Could be why you're in charge instead of me, but then I would have gotten us laid a lot sooner and a lot more. John's not half bad, you know, and offering up a pretty sweet deal – not to mention those two sweet ladies, Susan and Murphy. In answer to your question, though: no, that's not why I'm here.”

“I hate guessing games, and I'm too tired to keep this up,” I complained. “Could we move along?”

“No joke, jerk. You're not just asleep, your body forced you to sleep. But we don't have much time and we have issues to work through.”

“Issues? What, I'm my own therapist now?” I turned my back on my double and tried to find my way out of what I guessed was my own mind. It certainly wasn't my soul. “I've had weird dreams before, but this is just stupid.”
My double somehow slipped in front of me before I got very far. “Hold it, you don't want to do that.”

“I'm tired. I feel like shit. I should hurt, but that's sorta iffy right now. I don't need to waste any more time exploring Marcone's fantasies and my own apparently freaky kinks.” I did my best to stare my double down. “Now stay out of my way.” I turned to the right and started walking again.

My double was there, blocking my path. Apparently, he didn't have to walk to get from point A to point B. “It's not that simple, Harry. It isn't that easy to run away from yourself. You should know; you've been doing it long enough. I was bound to find my way through eventually.”

“Look, it's been a long night.”

“I know,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “Believe me, I've been along for the whole ride. But you have to unload a bit before your sanity takes a turn for the worse.”

“I'm not worried about that,” I lied.

He snorted. “Would you be talking to yourself right now if you weren't two shakes shy of crazy?”

I opened my mouth and did a fish impersonation for a few minutes. Then shrugged when I couldn't argue the point. “Okay, you've got me there.”

“I tend to do that. Smarter, remember?” my double said, waggling his eyebrows. “A lot has been happening so fast that you haven't had time to process it all properly, and it's not all going to happen now, but you can get through enough that you won't wake up screaming most nights, and you can do some hard thinking, fast, on how to get through this alive.”

I sighed, rubbed my eyes, and plopped my butt down on the floor. I didn't feel like standing. “What do you want to hear?” I asked.

My double gestured, and suddenly Murphy was there, just like at the police station, the flesh of her arm sickly jutting out from a broken bone, her face pale and spotted with blood. Streaked with tears and anguish.

“Murph,” I whispered, almost crawling towards her image, even though I knew it wasn't really her. “What have I done to you?”

“Nothing,” my double said, kneeling next to me. “This wasn't your fault.”

“Like hell it wasn't,” I snarled. “This wasn't necessary.”

“No, it wasn't. But it wasn't your fault, either. She wouldn't listen to what you could tell her, and you had good reasons not to share the rest.”

“Fat lot of good that did.”

“You can't change the past.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“No. No it isn't,” my double said quietly. “I'm you, remember? We can't change the past, but we can change the future. You've been trying to protect her, but the answer? Is letting her know how to protect herself, and letting her do it. You can't be there all the time, and she's going to go after these things with or without you. It's time to stop playing babysitter.”
“But that means...”

“Telling her everything. Leave nothing out.”

“The council won't like it.”

“The council won't care if she gets her face eaten. You do. Besides, Murph can handle herself. The council should think twice before messing with her.” My double considered Murphy for a moment. “If not for John, I'd say ask her out – I know you're dying to – but he's a better choice, since I know you won’t take both.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You're seriously repressed, man. I'm hoping Johnny manages to make a move before we die of old age. Well, a move that works, anyways. He's tried making plenty of moves that you’ve ignored.”

“I must be nuts.”

“Not really. I could throw in some nice fantasies into the old dream VCR after this, get the ball rolling, so to speak. You should get some supplies, too. Lube. Condoms. Try playing with yourself sometimes – and I mean with your ass, not your dick. Could be fun.”

“I am so not having this conversation.” I stood and turned – and found an image of Susan. Worried, beautiful Susan.

“She's only after a story, you know.”

I sighed, slumping. So much for the dramatic escape. “Yeah. I know.”

“I understand not trusting her. She's risking too much just for a story, and that will probably get her beautiful bod into trouble one day. She can't defend herself like Murph can, and she'll get hurt – and that will hurt us. That's not why I brought her here, though.”

“So? Enlighten me.”

“The connection between how you treat her and how you treat Murphy. Your chivalric streak, where you want to protect them and care for them. It isn't about the girls. It's about Elaine.”

And there she was, just as I last remembered her – well, with clothes.

I turned my back on the image before I could get a good look.

“That's over,” I said.

“No it's not,” my double whispered. “As long as you blame yourself for all that happened... no, it's not. It colors everything you do.”

I kept my back turned.

“She's still alive,” my double said. “You know she is.”

“She's dead, and I don't want to talk about it.”

“You can't heal this way. You can't let anyone in, and it's killing you on the inside. You trust Johnny more than anyone, because he's predictable, but you won't tell him anything because he's too close to
that darkness you teeter on.”

I closed my eyes and counted to five in quasi-latin, then reopened them to the image of Tera West.

“And why the hell are you trusting her?” my double demanded.

“It's not like I had much of a choice,” I snapped. “I've been a bit desperate, if you haven't noticed.”

“You know she's not human,” he said. “You know she was there when Spike became lunchmeat. You know she's got influence over a group of young people, the favorite targets of all sorts of nasties from the Nevernever. She's a shapeshifter of some kind who isn't telling all, but still wants help.”

“I'm not telling all either,” I said. “It's hardly my place to throw stones.”

My double shrugged. “She hasn't pushed hard enough, and neither have you. The kids, Harry. Who are they? What is she having them do? What is she turning them into? Why hasn't she told MacFinn about them? He didn't recognize those names you dropped.”

“All right, all right. I'll talk to her when I wake up. I was going to anyways.”

“If you have time. The murders are starting to pile up. Are you going to do something about that?”

“Of course.”

“At least we agree on something, then…”

“I still don't get why we can't just put a bullet in him and dump him.” They either weren't paying enough attention to know that I was awake, or I looked dead enough that they didn't care.

“Stupid,” Parker growled. “The others aren't here yet. Besides, as much as I'd like to kill him outright, Marcone wants a piece of his ass first.”

“Marcone,” Flatnose sneered. “I never figured him for a fuckin' queer. What are we doing catering to some fuckin' fag, anyways?”

*Good question* I thought, keeping my head down and trying to look like I was still asleep. Was Marcone coming to rescue me, or beat me to hell because I wasn't conforming to his plans? And what hold – besides the obvious – did he have over these guys?

“Marcone isn't just some fag – he's a fuckin' fag crime lord. Chicago's just his playground for his off time – he's got his fingers everywhere from the gov'ner to D.C. and back, and more money than God. You don't screw with people like that unless you wanna get screwed.” Just the obvious then. And since when were Marcone's connections that big? It sounded like the rumor mill had puffed up Marcone's reputation. A lot.

Flatnose snorted. “Maybe. Or maybe the rumors are right and you're getting soft. Marcone ain't one of us, there ain't nothin' sayin' we gotta take orders from him. The Parker I knew ten years ago wouldn't have stood for this shit.”

“And he would have gotten us all dead. Even when we were young, we weren't good enough to face him and win. I keep you up with cash, women, drugs – anything you want. So settle down and shut your yapper for a few minutes.”

“I think Lana's right – I think we should kill him right now. What's the sense in waiting?”
I tensed, preparing to make as big a break for it as I could. I'd rather go down fighting than as a sitting duck.

"Back down," Parker said – fiercer, sterner, more demanding. There was the sound of boots on concrete, cloth on cloth, a few grunts, and then an abrupt yelp as Flatnose was forced to his knees less than a foot away. I could smell the sweat and stale ale, and felt my stomach turn. He kept making whimpering sounds of pain, as if he were being held in a lock of some sort, and I forced myself to relax. Not to give myself away.

Parker snarled over Flatnose's whimpers, “I told you. You were never good enough or smart enough. Challenge me again, any time, any place, and I'll rip your fuckin' heart out.”

The way he spoke gave me the chills. It reminded me of Marcone's clean-cut superstore soul – he could have just as easily been commenting on the weather or noting that there was a leaky faucet in the bathroom. Calm, measured, and almost bored. A predator who is content to wait and let the prey trap itself.

There was a sickening sound of bone on bone, and Flatnose let out a howl of pain. Parker's boots moved away. “Get up, call Tully's, and get the others here before the moon rises. There will be blood tonight – wizard's or not.”

Flatnose was shuffling off, but it was slow and nonrhythmic. I heard the door to the office close, and hoped that Parker would leave so that I could do the same. He didn't, damn the man.

I needed a plan, and time was definitely not on my side. If I waited, the numbers would be against me – and I couldn't put any faith in Marcone coming to my rescue. I owed him too much and had turned him down and insulted him a few too many times. He probably wanted to make certain I died, or that he at least got his money's worth out of the entertainment.

No, I had to make my move now, while the odds were still slightly better. I was still bound, though, and Parker would be on me before I finished un-taping myself. I had no chance against him – he could rip me to shreds in under a minute on one of his bad days, and that was if he wasn't being serious. He wouldn't need more than his own two hands, either.

My only chance was distracting him – forcing him to go get a baseball bat, duct tape for my mouth, anything. I could make a break for it while he was gone.

Or he would get mad and rip my heart out.

I let my head slump sideways instead of straight down, and squinted through the darkness at Parker. “You certainly have a way with people,” I said. My voice was harsher than I remembered, drier, and it kinda hurt to talk. Hopefully all I'd done was sleep with my mouth open. That didn't stop me, though. “Did you read a book or something?”

I had startled him, and he spun with the reflexes of a nervous cat. “So, you're alive. I suppose that's something.”

“Mostly, I was tired. Still am, really, but thanks for the short nap.”

I saw the bright white of his teeth. The man knew how to brush well, apparently. “No problem. Fair warning, though: checkout is in a few hours.”

I shrugged, hoping the fact that his words scared me didn't show. “No problem. Your floor sucks. It's a good thing your people can't hit, or I might have been uncomfortable.”
Parker laughed. “You've got balls, kid, I'll give you that. Then again, according to rumor, you are living as Marcone's live-in boy-toy, so I can see where balls might be necessary.”

I grumbled under my breath – was there anyone who didn't know I lived with the man? It seemed to be commonly accepted that I was sleeping with him, which would be hell on my love life if I actually had one. This wasn't going well at all. I needed out, fast. “How's the knee?”

Parker's voice was rougher when he answered. Not happy I had managed to hit him, unless I missed my guess. “A lot better. Should only be an hour or two after moonrise to finish healing. You got in a lucky shot.”

“I should have aimed higher,” I quipped. “Made you sing soprano.”

I saw him smirk. “Too late now, kid. You'll be the one singing before the night's over, one way or another. Which do you think you'd prefer – Lana's teeth ripping you apart, or Johnny-boy spanking your ass?”

“Actually, I don't like either option. I'm not all that into pain. Maybe I could offer up your ass instead.”

His boot came out of nowhere and hit me in the side of the head, throwing me hard to the right and almost to the floor. It was almost a disaster.

“Damn cocky bastard. You should have learned to keep your mouth shut.”

“What have I got to lose?” I asked. “ Seems I'm dead no matter what happens, so why not do my worst? It's not as though I-”

“Shut up,” Parker snarled, cutting me off. I wouldn't have complied if he hadn't added a kick to my stomach, and all my breath rushed out of me in one swoop.

I sucked in around the hole in my chest a few times, and kept talking. At first, there wasn't any real words coming out, but it didn't take long for my voice to come back. “Arthritis must be hard on those joints, huh? Don't eat as much, not as strong as you once were – not as fast. Finding it hard to keep up. Needing to tumble with the older dogs because the younger ones will tear you up.” He was getting angrier, I could see it. I was hoping he would leave.

Instead, he picked up a tire iron and lifted it high above his head. “Fuck you, wizard,” he snarled. “I'm tired of waiting.”

He was furious. A tightly-packed wad of muscle just getting ready to explode – and I was the target. The plan, such as it was, had failed.

I clenched my teeth, kicked my legs enough to free my ankles, and braced myself. It was too late to do anything but prepare to die, so I don't know what I thought I was doing, since it would have hurt less if I had let myself roll with the hits. I guess it's just what you do when you think you're dying.

“Mr. Hendricks,” came a very hard, very calm voice. “If Mr. Parker does not put the tire iron down in the next second or two, please kill him.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Marcone,” Hendricks's rumbling basso answered. To my right, I saw Marcone in one of his fancy business suits with the large bodyguard standing just in front of him and to the side slightly. His suit was cheaper, but the short-barrel, pump-action shot gun held in his meaty paws and aimed for Parker's head made up for it.
Parker's focus had snapped to Marcone as well, growling low as he shifted from foot to foot. I could almost hear his teeth grinding.

“That's a twelve-gauge riot gun, Mr. Parker,” Marcone said. “I'm fully aware of your rather unique endurance at this time of the month, and I assure you that he is fully prepared to deliver a blow even you would have difficulty recovering from.” Marcone smiled politely while Hendricks clicked off the safety and widened his stance to brace for any kick-back. “Put down the tire iron, please.”

Parker glanced at me, and I felt my blood go cold. It was not the face of a man in control, but a furious beast raging against anything that stood in it's way. An animal that wanted to bathe in the blood of its enemies.

But Parker lowered the tire iron, collared the beast, and took two steps away from me. I let out a sigh of relief. I wasn't dead – not yet – and no one had realized I was freer than I should be. It was something, but I didn't have very many options left.

“My people are coming,” Parker warned. “You try any more of that heavy-handed shit, I'll have you ripped apart.”

“Your people are coming,” Marcone agreed, ignoring the threat, “but they are not here yet. I'm afraid that they've run into a slight delay. We have time to do rational business before they arrive.” I heard his shoes cross the floor towards me, and I looked up at him. He didn't look too pleased, but he didn't look particularly angry, either. I hoped that was a good sign.

“Hi, John,” I said. “You've got good timing.”

Marcone smiled. “And you have a way with people, Harry,” he said, glancing at Parker with amusement even as he bent down, repeating my words from earlier. “You must have read a book.” And then his face was next to mine, breath ghosting across my ear. “Make this good, and I might help you,” he whispered.

Then he kissed me.

Now, I'll tell you, I didn't have a whole lot of options left. At least Marcone would probably leave me alive at the end of all this, if nothing else than to get his money's worth from me.

So I kissed him back. I closed my eyes, opened my mouth, sucked his tongue in, and kissed as if my life depended on it.

It kinda did.

When he drew away, I followed him as far as I could without revealing my loose arms, and even managed to whimper slightly. I gave myself a pat on the back for that.

Marcone chuckled, and I opened my eyes to see Parker's disgusted face and Marcone's pleased one.

“I'm afraid, Mr. Parker, that I will need the wizard back. You would probably benefit from his services if you knew what was going to be roaming the streets tonight, looking for my own home on your city streets.”

“Someone who doesn't like your little displays?”

“A little more destructive, I think. Really, you should watch the news more. What did you say that things was, Harry? A loup-garou?”
I blinked. He was further away from me now, back under Hendricks's watchful gaze. “How did you - “

Marcone waved a hand. “The report you gave to Lieutenant Murphy. Such things have to be paid for, and thus copied and filed and copied and filed. It wasn't hard to have a copy made for myself.”

I shook my head. “Money won't keep MacFinn away.”

“Indeed,” Marcone answered. “And my family, such as it is, doesn't have any silver that could be considered inherited, or I'd have taken care of the issue myself. He seems to believe that I have gravely wronged him, and I can't allow for such... misconceptions to stand. That being said,” he pulled a familiar contract out of his pocket. “My offer is still open. Mutually beneficial, of course, and I'm willing to add in, on my personal oath, a promise that some of the pressure will be taken off of the Lieutenant.”

“I thought you wanted me back anyways?” I asked, licking my lips as they went suddenly dry. I needed time to consider my options – try to run, and get slaughtered by Parker; go with Marcone and get my hands dirty. Hard choice.

“If you're unwilling, I can certainly find services elsewhere that would prove capable. There's nothing in our contract that states I must come to your aid.”

But the new contract – no doubt – would state that I needed to come to his. Probably without something similar in place for my own safety.

And I kinda owed it to Murph to get some of the pressure off of her. She'd hate me for it, but she was my friend, and I had been the cause of her troubles. And part of the reason I'd gotten into this mess was to get her out of it.

I may not have been a perfect angel, but I wasn't trapped yet. Not completely. I could still say no to Marcone. Becoming his husband would pull me deeper into his world, into a place where no one would think twice if I disappeared for a few days, or showed up with a few new bruises. Where Marcone's mood could determine how well off my friends were. And I wouldn't be able to get out of it easily.

I needed another option, a way to help Murph without sacrificing my freedom, so I focused on a tool bench not far away, with loose tools and metal parts, gathered power together, and hoped I wouldn't kill anyone – that I wouldn't kill myself. It might cause trouble later, but I didn't want to die. Not on a concrete floor in a garage, and not on Marcone's leash.

I let out all the power I had gathered with a whispered spell that sounded like a curse, and the tools jumped briefly, but stayed where they were.

Fire erupted behind my eyes, the pain blinding, and I leaned forward and tried to take deep breaths and not throw up. It hurt more than I care to tell, and for a few moments I couldn't think, couldn't stop the whimpers and few scattered tears that escaped.

When I straightened, I kept my eyes from Marcone's. I was finding it hard to believe that my magic had... failed.

“Very interesting,” Marcone said, his face towards the workbench. He turned towards me again abruptly. “Perhaps you should have listened when I told you it was too soon to be out of bed. Of course, now you are even more injured. I'm still willing to make the deal, however.”

I glanced between my two choices – Marcone and Parker – and lowered my head. I needed a rescue
– a real rescue – but I didn't think Murph would be on her way any time soon.

“We were promised blood,” Parker growled. “The wizard is mine.”

“I promised you blood, yes. However I never indicated that Mr. Dresden would be the one you were free to kill. There's someone else I had in mind for you. Besides, I doubt he'll take the offer. He'd rather die, as I understand it.”

I saw Flatnose out of the corner of my eye, unnoticed by the others, and a plan blossomed. I lifted my head. “Give me a pen.”

Marcone's raised an eyebrow in surprise, but looked pleased none-the-less. “Harry?”

“Give me a pen,” I said again. “I'll sign it. Anything to get out of here alive.”

He didn't look convinced, but reached for his pocket again. I could almost see the gears turning as he tried to determine what my game was – and if he could hold me to the contracted terms later.

And that's when it all turned sour.

Laying in my bed, eyes on the ceiling, thinking back over the last few days, what stood out the most was not the deaths, though they were bad, and it wasn't the disappointment between myself and Murph, though it was a rocky slide in our friendship. It wasn't even the ache I felt when I had to say ‘no’ to Susan again, because I couldn't let her get caught up in the mess I was in – both with the wolves and with Marcone. It wasn't the running for my life, nearly getting shot, or nearly getting eaten parts.

It was the kiss Marcone had given me.

I still ached with the injuries. I was still confused over my magic failing me – and that, have no doubt, is a Big Deal for a wizard like me, who depends on his magic. I'd be finding some way to protect myself when I was that low and it would be something more reliable than a gun. Maybe some spells on that duster Susan had given me, that I felt like crap over and couldn't pay her for.

But Marcone had kissed me, and demanded I kiss him back or stay there and rot, and, well, I hadn't entirely disliked it.

I'd been in a crummy situation, and probably wouldn't have been able to get it up if I tried, so no, I didn't have some aching hard-on for the man. It'd been a simple trade – one kiss for help staying alive, and he'd held up his end of the bargain after I'd held up mine. He'd tasted like breath mints, which is a stupid thing to remember about your first kiss with another man, but seemed really funny now that I was looking back at the situation.

I'd just had the crap beat out of me, and Marcone showed up in a fancy suit and tasted like breath mints. Just another stroll in the park for him.

I'll admit to the fact that I was avoiding him. I didn't want to see him. I had all but agreed to marry him, and I don't know what that was going to do to the relationship I had with him – namely that of employee and employer. Or loanee and loaner. Or however that works.

I didn't know what he was going to expect from me anymore, especially since I wasn't prepared to follow through with my rash agreement.

Of course, I couldn't avoid him forever. He'd made certain that I made it to the hospital, which was
probably going to be another large charge to my account, and I wasn't going to bother with paying him at all this month. I couldn't face him, and I didn't have enough money anyways. After his “rescue”, my response would surely make him furious.

He was a crime lord, and I'd all but agreed to marry him right there in front of a gang of street thugs. Actually, I sort of did agree - I just hadn’t signed the contract.

And I was getting closer to looking like 'Subconscious Harry' with my new leather duster. I was right, Marcone had looked at it appreciatively, but that only served to remind me of when I had looked at one on that other-me, and his little tidbit of advice.

Not for all the money in the world.

That kiss, though – that hadn't been totally revolting.

NOTE: In October, where I've placed Fool Moon, a lot of the scenes (hopefully) sound very familiar. That's because they're practically the same as what happened in the book, with only a few minor changes. I actually wrote them with the pages in front of me, tweaking them as needed and working on my "Harry voice." I know that these scenes, essentially, are not mine, and that I'm hitting very close to plagiarism (okay, so the only reason I don't consider it outright plagiarism is because I'm saying it's not mine), but I wanted them to be there.

Again, I know that these are not mine. They belong to the author, who is very good at his work. Thank you, Jim; this is in no way meant to be an infringement of your copyright.

As in Storm Front, most of the scenes from Fool Moon are the same or similar, and therefore haven't been included. I've included (some) “added” scenes, and included or summarized any modifications that are major or just fun. Any changes should (if I've done my job right) be obvious.

Chapter End Notes

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Many thanks to my beta, StraightRhodes!

And many, many thanks to everyone providing kudos, comments, or simply just reading the story. I am very grateful for your support during these edits!

As usual, it took some time for the PD to process what they owed me – which, admittedly, wasn’t very much. I would have liked to say they paid good money for the whole loup-garou problem, but they didn’t. I had, technically, been arrested at the time and not working for the PD, so they only paid me for the time they had hired me for and added a nice 'reward' for 'protecting the city’s officers.'

Once Susan had released her video it was clear I had helped and not hindered when the shit went flying. Granted, they didn't know what I'd done or how I'd done it – and the tape had vanished – but they knew I had saved Murph from being wolf-dinner.

There was also a tidy little sum in Marcone’s ledger for strengthening the wards, though I probably would have made more if I'd been waiting tables at Mac's. It had occurred to me, later, that I could have argued about the wage, but by that point it was too late and not worth the effort.

And Marcone might have twisted the argument against me until I wasn’t working at all.

It wasn’t difficult to admit I let Marcone get away with actions I wouldn’t allow from others. Part of it was that I simply didn’t understand him or his motives. I didn’t fear him, but I knew what he could do - and what he wasn’t doing.

Most significant however, was the fact that he wanted me. And I knew he wanted me.

There had been roses outside my bedroom door every day for over a week after the night with MacFinn. Nine long-stemmed red roses, delivered fresh, for nine days. I'd ignored them. It was harder to ignore Marcone’s growing knowledge of magic. I told myself he’d seen MacBeth too many times.

I left my payment with one of the bodyguards and avoided Marcone for as long as I could. Some might call it cowardice; I call it strategic avoidance.

So when Marcone summoned me into his office two days later – sending two hulking ex-football players who will carry you if you don't comply can't be anything short of summoning – I was both confused and worried. I had made my payment, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about. I couldn’t think of a single reason he might need to see me aside from my avoidance after the whole 'face Marcone after kissing him like you meant it, kinda-sorta agreeing to marry him, and maybe not being so disgusted by a guy’s tongue in your mouth after all' ordeal. They picked me up outside a cafe where I’d started loitering recently and drove me to one of Marcone’s office buildings. Then they’d escorted me to the top floor.
I'd have rather avoided facing him for a while longer, but apparently that wasn't happening.

"Was there something you wanted?"

"Good afternoon, Harry," Marcone greeted calmly as he situated the papers on his desk.

"Don't call me that." He took far too many liberties with my name.

"I should think I have the privilege of addressing you by your first name, considering our situation."

"What situation?"

His head tilted slightly, and he watched me with narrowed eyes. It was the way a predator sized up prey to determine if it was good enough for a meal, but I didn’t feel like prey at the moment. I just felt annoyed and awkward. "You do remember our agreement, do you not? You agreed to sign the contract. I think that makes you my fiancee."

"You think wrong."

"Then I guess there is no purpose to this meeting."

Wait... what? "You called me up here for nothing?"

"I had prepared a task for you. You had expressed distaste for accepting money without performing a task in return, so I had hoped to help curb your increasing debt by creating jobs you could complete. Combining our schedules would allow you to work and give us some time together. However if you are unable to even allow your fiancee to address you by your first name there is no way that you could perform the tasks I had prepared."

"And those tasks were..." I hated to ask, but I needed every stupid break he was willing to give me.

"Really, there's no need to trouble yourself over it. Staying in debt seems to be acceptable to you, and I certainly don't mind having a wizard owe me. I could use a few thousand extra dollars a month."

"Excuse me?" My debts weren’t that high. Well, not yet anyways.

"By the start of the new year, you will owe over a thousand per month." That was still a few months away. "By next year, if the same patterns present themselves, you will owe nearly two thousand a month. Within four, it will likely be around three thousand. And that's assuming you move your business into the house, and perhaps cut a few other costs."

I knew it was bad, but I had hope I could turn it around. It wouldn’t get that bad. It couldn’t. "What’s your point?" I asked.

"If you want to succeed in curbing your debt, you are going to have to make some changes. Allowing a few simple courtesies would allow me to present you with more opportunities."

"What sort of opportunities?"

"Do you really want to know?"

No, I didn't really want to know, but apparently I was going to ask anyways. Hell's bells, I just wanted this meeting over with so I could leave. No, I don't want to know, but I don't want to be stuck with him indefinitely either. "What's the job, Marcone?"
He smiled a bit, a quirky grin showing a bit of tooth and reminding me of the cheesy movies where the bad guy was always obvious. “Nothing too strenuous. I will be meeting with some colleagues of mine at the playhouse. You would be acting as my engaged. Your primary task would be to keep an eye out for any magical presence or interference. I don’t expect any trouble, but it’s not detrimental to be over-prepared. Other tasks may also present themselves as the meeting progresses. We will, of course, be sharing a private balcony, and will be able to enjoy the play while not conducting business. I realize you expressed a distaste for this form of entertainment, however in this case it is, unfortunately, necessary.”

Plays weren’t all bad, I just didn’t want to go see one in a private balcony with a man who was trying to date me. It had been an off-hand comment to tell him I wasn’t one for plays, more to avoid being alone with Marcone in the dark and look like a couple than to avoid plays altogether.

At least he wasn’t saying I was his engaged. Not exactly. And the task was real enough, even if it was mostly for show. “Why would I bother?”

“Because I would be paying you for the time you lose at your current job. It requires nothing other than your presence and obedience.”

“Obedience.”

“You are my engaged, and there is a certain amount of proper behavior expected of you, along with a certain level of decorum and dress among my associates. As you are not yet aware of what these expectations entail, I will require that you look to me for direction and perform appropriately.

“If you would prefer a safer route, however, you may act out another role. I have made use of escorts in the past, and though I have not used their services since beginning of our relationship we could alter your looks so that you are not immediately recognizable as my engaged. You could work under such cover. It wouldn’t pay as much, of course, but we could make arrangements.”

I looked away, walking over to the window. I didn't bother with the trinkets on his shelves, though some were vaguely recognizable at a glance. One looked like a vampire mask from a Native American tribe that probably belonged in a museum. It had some history to it if it was real, but Marcone probably didn't know the mask had a story.

He probably kept it because it looked scary, and maintained his image.

Outside, the dying grass was as pristine as it could be, and nothing remained of the pit Marcone had been hung over. I may have been looking out at the wrong part of the yard, but it didn't matter much. Marcone would have made certain it was taken care of, that each part of the yard looked the same. The damage caused by various werewolves ripping up the yard would be gone.

There wouldn’t be any evidence. Any reminders.

There wasn’t any evidence that Marcone had muddled with my work, either, but I was certain he’d been just as thorough when securing my services.

October had been a fairly busy month – admittedly, the werewolf trouble had been new, but there had been other work – while November and December would be slow. I'd already paid for this month with the money that should have paid for October, but it wasn't enough to cover the interest I’d created by not paying after - after I’d kissed him. I wasn't likely to get more steady business until February, not at the amounts I needed to make.

A wizard PI wasn’t needed when people were all bundled up from the cold and safe in their houses.
Even less would hire one who was associated with Marcone. Even less one who had been arrested and escaped. I’d been a suspect more than once; the police were the only ones who really knew the circumstances, but the rumor mill was not to be underestimated. They gave me less work, and everyday citizens questioned the lack.

In short, only the desperate and the uninformed were still coming to me. Holidays were for Santa and his elves, not wizards.

“How much?” I finally asked.

Marcone smiled. “For you to act as my fiancé? Depending on how well you conduct yourself... let’s say around fifty an hour, more if you act to my benefit, and less if you in any way damage the negotiations going on.”

My old standard fee then. Because he had asked me instead of the other way around? Or because I would be with him for the duration? I didn’t know, and tried not to care. “I don't have a suit.”

“That could prove to be a problem for you,” Marcone agreed.

I couldn't believe he was going to make me ask for it. “How much to rent one?” There was no way that I could afford to buy one.

Marcone raised an eyebrow. “Rent one? Don't be ridiculous. I'm having one made for you. I realize you can't afford the quality and custom tailoring required, so consider it a... gift.”

“A gift.” Yeah, right. I wondered what he would have done with the suit if I’d refused.

“A reward, if you will, for choosing to fill the duties of my engaged.”

“And if I choose the other option?”

“You get paid twenty five an hour. Flat rate, no suit required.”

So if I went as his ‘escort,’ I could screw up all I wanted and I’d still make money. Not as much, but I'd still make some. If I went as if I was planning to marry him, I could make more money. If there were no problems. Or complications.

Considering who he was meeting, though, I didn't think I wanted to go as anything less than his engaged. Any associates of Marcone’s would be criminals to one degree or another, and questionable company at best.

If these people were gangsters, they’d be looking for a hold to have over a mob boss. Said boss's lover would be a potential target. If I was only his entertainer I’d be considered defenseless. Easy. They may even try to sample the goods for themselves if they got a hold of me, and Marcone wouldn’t feel any need to come to my aid or protest such treatment - not that I would need his assistance. If I was his engaged I might gain a bit of respect, and at least look like I could defend myself. Marcone wouldn't be engaged to a sloppy, weak man.

And they’d be less likely to hire me for my other 'services.' I don't care what those people think, I didn’t prostitute myself. I didn’t sell my body. When I had intimate relations with others, they didn’t pay me for the privilege.

I closed my eyes and fought the shudder that threatened, and took a deep breath. I couldn’t even pretend to be an escort. “Tell me when and where I need to be. I'll go... as your engaged.”
“Good.” I could hear the smile in his voice, and clenched my fist against the little voice that told me I was disappointed in myself. “Your suit should be in this afternoon. Be ready by eleven-thirty tomorrow, and I'll take you out to lunch first.”

It sounded like a fairy-blasted date.

“Was there anything else you wanted?” I asked.

“No, that will be all.”

I left. I didn't run. It may have looked like I was running, but I didn't. I just have long legs. And a fast walk. Really.

Marcone’s idea of lunch was, apparently, a seafood restaurant near the playhouse. It made some sort of sense, since we weren't more than an hour's drive from the waterfront, but it was the sort of fancy restaurant I avoided. It was full of rich politicians and over-priced wine.

The food was good though, and there was plenty of it. Marcone never seemed to have any problems with my healthy appetite, which was a shame. It would have been a pleasant way to slowly empty his pockets of the money I was putting in them. As we were eating, he told me his 'rules' – which pretty much boiled down to “don't make me look like an idiot for choosing you.”

Then we'd gotten in the car and driven all of five minutes to the playhouse, where Marcone led me to his private balcony and sat me down beside him.

“We could have walked, you know,” I told him as we settled in the plush loveseat. Seeing as everyone else had chairs, it wasn’t hard to figure out Marcone had made some special arrangements. I sat as far away from him as I thought would be socially acceptable. “It would have been faster.”

“On a full stomach?”

“Helps digestion.”

“Particularly when there is a bullet hole in your stomach.”

“Oh please,” I snorted. “You’re not that paranoid. You probably have the street covered.”

I saw a grin out of the corner of my eye as he said: “It’s good to know you trust me so completely. My men are, in fact, watching this particular street for trouble.”

I paused. “Wait - you really are that worried? Who are we meeting?”

“Some associates,” he said, draping his arm over the back of the loveseat in a way that was so cliche it was almost sickening. “Associates I have begun to doubt, but you shouldn’t worry. I have men in the theatre, and I am armed. You need only watch for any magical interference. My men and I will handle the rest.”

And on that note the lights went dim and the play began.

I hadn’t paid much attention to the actors or even the plot, to be honest; I was more concerned about Marcone’s missing colleagues. They didn't show up until intermission, possibly because the ushers had a rule about not letting anyone in late. I had thought John would have made certain an exception would be made for anyone important enough to warrant my presence, but he could have just as
easily been showing his displeasure at their tardiness.

“Mr. Marshall, Mr. Banks,” Marcone greeted, nodding to the pair as they stood awkwardly to the side of the loveseat. He didn’t rise, and he ignored the outstretched hand he was probably meant to shake. “You are late.”

“Our apologies,” one of them answered — I wasn’t certain which was which - as he shifted on his feet and withdrew the offered hand. He was obviously nervous and sweaty, his shirt starting to look a little damp. Waiting over an hour for “Gentleman” Johnny Marcone could make anyone sweat, though. He’d probably been imagining all the ways this meeting had already gone wrong, and what Marcone was going to do to him about it. His excuse was flimsy at best: “There was a slight hold-up with a skirmish down near the university, and we were needed to help clear it up.”

Marcone visibly hesitated, a move I knew to be carefully calculated. “The University?”

The other man nodded, staying behind his partner as he spoke quietly: “Nothing to be overly concerned about. It was an argument over price, not a trade.”

“I will determine what I will be concerned over,” Marcone stated very calmly. “And I expect you to know my business practices well enough by now to respect them. Especially if you plan to continue business with me.” His hand on my shoulder tightened for a moment. I was facing the stage, only watching the pair sideways, but it was easy enough to determine they had little magical talent, if any. The nervous man had a blackberry that was working quite well, if the glow was any indication, so any skill they may have had was too small to cause damage. “Should we continue working together,” Marcone continued, “I expect you to increase your efforts in avoiding areas where a large number of children gather.”

The first man, rubbing his arm in abrupt, jerky strokes, spoke again: “Surely you don’t expect—”

“Rules are rules,” I said, cutting in and hoping to end this deal sooner rather than later. Whatever Mr. Nerves was dealing, I wanted no part of it. From the way “Gentleman” Johnny was acting, he’d already dismissed the deal as worthless, and I didn’t see any reason to play charades. “If you can’t play by the rules, perhaps you should leave.”

Marcone leaned in and kissed my temple. “Be patient,” he said. Despite the seeming reprimand, his grip had loosened, allowing me a little more space to myself. “Though I do agree. If they can’t be trusted to follow the rules, they aren’t the sort we should be working with.” He turned his attention back to the pair still standing beside the loveseat. “You are, of course, welcome to take your business elsewhere if you are unable to comply.”

Mr. Nervous-and-Showing-It shook his head. “I apologize for our missteps,” he said. “Today was simply a miscalculation.”

“I hope this isn’t a reflection of how well you do business,” Marcone commented, his attention focused on the floor below and the people milling about. I wondered how many worked for him. “Though I do agree. If they can’t be trusted to follow the rules, they aren’t the sort we should be working with.” He turned his attention back to the pair still standing beside the loveseat. “You are, of course, welcome to take your business elsewhere if you are unable to comply.”

Mr. Nervous-and-Showing-It shook his head. “I apologize for our missteps,” he said. “Today was simply a miscalculation.”

“I hope this isn’t a reflection of how well you do business,” Marcone commented, his attention focused on the floor below and the people milling about. I wondered how many worked for him. “I would hate to think such mistakes are common with your employees. I will be blunt, if we had not been staying to see the production, we would not be here.”

The man was sweating visibly and wringing his hands in obvious uncertainty. His partner looked as cool as an ice cube in the snow.

“We appreciate the fact that you are still here,” Mr. Nerves managed to say without stuttering. “I hope you are still willing to listen to our proposal despite our... troubles?”
“I don’t know – what do you think, Harry?”

I glanced at Marcone, but didn't let my gaze linger. “I think the intermission will be over soon, and they're blocking the view.”

Marcone chuckled, and reached across himself to pat my leg without removing his nearer arm from around my shoulders. It twisted him sideways on the couch so he faced our guests, who were only blocking a view of a bland wall, and he’d surely have a cramp in his side if he held the position too long. “Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll be out of the way before the production begins again.”

I shrugged and leaned back in the seat. It meant I was leaning further into Marcone’s hold, but I couldn’t avoid that without being obvious. I really didn’t know what he was expecting of me, or why I was even necessary. I couldn’t ask him that, though, and there didn’t seem to be an answer anyways. “Why are they here again?” I asked instead, deciding if I couldn’t get rid of them I could at least give them a hard time.

My question, however, seemed to be the nervous man's cue to discuss what they had to offer, how good their equipment was, and their excellent track record. It didn't take a genius to figure out they were offering underground weapons, and I almost laughed at some of their selection. All the newest and the best - and completely useless for someone like me.

Some of my amusement must have shown, because Mr. Nerves trailed off and gave me a funny look. “Have I missed something?” he asked.

I bit back a smart remark. “No. Go on. Your time to convince John is limited.” I put a little extra emphasis on the name, mostly because it was hard for me to say his name without making it sound sarcastic.

“Do you have an opinion?” Marcone asked, angling my upper body towards him. I resisted as he tried to pull me into his lap, and he couldn’t press without being obvious. We were pretty much chest to chest, and about five inches from cuddling. It was awkward and uncomfortable.

I forced myself to smile and spoke directly to John. “Sorry, but in my experience equipment like that tends to fail under pressure.” Marcone’s hand on my leg tightened in warning, not quite bruising my thigh but enough to be noticeable and slightly painful. I didn't want a cut in pay, and I didn’t think it was the talk he was displeased with. I stopped resisting and let him pull me closer, all but laying on his chest.

I tried not to think about what Marcone was going to do with all the guns he was buying.

“No offense, but I'd rather have a gun that will fire under pressure. Or a lot of guns good on the first shot.”

“I assure you, these are more than adequate for - “

“Prove it,” Marcone challenged.

“Excuse me?” the nervous man stuttered, startled out of his indignant anger.

“You have at least one with you, I imagine? I wouldn't recommend trying to use it on us, since my own men are carefully watching this balcony and will fire at any indication of trouble. Once the play is over, you will show us some of your goods and prove to us that they are capable of withstanding heavy use.”

“But that - “
“If you're unwilling to stand behind your shipment, then I don't think there's any reason for us to do business with each other. Now, if you don't mind, the play is starting.” Marcone pulled me even closer. It was still uncomfortable, and not because of whose arms I was in. It would have been easier to go ahead and lay in his lap, but I brushed against his holster and realized such a move would limit how easily he could reach his weapons. And then, with unnerving clarity, I realized our current position made it very easy for him to tip me to the floor and shield me. I was already off-balance enough; it wouldn't take much. “You have until the final curtain to decide, and I suggest you do so elsewhere. We are here to enjoy finer entertainment.”

I shifted a bit to face the stage again. Uncomfortable with the way my shoulder seemed to get in the way, I finally just shoved it under his armpit and laid my head on his collarbone. Marcone didn’t seem to like this position as much, and I had to sprawl out over most of the seat to make it work with my height, but John didn’t protest. Better yet, I felt less like some protected ornament.

His hand slipped from my shoulder to my waist and stayed there. I would have asked him to move it, but Nerves-Are-Us and the Silent-Wonder were still behind us on the balcony, standing awkwardly and unwilling to interrupt the scene that was unfolding on the stage. I knew Hendricks was somewhere behind us as well, but I gathered up some power into my shield bracelet just in case. I'd felt a little silly wearing it with a suit – it doesn't exactly lend itself to high society – and Marcone had questioned me about it until I'd finally told him it was for protection.

He'd asked that I make another one as a backup he could keep on him. He'd offered to pay for it. I was still considering. It would look like we really were married if I did – engagement bracelets instead of rings – but I didn't know if I could turn down the money. Winter months were slow.

I was still considering a shield bracelet for Marcone when the play ended and the two dealers were leading us to their workshop. I had the feeling Cold and Silent was the real owner of the operation, and that Mr. Nerves was simply a front so that people didn't take a swipe at him. Marcone, I think, already knew this as well.

The little touches didn’t stop during the trip, and I didn't protest with the other two in the car with us. I was acting as his engaged, not a reluctant bride or some protesting escort.

I did manage not to clock him when he helped me out of the car then kissed me on the cheek and apologized for the delay in our plans. He’d been freer with those little chaste kisses lately, almost always ducking them in when I was too angry or simply not in a position to protest.

Mr. Nerves saw that chaste kiss and fumbled his blackberry, dropping it on the concrete. I got the feeling that no one would be trusting the nervous man with a gun any time soon. It wasn’t even the first kiss John had stolen in front of him, and now he started fumbling?

Marcone's men were tailing us – I could see three, excluding Hendricks – and stayed with us when we approached the warehouse. Strangely enough, it made me feel safer to have four men at my back, even if they were Marcone's. It reminded me that he was taking this seriously, no matter how strange it was.

The man who was testing the guns was about average height with short black hair that was carelessly spiked, like he had just fallen out of bed. He was dressed head to toe in black. He actually reminded me a little of subconscious-Harry, except his eyes were a brown-green mix right above an upturned nose and a crooked grin. On one side of his neck was a nasty-looking scar that was mostly covered by his shirt, and over a chair against the wall was the turtleneck I assumed he wore to hide it.

“Hey, Rex, would you mind demonstrating the new military-issue for us?” the nervous man asked –
actually asked, which surprised me.

The man shrugged, and grabbed one of the newer guns off of one of the crates. I didn't know what it was, except that it was automatic and shiny-new.

I didn't have to use any magic for it to jam within ten shots. Rex looked at it funny, slipped the clip in and out, and fired it a few more times. It jammed again.

I wasn't deliberately trying to change Marcone's deal, but simply by being there I was proving a point that would get him more weapons for less, and maybe that had been the point all along. Maybe that was why he had been so insistent I accompany him either as his engaged or his entertainment. Marcone knew how to get a good deal, and he was using me.

I was participating in the kind of slimy, bloody, underhanded deals I'd tried my best to avoid ever since Justin. Ever since Elaine. Ever since -

I thought I was going to be sick.

Rex tossed the gun and picked up another to repeat the process. I was nervous enough that it didn't get through five shots. I willed my hands not to shake, but John, at least, would have felt the tremors I hadn't managed to quell.

“I think our point is made,” I cut in, eager to leave. “Is it really necessary to continue?”

“I don't understand,” the man said, still wringing his hands. “These are military-issue. They don't jam for soldiers out in the field.”

“It's military-issue,” I said. “Anything that doesn't go to their own men is doomed for bad places.” That, at least, was true.

“Considering the quality of your supplies, I'm not certain I want to do business with you, Mr. Banks,” Marcone said – and I finally knew which was which, not that it mattered much.

“Please – I'm willing to double the offer,” he said.

Marcone raised an eyebrow, and then I knew. He wasn't looking for a good deal. He was looking for a rat.

“Mr. Banks, I do believe that we have reached an understanding.”

“We have?”

“Indeed,” Rex cut in. “Mr. Marshall?”

The larger, quieter man pulled out a gun and shot his partner in the back.

“What the hell?” I demanded, backing away and covering my nose and mouth even as I brought up a small shield. There was the smell to consider, so the action didn’t seem totally misplaced. Let no one ever tell you that a dead body – even a freshly dead body – doesn't smell. There's that moment of fear when the person in question knows what's coming, and their lower body lets loose all that it's holding. And then there's the blood, and the gunpowder.

Marcone tightened his arm around me, already on the wrong side of the shield for it to save me from him. “Forgive me for not warning you, Harry. We thought it best that as few people as possible knew.”
“So who was he really?” I asked. “And can we get out of here?”

He guided me out with Rex, Mr. Silent, and our four own bodyguards following, and I let the shield drop before someone ran into it and tripped over air. “He was an employee in my company,” Rex stated. “I knew one of my men was getting hot weapons from an unapproved supplier and shipping them through quickly, using our name in order to siphon off profit for himself – and apparently with defective goods as well. I asked Mister Marcone to help me weed the rat out, and placed myself in the company as a weapons tester.” He didn't have to mention that he was an assassin. It was there in the way he moved. Either that or he was a dancer, but I don't think he really fit in well with the ballet types. Not with that scar. And there was the fact that he was able to become just another cog in his own company. That took some acting skills. “I apologize if you were offended.”

“I was offended, thank you very much. You just killed a man.”

“My fiancée still holds a few ideals that some of us have given up on,” Marcone interrupted, squeezing my side slightly and frowning at me. I made a show of pouting and ducking my head. “Including a respect for life – even for the lowlifes that don't deserve it.”

Rex nodded. “A rare thing to find in such places as we traverse,” he said. “I now find myself in need of making up for such a display in your fiancée's presence, then. Shall I treat you to dinner?”

“No after that,” I muttered. “You don’t even know why he was taking those shipments.”

Rex raised an eyebrow at me - and it was even more annoying then when Marcone did it. “For profit,” he said. “Why else?”

I shook my head, dismissing the idea, and felt Johnny-boy’s hand squeeze tight enough to bruise. “He was a nervous wreck - men like that don’t come up with plans like this and execute them. Not on their own. They’re too afraid of getting caught, and they give in too easily to outside pressure.”

“And here I thought you were just being squeamish.”


Rex’s crooked grin was back, along with a slight twist of his head that made the smile almost normal, if you ignored the fact that his head was cocked to the side. “You are a treat,” he said. “There’s nothing to worry over, though; his friends have already met the same fate, or will soon enough. We only needed confirmation of his involvement.”

He was ruthless. He was also much worse than the man standing beside me, though it ached a bit that neither of us had made a move to stop what was coming.

“Perhaps next week we might have a pleasant meal as an apology for testing your nerves, and not supplying you with the necessary details? I'm interested to know more about you, Mister Dresden. I'm afraid your engaged has been mysteriously quiet about the things that you actually do.”

“Don't you have a phone book?”

“I do, but I find it less than reliable these days. After all, what respectable company would actually advertise that there was a wizard in the city? Not only a wizard, but one who refused to work birthday parties. Such nonsense.”

It didn’t surprise me. Most people didn't believe. It wasn't my job to educate them. “You've never had to deal with kids on a sugar high,” I said instead. “They're worse than fairies to keep up with.”
He laughed. “I like a man with a sense of humor,” he commented, clapping me on the shoulder. “You must accept my invitation to dinner – both of you. And give me some hint as to the wedding date; I want to make certain I have time to find you an adequate gift.”

“Perhaps sometime next week,” Marcone said.

I frowned, and dodged out of the building. Unfortunately, it only shifted Marcone's grip from my waist to my hand, and there were still the bodyguards to deal with.

“Call me, and we'll make arrangements,” Rex answered, leaning against the doorframe. “And keep an eye on your partner, there – if I like him enough I may just try to steal him away for a little while,” he added with a wink. “My wife and I could use a little excitement.”

“Careful, Rex,” Marcone growled. “I don't think even you could afford this one.”

Rex simply smiled again and went back into the building. It was actually somewhat creepy, and I didn't like the man at all.

Marcone slid into the car with me and did his own version of the cat-that-got-the-canary smile. It wasn't much better, in my opinion.

“You did a good job today, Harry,” he said. “You'll be reimbursed for the time I stole from your working hours. Six hundred should cover half a day - would you like it in cash? Or shall I simply make it part of this month’s payment?”

I turned my head away, for some reason upset that he'd brought up what this was really about: money. Somehow I'd thought that he'd keep up the act all the way back to his sprawling house. That maybe he wouldn't bring it up at all and the credit would just appear on the ledger in a few days.

It disturbed me, that he was a villain who was getting rid of villains, but I'd known he was a criminal before I ever got mixed up with him. He may have wrapped this trap around me against my will, but I'd known exactly what this trap was when I'd chosen it. And now I was faced with the chilling thought that I actually preferred Marcone over men like Rex.

I hadn't counted on participating in - or witnessing - Marcone's business endeavors.

“On the account,” I answered, looking out the window.

“Very well. Shall we set our next dinner with Rex for, say, Thursday evening? He prefers the private grillhouses, but a change might be nice for him. Maybe we could eat in.”

“Whatever,” I answered, not really caring. I hadn't exactly told them I'd be going with them, and Marcone could always play it off and say I was sick or something. Or that I didn't want to hang around with murderers, which was actually something closer to the truth.

Stars and stones, what was I going to tell Murphy? I couldn't tell her that I'd stood there and watched a guy get killed and done nothing about it. I couldn't report the killer, either, because I could be labeled an accomplice. Murphy might be a cop, but she was also a girl. She'd know something was wrong if I talked to her. Avoiding her was out of the picture as well, one because she was my only steady source of outside income at the moment and two because it would only clue her in faster.

I slid down in the seat, letting the hum of the car and the buzz of the radio that could never find a station while I was there drone on in the background. Marcone had gone quiet, watching me, but I didn't bother commenting on it. Instead I let my head fall back against the cool leather and wondered what exactly it was I was doing with my life, because I sure as magic didn't know anymore.
Chapter End Notes

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Please note that this chapter was originally posted as Chapter EIGHT, so if you're comparing to the original there is a slight mis-match.
“What's going on, Harry?” Murphy asked from the other side of the table, leaning back in the booth and watching me. I had known she would notice, and maybe that’s why I hadn’t tried very hard to hide how lost I was.

“I don’t know.” I told her, and I really didn’t. I could give her the facts, sure, but they couldn’t explain the rocks that had settled in my belly the night I’d met Rex. They couldn’t explain how protective Marcone had really been, or how disappointed I’d been when the illusion shattered.

The facts couldn’t tell her that, even though I hated what had happened and had been so very uncomfortable during all of it - despite all that, for a few moments I had felt like something more than an investment.

I picked at my pasta. I hadn’t had much of an appetite lately, but today I was eating anyways. Or trying to, at least. “Would you... mind if I came over for Christmas?”

“Harry!”

I focused intently on my fork so I didn’t have to see her face. “You can go out and do your family stuff, still, or whatever you’d like. You don’t have to stay home or anything, just let me spend the night when you get back. I think Marcone's throwing some sort of Christmas party, and I'd rather not be there if he does.”

“You don't have to be there at all.”

“It’s easier if I stay.”

“Since when have you cared if something was easy?” she asked, her words twisting together in a sort of snarling gripe.

I pushed my plate away with a heavy breath. “I'd rather not think about it. Not now.” Not when I was a witness to a murder, couldn’t tell her everything, and could get her into trouble if I wasn’t careful. I could be arrested. Again. And she didn't know.

She was looking at me, I could feel it. Not in any magical way; I just knew Murph, and I knew she was. “Again: what's going on?” she asked.

“I owe him, Murph. A lot. And... I can't pay it off,” I told her, admitting to that much. It was the root of my problems, and I had to get some of this mess out in the open even though she couldn’t really help.

“Marcone basically gave me a large loan, but I never told you how much - and I’m not going to,” I told her firmly before she could ask. “I don’t make enough to pay it off, and I’m pretty sure I never did.” That hurt to admit. I’d been living outside my means and hadn’t given it a second thought until Johnny-boy came along. I’d never considered how much I spent just to live and work.

If Ebenezer, the mentor and guardian I’d had after Justin, had seen how I’d been living, he would have whacked me in the head and made me muck stalls for a month. At least.
“Do you need me to help?” she asked, as if she could read my mind. Murphy didn’t need that ability; she knew me well enough to guess. “I can’t give you much, but I can spare a few hundred.”

I shook my head. “That wouldn’t even make a dent right now.” I let that sink in for a few moments before mentioning: “He offered a solution.”

“And that is?”

I knew she’d ask. That’s why I told her. It didn’t make the next part any easier. “Marriage.”

Murphy frowned, as if thinking. “How would that help? I know you wouldn’t, because you won’t take advantage of a girl like that, but really, unless she’s rich…”

“I wouldn’t be marrying a girl,” I told her, quietly, keeping an eye out for any eavesdroppers. Marcone had given me a bodyguard again – it happened off and on, and I had yet to figure out any sort of pattern to it – but he was sitting in the corner quietly sipping a cup of coffee and pretending to read the newspaper. “I’d be marrying… him.”

She swallowed her coffee before she spoke, her body tense. “I thought that was just a rumor. Some guys having fun at the very most. How do you get into these things?”

I shrugged, slightly surprised that she’d heard about it. I shouldn’t have been, but I’d hoped that those rumors had only been on Marcone’s side of the fence and everyone else still thought I was just a passing fancy. “Just lucky, I guess,” I finally answered.

“Bad luck.”

“Better than no luck, right?”

“That’s debatable.”

I laughed. Not because it was funny, but because if I didn’t I might do something stupid. Like scream. A very manly scream. No tears. Big boys didn’t cry in front of ladies.

“So what are you going to tell him?” she asked. “You’ll refuse, of course.”

“I sort of already agreed.”

“What?” she almost yelped.

The bodyguard following me - a nameless shadow - looked over at us quickly, carefully observing, and I spoke quickly and softly, hoping she wouldn’t make another outburst. “He was better than the alternative at the time, and I can’t exactly take it back now.”

“Yes you can,” she said, shoulders set firmly. “You can say you changed your mind.”

I shook my head. “How would you feel if the man who just accepted your proposal turned around and said ‘nevermind, my answer’s changed’?” I asked.

“This is Marcone-”

“Who is still human, and still dangerous. I’ll do the same as before,” I said. “My plan hasn’t changed. I’ll do my absolute best to pay him off as quickly as possible, interact with him as little as possible, and wait until I’m not the new shiny investment anymore. Then I move out. Get some distance. When he doesn’t care as much, I tell him I don’t want to marry him. Stars, by then he may have changed his mind anyways.”
“We can only hope,” she muttered. “Are you going to eat?” she asked, huffing slightly.

“I’m not that hungry,” I told her, but I pulled the plate closer and nibbled away. Some of my appetite had returned.

“You’re losing weight,” she commented. “I thought Marcone fed you.”

I shrugged. He tried, but I resisted. It helped that he was busy lately, and hadn’t had time to arrange the scheduled dinners he had before. I tried to make certain I had plans on the nights he was free.

“Look, it’s three weeks before Christmas. I don’t trust you around machines, but there’s usually some harmless work to do – stuffing envelopes, hanging decorations, things like that. Low pay, but it’s something. And I’ll try to get more consulting hours approved, but it’s never been easy.”

“Did IA get off your back about me?”

“For now. They’re more embarrassed about the screw-up they made in October than worried about what’s going on in SI. The public face of the PD is more important than one little officer.” And that right there said a lot about how bad that full moon had been. Having hexenwolves on the case had really screwed with the heads of IA – mostly because they couldn’t accept that the men involved had been a form of werewolf. There was also the scandal of having thrown a consultant in jail while their own people were out planning to kill innocent - and not-so-innocent - citizens.

I don’t know how Murph wrote it off, but it was likely something normal and safe. Like schizophrenia.

“I’m a little too desperate to turn down work,” I said.

She waited until the waitress had refilled Murphy’s water before speaking again, giving me a few moments to eat. “I thought you had, you know, friends like you,” she said. “Can’t they help?”

Help? From the paranet? Yeah right, they could barely get by themselves - and the last thing they needed was to draw Marcone’s attention. The Council members could withstand Marcone’s pestering, but getting rid of his questions would take some fancy footwork and they’d hate me even more. Most of the Council wizards already had enough money to live and magic for what they couldn’t afford. “The small-time practitioners are just as bad off as I am. And I don’t have friends on the Council. They don’t trust me.”

“I wonder why,” she commented dryly.

I winced. “Sorry.”

“How can you expect people to trust you when you won’t trust them?” she demanded. This was still a sore spot between us, ever since the Sells case, and sometimes Murphy would still get mad over it. “Damn it, Harry, you trust Marcone more than you trust anyone, and he’s the most likely to stick a knife in your back!”

There was nothing I could say to that. My ‘trust’ in Marcone was that I trusted him to put that knife in my back when I stopped being useful, but that would hardly be a comfort to her. To say I trusted Marcone to keep me until I was too expensive to bother with would be worse.

I trusted Karrin too, but she was a lady. She acted tough, but there were things I couldn’t tell her - things I didn’t know how she’d take. Women were unpredictable.

The silence had gone on too long; I couldn’t answer now without sounding trite. Murphy had calmed
down again, anyway. “There are other wizards out there,” she said, her voice still a bit tight. “They must get by somehow.”

“By pretending to be normal,” I answered, thinking of all the wizards she probably saw each day without realizing it. People without much power, and out of the sight of the council. “One wizard I know owns a farm. I can't ask him for money. Most of us are the same. I get a lot of flack for being as open as I am about magic, among other things. I’m not exactly favored, here.” Even the small-timers had to follow the rules, and I had a reputation for not doing so. Hell’s bells, I had just gotten out of the direct sight of the wardens not too long ago. Asking for money from people who, for the most part, wanted me dead didn't seem like a good idea.

She snorted. “I wouldn't call you 'open.' You never tell me anything.”

“I wish I could. You know I do.”

It was Murphy's turn to shrug like it didn't matter.

“I... I do have something I can tell you.” I had to. I couldn't leave without telling her. It was weighing me down enough as it was, and if she ever found out... “I have no idea what's really going on, and I have no idea what Marcone really wants from me,” and boy, did that burn, “but I'm... caught up with him, somehow.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re marrying him.”

Stars, I hoped not. I would if I had to, though. “And I’ll make something good come of it.”

“Harry.” My name came out slow, almost a warning, almost a plea.

“I want you to search for someone named Rex. I know he's out there, and I know he's done stuff. I can't tell you what, because if I did I might catch trouble. Big trouble. In fact, don't even search for Rex by name. Look for a weapons dealer with black hair and a crooked grin. He'll give you the creeps just looking at him. When they get him, make sure he's questioned thoroughly. About where he gets his stuff and his employees - and where his employees get their goods.”

“And what if he finds out you were the one who told me?” Murphy asked, looking concerned now. “Just what you've given me could trail back to you, if we're not already searching for him. Even if we are looking for him, if I suddenly stick my nose over in the gang units...”

“I'll come up with some excuse for Rex. I'll need one for Marcone, anyways. Maybe tell him it was payback for surprising me with... just surprising me. He'll know. If nothing else, it would amuse him.” And hopefully not end with a bullet in my back. Hell, I'd give her dirt on Marcone if I had any, but the word of a self-proclaimed wizard wasn't very good in court, and I didn't have proof of anything. There never would be proof, either. Marcone was too good for that.

Much too good.

“He doesn't sound like someone you want to amuse. Look what happened with Marcone,” she reminded me. “You amused him way too much.”

Like I needed reminding. I lived with the guy, waiting for the day he'd get tired of waiting and just ask for what he wanted. He was using me, I knew he was, despite the fact that, so far, I had really only felt used once – after meeting Rex, when Marcone had reminded me of the deal. Somehow I'd gotten used to the numbers appearing in the ledger when I wasn't looking; it seemed wrong, somehow, to mention them out loud. And after the way he’d acted and the banter with Rex - I’d have felt better if he’d paid for my silence, not my presence.
Bob was no help, either. According to him I should have been offering myself up since day one.

“T won't have to worry about trouble if he's in jail,” I told her, going back to the subject. “Rex is probably short for T-Rex, though he acts meaner. Take from that what you will.” Hopefully she'd get that he had some mean teeth, and wasn't afraid to kill.

She nodded. “I know you're in a tough place; just remember that you don't have to stay there.”

“I really don't want to talk about it.” She kept saying I didn’t need to stay, but she didn’t know John. Didn’t know what he could do. I didn’t know either, but I’d bet my socks he could get her fired. No, I needed to stay.

Marcone arrived just as Murphy and I were getting comfortable with each other (and the silence) again. He looked less than pleased as he took in the cozy restaurant and Murphy on the other side of the table. He didn’t look at her as he slid in next to me, a hand slipping around my waist before I could slide away and put some distance between us. He greeted me with a small peck of a kiss on my cheek. “Good evening, Harry. I am sorry to interrupt your meal, but we need to leave soon.” He didn’t give a reason.

I knew why he was there, of course. He was there to drag me back to my prison-in-all-but-name, he wouldn’t have been there otherwise. It was unusual for him to come himself, but I couldn’t let Murphy get suspicious. I told her he’d been trying to spend more time with me - for the marriage. Since my car needed an oil change, Marcone was going to take me to the house.

She didn’t ask too many questions. She wouldn’t look at me as he pulled me out of the booth, either, and deliberately moved away from us when he placed another chaste kiss on my cheek, showing his affection rather heavily.

“I should head out,” she said, laying cash on the table and starting towards the door. “Good luck,” she called over her shoulder.

“Thanks,” I answered. “You too.”

Marcone had the grace to wait until we were in his car to ask his questions. “What was that about?”

I shrugged. “You tell me.” I couldn’t tell him I was trying to get Rex in jail. I didn't know what he knew, but he couldn't have known that I'd mentioned Rex already. He probably didn’t like me meeting with Murphy, a known cop, without actually being on a case.

“I don't want you leaving the house.”

“Excuse me?” This was new. Did he think he could actually do something like that? “Stars, are you drugged?”

“No in the slightest.”

“Then what gave you the idea that I would agree to-” I stumbled a bit to find the right word “-to house arrest?”

“There is a situation I need to take care of. I don't want you involved.”

“The last time you said that I ended up solving a case – both times you've said that, actually. So forgive me if I think I should be involved.” Nevermind the fact that I wasn't on a case yet. Maybe I needed to find one.
“Both times you were also nearly killed,” Marcone cut in. “I will be placing you under guard, and I
do have a panic room that would work well for protecting those such as yourself, if necessary. Will it
be necessary?”

“No,” I grumbled, having no intention of staying in the house. It wasn’t like any mundane lock could
keep me in, but there was no telling how long it would take or how much power I’d need to break
out of his little safe room.

Something was seriously wrong here, but I didn't know enough about Marcone to be able to say
what, exactly, that was. Judging from the way the wolves had reacted when he wanted to see me and
they wanted to kill me, Gentleman Johnny was pretty big in the crime world, and maybe it was just
me being paranoid but I didn't think Rex was a small fry either. Of course, the vampires could be up
to something as well, and I'd gotten one call about ghosts that I was considering following up on just
for the cash – I doubted there really were any.

But if it were something like that, I hoped Marcone had the brains to ask the wizard he was holding.

Marcone's gaze hadn't lifted from me, and I was getting uncomfortable with it. I’m a horrible liar, and
I hadn’t exactly told the truth. At least with Marcone I didn't think I'd start spilling out dangerous
secrets. “You need to stop going around telling people I'm going to marry you,” I finally said,
changing the subject. “Word gets around.”

“I see nothing wrong with that.”

“It looks bad, okay? How am I supposed to get clients when they’re afraid of what you and your
men are going to do to them?”

“So long as they don’t place you in any danger, and so long as they are not a threat to you
themselves, they have nothing to fear,” he said. “I’m not going to apologize for protecting you.”

“I don’t need your protection.”

“That’s debatable,” he answered. “You certainly need my money, and I don’t think my reputation
has harmed you in any way. It has even gained you a bit of respect among my peers. The nature of
my attention keeps you safe. What do you think is going to happen to you if I take all of that away?
Or if I don’t take it all away, but just the protection of being mine? How many do you think would
try to kill you just to get to me?”

“You’re not that big a fish,” I snapped.

“Outside Chicago? No. But are you going to move just to avoid me? Could you afford to? You’d
have to go pretty far to get out of the city.”

“Look, I just want the rumors to stop. We're not really engaged, anyways.”

“Oh – but you did show an intent to marry,” Marcone said, leaning back and looking smug. He lifted
his arm over the backseat and brushed my shoulder. “Despite the fact that the contract couldn't be
signed, I think a statement of that kind does imply a certain status.” I could feel his fingers in my hair.

“I was under pressure, okay,” I said, already knowing my excuse because, let's face it, I'd been
waiting for this conversation for a while.

“Are you saying that you never intend to complete the contract?”

I stopped. I had expected that argument and knew I couldn't say it. I couldn't close that door. I
wanted to – stars and stones, I wanted to – but it would be like putting a knife in my own gut. It would cut off any chance of getting out of debt fast, especially considering the number of clients I had lately. I no longer had to pay rent for the shop – last month had been the end of the flat with “Harry Dresden: Wizard” printed on the door – but it wasn't going to make a lot of difference at this rate. I’d thought it over and worked all the angles - and this engagement, however long it lasted, was my best shot.

Maybe he would lose interest. Eventually. Hopefully before any sort of wedding ceremony.

Hopefully before my faery Godmother found out.

“If there’s no chance at all of the contract being signed and completed, then I'd like to know now. Your debts have become too... what would you say? High risk? While I don’t mind having others owe me, I'd rather not hold on to a man who could never pay back what he owed. It doesn't look good, you understand,” Marcone said, his fingers brushing my scalp and sending a shiver down my spine. I didn’t doubt that he’d be able to snap my neck if he wanted to, or crush my windpipe. “It’s bad for business.”

He was bad for business. It was as simple as that. And he knew I wasn't in a position to pay him.

“Look, I'll pay you, okay? It's just going to take a while.”

“Really?”

“What do you want?” It couldn't be much worse than where I was now, right? The guy was going to put me in jail.

Marcone seemed to consider it for a moment. “Dinner with Rex is delayed, since we both have other matters to attend to. I'll be traveling to Vegas briefly, to settle some outside business. You're welcome to join me, if you like, but you won't be leaving the hotel room without a bodyguard. Just being my fiance doesn’t protect you the same way outside the city.”

“Will Rex be there?”

“No. Rex doesn’t need the supplies offered, and he’s not that big of a dealer for the discussions.”

I didn't think Marcone was, either, but I guess he had to keep Chicago's underworld supplied somehow. Keeping a bodyguard on me all the time was a bit much, though. “Would I get paid?”

“Depends on what services you offer.”

I paled, I know I did, but my mind went straight to the gutter. Sure, that was on the table, but he hadn't demanded it yet and I didn't think he would. As much as he tried to appear otherwise, I doubted Marcone actually swung that way; he'd never shown any interest in men before and he seemed to be getting more grief for this than was good for him. So I wasn't sure why he was doing it. Experimenting could be a part of it, or maybe he was trying to show the world something. It didn't really have much to do with me, I don't think. I was just someone safe. Maybe my soul had been one that he saw could be bought (not likely), or manipulated (probably), or too thick to understand (most likely).

Or maybe he'd seen subconscious Harry, in which case – I was so totally screwed. Literally. Subconscious Harry had a hell of a lot fewer reservations than I had, and maybe actually wanted him. Maybe he liked the extra protection from vanilla mortal laws.

I wondered why Marcone didn't just go out and buy the services from a pro. It would have been
easier. And just as 'safe,' if this could be called that. Then again, maybe he simply liked a challenge, and was trying to prove that there wasn't anything he couldn't get.

I took a deep breath and remember to focus. Worrying about Marcone’s motives wouldn’t help right now. “If I'm to be followed around all the time, what am I supposed to be offering?”

His gaze was focused somewhere below my chin, his fingers still brushing the short hair at the back of my neck and toying with the chain of my pentacle. It irked me a bit. He was supposed to have the answers, and he had to think about it? Was I that useless to him? Then what in all the Nevernever was the point?

“I think,” he said, “I'll leave that up to you.” We were pulling into the drive of his mansion.

This was not going to be totally useless. I couldn't let this be totally useless. I also didn't know if going to Vegas would be the answer, since payment would be sketchy at best, and I didn't know if Marcone planned on paying my way or if I'd have to cover that as well. I could end up not earning enough to cover it, or not making enough to make it worth the trip. I'd have to come up with an excuse for Murphy as well – especially if I wasn't taking her up on her offer right away.

There were already things that I couldn't tell her. Too much I couldn't tell her. I didn't like it; I hated keeping secrets from her, because that had put a hard strain on our relationship before and we'd never completely recovered. It couldn't be helped, then or now.

“If I kissed you and pretended to like it, would you pay me?” My mouth had spoken without my brain’s express permission, but I wouldn't take it back. I could kiss him. I'd already done that once. It wouldn't be life-or-death, but I couldn't wait for it to get that far.

“I thought you weren't that type of boy,” Marcone answered, teasing.

“I'm not.” It was a lie. I didn't want to be, but I was becoming one.

“Really?”

“I meant now,” I snapped. “If you don't want to, fine, I'll get out. Hell's bells, but you're annoying.”

“Get over here, then,” he said, his arm sliding down to pull me over by the back of my neck. Again I thought of how easily his large hands could strangle me, and had to push the image aside. I wished I had the protection of more clothes, some sort of barrier between me and him and what I was about to do. I let him pull me closer and shifted so I was less uncomfortable on the bench seat. There was no pretending this time; I was being paid for a kiss. And I’d been the one to ask for it.

I took a deep breath, leaned forward, and pressed my lips to his. It wasn't quite the same as before; he was the one who thrust his tongue into my mouth, for one, instead of me pulling him in, and his hands were actually on me, holding my waist, instead of bracing himself as he leaned down. I would have gasped if I actually had more room for air.

I put my own hands on his shoulders and twisted a bit to get a better angle. Trying to remember how kissing went when you liked your partner, I made some noises of enjoyment and agreement, and moved my mouth a bit as he tried to reach my tonsils. I pulled back when I needed air, and felt his hand come up to the back of my neck again, tangling in my hair. He rained kisses down my cheek and jaw until he got to my throat.

If I didn't know better, I would have thought he thought he was a vampire. As it was, I knew he was going to leave a mark. A very visible mark. Murphy was going to have a fit if she saw it. That was probably the point.
His other hand started rubbing my hip, his thumb hooking just under my shirt to catch some skin, and the moan I let loose may not have been entirely fake. Let's face it, I was a guy who hadn't had any real action in a long time, and hadn't had any real offers since Susan – which I couldn't take her up on, unfortunately. I may have been a little bit desperate. Just a little. It'd been a while, and what Marcone was doing actually felt good.

I tucked my chin down and brought our lips back together. It was weird, and his face wasn't entirely free of stubble, but it wasn't repulsive either. Let's just say that the nether regions were looking forward to a little action after having been so lonely for so long, and they didn't care much that the partner had equipment to match.

I cared when Marcone lightly pushed me away and back into my seat. For a moment I was confused, and almost leaned back in for more. My body missed his warmth, and I could feel my pulse throbbing inside me as certain parts of me ached.

“A wonderful performance,” he said, pulling me back into what I was really doing. He didn’t appear to need any time to collect himself, either, the bastard. “Worth the cost, at any rate.”

That frustrated me, too. I hate to think that I'm turning into some emotional twit, but it was driving me nuts every time Marcone brought up the hell-dammed money – I hated mixing business with life, and the fact that I was panting a bit, flushed, and not entirely uninterested in some action just made it worse. I didn't want to do these sort of things with Marcone, but I was a guy. Any action would have been nice.

I could have offered more. I could have let him keep going. But I didn't want to have to ask for it; asking for the first part had been hard enough. The weight in my stomach returned, growing with each reminder that I’d just made out with someone purely for money.

I wiped my mouth and tried not to feel dirty as my heart rate slowed, not allowing myself to feel the nausea or the threat of tears. I wasn’t a blushing virgin; I was a grown man. I could handle a little kiss.

Marcone slipped a twenty over to me on the seat. “Simply for cash-on-hand,” he said. “I'll add, let's say, two hundred to the ledger? You’ve been trying hard lately, and it really wasn't bad for our second real kiss.” He was grinning broadly, and that scared me a bit. He knew he had me.

Two hundred and twenty just for one kiss and a hickey? If I'd started earlier, I would have been out of debt months ago.

“I... I need to make payments,” I finally said, “and it's become obvious that, so long as I'm connected with you, I won't get many other clients.”

He raised an eyebrow, and I could hear the silent 'and how is that my fault?’ But he didn't actually comment, so I told my pride to take a hike and went for the plunge: “I could offer something similar when - when we're both available.” Stars, I hated myself for that comment. The stone gained weight and rolled, curbing the ache of my lingering hard-on. Hell’s Bells, I had a hard-on for Johnny Marcone, and I hated it.

I hated it, but I was willing to do it again.

Well, let's set that straight: I hated that I had to do it, and I hated that I was doing it for money. I didn't exactly hate the act itself, and though I hated what Marcone did and his methods, I did have some respect for a man who knew what he wanted and went for it. A guy trying to protect his own and trying to make his way in life.
It was... complicated.

“I see. I can't guarantee a price, you realize. It will vary depending on the situation and how much effort you’ve shown,” Marcone answered.

I closed my eyes, breathed, and tried to think. As sad as it sounds, I didn't know where to go from there. He’d emphasized spending time together before, though, and we’d stopped having dinner dates. I’d thought when he spoke of how hard I tried - my ‘efforts’ - he’d been talking about my work. Now I didn’t know what he meant. I didn’t know what he wanted. Which made it hard to figure out what to offer. “A regular movie night?” I asked after a moment. “Fridays?” There was no waver to my voice, and anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar. Really.

It was a few moments before he asked: “A boy's night in? I didn't exactly have you pegged for a romantic, but I think that can be arranged. Considering the time of year, I think there will be a good number of sufficiently romantic and holiday themed movies on; shall we have dinner around five tonight, then?”

Right. Today was Friday. We were supposed to meet with Rex in less than a week, but it had been put off because Marcone was traveling instead. I could deal with this. I nodded, and shifted a bit. “Five is good.”

Hendricks opened his door, and Marcone got out and left. I waited a few minutes before I followed, knowing that I didn't look as neat and unrumpled. I hoped I didn't embarrass myself before the ex-football player handed over my coat and I could fold it in front of my lap.

I was almost presentable before I went inside, but it took images of Bianca, Parker, the Alphas, and my faery godmother to do it.

Days like this? I hated.

I hadn't exactly expected pizza, cola, and a movie, but that's what we had. All while snuggled up together on the couch watching the only television in the house that wasn't hooked up to some complicated cable system.

The movie was some romantic love fest about a girl kidnapping a guy to pass as her boyfriend and then actually falling in love with him, and then he fell in love with her and happy endings abounded. I was actually amused by some parts, and wasn't totally bored. It wasn't something I would have watched on my own, being a cheesy romance, but I didn’t fall asleep the way I had with the first movie John and I had watched together. It also had enough commercials for a few us to share kisses, and for Marcone to make certain his hickey was going to last for a few days.

That didn't bother me as much as it should have.

After the movie, sleep hadn’t come easy. I was too wired and jittery to settle down, a bundle of nerves waiting for something to - I don’t know - strike me dead for the trade I’d made.

Which was silly. It wasn’t like the people who did this sort of thing professionally dropped like flies, or anything like that.

Still, my nerves kept me awake until I finally gave up on sleep and went to make a few potions before my housemate woke up and I had to avoid him again.

Bob, of course, noticed the mark right away.
“Come on, Harry,” he whined. “If you aren't going to give me any new books, you could at least tell me all the sundry details of your love life. Was it Murphy? Or, ohhh, Susan? Or did you finally let Marcone get past that chastity belt you call honor?”

“None of the above,” I told him, pulling down the bowl for the hot plate and a wooden spoon. “I need some good potions for working with ghosts. Or anything that might come in handy.”

“I don't know, maybe something with an aphrodisiac?” Bob offered. “That would certainly be handy.”

“You are a pain.”

Bob got quiet. I don't know why. A lot of things were happening lately and I didn't know why. It was making me cranky, especially since most of what came with being a wizard was supposed to be a good amount of knowledge. “Maybe you shouldn't do this today,” Bob said. “Moon's not right, and you're not in the right mood – not for ghost potions.”

I needed something to calm me, not a lecture in how delicate potion making could be.

“For the price of one cheap paperback, I'll give you some tips while you rework the spells on your blasting rod. I may even help you with that second shield bracelet you started.”

I took a deep breath before reminding him: “I could make you tell me.”

“You could,” Bob conceded. “But then I wouldn’t get any good porn, and I’d be cranky. And you’d still get a crummy potion. I could really go for a night out with Mister, too, if you need anything.”

“No nights out for a while,” I told him. “I may need you soon. Where has Mister been hiding, anyways?” You wouldn’t think I’d miss getting knocked in the knees by a thirty-pound cat, but that was one of the things that set this place apart from my own basement apartment: Mister had a lot more room to roam around inside.

“I think the redhead set him up with a playhouse a few rooms down. Your freakishly large cat seems to like the freakishly large man. Maybe they had a common ancestor or something.”

Figures. “All right, fine. Tell me about the rod and I'll think about getting you a new novel.” Marcone had given me twenty bucks, I could use five of it on something for Bob. Hopefully I'd find something on sale.

Murphy had been pretty upset when I called her, but not angry. Very clearly not pleased that I’d be going out of town, but I known she would be. I told her I still wanted whatever she could give me when we got back; she'd sounded hesitant when she said maybe in January, and I didn't ask why.

Marcone had been looking pleased, but then again his deal was going well.

I fell somewhere between the two.

We'd taken a plane out, and in order to actually fly I'd needed to take a potion to contain my magic and a potion to keep me calm. I'd insisted on taking a commercial plane – less chance someone's messed with it, and less chance Marcone would mess with me – and hadn't met with much protest.

Though I’d tried not to, I slept through most of the flight. It was probably safer that way, but I’d woken with my head on John’s shoulder and the plane on the ground. The feeling made my skin crawl.
Marcone had taken me up to the suite without introducing me to anyone, leaving me to entertain myself for a few days. Unfortunately for me, there wasn't much for a wizard to do in a fancy hotel full of technological wonders. I snuck down to the jacuzzi after hours one night, and the hot water jets had been bliss for an hour. By some wonder of modern grace, I didn't break it. That had been the extent of my explorations outside the room, however.

That night I had been completely relaxed for the first time in years. I didn't even wake up when John got back from his meetings.

Mostly, though, I was bored. John was rarely in the room himself, usually only staying for breakfast, leaving, and coming back sometime well into the night. I didn't relish the idea of walking around strangers who would know who I was only because of Marcone, so I didn't go out.

I hadn't made any money at all after three days.

It surprised me, then, when Marcone came back in the middle of the afternoon on the fourth day. I knew he would give me some opportunity to work, because I still had to pay for my first-class plane ticket, but he'd almost seemed to have forgotten me.

I swallowed what little dignity I had left and asked: “Are you here for me?”

I couldn't see his face as he stood at the dresser, removing his cufflinks and jacket. “Not as such, no. I'm here for a shower. You are, of course, welcome to join me.”

I think I managed not to go pale (or horribly red), but the effort was probably wasted. He wasn't looking. I did not want to be standing in a shower naked with Gentleman Johnny while he was naked, and probably thinking about investments. Of an intimate nature.

It seemed rather stupid to have not done as the other Harry had suggested, and played around to know what it felt like. My stomach might not have been twisting up in knots if I had.

In the end, it didn't matter. By the time I'd managed to speak above a whisper he'd already gone into the bathroom and closed the door.

He hadn't teased me, or egged me on. He hadn't pushed. Maybe he was being courteous – a gentleman, so to speak. Or maybe he just wanted me to fail. Maybe he wanted me to have to pay for my ticket, to put me further in debt.

But I already owed him too much, putting me further in debt would be stupid.

Maybe he just wasn't into guys. It made sense if he didn't want me to see his lack of interest. Maybe teasing me was just a bonus. He had to know that I was pretty much as straight as they come, and maybe he was trying to push me into being something I wasn't. Compromising my morals or something. He was a crime lord, after all. It's what they did, right?

Well, I wasn't going to be gay for him. I'd get through this job, and all the kisses and touches I'd already backed myself into, and when we got back I'd get my pay from Murph, and put all this nonsense about warming his bed and playing arm candy out of the picture.

He came out of the shower with only a towel on his head, and I didn't want to look. I very clearly turned my head away and – oh, all right. I looked. Can you blame me? This whole mess was about sex between men, of which my limited knowledge of boiled down to insert tab a into slot b. I very much wanted to know if tab a was going to fit into slot b.

My one look wasn't giving me much hope.
The only good thing about the situation was Marcone's human nature. He wasn't any kind of fae or similar. He wasn't going to turn it into a virgin bonding ritual or enslavement rite, which they could have with the right circumstances. I wasn't a virgin in the conventional sense, but I'd never actually been with a guy before, which is a type of virginity. Don't let those newbies and con-artists tell you that it's about potential or opportunity or anything like that. Virginity is about firsts, and there are some magics that can take advantage of those first experiences. In the end, that means that they can take advantage of anyone, because there's always something that someone hasn't tried.

Gay sex was one of mine.

Though the look had been quick and I hadn't gotten a full-on view, I could tell that Marcone was rather well endowed, and that he'd be very well endowed once he got it up and running. Hearing him move about the room was disconcerting in one sense – I couldn't tell what he was doing – and beneficial in another – if he was over there, then he wasn't next to me, breathing down my neck, wanting more than I wanted to give.

"You do realize, Mister Dresden, that you have yet to complete your portion of the bargain on this trip?" he said, voice somewhere behind me. Who knew what in the stars he was doing? I tried not to think about it.

"You didn't seem to want my company," I told him, managing not to let my voice shake. I reminded myself that he didn't really want me at all and I should be angry that he was dragging me through all this for something that he couldn't be bothered to ask for.

"Yes, it has been rather busy, but negotiations will be closing tomorrow. We should have several days to work in your payments."

I nodded, still not daring to look back in case he was still bare-skinned. I admit to being a little nervous about it. I know people have been doing this to each other since the Grecian and Roman empires – and hey, let's not forget to thank them for those lucky signs and sex toys that just happened to be the same shape and even sometimes one in the same. Gotta love the Romans for loving the male figure.

But as much as they may have fantasized about a dick like that, I don't think they had one that big.

Marcone, I realized, was still waiting for some sort of response. "What did you have in mind?"

"As always, it depends on what you offer. I could offer a substantial payment for making an appearance tomorrow as my betrothed, which would depend on your performance and may or may not cover the cost of your ticket."

I had seen the suit meant for me in the closet, but I had hoped I wouldn't be wearing it.

"After, I believe dinner and a night in would be in order." There was the slight touch of a hand at the back of my neck, rubbing, and I stilled the urge to bat it away. "Perhaps another mark, at that point, for appearance’s sake. Some of the harpies here will go after anyone. We could even visit the hot tub you enjoyed so much, if you’d like. I will, of course, compensate you for your time."

I shrugged, pulling away from his hand. Of course he’d kept tabs on me; I was followed everywhere by guards who reported back to him. It didn’t surprise me that he’d known about my little trip. “I hate you.”

I heard him chuckle. “That may be, Mister Dresden, but you have a very peculiar way of showing it. Which reminds me; a certain man is bound to show you his collection, as a blessing on our upcoming
wedding. It is a gift from a promising coworker, so I expect you to be both sufficiently surprised, shocked, and intrigued. You are, of course, expected to choose the gift that would suit us best — any that you like, and if he does not cover it, I most certainly will. There's no need to worry about cost.”

I frowned. Marcone never just offered up gifts for free. Not to me, anyways. “Just what sort of gifts are these?” What in the world would Marcone be willing to buy for me?

“You will need to wait and see — I would hate to spoil the surprise,” Marcone chuckled. “Off to bed with you now. We have an early start tomorrow.”

I stood and carefully did not look at him — I still didn't know if he was dressed — as I made my way to the pull-out bed. I could have shared Marcone's, and he'd offered it as a way to help pay my way. He'd even hinted that few clothes would mean a higher pay.

I'd declined.

Now it seemed stupid. It was just a bed. But I didn't want to be in that bed with Marcone, and I still had some morals left, if not dignity.

Breakfast and lunch hadn't been bad. The food was decent, and I hadn't needed to do anything but follow after Marcone and smile. I was slightly worried about this afternoon, however, and whatever gift I was supposed to be accepting; whatever it was, it was certain to make my relationship with Marcone all the more obvious.

“Mister Dresden?”

I turned towards the voice, but it was a man I didn't know. Not surprising, really; I didn't know much of anyone here.

“Are you Mister Harry Dresden, the wizard?” the man asked, looking nervously at Hendricks, who was lurking at one of the far walls, and then at Marcone, currently chatting it up with some mafia big-wig, and finally at the two suits he'd had to pass to get to me.

“As far as I know.”

“I have a message for you.” He passed over a piece of paper. “I'm to tell you it's from Michael.”

My eyebrows shot up. Michael Carpenter was a Knight of the Cross, and a good friend, but I hadn't heard from him in some time. His wife, Charity, was mad at me for putting him in danger one too many times.

It sort of came with the territory, but I didn't dare tell her that. Charity was a mother.

“Is he expecting a reply?” I asked.

“No.”

“Was there something else?”

“No.”

Then why the hell was he sticking around? I turned my back on him and made my way to somewhere the crowd wasn't so thick. Maybe he was trying to figure out what the message meant, or something. It was slightly creepy, but not something that set off any alarm bells.
I opened the note.

Harry,

You have become more difficult to contact than ever. I hope this reaches you safely. There have been reports of unusual happenings that may require your attention. There is no immediate danger, however it would benefit us both to meet once the holiday has passed. On the twelfth day, I will be at the Church.

God bless,
Michael

Ominous. I didn't like it. I didn't like more that he was already arranging a meeting – not because I didn't like meeting Michael, but because that meant it was serious. The twelfth day would be the twelfth day of Christmas, the last day of the holiday, and the first day Michael would consent to work after. I don't know how he found out the number here, but it gave me some time to think. For Michael to say something odd was going on, it had to be magical. That knocked off visions and possessions, for the most part. Most times those were faked, anyways. Something to do with the fae? But this was Michael – it was more likely to do with the Church. Some lesser demon or something. Maybe a true possession? A miracle working he didn’t think felt right?

I would need more detail, which would mean contacting him. The 'holiday' had already started for him, so he wouldn't want to delve into this right away; a simple phone call, however, would better prepare me.

“Something on your mind?” Marcone asked, touching my arm.

I didn't flinch, but it was close. “News from a friend,” I told him. What could be an emergency serious enough to warrant contacting me here, but minor enough that it could wait until after the new year?

“I see. It is troubling?”


“To see you, of course,” Marcone smirked. “Come with me, there is someone I think you should meet.”

Rings. The surprise was bloody engagement rings, and the 'anything I want' included a selection of wedding rings as well.

The man had hinted at other sorts of rings (along with 'jewelry'), but I was making a strong effort to ignore that, and almost succeeding. I knew what they were for and what they were in an academic sense, but I didn’t want to know. And I didn’t want to even think of how they might play into a love life between me and ‘Gentleman’ Johnny.

In the end, I hadn't needed to pretend to be shocked, although I had needed to force a smile and pretend the surprise was pleasant. As quickly as I could, I picked out a set of rings with a stone the color of old dollar bills, inlaid in silver. I couldn't get out of looking at the wedding rings, and then starting looking for the most expensive there were. A set of wide-banded, white-gold rings inlaid with emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds caught my eye. Some Celtic design or another was burned in between the stones.

I smiled, simpered, and made certain the man knew I liked them so Marcone would buy them as
another 'surprise.' I was getting rather sick of surprises.

I smirked the entire way up to the hotel room thinking of the surprises I could give Johnny if the tables were turned. I think I may have scared Hendricks a bit. It was fun.

I knocked briskly on Murphy's door and hoped she wouldn't kick me out. I’d only been back in the city a few days, but I hadn’t been able to talk to her. Call me a coward if you want, but I was feeling pretty lousy as a human and I didn’t think I made for good company.

I’d enjoyed the jacuzzi and the room-service dinner. I hadn’t thrown up when Marcone put his arm around me for the in-room movie, which we’d had to lay on the bed to watch.

I’d even fallen asleep in his arms again, and spent the night in his bed - willingly. I remember almost waking up and thinking that I should change out of my clothes - move to the pull-out bed - but I hadn’t. Marcone’s - John’s - *his* arm had been around me and I’d just gone back to sleep.

Then I’d avoided him with the excuse that, if I got any more agitated, the plane would crash on the trip back. It was true enough, which is the only reason I think I got away with it.

When we got back to Chicago, I’d holed up in my room and paced the floor for a few hours. Tried to sleep. Showered. Tried to meditate. Then repeated the process all over again. I could still feel his arm around me as I slept, free of dreams and nightmares.

I hadn’t called Murphy or Michael.

I heard locks clicking open and deadbolts sliding before I saw Murph. The night before Christmas Eve and she was dressed in comfortable sweatpants and a t-shirt. She was even sweating, so she must have been working out.

“What do you want?”

“I was wondering if I could still stay here for a few days.”

She rolled her eyes. “Johnny’s company finally rub you the wrong way?”

I glared at her, shifting the duster on my shoulders to try and keep the heat in and cover my neck. She might be able see what was left of his mark, though it was mostly gone now, and I didn’t want her to. “You know I don't approve of the situation.”

“A lot of people don't approve. You appear to be approving more than others.”

“Look, I can go ask someone else if you don't want me to stay, but I don't want to go back there for the next three days. He'll try to give me things.”

“Isn't that what Christmas is about?”

“*His* things come with a price, and that's what got me into this mess to begin with.”

She sighed. “It's cold out,” she said, turning and walking inside. She left the door open, but was careful not to invite me in. It was one of the first things I'd warned her about when I'd started solving cases with her: don't invite people in, even if it's someone you know. It's harder for them to hurt you that way.

I followed her, feeling the stress of the threshold pushing down on my magic, not as strong as if she had blatantly told me I wasn't invited, but still there. Murphy's house was a home, and a home with
some history. It'd been her grandmother's or something. It had strength.

I was panting a bit as I shut the door and slid the locks into place. Since I didn't intend to cause her harm and didn't intend to use magic, the effect was lessened even further, but it was still there and still strong.

“What happened in Vegas?” Murphy asked when I made my way into the kitchen.

“He bought us rings – engagement and wedding,” I told her, showing her the ring I wore at Marcone's insistence. I took it off and set in on the table; Marcone wouldn't know if I didn't wear it here.

“What's going on, Harry?” she asked, setting a cup of tea down before me. I would have preferred coffee, but it was late, and Karrin Murphy never made coffee after six o'clock in the evening unless she was pulling night shift. “What happened to letting him get bored with you?”

I added some cream and sugar, staring at the ring. “‘I'm trying to pay him back, but...’” but he was pulling me deeper and deeper into a world I wanted no part in. I now had things I couldn't tell Murph, that I should tell her, vanilla mortal things, and that settled wrong. Murphy was a friend, one that could handle the less savory things I dealt with (if not the magical), and I was pushing her away. Again.

“Did you find Rex?”

“Not yet,” she admitted, accepting the change of subject gracefully. “I set out a few feelers, and told Major Crime and Narcotics that there might be someone on the scene working from the shadows. They'll let the gang units know, since I don’t have any contacts in that department. It should keep things quiet enough not to raise any alarm bells. I couldn't give them much detail, but they know to look for someone big now, at least. It will be a few weeks before we get any sort of information, even an acknowledgement that he exists. Major Crimes told me they question all suspects thoroughly, so I doubt there's going to be much help there.”

“He's... mundane, I guess,” I told her. “Nothing about him would qualify him for SI, that I know of. But he's trouble. Just as bad as Marcone.”

“Could you get us anything on Marcone?”

“I wish, but as soon as I do he's going to crack down on me. Nothing illegal, of course, or at least nothing that would hold up in court.”

“Damn.”

“I'll keep looking. If I find somethign worth it, or won’t look strange to be passed on, you'll be the first I tell.”

“Just be careful,” she said, looking pained. “I have to tell you, officially, that you don’t need to do this and that the best thing for you to do is not to follow through with this plan. You have not been trained in undercover operations and we have no way of monitoring your situation.”

“Unofficially?”

“Unofficially I know you beat the crap out of werewolves, and should be able to put up enough of a fight if Marcone tries anything. And you don’t have to worry about maintaining a cover story. You may be better protected than a lot of the undercover agents we do have, though less able to reliably pass on information or gather proof for a trial. It’s not like you could wear a wire or anything like
that. Overall I don’t like it. It’s dangerous, you’re not trained, and we can’t help you. We won’t even know you need help. But I can’t stop you.”

Abruptly, she stood up. “I’m going to finish my workout. There’s a bathroom two doors down the hall on the left, and the first room on the right is a guest bedroom.”

I let her change the subject, grateful for her honesty. I wouldn’t push. “Thanks Murphy.”

“Just don’t make a habit of this.”

“Right.” I’d try not to. “Can I use your phone?”

She nodded, then left.

I called Michael.

Chapter End Notes

**Note: Movie reference is Holiday in Handcuffs, which has aired on ABC for the past two years at Christmastime.

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I’ve never liked snow. The fact that it was falling on the day I was meeting Michael didn’t make me feel any better about dragging myself into the harsh, dirty white winter. My duster was warm enough that wasn’t freezing, but I still felt the chill.

I stepped into the church, and shrugged the snow off my shoulders. God hadn’t been very pleasant to me, ever, so I hoped I hadn’t just deeply offended him or anything. This particular church had been all but deserted for some time; a few priests maintained it, said their prayers, and slept in the back, but there wasn’t enough of a congregation to justify even a weekly mass. It was mostly a tourist attraction now.

Michael came in shortly after I sat down, genuflected, then sat in the pew with me. He did it with much more grace than I ever could, but that was Michael Carpenter for you; he went to church every Sunday, and wasn’t ashamed to do the Lord’s work whenever the Lord called. Even if the building was deserted, he would still honor the holy ground.

I thought it was a load of crap, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. Places only had power because people believed they had power.

“Harry,” he greeted quietly, “it’s good to see you.”

I nodded. “Good to see you too, Michael,” I said. “It’s been a while.”

“Your friends have been worried.”

“What friends?” I asked – honestly, I’m sad to say. I didn’t have many friends left.

Michael gave me a dirty look, as if I was a child being deliberately obtuse. “You have friends, and they were most upset when we found we could not contact you easily. Even Charity showed concern.”

“Yeah, I wasn't too happy about that either.”

“And you didn't think to give us any way to reach you?”

I sighed. “I don't want you getting mixed up with Marcone – I don't want anyone getting mixed up with him. It's dangerous.”

“It is,” Michael agreed. “But ask yourself Harry, is it Marcone that you do not trust, or is it us?”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Think on it, Harry. Is it that you don’t trust Marcone not to hurt us, or that you don’t trust us not to get hurt?”

“Tricky word play,” I said. “I think I almost followed it. Where’d you pick that up?”

“A certain wizard I know sometimes twists his words so he does not lie,” he said, smiling. “He’s a horrible liar.”
“Picked up on that too, did you?”

Michael’s grin was wide. “Yes, I did. But that’s not a bad thing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Also not why you wanted to see me.”

“True. I have news you might find interesting. There was an increase in the number of visible, tangible spirits for a few weeks, but since The Birth they’ve diminished.”

The Birth. He meant Christmas, or Christ's Mass, but to Michael Carpenter it was always The Birth of Christ. “It's a powerful holiday,” I told him. “That much faith and prayer all at the same time might have weakened the hold the ghosts have on this plane.” It was possible, one of the side benefits of yearly rituals that few ever noticed. “I'd have to check a few things to see if it affects ghosts, but it's possible.”

Michael nodded. “Then these spirits will show again?”

“Possibly. I don't know why a bunch of ghosts would start popping up all of a sudden in the first place. It's more likely there's been more people who can see them.”

“And how likely is that?”

I shrugged. “Guessing? Maybe one in ten can sense a ghost, and one in twenty might be able to see it. Fewer would admit it, because others can’t, maybe more would depending on the crowd. And then there’d be more who would say they saw something because their imagination starts acting up. Of course, that’s just guesswork. It's impossible to do the math.”

“So not very likely, but a few might cause something of a fad?”

I nodded. It still wasn't very likely – but it was easier to deal with than something going on in the Nevernever or whatever half-way plane ghosts were superimposed on.

“There’s no rush right now, as the problem seems to have resolved itself, but it might be a good idea to keep an eye on the situation.”

“I'll look into it, do some research, see what I come up with. There are wizards who've devoted their lives to ghost research; it's a large stack of notes. And they need to be translated, since they used some half-assed version of English then. But maybe there’s something there.”


“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Him.”

I huffed. “You've been nicer to me than He has,” I told Michael. “I don't think He listens to me anymore.”

“The Lord always listens,” Michael told me, “He just doesn't always answer.”

I could understand that. With a hundred people knocking on your front door every day, you couldn't answer all of them, and you couldn't please all of them either. And God had a lot more than a hundred people knocking on his door.

It didn't upset me that He left me to fend for myself. I was used to it. I didn't believe in Him much as a result, but I did believe in magic. Catholics didn't really like magic, so I guess it all worked out.
“How are things, Harry?” Michael asked, sounding concerned. “You were hard to find.”

I shrugged. “I’m engaged to another man.”

I had to give Michael credit; he didn't flinch or wince or even twitch. Just said: “I see.”

“I owe him a lot of money.”

“Not really a good reason to marry.”

“No, but a practical one.”

Michael was silent. And disapproving.

“I haven't really agreed to marry him yet,” I finally said, fiddling with the ring I wore, feeling the stones in the smooth metal. It was heavy, I thought. “I just told him I intended to. We don't have a date set or anything. Not yet.”

“Fine line.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It is.”

“Do you intend to marry him?”

“Eventually?” I hesitated, but there was was really only one answer. Michael deserved honesty. “Yes. I don’t really want to, but-”

“You don't have to defend your decisions. I trust you to do what you believe is best.”

I frowned, not realizing that it may have come across that way. “I just didn't want you to hear about it from the wrong people. I bet Charity's still furious with me. If she found out from rumors...” I didn’t know what she’d do to me.

“She's pregnant, you know.”

“Again?”

Michael nodded.

“Congrats, man. When's it due?”

“Not for some time. Around August.”

I blinked, and did the math. “What, you just got her pregnant yesterday?”

Michael chuckled. “Last week, actually. We found out yesterday. Charity always does a test right before her time, so there are no surprises. If the Lord provides, all will turn out well.”

I let out a whistle, loud in the almost-silent church, and a few people glared at me. “Wow. Quite a brood you've got going there.” Michael had more kids than I would know how to deal with. I'd lost count over the years, and they had probably had at least one more since I last saw him.

“They are family,” he said with a fond smile. “I’m glad you’re beginning to form your own, even if it is for questionable reasons.”

I rolled my eyes. Michael believed in marrying for love, and marrying for family; marrying because I
had a debt to pay didn’t figure into all that. But he also believed it would all work out in the end.

At least I wouldn’t have any kids. The danger and debt they’d inherit would dog me in the afterlife.

The church bells rang, and Michael stood. “It was good to see you again, Harry, but I need to go. The kids will be home from school soon, and I promised we’d go ice skating.”

“Sounds like fun,” I told him. “Tell them ‘hi’ for me, and Charity too. And tell her I really am sorry.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

No matter how many times I told her that, though, or passed the message on to her, she still hadn’t forgiven me for putting her husband in danger. If Michael had died... well, they wouldn’t be about to have another kid in eight months, would they? I put in a quick thought to the Lord to have everything go well with the pregnancy – they worked hard enough for God that He should be able to do something in return – and left myself, making my way to the subway station.

Mister plowed into my legs as I entered my door-less workspace, nearly knocking me over and purring like a small motor, acting as if I had deserted him. He was just as big as ever, and in as good form as when I had been moved out of my apartment, gracefully letting me scratch his ears in apology. Since the trip to Vegas as Marcone’s arm-candy, Mister had been more affectionate. I liked to think he had missed me.

Mister had given his services to the Marcone mansion by chasing away both mice and other cats, and since there were very few of those he spent the rest of his time guarding my workspace.

Hendricks had the marks to prove Mister’s ire was formidable.

None of Marcone's lackeys had discovered the secret to this affection: a half-can of cola I poured for him whenever he visited me instead of the cat-haven down the hall. I wasn't going to tell them, either. I poured his portion into a bowl, set it on the table, and Mister leaped up to begin his feast, the wood creaking under his weight.

With a smile, I started sipping what was left in the can. It was good to see Mister still being himself, even in Marcone's house.

Bob's eyes began to give off a soft orange glow. “Your fiancé left a letter for you,” he said. “I think it's a love letter. Can I read it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Marcone's not the type for love letters,” I told him. I spotted the letter close to the skull Bob lived in and opened it.

Like the first letter John had sent me, back during the loup-garou ordeal, I didn’t like what the letter implied about my relationship with Chicago’s biggest underground thug. It also wasn’t all that it appeared to be at first glance.

Marcone had set our wedding date for this August, so it looked like my 'reassurances' to Michael had come just a few hours too soon. If I couldn't find some way to pay Marcone back or at least get reasonably close, I would have to marry him.

In so-called celebration of the wedding announcement, Marcone was providing me with a chance to relax and calm my obvious nerves.

It was very overly sweet, and just a bit unnerving. He was giving me gifts again, and they were again
about the wedding. But Marcone didn’t do anything for free, and he didn’t give things away either.

“So boss,” Bob cut in, interrupting my thoughts. “Is it a love letter?”

“It’s about business,” I told him. “So you should mind your own.”

Bob pouted, a pretty amazing talent for a skull with no actual skin.

I looked back at the letter. I would meet an escort tonight, in about an hour. If he was able, Marcone would arrive later. An hour wasn’t much time; I’d probably need to interrupt any work I started so that I wasn’t late.

Not that I could start on the ghost problem anyways. Until I knew what the problem was, any research would be guesswork at best. Michael had said they’d been appearing more frequently for a short time, but less often since Christmas. Either the problem was fixing itself, someone else was, or someone was hiding it.

“Harry, come on,” Bob urged. “Let me see the letter. You haven’t bought me a new book in ages; I have to get my pleasures where I can, even if you are trying to pretend it’s only business.”

“It’s not a love letter,” I told him bitterly, and it wasn’t quite the lie I wanted it to be. I took a sip of my cola.

The ghost research would have to wait until I could dig up the right books from the closet Marcone’s muscle men had shoved them into – a task I wasn’t ready to take on just yet. But I could get started on Michael’s other concerns.

Red came to pick me up as I was scribbling notes for a communication spell. There was no way to make the contact private, maybe not even a way to speak to each other, but-

The guard cleared his throat again. Red wasn’t one of Marcone’s bigger men, but that didn’t mean much. He was small, quick, and rivaled Marcone for ability with a knife – although I would have put more money on Marcone. I’d once seen John working out with Hendricks by accident, and had never gone near that area of the house again.

“Mister Dresden, if you’re ready?”

“Right,” I answered, setting aside the calculations. I was as ready as I was ever going to be. Bob had been a bit of a help despite grumbling about the letter, but it was still tedious.

I put away my notebook, scratched Mister’s ears where he was still stretched out on my table, and followed Red out.

I wasn’t exactly fond of being chauffeured around, but this gift was apparently an experience and not an item. A way to relax. I didn’t think much about it until the car pulled up to what looked to be a very high class gym. "If John thinks I need to work out," I told the driver, "he can think again."

"I’ve been instructed to escort you inside," the driver said as he parked next to the curb. "It’s better than it looks, though, Mister Dresden. I promise. The Boss likes you."

I shook my head as he got out. Somehow, he reached my door before I did and opened it for me. Grumbling, I got out and let him escort me inside.

It was a gym. Not the fancy one I had expected from the size, but one that was clean and had a lot of
space for what appeared to be the main feature of the first floor: the pools. One off to the side was a
typical pool with lanes marked out with flotation devices, but there was also a tidal pool, a training
pool, and various kiddie pools watched by lifeguards. Behind a glass wall, I saw what looked like
half a tennis court, and next to that a room with treadmills and stationary bikes facing the kiddie
pools.

A parent's gym.

"This way, Mister Dresden," my escorted said. "There's a room reserved for you upstairs."

Of course. Inside the city's business limits, you wouldn't waste real estate on a single story building.
Not with the cost of land. The gym was probably just a front.

There must have been hundreds of pipes below the floor, feeding the pools and keeping the water
flowing in the specialized pools. As soon as I started walking across the floor, I felt my magic start to
pull away from me. I kept a firmer grip on my faith, reminding myself that there was a lot of room
between me and the flowing water - if I concentrated, I could still call my magic. It was just the bits
that I didn't have a hold of that wanted to be washed away.

Red took my duster when we reached the stairs. By then, my sweat was pretty obvious. The basic
spells I’d started working into the leather didn’t cool me off if it turned hot, and it was warm and
humid inside this place. The windows looking outside were fogged - and some were even open.

“Would you prefer the elevator?” Red asked.

I shook my head. “Don’t like them. Isn’t it the wrong season for the pool to be open?”

Red shrugged. “The swim club has to stay alive somehow,” he said. “Since it’s indoor, there isn’t a
real problem - although this floor is practically a steam room sometimes.”

The stairs were a relief, the heat of the pools trapped behind a solid door. It was a quick trip to the
designated room after that.

The room was private, with a waterfall-like fountain taking up most of the far corner, a couch along
one wall, a massage table, a side table with oils and lotions, a few bamboo plants - it looked like it
was meant to induce a ‘zen’ feeling in a refurbished ballet training room. There was even incense
burning.

“Good evening, Mister Dresden,” a new voice said behind me. I turned and faced him.

“You know me, but I don’t know you.”

“Call me Frank,” he said, holding out his hand. He had on a pair of latex gloves, but his grip was
firm and steady. “I’m an old acquaintance of your fiancé,” he continued. “When he noticed how
tense you were about the ceremony, he of course called me to visit.”

“You mean you don’t normally work for him?” I asked, curious.

Frank motioned me further in the room before answering. “Off and on, I guess. John rarely has time
for a good rub-down lately.”

I stood awkwardly in the center of the room, not knowing what to say to that.

“Why don’t you take your shirt off, and we can get started?” Frank suggested. “You can make
yourself comfortable on the table there. If you’d like to strip further, you are more than welcome - I
give a great leg massage - but John had mentioned you might be opposed.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I’m comfortable enough to even take off my shirt, much less my pants,” I said.

Frank cocked his head a bit, as if he heard better out of one ear. “Body shy?”

“Not particularly,” I said. “But it’s asking a lot to let a stranger behind you when he could be carrying a knife.” I really didn’t care if Frank saw me naked or not - he wasn’t the one wanting to pay me for intimate favors - but I didn’t trust him behind me. Murphy was right - it would be easy for him to slip a knife between my ribs. And with the water below me, it was harder to gather enough power for a shield. Raw blasting power, maybe. With effort, my shield bracelet would only hold for a moment or two.

And it would be draining.

Frank seemed to be considering something, and had finally come to a conclusion. “I could have a chair brought in, so you wouldn’t have to lay on the table. You’d be able to move easier, and have a better view of the room.”

I nodded, and began to strip off my shirt. I’d been honest, I wasn’t body shy - after Justin, such things were pretty petty - but I didn’t like being vulnerable.

Frank left, and about ten minutes later two men in jeans and uniform shirts hauled in a cushioned lawn chair. “You’ll need to straddle it,” Frank said, “but it’s the best we could find on short notice.”

I waved it off. “It’s fine,” I said.

“Next time we’ll be prepared.”

I rolled my eyes, sat down, and let Frank arrange me, noticing how careful he was to either keep his hands in my line of sight or touching me.

He was being silly, but a part of me relaxed.

I suspected Frank had been in this line of work for years by the way he managed to make muscles I hadn’t known were tense just melt. He still thought I was as tight as a bowstring, and I wasn’t going to tell him differently. It was a little under an hour later when he began to slow down his efforts, and began to pack up for the end of the session. For a moment, I was sorry it was over.

I wasn’t completely relaxed, he was right about that, and I certainly wasn’t mellow enough to miss John entering the room. I closed my eyes to try and recapture the mood, but I could already feel my muscles tightening again.

A bare hand was on my back, and I tensed further. “It is such a pleasure to see you, Harry,” Marcone drawled out. “I must say, you look wonderful tonight.”

“What do you want?” I asked. For almost half an hour I’d managed to forget him - forget why I was getting the massage - and almost meditate with ease.

If they could bottle up and sell that feeling, Marcone could make a fortune.

“To see how you were enjoying your gift, of course,” he said. “I was hoping you would like it.”

“Do I have much of a choice?” I asked.
“Of course you do,” he said. “You could have, at any point, said no. You didn't.”

“You're blackmailing me,” I growled. “I don't call that much of a choice.”

“What makes you say that? I only asked that you pay the man for his wasted time if you did not make use of his services. Nothing wrong with that. Frank is an old friend. I'd prefer not to trouble him for no reason.”

His hand hadn't left my back, and his thumb was rubbing small circles on my shoulder blade. Gentleman indeed. Ha. A Gentleman kept his hands to himself.

“What's the real reason behind this?” I demanded.

“You're thinking too much of the short term,” he said. I saw Frank slipping out of the room, Red following. I was alone with Marcone now, straddling a chair with his hand on my back. Rather than show my discomfort, I gripped the chair harder and stayed seated.

“You were so relaxed earlier,” he said. “But you started tensing as soon as I came in. That hurts, Harry. I don’t want you to fear my touch.”

“What does my dislike of your touch have to do with this gift?”

“I am hoping to prove I don’t want to hurt you.”

“No, you just want me to sacrifice my morals.”

“I’m sorry if you feel that way, but it wasn’t what I intended. Is it immoral to be touched by your future husband?”

“No,” I said, gritting my teeth. I knew what was coming, and I had walked right into it.

“Is it immoral to want to touch my future husband?”

“No,” I bit out again.

“When we are married, will it be immoral to sleep with my husband?”

It took a moment, but I finally said a quiet: “no.”

“Then I don’t know what you’re objecting to. I’m attempting to remove the obstacles between us,” he said, both hands on my shoulders now and rubbing lightly. “I loaned you money when you would have lost your business to debt, and offered you a place in my home when you would have been evicted. You disliked the business arrangement. Since you objected so strongly, I thought you would prefer being joined in a ceremony with official sanction and public recognition. I hope I wasn’t wrong.”

I couldn’t answer. If I had cared for John, maybe I would want recognition. Maybe I could be able to put up with his business, with his forcefulness, with the way his presence made me stupid with anger and guilt and something else I didn’t care to identify.

Marcone sighed. “Frank may offer you other gifts, outside these sessions. You may choose to accept those or not as you deem appropriate, but I do ask that you continue to see him. It was good to see you relaxed.”

It had felt good, too, but I wasn’t going to tell him. “Is it really necessary to be driven across town and monitored the whole time?”
“There’s a security camera monitoring this room constantly, though I believe you are referring to Mister Charles. I did say that Frank was an old friend. It has been quite some time since we have had regular contact, and while I am confident that he would not dare to hurt you, I am uncertain of his ability to protect you should the need ever arise.

“It would also be somewhat inappropriate to be alone with him. You might become the subject of ill-natured rumors.

“I believe you are safe here,” Marcone continued, “even with your magical limitations. There are thousands of pipes in the floors and walls, supplying everything from the pools to the bathrooms to that fountain, and I believe you informed someone at the Arcane about running water disrupting magic. That story, unfortunately, made its way to publication for any of your enemies to see. What was that journalist's name?”

The bastard knew it was Susan. He knew that she was interested in me several months back, and that I was interested in her. The only thing separating us was him. Well, him and a few threats from Hendricks. “Are we finished?” I asked. “I have work to get back to.” I didn't want to talk about any romantic interests he had spoiled.

“Back to bed,” Marcone corrected, sounding fatherly. I could just imagine those money-green eyes shining with mirth. “It's late – you need your sleep. You can stop visiting Frank anytime you like. The entire month is prepaid, so our deal still stands. You might as well enjoy it and avoid wasting the money.”

“I don't have time to waste on activities I don't get paid for.” That's it, Harry, I told myself. Be demanding. Be cross. Show him your surly wizard side. Don’t let him order you around.

Marcone leaned down and nuzzled my neck. Actually nuzzled it. I was going to have to look for the earmarks of possession soon. “If you want to be paid,” he said, his voice low, “you know what to do.” Marcone was back to his irritating self, no matter how affectionate - he was acting.

“Fine,” I said. “One kiss.”

I didn't need to see his smile. I could hear it in his voice when he said: “Very well. By the way, you get more if you enjoy it.”

I grit my teeth, felt him straddle the chair behind me, and concentrated on not enjoying it. Nothing arousing about it. Nothing sexy about Marcone's body against my back, his arms around me, his teeth on my chin.

My hands fisted as my brain received confused signals. He was marking me again, leaving a hickey in an obvious place, much harder to hide than lower on my neck.

My brain wasn’t too happy with that; my body was.

Eventually, he moved from my jaw to my lips. My head was tilted awkwardly, straining my neck to reach his lips over my shoulder. He didn’t try to explore this time, though. He tightened his arms around me and let go.

His hands trailed along my waist as he stood. “I won't be able to visit you after each session, but I'll stop by as often as I can, and Drake can reach me if you have any problems.”


“Mister Charles,” Marcone said.
He meant Red. “Oh.” I looked away.

“Have a good night,” he said as he left.

I felt my face twist into a scowl. Someone or something had lit a fire under Marcone concerning me. The wedding date, the ‘gift,’ the attention - he wasn’t content to wait around anymore, wasn’t looking for me to go to him.

He’d also made it fairly clear that he wasn’t against having sex with men. Not with words, but with the way he’d been sitting, pressed against me, I had felt that he wasn’t against it. I had been wrong.

I hated being wrong.

I arrived at the station at nine on the dot. The woman at the front desk gave me a pass without question or protest – Hell's Bells, she didn't even bother scowling at my duster, jeans, and t-shirt. I had made the effort to look presentable, but didn’t have anything appropriate for an office setting. The closest I had to that level of nicety were the suits that I had been wearing in Vegas, and I wasn't about to wear those. They were stuffy.

“Hey Murph,” I said, knocking on her door after the standard climb of stairs and careful not to enter just yet.

She was on the phone and waved me towards the seats in the front of the office, so I went and waited. I didn't take offense; phones tend to lose connection when I'm around. The frown she was wearing told me it wasn’t good. She was arguing, as close to raising her voice as she ever got.

I didn't think she would mind me Listening. I usually wouldn’t dare, especially with Murphy at work, but I knew Marcone had been cutting my cases. It would make sense if he was talking to Murphy directly, threatening her, and I just had to know. If it wasn’t John or Hendricks, I told myself, I would stop Listening.

“-just think that he should be told - “ she was saying, before a voice interrupted her. I couldn't quite make out every word, but the voice was male and familiar. Hendricks, occasionally raising his voice and growling ‘Mister Dresden.’

“Look, if you want to file a formal complaint, fine, you know the standard numbers. You’ve used them. It's not an SI case. Would you like me to transfer you? Then stop wasting my time. I have work to do. Good day.”

She hung up.

Of course it was about me. What other business could Hendricks have with SI? That didn’t explain what he complaining about.

Not everyone was going to be receptive of the kind of relationship Marcone was pursuing. He’d already fired at least three minions that I knew of, I hoped not literally, and put a small time drug dealer out of business for trash-talking about our so-called engagement. The police never officially made the connection, but I remembered reading the obituaries in the paper.

They were warnings.

Murphy waved me in as her computer shut down, and I waited for the noise to die before I actually walked in. “What was that about?” I asked.
“Nothing important,” she said, waving off the question. If I hadn't listened in, I would have believed her. I felt slimy for eavesdropping.

I felt like I’d been kicked in the gut when I sat down and she still didn’t mention Hendricks had been on the phone.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” she asked.

I shook my head. The walk to the station had woken me up, and coffee wasn’t exactly my drink of choice anyways.

“What have you got for me?” I asked.

“I don’t have anything,” she admitted, “but Renee, on the fifth floor, needs some help with filing. I’ve warned her to keep you away from anything electric.”

“Fifth floor?” I asked. “Homicide?”

“Major Crime,” she corrected. “Harry, before you go, I have to ask you,” she paused, struggling with something, and I wondered if she was going to tell me about the call. Or maybe ask about my relationship with Marcone. I couldn’t deny a sexual intimacy between us had happened, now. I couldn't deny that he'd paid me for it, either. My chest tightened, my stomach rolling.

His lawyers would say one had nothing to do with the other. Lawyers could twist the circumstances without lying. Maybe in their minds it was even the truth. It didn't change how I felt.

Or the fact that I had, on some level, enjoyed the attention.

“Is there something I need to know about going on?” she asked.

Something I needed to tell her, not the other way around. I wasn’t sure what upset me more - that she was keeping secrets from me or that I was keeping secrets from her.

“Probably,” I answered. I closed my eyes and rubbed at my forehead with one hand. “I should start by telling you we’ve set a date.”

“Harry, you didn't,” she scolded lightly. At least she wasn't congratulating me.

“The wedding's in August. I don't expect you to be happy about it.”

“I'd be happier if you were marrying for love, not to cut an illegal deal on a loan.”

“It's not illegal,” I said. Technically, it wasn’t. Not yet, anyways. “It sounds bad when you say it like that.”

“What aren't you telling me?” Murphy asked. I guess protesting was just making her suspicious.

I had to give her something. Something that wasn’t really a lie. “I'm bi, Karrin,” I said, trying not to trip over my words. “John isn't bad to look at, physically speaking. And I can still try to get something for you.”

“It's still dangerous,” she warned. “Just as dangerous as it was before, if not more so. You’re so close to him, and it would be so easy to blame anything that happened to you on a rival or - or a known enemy. I still can't ask you to do this. I'm still obligated to ask you not to.”

“But you still think I might have a better shot than someone else.”
“And, six or seven months down the road, it might help. Maybe. We can’t act on anything you give right away. I can’t even say we’ll go for Marcone.”

If they didn’t, I’d still need to go through with the wedding. I would need to be careful. Things weren’t too bad right now, but it could get worse.

If I had to suffer a bit of humiliation to get the higher-ups off Murphy's back, well – she would have suffered worse for me, at one point. Marcone would just have to understand that.

“I’ll do what I can,” I told her.

“Stay out of trouble.”

“Don’t I always?”

She gave me a flat, unamused look.

“They expecting me up on fifth?” I asked, hoping to get out of her office soon. It’s never good to have an officer displeased with you.

She sighed and nodded. “Ask for Renee. Try not to blow anything up.”

“I make no promises,” I quipped, standing.

She scowled at me as I left.

Renee had told me what she wanted done, but I had been unprepared for the sheer magnitude of work. Filing is not a mindless task.

First, filing requires constant, careful reading. Otherwise John Smith’s paperwork could get filed under Jonathan Smithe and make life difficult for some unsuspecting cop.

Second, filing requires a constant rearranging of papers to make room for the new information. It seemed like every ten minutes I was shifting files down because the upper cabinets had gotten too tight, or moving files over to a new cabinet.

Third, filing requires a strong knowledge of the alphabet and the order of the letters. It takes forever if you have to sing the dopey little song, but I wish the person before me had taken the time. Half the “I” files were before the “E” files, and at least one in every ten were filed by first name, not last.

By noon, I had only finished half of the box and was considering staying long enough into the afternoon to finish it. I could have really used the money, and it might get me a few brownie points with the PD in general. Even if the pay was lousy.

“How's it going?” Renee asked, not quite managing to startle me.

Her ninja skills weren't that good. Not like Marcone.

“Slowly,” I admitted. “I think I've got most of the cabinet back in order, and I've made progress with this.” I held up a file folder from the box, slightly bent at the corners and thinner than most.

“Great,” she smiled, somehow managing to be perky. She must have had a hot lunch date, because she really didn't look like the perky type. “So would you mind if I asked Karrin if we could borrow you again tomorrow?”
I blinked. There wasn't that much left. “I guess not,” I told her. “But this is really only a few hours worth.”

“Oh, that was only the first box,” she said. “There's about five more that have been circling the office. Everyone's been throwing the older cases in them and pulling folders out as needed, but it's getting a bit old.”

“I can imagine.” Five boxes? Hell's bells, they must not have filed for months. I didn’t know if five more boxes would even fit.

“Great – I'll let Karrin know to send you up here tomorrow morning, then. Have a good day.”

She left, and I stared at the files on my impromptu counter – the top of a box that was probably the same size as those floating around the office.

Did I mention how boring filing was?

It wasn't unusual for there to be strange items in my lab. I was a wizard, things like folded sunlight and pixie dust were fairly standard. Even the centuries-old skull that housed the spirit of air and intellect I called Bob didn't look out of place among the books, candles, and occasional jar of mouse scampers. All of these were items I'd collected for use in potions and spells.

The box sitting just inside the doorway, however, was ominous. I hadn't put it there. Most of the mail addressed to me was considerably smaller, and came in envelopes. Marcone had stopped ordering furniture for my lab months ago.

"Bob," I said, still keeping an eye on the strange, brown package. "What's with the box?"

The eye sockets of the skull began to glow with an orange light as the jaw chattered slightly with a large yawn. "Some dainty little thing dropped it off," he said. "Dressed in a maid's outfit, too. Absolutely adorable."

"Marcone doesn't hire dress-up maids," I said, frowning. "Says it looks bad."

"So it wasn't exactly a French maid," Bob said, somehow managing to shrug. "She was dressed up nice. Maybe she had a hot date or something. You going to open the box or what? I've been waiting all morning to see what your boy's sent you."

"He's not my boy," I snapped. "And how do you know he sent it?"

"I read the return address."

"From across the room?" If his eyesight was that good, I might need to be more careful about what I left out. He'd have a field day if he knew about the roses that had been outside my door this morning. I’d nearly tripped over it on my way to the PD for a second morning of filing.

Bob seemed to hesitate before answering. "A bit. Okay, I admit it, I mostly guessed, but I'm right."

He was a spirit of intellect. It made sense that he could make intelligent guesses. I let out a sigh and picked up the box. It wasn't a particularly large box, but it had some weight to it that startled me. Settling it on the table, I pulled out a knife I used for chopping potion ingredients and cut the tape.

Books. A lot of books. And while a few looked like the cheesy romances I bought for Bob, the vast majority of them looked a lot more scandalous than I was ever willing to buy for him.
They were the kind of books he liked, that I had only ever picked up by mistake.

"Are those what I think they are?" Bob asked, his jaw sliding on the shelf in excitement.

"No." My voice didn't shake. I closed the box back up. On the cover of the top novel had been a picture of two very nearly nude men - in a bed. Most likely completely nude under that very scandalous sheet. "Definitely not."

"You're a horrible liar, you know. Come on, let me see."

"I said no."

"Not even one?" He sounded appalled. And maybe just a bit panicked.

"He's getting them back. Obviously there's been a mistake."

"I don't think so, boss," Bob said. "He was scanning my collection pretty thoroughly the other day." He'd have noticed which books were more well-used than others, too. He was observant enough.

Stars.

"Like I said," I managed to ground out through a suddenly tight jaw, "there's been a mistake."

Marcone wasn't at the house for me to return the box of - I wasn't sure if I could even call them books. I wasn't about to keep the box any longer than necessary, however, and I wasn't going to trust the men in the guardhouse to deliver it without peeking inside.

They'd probably think I was trying to give him a gift instead of returning one.

After a few minutes and a phone call, I had a ride to Marcone's office. It looked like he was back in the hotel-like building I'd visited before, so I knew generally where we were headed. I took my duster off as my guard talked to the attendant, and some bellboy took it off to a coat room. I made certain he never got a peek inside the box.

My guard was apparently flirting with the blonde hostess, but eventually determined we were allowed up and returned to escort me to the office. Waiting for the elevator, I gave in to temptation and Listened for Marcone, hoping to catch some clue as to his plans. I wondered if this time he was the one talking to Murphy about me.

"-was glad you chose me, of course. It isn't often that I hear from you anymore." The voice was familiar. Frank, not Murphy. And he was here, not on the other side of a phone.

"I had heard you were available for work, and thought I might take advantage. Your schedule is typically full." Marcone. It didn't take a genius to recognize that voice. He sounded indulgent. I realized that I should probably stop eavesdropping. It was an inane conversation that I had no business overhearing.

But something had caused Marcone to set a wedding date, just as something had caused him to propose. I hadn’t figured out what was going on without Listening, and it bothered me.

"You know I always have time for you," Frank was saying.

"Those days are behind us now," Marcone said. "We're not kids anymore. And I'm engaged. Speaking of, how did Harry do?"
"Much better than some, though it was a bit odd." He hesitated over his words, and I wondered what he really wanted to say.

"What do you mean?"

"I hope you don't mind, but I thought I might see how sensitive he was during the first session. It makes a difference in how I can approach him in later sessions."

"I hope you didn't attempt anything I would not approve of."

"Nothing like that," Frank said. Distantly, I heard the elevator arrive. I didn't get on. The bulky guard attempted to shake me, but I moved out of his way without losing too much focus. He left, and I picked the distant conversation back up. "-consistent with men."

"So, in essence, you're miffed because my fiancé isn't attracted to you," Marcone said. "I fail to see the problem."

"How am I supposed to get him to relax if I can't -"

I'd heard enough. I stopped Listening and went to the front service desk, setting the box down on the counter hard. "You can tell John that he can have these back," I snapped.

Then I left.

One of these days, I was going to remember that Listening had only ever brought me bad news.

After five blocks, I'd lost sight of anyone tailing me. After ten, I'd made enough turns and jaywalks I was certain I'd left them behind. That was all pointless, though, when a few hours later my wanderings had me standing outside the Varsity. I hadn't been in the club since it burned down almost a year ago, but it looked like Marcone hadn't wasted any time rebuilding. The club was just as crowded as it had been when I'd stormed in and found a rat in Marcone's company, and the building wasn't even completely finished. There was still scaffolding on the outer walls, at least.

The bouncer didn't ask me any questions when I walked in, though it was still early in the evening. I'd left my coat at Marcone's office building. It was cold out, but I'd hardly noticed. No one seemed to think it odd.

I recognized the bartender from my last visit, and when I sat down at the counter he came over with a smile. I wondered how long it would be before someone called John. Or if they already had.

"Can I get you something, Mister Dresden?" He asked. "On the house, of course."

"Just a beer," I said. "Whatever."

He frowned, but obediently fetched a bottle from somewhere. "Something on your mind?"

"Why?" I asked. "Something on yours?"

His frown deepened. "Just concerned. I heard you'd left in quite a rush from somewhere, though I didn't get the details. There's people searching for you, you know."

I shrugged, and nodded to a man in a corner. "I think they found me," I said, taking a sip of the beer and wincing a bit. It was nothing like Mac's ale.

The bartender scanned the crowd, but didn't seem to find the same answer I did. While I recognized...
the man who’d tailed me while I talked with Murphy and made a few trips around town in the Beetle - when I managed to wrestle it back - the bartender apparently wasn’t as well versed in Marcone’s men. He didn’t attract attention, and he’d been sitting there when I walked in. Maybe the guy was off duty, or something.

“Still, I think I should make a call to the right people,” the bartender finally said. “The Boss is very worried.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t like John didn’t know already, and I didn’t want to get the bartender in trouble. I didn’t remember him rubbing me the wrong way at any point, and he’d been discreet when I’d been tracking down Sells. Or at least he hadn’t blabbed about how snappy I’d been when the warlock had gotten a hold of the means to kill me. “Do what you must,” I finally told him.

He slipped away, and I nursed the beer. It tasted awful, but after a few minutes my tongue was numb to to the flavor.

I waited.

It didn’t take long for the man - I would eventually drag his name from memory - to return. “I suggest you go with them when they pick you up,” he said quietly. “No fussing.”

"Excuse me?" I asked, unfortunately spewing a small amount of beer across the counter.

“The Boss is furious,” he said. “He even had cops looking for you. He tore apart two gangs, and is working on shaking down the Li house - and that’s in less than three hours. Just let him see that you’re safe.” His eyes darted to the door briefly. “He wouldn’t hurt you, Mister Dresden, but there are others who would. He knows that.”

“I know that.”

“He thought they were.”

“They weren’t.”

“Let him see it. Please. Try not to stress him so much.”

“This is ridiculous - he’s John Marcone. He doesn’t worry over the likes of me. He’s probably had the whole shakedown thing planned. It’s not like he wouldn’t have other offers if I disappeared, either.”

“Is that why you ran off?” He looked confused.

I didn’t have any answers for him. “I don’t know why I left,” I said, “but I don’t want to talk about it.” My gut had twisted some time during that overheard conversation, and I had yet to undo the knot. One of the many reasons Ebenezer, my old wizard mentor after Justin, had strongly warned against using the skill for information-gathering.

He had cautioned that Listening was an easy skill, but it was also an easy skill to get lost in. You could spend hours trying to figure out just what you had overheard, only to find you’d been Listening to the wrong conversation.

This was the second time I’d used the skill in as many days, and I was beginning to understand what he meant - and why we had only used it to listen for traps or creatures, not information. I was remembering why I hadn’t used this particular talent in over a year.
When it was clear I wasn’t going to reveal anything further, the bartender left. He didn’t go far, serving customers from where he could clearly see and hear me, and reach me within a few steps. He was obviously keeping an eye on me. I tried not to let it bother me and watched the crowd instead. It still wasn’t late enough for a heavy crowd, but it was pleasantly full enough that a man could get lost between the bodies.

If that man wasn’t as tall as I was.

When I finished the beer, I was suddenly flanked on either side by two men in jeans and t-shirts. They had the presence and muscle of men who lifted weights and did curls just for fun, though they weren’t tall or bulky. I think Marcone chooses his men from former athletes, and those two were good examples.

“I’m guessing you’re my escort back?” I asked.

They didn’t answer. The bottle was empty, but it was clear from the way the bartender had his back deliberately turned towards me that I wasn’t getting another. Marcone wasn’t even going to let me get drunk. Most vanilla mortals couldn’t get drunk off of one beer; wizards weren’t any different. I wouldn’t even get tipsy off of what I’d had.

I sighed and stood, leaving the empty bottle on the counter. The man on my right, a dark-skinned man with a ring in his ear, held a coat open for me. It wasn’t mine.

He slipped it over my shoulders anyways.

When the car stopped outside of a motel, I glared at the dark-skinned man in the front seat and didn’t get out. "This isn't the house." It might have been curt, but it was the truth.

"This is closer, and the Boss insisted," the other of the pair answered as his partner got out of the car and opened my door. Tweedledee followed suit, standing guard at the other side just in case I decided I didn't like where we were headed.

"Are you going to get out, or do you need assistance?" Tweedledum asked.

I crossed my arms and stayed where I was. So far no one from Marcone's side had made a move to harm me, putting aside Hendricks' threats. While I wouldn't have fought Hendricks or Red in the same way - or the subtle strength of John himself - these two were new, and their black t-shirts and faded blue jeans didn't intimidate the way the suits did.

That didn't stop him from reaching in the car and dragging me out by my arm, though. He deserved every bit of the right hook I delivered to his jaw.

While this man didn't have the obvious bulk of muscles Hendricks did, he didn't let go when I hit him. His hand squeezed my arm tighter - tight enough I'd have bruises shortly - and he had started moving out of the way as soon as he saw me moving to strike. I was pleased with the solid mark I'd left on his face, but the anger clearly scowling back at me was not an improvement on my situation.

I glared back as best I could, looking somewhere around his left cheek bones and not directly at his eyes. I didn't want to risk a soul-gaze. Such glimpses are intensely private and, as Marcone had shown me, dangerous.

"I'm not going to be hauled into some Holiday Inn like a dog," I told him. "You won't like what I'll do to you."
He bared his teeth, showing off a yellow coffee stain. "You won't like what the Boss'll do to you if you're not in that hotel room in five minutes, Dresden."

"Ease up," the partner said. "You know we're not supposed to hurt him."

"Then the little prima donna should get his ass inside."

I whispered the faux Latin phrase I used to gather a bit of wind and put a touch of my will into it. The man's hand was ripped from my arm as he went troubling end over end into the parking lot. He stood shakily, moving out of the way when an angry driver honked his horn at the man blocking his path. I was surprised the driver didn't get shot - I had noticed a bulky shape tucked into the back of Tweedledum's shirt as he went rolling, and it seemed like he had a short temper. Not that mine was any better at the moment, but I wasn't the one grabbing innocent wizards.

When Tweedledum looked at me, his stance and face showed fear, but not caution.

"Cut him a break, would you please," his partner asked. This man was shorter, though not smaller, and older. When I looked closer, I could see hints of grey that had been dyed to match his hair, and a few too many wrinkles to be considered young anymore. "It is his first major assignment, and we pulled him from another to complete it. Our resources were spread a bit thin as we searched for you."

I didn't see why I should be accommodating to anyone who was essentially kidnapping me, but that would have gone over as well with Tweedledee as with the partner warily approaching again.

"I don't see any reason why I should be nice to you," I said. "You're the one making a scene."

Although we'd gotten a few glances, no one was openly staring. It was past five, so the crowd was thinner than it might have been at around three, when check-in usually happened. Most of the people around were out-of-towners, as well; they wouldn't want to get involved in anything suspicious on their vacation.

The dark-skinned man seemed to realize this after a few moments, so I clued him in on the next logical conclusion: "Even if they don't interfere, do you really want to start those rumors? You want Johnny to lose business when his customers leave?"

He hesitated. The man wasn't stupid, even if the addition of one scrawny wizard had made him act like he was. People are like that around me when they know what I am. It's like their common sense takes a nosedive off a cliff, and they forget I'm also human.

"Keep your hands off me and your mouth shut unless I'm asking a question," I said. "And you should probably remember for the future: if you don't have anything nice to say, I can kick your ass all the way across this parking lot."

The man nodded. "You still need to get in that room now. The Boss is watching the camera feed."

"Let me guess, he's going to take it out on you if I don't stroll through the lobby looking healthy and whole?"

He nodded again.

"Fine. We'll go in the lobby, let him see me, then head back to the house. Problem solved."

Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple.
Being stuck in a hotel room when you are a wizard isn’t as pleasant as it might sound. I caught about half an hour of a show about space travellers before the TV static made the voices unintelligible. By the faces my two ‘guards’ were making, they hadn’t shared my opinion - but I’d actually been enjoying the show.

If Marcone wanted to get me gifts, I would have been reluctant to turn down videos of the series now that I’d had a taste of it. Maybe if the TV had been even just a few years older, I could have seen the end without losing an eardrum.

Instead I ordered pizza - charged to Marcone’s bill, of course. He owed me - and didn’t offer to share. I could give the leftovers to Toot and his friends. Marcone was still having deliveries made to their usual spot on my behalf every week or two - Toot occasionally made a point to stop by and thank me - but it wasn’t the same as actually going to see a dozen or so little pixies devour a pizza in less than a minute. Besides, I actually missed the little guys.

Marcone was late - later than he said he’d be, anyways - and there wasn’t anything else to do. I wasn’t about to take a shower with my two watchers in the room with me, nor was I going to lay down and take a nap with them here, either.

Not to mention how much I despised the idea of John walking in on me while I was asleep.

“Your boss is late,” I finally said, my mouth full of half-chewed cold pizza. “Exactly how long are we going to wait around before it’s official that he’s a no-show?”

“We stay until he shows.” Me and this guard did not get along.

“Yeah, I’m not that generous,” I said. “Sorry, Twitchy, but we could have been back at the house by now, where I could be doing actual work instead of sitting around getting stared at.”

His right eye twitched at the new nickname. I had a feeling if I called him ‘Tweedledum,’ I’d get shot at, so we’d both have to settle for Twitchy.

“I believe Mr. Marcone did not wish for you to see him in his current state, and so he has gone to clean himself up and make himself presentable using the facilities at the gym on the first floor,” his partner said. “He should arrive shortly.”

I actually didn’t like the sound of that. “Why would he need to clean up?”

Neither of the guards answered.

Scowling, I let the pieces fall into place. I’d gotten enough information at Varsity to draw some conclusions: Marcone finally had an excuse to take some frustrations out on someone, and now he was making certain it couldn’t be traced back to him.

He was washing off the blood.

I pushed past the guards and darted out the door. They were slow to react, and my legs were longer. I hit the stairs just as they were tumbling out of the room.

The first floor of the hotel had a pool and an exercise room, both fairly small, and an attached ‘shower,’ which was really just to rinse off the chlorine before going back to the room for a real shower. It didn’t take me long to locate the room - it was the only one with a furious Hendricks standing outside.

“You care to explain this little outing?” I asked, “or should I just yell at John?”
My two escorts slid to a stop behind me. “Sorry sir,” Tweedledee said. “He just took off.”

Hendricks bared his teeth in what was almost a growl. “He’s made a habit of that today,” he said, his voice almost inhuman. “Maybe we should fit him with a leash.”

“You try it, and I’ll wrap it around your throat,” I snapped. “I’m tired of being the bad guy here. Either give me a face to yell at or let me leave.”

“You’re the one in trouble here, Dresden,” Hendricks bit back at me.

“What for?”

“First off, the receptionist you left the box with? Was convinced you’d just dropped off a bomb. It took two hours for me to explain to the bomb squad you’d been trying to return a package sent to the wrong address. Then I had to explain why we were bulk-ordering a sample of steamy romance novels to a bunch of overly curious cops. And do you know where the Boss was while I was doing this?” he asked.

He didn’t give me a chance to answer. “He was out organizing the men, getting an APB put out on you, contacting anyone he knows with eyes on the street, trying to find out just who’s got a hold of you - what you saw or what you heard or who had the balls to make a move against you. To find a reason for what happened and to find you. And you were out doing what? Drinking?”

“Does it matter?” I asked. “You’ve already decided whatever reason I have wasn’t good enough. I don’t need to explain myself to a brainless thug who doesn’t want to listen.”

“Don’t push, Dresden,” he growled. “It’s been a long day.”

“You think you’re the only one inconvenienced today?” I asked. “Take a look at my life. The people who need me can’t reach me and the people who can reach me don’t need me. Then things blow up into a mess of hexenwolves and shadowmen and you get in my face and in my way-”

“Harry,” John interrupted, stepping out of the room behind a red-faced Hendricks. It clashed with his hair. “I expected you upstairs.”

“I got tired of waiting,” I said slowly, taking a moment to look him over. He was wearing a custom-fit pair of jeans that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe, and a button-down shirt with all the buttons undone. I could see the two knife-holsters, one on each forearm, where the sleeves weren’t buttoned, with the knives secured. He wasn’t wearing a gun that I could see; his chest was still wet from rinsing off and his shirt was clinging to his skin. “You’re bleeding,” I finally said. He was. The skin had broken around the first two knuckles of each hand. I could see some smeared around the engagement ring.

Marcone glanced at his hands briefly. “It’s a bad place for a wound,” he answered. “The skin moves too much.”

“You should be careful with the blood,” I found myself saying, almost without thought.

He nodded. “Are you okay?” he asked. “If it bothers you, I can have them bandaged.”

“I’m fine,” I snapped. I was okay, but I hadn’t expected him to be injured. He was Marcone, he always had complete control over everything. I had thought Hendricks - and the bartender - were exaggerating. “Why all the fuss?”

He didn’t answer right away, watching me instead. “I was worried,” he said after a moment. “You
weren’t acting like yourself.’

Neither was he, but I wasn’t beating up anyone who’d looked at him sideways. “I just needed to be elsewhere. I didn’t think you’d mind. You had company. I didn’t appreciate the gift, by the way.”

“Is that why you ran off?” he asked, seemingly startled. “I saw your collection and thought-”

“They’re Bob’s.”

Marcone froze. “They’re - what?”

“Bob’s,” I said. I couldn’t exactly tell him who Bob was, since that knowledge was pretty sensitive - Bob knew some scary spells that, in the wrong hands, would be disaster on a worldwide scale. He also had some nasty faeries after him, and it was my job to protect him. “He’s - not a friend, exactly, but something of a co-worker. He’s also not human and doesn’t really have a body right now. He lost it. Those books you were snooping? That’s his payment.”

“A non-human, bodiless co-worker you pay in books?” John asked.

I frowned. “Okay, when you say it, it doesn’t sound sane. But yes. Essentially.”

“You work with ghosts?” Hendricks asked. He looked floored.

“Stars, no. Ghosts are just impressions of people. A sort of after-image. They don’t think, and they get nasty when something interrupts their routine. Bob’s a spirit.”

To my surprise, Hendricks was seriously thinking about what I’d said. His hand was tapping his thigh, as if itching for a pencil - or a gun - and his eyebrows had lowered in concentration.

I didn’t think Cujo was an intellectual, but it seemed he was at least trying to understand. Unlike Tweedledee behind me who was not-so-quietly whispering: “There’s a difference?”

I ignored him.

“Does Bob visit your office often?” John asked.

“Fairly,” I hedged. It was a lot, but I wasn’t going to tell Marcone he had another houseguest.

“Perhaps I could meet him.”

“No,” I said, putting a hard edge on the words and gritting my teeth. The last thing I needed was for Bob to tell John various ways to tumble me into bed.

“You’re upset,” John said, looking away. “It’s been a long day for all of us. Joey, Ren, you’re free to return to your duties. Nathan can drive Harry and myself home.”

Just what I needed: another car ride with Marcone.

My next session with Frank came, in my opinion, much too soon. I was straddling a chair and stiffly staring at a closed door while he tried to rub out kinks in muscles that didn't care much for his touch.

Now that I knew he was using me to try and get John's attention, I wasn't all that keen to continue.

"You're very tight today," he said. "Is something wrong?"
"Nothing worse than usual," I answered. I really didn't want to talk about it, and Frank didn't push. His hands slid down an arm and worked the shoulder muscles sideways as he watched me.

"John was in a foul mood the other day too - well, as foul a mood as he ever lets show. He actually walked out on me while we were meeting!"

“That so?” I asked, doing my best not to let on that I already knew. “You giving him sessions as well?”

He laughed. “Not hardly. It would take more than oil and an hour to unbend that spine! No, we were just catching up. He had a mountain of paperwork though - and he never did call to say why he ran out. His workers were very tight-lipped about the whole mess.”

I shrugged a bit. “John’s not one to get riled up about things. I’m sure he had everything under control.”

Frank moved again, working on my shoulders from the front. I moved my gaze to the floor, burying my mouth in my arms. He’d put his crotch right in front of my face. He used the angle to work on the back of my neck.

“You think so?” he asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Just making conversation,” Frank said. “Thought it might help you relax.”

I didn’t really know how that was supposed to work. Was talking about how my almost-stalker getting freaked out when I left his careful watch supposed to make me feel better? It didn’t seem like my thoughts meant much of anything once Marcone got worked up. “I’m not in a good mood for this,” I said finally.

“We could resched-”

“I’d rather just get it over with.”

He sighed, seeming to slouch back, but when I glanced up I still had an eyeful of his zipper. His hands didn’t slow either. “I don’t want this to be a chore, Harry. It defeats the purpose.”

“I really don’t care.” What, did he expect us to be friends? Marcone was paying him for a service, and I was to be the recipient of that service. That didn’t exactly make us chummy.

“Well, aren’t you cranky.”

“I’m a wizard. It’s in the job description.”

“Or maybe you just need to go home and let John give you a more intimate massage.”

I snorted. “That part of the package, too? Advice on how to get laid.” Between him, Hendricks, and Bob, you would have thought I was the one being unreasonable. Everything was about sex lately.

“You’re more tense than any I’ve ever had to massage. I have to find some way to make certain you don’t get any tighter before our next session.”

“Yes, and I’m supposed to be happily reminded of how that should be done by you waving your crotch in my face? Want me to lick your unmentionables, now? I’m sure John would love to hear about that.”
Frank froze for a moment, and then quickly backed away. “I hadn’t meant to make you uncomfortable,” he said - and suddenly he was the one who was tense. “Perhaps some different music will help.”

He took off his gloves to handle the fancy CD player hidden in the wall, behind a drape. The almost-curtains had been placed all around the room to hide less visually appealing aspects, such as the CD panel or the support beam that made the wall jut out awkwardly. One even hid a bar along the wall that hadn’t been removed when the room had been converted from a ballet practice area. The last time I’d had a session, the drapes had been removed. Now they hung from the ceiling in bright red stripes.

The CD player switched over flawlessly, Celtic flutes coming to a sudden stop and being replaced by something more natural. “What is that?” I asked as he retrieved a fresh pair of gloves from a box and poured oil over the latex.

“Sounds of the rainforest,” he said. “I would have gone with the ocean, normally, but it doesn’t blend well with the fountain.”

He came up behind me this time, working on my spine. His thumbs pressed on either side of the bone, his fingers reaching towards my armpits. When I glanced back, he was kneeling.

I almost preferred him in front of me.

The rest of the session went on in silence, at least on my side. Frank occasionally attempted conversation, but they were weak attempts at best and I didn’t respond. When it ended, Marcone didn’t show.

I wasn’t disappointed, or angry, or even confused. I was just tired. Getting escorted everywhere and practically locked in a maze of a house did that to a guy.

On the positive side, though, my mental floor-plan of the house was improving, and I’d moved several of the books stashed in the closet to the bookshelf in my bedroom.

I dredged through eight more sessions with Frank. Only eight more to go, right? I hoped, at least. Each session was stranger than the last; in an attempt to help me relax, Frank was trying different methods. Different incense, music, even once a book on tape. He’d also started bringing gifts, and remembering Marcone’s ‘advice,’ I accepted them grudgingly.

A book. Wine. A card to a tattoo parlor. A bottle of oil he’d handed over with a sly look and a wink.

Despite the rocky start, Marcone had shown at five of the eight sessions. Twice he had hastily bandaged knuckles. I guess he was still dealing with the fallout of turning several rival gangs on their heads trying to shake me out.

We didn’t touch, and we definitely didn’t kiss. I was finding myself getting more at ease with his visits, though. Either Frank was doing a good job or I was becoming more comfortable with Marcone. Probably the latter. The more times you emerge from danger unscathed, the more you believe yourself to be invulnerable to danger. And as often as I told myself Marcone was the bad guy, my body was beginning to doubt my brain.

That wasn’t going to stop me from discovering what demon had been chasing Marcone. I suspected it wasn’t anything supernatural or magical in nature; possibly it was just an elaborate performance for an audience I couldn’t see. I almost never saw him in private anymore, but then again it was like he’d super-glued guards to my side.
Twice I had discretely checked for spells and found nothing – although that wouldn’t help me find an extra dose of Benadryl in his coffee or anything like that.

Once again, I found myself staring at the off-beat haunted church, this time from the street where several tourists were taking pictures. I didn’t get too close; I didn’t want to fuel any more ghost stories. It had taken two weeks to arrange a discreet meeting with Rex, and I’d spent three hours slowly losing my guards.

With any luck, it’d be worth the trouble.

“Some place, huh?” Rex said beside me, startling me. I had heard someone near me, but I had thought it was another tourist. Rex looked the same as before, with the added bonus of his own dusty-brown trench coat and leather gloves. His thumbs were hooked in his jean pockets, holding the front of his coat open, and while it looked like something out of a new-age movie it couldn’t have been very warm. It was too light; he didn’t have enough layers. His crooked grin wasn’t as obvious today. Apparently he was as amused to be out in the cold as I was.

“I guess so,” I told him. “God hasn’t really done much for me lately, though, so it seems a little impractical to be asking Him for help.”

“That’s what you get for being a wizard,” Rex quipped. “Of course, they say that this place is haunted.”

I smirked, and told him truthfully: “It is.”

“The little girl?”

“Older than that,” I answered – then added, only partly teasing, “bloodier, too.”

That got him to smile. “I’d love to hear about it someday, but I don’t think that ghost stories are why you’re out here all by your lonesome.”

“You never know,” I said, thinking back to my meeting with Michael. “Besides, I’m not really alone here, am I? I’ve got the ghosts to keep me company, even if they are creepy,” I added with a bit of a smile. I reminded myself that I was supposed to be Marcone’s husband-to-be with a queasy stomach. Dodging Marcone’s guards to talk to Rex wasn’t exactly expected of me.

“There are some who might take advantage of your apparent solitary state, however false it is. Come, let’s walk.” He clapped me on the shoulder with one gloved hand and led me away. “Tell me why you called me, and why I couldn’t tell your fiancé we were meeting.”

“It’s about John,” I said, remembering at the last minute to use his first name and not any of the other names I’d like to call him. Scumbag was somewhere near the top of the list. “Something’s bothering him, and I want to know what.”

“Ah – concern for your beloved,” Rex commented, and I didn’t correct him. “How valiant and noble. John did say that you were a good sort, you know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I don’t remember hearing a question.”

Christ, but this man was as difficult to talk to as some of the lesser fae. He didn’t hold a torch to any of the higher-ups, and no mortal could match the Queens for twisting words, but he certainly knew how to frustrate a man. John wasn’t this difficult to talk to. Work with, yes, and his contracts could
probably spin circles around that little side-step without even trying.

But he was easier to talk to.

“What or who is bothering John Marcone?” I asked straight out.

“I don’t know – but I can find out.”

“And how much will that cost me?”

Rex laughed. “Oh, Harry, you could never pay me. You can’t afford to if you’re trying to keep this out of your lover’s eyes.”

“You must want something, then, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Rex kept walking past a few cars and tourist traps; I had to keep pace with him, which wasn’t hard, but it would have been better if I knew where we were heading.

“How about the pleasure of your company for a few hours?”

“I’m not a whore,” I snapped, firmly telling myself that it was not a lie. “I’m engaged.”

“To Marcone,” Rex answered. “You wear his ring, and no doubt share his bed.”

I grit my teeth and didn’t say anything to the contrary, as much as I wanted to. The ring had been a cold weight around my finger, and I’d slowly begun to forget I was wearing it. Sometimes, at least.

“What do you really want, then?”

“Information. Marcone seems awfully interested in this arcane nonsense you play around with, and I want to know what he knows. I want to know how much of it is real.” He gestured to a limo. “A few hours in my company, and you can go back to comfortably warming your beloved’s bed. It shouldn’t take long.”

I hesitated. My mother hadn’t lived long enough to teach me not to get in the car with strangers offering candy, but my time with Justin had taught me to sense when someone was trying to push me into a corner. Murphy did it sometimes, as did Bob. Marcone did it a lot, and I couldn’t always see where he was pushing me. That was scarier. With Murphy and Bob, at least I knew what they wanted.

Rex was pushing like that now.

I got in the car.

“Good choice,” he said, then called up front: “Mr. Hendricks, if you could drive us to Johnny’s please.”

Crap. “You rat bastard.”

Rex smiled at me, and that crooked grin was back and as creepy as ever. I wondered briefly if his mother had been friends with a gargoyle. “I apologize for the deception, and I understand your concern, but I felt that this was something better handled by John himself.”

“I should have guessed you would be in on all of this,” I hissed distractedly, wondering if we were going fast enough that a blown engine would be a bad thing. “That’s why you put me off all week.”

“I think it’s cute, how much you think you can help, but it’s time to put away the blinders, Harry.
You’re nothing more than his mistress, a modern angel in the house, and you should act like it. Throw a party, bake cookies, help a charity – those homey little domestic things John can’t be bothered with himself.”

“I’m a private investigator,” I snapped, “not a housewife.” The door was locked, the handle unmoving as my hand landed on it and tried to force it. Rex made some sort of ‘tsk’ing sound at me, the kind used on small children or misbehaving puppies. It was insulting.

Apparently I was loosing a bit of that ‘wisdom’ that makes wizards so seemingly wonderful, because I hadn’t come prepared for any sort of fight or a trap, and was only just realizing how dangerous that had been. It had been stupid. Who knew how Marcone was going to react?

“You should know your place. What if I wasn’t as nice as I am? Wasn’t as… loyal? That could be my man up there driving. I could take you away to a nice little house on the lake, tie you to my bed, and have my wicked way with you as often as I liked. Or I could just have him drive around while I make use of you in this very spacious limo, and drop you off on John’s doorstep when I was finished. Do you think Marcone wants used goods? Do you think he’d care if you were willing or not? He has an image to maintain, and it’s tarnished enough with him so serious about a man. Marcone’s marrying for love. I can get that. I think you’re a little nuts, but so’s he, so you should be good for each other. Maybe you could show a little love in return by not making this so hard on him. I’m certain he’d rather other things be hard.”

I stared at him in shock, and then started laughing. Rex thought that I was some poor dead beat who’d gone a little round the bend, but had managed to fall in love with John anyways – and get that love returned for my trouble.

It was hilarious.

Rex didn’t get the humor, but I didn’t expect him to.

I didn’t speak to him for the rest of the ride back to my prison-in-all-but-name, though he tried several times to start conversation. He tried for that information he wanted, but I didn’t see any reason to give it to him when he had failed to hold up his side of the deal. I’d played into his hand enough as it was.

John was going to be pissed.

Well, I could be pissed right back.

I stared out of the window into the snow-covered yard. If asked, I would have said that I was looking like a wizard. You know, brooding.

Ruminating on the evils of the world.

“Really, John, can’t you tell him something?” Rex asked, sounding amused. “He was really concerned about you. Think of all the trouble he went through.”

“I’ll tell him what I can later,” Marcone answered, not sounding nearly as pleased. “It really shouldn’t be aired out over lunch.”

Rex’s reflection in the glass nodded, and I wondered if I should warn Marcone about mirrors. He probably couldn’t live without them, and it would serve him right if a demon came through and ate him. “If I were you, I’d keep more bodyguards on him as well. Anyone could have just picked him up off the street.”
Marcone hummed in agreement. “I did, the first time I saw him, and still try on occasion. He’s shown an ability to slip them when he really wants to. When we first met, he was working a case I didn’t want him involved in, but it turned out to be to my benefit to let him pursue it.”

“Really?”

“He uncovered a few turncoats in my midst in the process, and put several renegades out of business, all without getting the police too deeply involved. I did lighten his guard, but he never quite forgave himself for the fire, or the deaths.”

Rex gave me an appraising look I ignored. “Not bad for a man like him, I guess. A little tall, otherwise physically average. Wouldn’t have made it out on the streets, but could have made it on the basketball court. What do you see in him?”

I heard Marcone’s smirk. It was, I felt, a rather distinctive sound that never boded well for me. “I’ve seen into his soul,” he said, “and I found a gem worth keeping.”

I tensed. Soul gazes were very - intimate. Private. Wizards didn’t talk about them, even to find out about themselves. It just wasn’t done.

I would have slept with Marcone before letting him see my soul if I’d had the chance to think about it. Very few people have soulgazed with me. It isn’t exactly sunshine and rainbows in there.

“It must have been a very raw gem,” Rex said, breaking my chain of thought.

“Yes,” Marcone conceded, damn him, “but it also had potential. And power.”

I repressed the urge to remind them both that I was still in the room and could still hear them, and then repressed a second urge to yell at Marcone that a soulgaze was private – I didn’t go blabbing to others about his grocery store mind, so he shouldn’t be blabbing about mine. No matter what pretty words he was dolling it up in.

The memory of Marcone’s soul was still a little scary. I hadn’t seen more than a glimpse, but that was more than enough of a reminder that this man took what he wanted and gave little in return. A man with dark secrets he himself rarely acknowledged. They were simply a part of him, like stripes on a cat. A dangerous cat.

A tiger.

I heard the clink of silverware as the table was set, and then Marcone asked: “Harry, won’t you join us?”

I ignored him.

“Harry.” His voice was firmer; a warning.

“I’m not hungry,” I bit out.

“I’m afraid he’s angry with me,” Marcone said to Rex, his tone apologizing. “Give me a moment, and we’ll join you.”

Rex seated himself just as Marcone’s hands landed on my hips. “You are being very rude. If I lose business with Rex because of this, it’ll be coming out of your hide – and I mean that both literally and financially. I’m already conceding a good deal to him for bringing you home unharmed.”
I nodded. There wasn’t much else I could do.

Marcone’s hands tightened. “Come and eat. You’re too thin.”

I let him lead me away from the window and to the table. I could eat and fake being polite long enough to get through this, and then try other avenues. Rex was the only associate of Marcone’s that I knew of by name, but I had seen others, and I could spot an underdog when I saw one. I knew places John Marcone owned – visiting the patrons couldn’t hurt. His clubs were exclusive; half the clientele were bound to walk on the other side of the law.

One little detour wasn’t going to keep me from getting to the bottom of this mess, whether my fiancé approved of the interference or not.

I didn’t bother trying to slip away while Marcone showed Rex the door. He’d implied I would get some answers, and I was going to get as many as I could.

When John returned, he looked tired. “Do you have any idea what he wanted to do to you?”

I had a vague idea, and it wasn’t anything to brag about. I’d never gotten so much attention from men - Bob’s comments didn’t count, he wasn’t serious - and I couldn’t really say I knew what to do with it.

“I could have handled it,” I said instead.

“I don’t doubt that you could have,” John said. “What I doubt is why you thought it necessary.”

I stared at him. Marcone looked completely normal. Like someone’s uncle who had just spent a tiring day with a bundle of troublesome kids. He didn’t look like someone who worked with criminals. Who was a criminal himself. “I was hoping to find out what was wrong with you.”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?”

“I don’t know - maybe all the guards following me around, the fact that you set a wedding date. Maybe it’s the way you always seem to be making a show of us, or the sudden need to give me gifts.”

“How are you enjoying your time with Frank?” he asked, picking up the trail of thought while sitting down at the table. He pulled the chair out so he was sitting casually, facing me and leaving a significant space between us. He kept his hands visible, but unlike Frank the move was natural for John. “I’m sorry I can’t always be there, but Drake tells me you seem to be enjoying your time, for the most part. Or napping.”

“If enjoying myself means accepting the inevitable, I guess you could say that.” It wasn’t what I would have chosen for myself, but it was acceptable. I wouldn’t have turned it down if it was from Murphy. Though I could do without Frank’s attempts at conversation and the oddity of his gloves. “Is it normal for him to wear gloves all the time?” I found myself asking. I hadn’t actually meant to, but the question had slipped out. I had meant to turn the conversation back to what was wrong with John - but there were just so many things about John that were contradictory or strange.

Marcone shook his head. “Frank doesn’t like to touch people.”

“Then isn’t he in the wrong line of work?”

“When he was training, he did not have the same issue. He is still very good, and you deserve the
best. Even if he is a bit odd. Most don’t consider it off-putting."

“That’s what I mean, you suddenly deciding I need Chicago’s best massage four days a week,” I said, gesturing. Marcone startled a bit in his seat when I waved my hand, and I noticed what he did a moment later.

During lunch, I had excused myself for a moment for a bathroom break. I’d needed to get away from the ‘polite’ talk. Before I’d washed my hands, I’d taken off the engagement ring.

I’d forgotten to put it back on.

I clenched my fist and crossed my arms, hiding the hand. Marcone was going to be furious, especially if Rex had noticed.

“You don’t do things like that,” I continued, pretending he hadn’t noticed and I hadn’t noticed he’d noticed. “Not for me. You don’t go telling the PD what jobs I can take. It costs you money and prevents me from paying you the money I owe. You don’t spend money on gifts, because there’s no way I can return the favor. So why are you?”

If I thought John was tired before, it seemed as though that weariness had suddenly magnified. “I am not your enemy, Harry,” he said. “Nor am I a mercenary. Have you never had someone give you a gift just because he thought you might want it?”

“In my experience, life isn’t that simple. I know you aren’t. I know you want something. I just can’t figure out what.”

His eyes, still the color of old dollar bills, found mine. I wouldn’t say they were exactly dancing with mirth, but there was something about the way he looked at me that told me he’d just found me both amusing and endearing. It was the sort of look you give a child who’s made a mess of the kitchen just to bring you breakfast in bed. I didn’t know how to interpret that look; I couldn’t remember anyone directing it at me since my father.

“You don’t have to pay for the gifts, Harry,” he said. “They’re yours because I want you to have them.”

He stood, stretching. “There’s still work for me to do today, so I’ll have to get back to it. Next time you’d like to know something, though, please just ask me. It’s safer that way.”

“And you can tell if you’ve been drugged?”

He paused. “Is that a concern?”

“I know you’re not cursed, and you haven’t been affected by any spells recently. I checked. Most black magic - and this would most certainly count - leaves a mark not only on the spellcaster, but on the victim as well. I know you aren’t casting black magic; your personality hasn’t started warping that way, and there isn’t a foul taste in your aura.” That had been an experience. Marcone’s aura was a lot cleaner than I’d expected it to be, though I probably shouldn’t have been surprised. Marcone followed his morals and ideals strictly, the difference was his morals and ideas weren’t the same as those most vanilla mortals held.

“I’m relieved to hear that,” he said, his shoulders slumping slightly in a way that meant I’d eased some sort of burden. “So you can actually see if someone’s been targeted by a spell?”

“No,” I said. “I can tell if you’ve been cursed by black magic or have any active spells on you. It’s not the same thing.”
“Perhaps you should explain.”

I shook my head. “I’m not permitted to explain.” There was just a bit of resentment in me for that. If I had been able to explain the Laws, even admit to the existence of the Council, try and explain the Wardens and the Merlin and wizards of the Council operated, I could have avoided some of the mess with Murphy. I could have kept her from being hurt, or given her someone to turn to when I wasn’t available - or even someone to ask for a second opinion. “You’re aware the Council exists, since you overheard me talking about it - but you aren’t aware of the rules it has.”

“First rule of Fight Club?”

I paused, thrown by the sudden change of subject. “What?”

He gave me an odd look. “I can accept that you didn’t have the opportunity to see the movie, but did you not read the book?”

“It doesn’t sound like one I would have picked up,” I said. “Why?”

“The first rule of Fight Club is that you don’t talk about Fight Club,” he said, smiling. “Sounds like your wizard Council is similar.”

“Don’t tell them that. They’d probably go after the author for giving away Council secrets.”

“I am hoping that is where the similarities end,” he said. “What type of books do you normally read? If those books on your shelf aren’t actually yours.”

“They’re still in one of your closets, I think. My taste varies, depending on what’s available.”

“Just not romance.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, not romance. Not what Bob reads, anyways. You’d think after a few thousand years he’d lose the hormone kick.”

John chuckled, and it suddenly hit me: I was having a civil conversation with John Marcone. A conversation I didn’t have to have and I was having it anyways. We weren’t arguing, he wasn’t demanding things, we were just talking.

“I should go,” I said, and then left before he could contradict me.

Maybe I was the one who needed checked for drugs.

“Bob,” I called out, collapsing in the rolling chair that had appeared in my temporary lab when I was still setting it up. It hadn’t taken me long to retrieve the ring and put it back on, but I’d felt a bit embarrassed by the slip. “Bob, wake up.”

The orange lights slowly blinked to life in the skull that sat surrounded by old romance novels and porn on a shelf eye-level with me on the wall. His collection had been growing slowly as the weeks rolled on, and had been growing increasingly more homosexual. I had a feeling Marcone was using the books I’d tried to return, but I couldn’t be sure. He knew they weren’t for me now, so I wasn’t sure what he was trying to accomplish.

The teeth clacked together noisily as Bob yawned, somehow managing not to look stupid without any skin. “So Boss, I see you’ve finally decided to grace me with your wondrous presence.”

I hadn’t seen Bob in a few days - I had spent most of that time finalizing the meeting with Rex - but
the sarcasm seemed a bit much. Then again, this was Bob. Sarcasm and sex were his defaults. “I’m not the one sleeping in a two-thousand year old skull when my boss is working.”

“Oh come now, Harry, you know this skull is much older than that.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right, right. And I keep you around just for the conversation.”

Bob huffed. “No need to be rude about age, young whippersnapper. Why, you’ve barely scratched the surface on the potential of magic.”

“I know,” I sighed, looking around at all that I had. “And it still seems like too much.” It wasn’t just the magic itself anymore, it was what being open about magic had done to my life. I was beginning to see why most wizards considered it troublesome to be known. Once John had known...

“So what are we working on today? Love potions? Lubrication potions? Spell-enhanced sex toys?”

“Gah! Bob!” I scolded, not even wanting to know how he knew those things. “Don’t be stupid!” Was everything about sex?

“Well it’s not like they wouldn’t be useful,” he muttered. “Considering what an obvious virgin you are with men, you need all the help you can get. And maybe some practice as well – I happen to know a spell for summoning a creature to help. Granted, it might kill you, and you never know which one you’ll get, but it would be worth it. If you let me watch, I might even tell you how to please it so you won’t get sucked dry.”

“I’m not here for sex advice,” I told him, my face heating. “And we don’t have a job at the moment. Marcone’s been cutting me off, even from the station. He’s getting protective. Or crazy. It’s hard to tell the difference.”

Bob paused, somehow managing to frown. “Why are you here then?”

“Just because I don’t have work doesn’t mean I can’t learn.”

Bob’s eyes gleamed, suddenly brighter in the glowing sockets. It had been a long time since I’d actually gone through lessons; Justin had been strict about doing them daily, but since then I’d been relying heavily on Bob to help me out with what I needed now, making certain I knew how to execute when the time came. If there was one thing Bob loved, it was reveling in the fact that he knew more than anyone else – and showing off that knowledge. He wasn’t the best teacher, but he certainly knew his stuff.

He also liked to constantly remind me I wasn’t as good as I hoped I was.

“Very well,” he stated primly, his voice betraying the fact that he was as pleased as punch to actually be doing lessons again. “Let’s begin with a review.”

I leaned back in the chair and did my best to answer the questions to Bob’s satisfaction.

Frank’s hands eased the sore muscles in my shoulder slowly. I’d hunched over my lab table a bit too much the past few days, trying to find an easy way to communicate with other non-wizards. Now, my shoulders were protesting the position I’d put them in.

“I’m surprised you don’t have any marks,” Frank was saying. It wasn’t the first time he’d brought it up, probing for the reason behind my lack of love bites after the first one he’d seen. “John used to be fond of tattoos - much more permanent than a ring that can be slipped off at any time.”
I made a sort-of agreeing sound. John’s marks weren’t permanent, but he’d made them. In obvious places too. I didn’t think Frank knew about me forgetting the ring a few days ago - John wouldn’t have wanted that rumor spreading - but I didn’t consider it a big deal if he did.

“Perhaps you’re just waiting for the honeymoon for a mark like that? Or are you still deciding?”

John hadn’t mentioned anything, but I didn’t particularly feel like having that conversation with the guy who had tried to get in John’s pants. Not that I would mind if Marcone no longer wanted that from me, but it was horribly rude to just go after a guy when he was already involved.

Frank’s hands tightened on my shoulders when Red’s cell phone went off. He’d been startled, and I had been too; I hadn’t even realized Red carried one.

“Would you mind going into the hall?” Frank asked.

Red glanced at him for a moment, a displeased look on his face, but he complied. Frank closed the door behind him. “So we don’t have to listen to him,” he said. “I know why they call them gruntmen - they hardly seem capable of civilized speech.”

I didn’t answer that, either. There was still a good 45 minutes left in the session, and though I did allow myself to enjoy the massage I still didn’t feel any desire to talk to Frank.

Frank went back to the table, presumably to get more oil before starting on my neck muscles. I recognized the smell on his hands when one latex-covered palm covered my mouth.

I was out within moments.

I wasn’t sure how long I was unconscious, but it couldn’t have been very long. Frank hadn’t used much of the drug, I guessed, but I was still feeling the effects. I didn’t have a shirt on, so the first thing I noticed was the chill. My arms were sore and heavy, and it didn’t take me long to realize they’d been restrained above my head. Frank must have pulled me out of the chair and dragged me to the wall, because I was sitting on the ground with my arms tied above my head. I couldn’t tell what had woken me up.

“Awake again?” Frank asked, coming into my view. I was sideways to the wall, facing away from the door. The table with the oils was on the other side of the room, and the fountain in front of me.

“How-” my mouth was too dry to speak, and the words died in my throat.

“You should know, I don’t like to be ignored,” Frank said, rising. “If you hadn’t been so rude, I might have been able to go about this the proper way. I did try to suggest it, after all. I don’t even have the proper tools here, but I have heard that some older, poorer countries did their work this way - granted, they are more controlled scars than true marks, but John deserves to have his mark on you.”

“You-” I almost gagged on the thought that he was going to use some medieval method to tattoo me. On John’s behalf.

Stars.

“Yes, I would gladly take your place. Unfortunately, John has made it quite clear he no longer desires me,” Frank said. “I don’t blame him - it was many, many years ago. Before he made all that money. If I’d known how far he would go, I would have stuck around longer. We were both grunts back then, but it was clear Johnny was much, much more than just a grunt, and we couldn’t afford to
be open about what we were. And then I lost him.

“You should be grateful, you know. He really is a gentleman with his lovers. Treats them very well. And he seems to think you’ll be the only one from now on.”

I honestly didn’t know how John treated his lovers because I wasn’t one. I wasn’t going to say that to Frank, however - not when he’d apparently taken a jump off the deep end.

I finally got enough saliva in my mouth to speak, though moving would take a few more minutes. “Why this way?” I asked, trying to wrap my mind around what was going on. “Why not just say something?”

“I told you: I don’t like being ignored,” Frank said. I couldn’t see where he was or what he was doing, but I was sure I wasn’t going to like it. I tried to shift into a better position and discovered my ankles had been tied together with a strip of red silk - likely cut from one of the drapes. It made movement even more awkward. “Johnny doesn’t need someone who ignores him.”

“Because he’s a gentleman?” I asked. I felt my shield bracelet on my wrist still, and started gathering my will. It was hard to focus, however, with the edge of drugs still in my system and the pull of running water under me. A shield might just make him angry; I needed a way to get him out of commission for long enough to get away.

“Exactly!” Frank said. He was closer. “You know, you don’t realize how great that is until you get lovers who aren’t as considerate. I’ve had some of those. Some people just like it rough. I even had one lover who really enjoyed that I’d once bedded the great Gentleman Johnny. She’s the one who showed me this method.”

I felt the knife cut into my skin moments later, and jerked away.

“Easy now!” Frank said, grabbing my side. “You’ll ruin the design. It took me ages to get it right.” The blade cut in again, not deep but still painful. “I’m going to carve a tiger in your skin, then use some dyes to color the cuts. You’ll be recognized then - even if you try to get another lover, they won’t take you when they see you’re his. Not with a mark like this. Which is good; John doesn’t need another whore.”

I wasn’t an expert on what Marcone needed or who he’d bedded, but I didn’t need someone taking a knife to my back. I let myself go slack, hoping he’d come around to check on me so I could get a target - if I let magic loose without one, I could miss him entirely. Or kill him.

“You haven’t passed out, have you?” he asked, shaking my shoulder.

I bit my lip against the sharp pain, and stayed still. I may have lost a few moments trying to breathe.

“Harry?” Frank asked, and he was suddenly in front of me, my blood on his hands.

I whispered a wind spell and let the magic I had gathered loose in a solid blow to his midsection.

Frank went flying into the fountain, landing on his backside and hitting his head on part of the design. He didn’t get up, but he wasn’t underwater and I could see him breathing. I hadn’t killed him, thank the fae.

I was breathing hard myself, trying to catch my breath. I hurt. I just hoped Frank didn’t wake up before I found some way to get out of my bindings.

While I was catching my breath, I heard someone break down the door. I snarled, pulling at the
bindings once more and attempting to gather up more magic in pure reaction. I was pissed enough that I didn’t care what they wanted, I just wanted them gone.

Someone fired a gun – at the fountain. I stilled, panting harder. I hadn’t gathered enough magic yet to throw them off, but the unexpected turn had startled me. I took a chance and looked over my shoulder to see Marcone pass the gun off to Red and remove gloves from his hands. He still had his coat on.

“He should have known better than to touch what was not his,” Marcone said slowly as he approached.

“I belong to no one,” I bit back, fists clenched, still pulling against my bonds.

“You are my fiancé,” Marcone countered.

“Yeah right,” I huffed, and started gathering what I could again. There was no elegance to what I was doing, no spell to shape the magic – just pure intent and pain. And fear.

I am not ashamed to admit I was afraid of what Marcone might do to me.

“You will have to forgive me for placing you in the middle of this,” Marcone said, touching my arm lightly. “When I began looking for traitors in the midst of my home, I did not suspect Frank to be one of them. This was meant to be a gift.”

It didn’t help my anger. “And what made him turn on you, huh? Getting better deals elsewhere, just like Gimpy?” I asked, rubbing in his face the fact that this wasn’t the first turncoat in his company that had blatantly turned on me. “Or just better lovers?”

“Unfortunately, no, it wasn’t as simple as that.”

I pulled at the bonds. Marcone rubbed at my lower back, avoiding the cuts and letting me gather up strength against restraints that simply were not budging. I heard someone approaching, and without thought let the magic I held rush the stranger in pure instinctive reaction, slamming him against the far wall. A quick look showed it had been Red, a glass of some drink smashed into the wall beside him and dripping onto the ground.

I was panting again, not quite ready to gather up the power for a third blow, not knowing if I could. Marcone was still a danger, but at least with him I had a faint hope that he would not damage his ‘investment.’

“Hmm,” he hummed, still stroking my back in an irritatingly soothing manner. “Apparently running water beneath you is not enough to completely negate your magic. Perhaps I should warn the staff to be a little more cautious.”

“Cut me loose.”

“Hendricks is fetching some bandages, which we’ll need to put on those wrists once the ties come off. He’s also bringing some lotion to rub into your wounds. Please be kind enough not to throw him against the wall when he arrives.”

I panted, and didn’t tell him that I didn’t know if I could.

“Unfortunately, there are several within the city who have not taken lightly the fact that my intended is a male – nor that he is a wizard. I have attempted to keep assassination attempts and other unsavory factors from reaching you, however I cannot soulgaze with everyone as I did with you, and
mindreading is far beyond my current capabilities.”

I snorted. Inelegant, yes, but at the moment I was lucky I could. My heart rate was slowing back to normal, and I almost had my breathing back under control, though I still felt like I had just finished a marathon without stretching first. And I was sweating like a pig. I needed a shower.

“Several of these displeased workers fell within my own organization, and so I have, for the past few weeks, been working to eliminate them. Ah – there’s Mr. Hendricks. Please refrain from attacking him,” Marcone commented, as if this were an everyday occurrence. I watched the larger man approach, hand over a bag, and then go to check on Red. Once he was certain the other man was breathing and had a pulse, he simply stood there.

Guess I still needed a bodyguard.

I hissed at the feeling of a warm, wet cloth meeting the broken skin. “He wasn’t exactly against you,” I told him. “He just thought I didn’t appreciate you.”

“You don’t,” John said. “And I don’t expect you to.”

“He wanted to mark me as yours.”

“As appealing as it would be to see you marked, bound and sore in uncomfortable places, this was not what I had in mind,” Marcone said, his voice laced with sympathy. “Not at all.” That was angry.

“If you think I’m going to let you tie me up you’d better start re-thinking this relationship, because it’s not going to happen,” I snarled. “I’m not into that crap.”

Marcone chuckled. “Such a strong statement, though after this I can see how you might be reluctant.”

“Never going to happen,” I said, just in case he didn’t get the point the first time.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to trade your body for money, either.” I hissed as his hands began untying my bound wrists. He held them and lowered my arms slowly, and I winced as the damage became visible.

“Burn anything with blood on it,” I said, suddenly struck with the thought that he might not know how to clean up to protect against magical enemies.

“What?”

“The blood. It’s dangerous. Burn anything you’ve used to clean it up.” I tried to think of a way he might understand. “If someone like Bianca or another Shadowman gets a hold of it, I could be dead - or worse.” He could also use it to bind me to him. He wouldn’t need a vanilla mortal marriage then.

Marcone nodded. “We’ll take care of it.”

I shook my head, suddenly worried. There was so much that could be done with blood. “Just pile it somewhere. I’ll do it.”

He didn’t question it for once, just complied.

The cooling lotion was beginning to feel good – good enough that I didn’t get up when the bandages were finally secured and Marcone went back to rubbing my lower back - the part Frank hadn’t cut. Of course, I probably couldn’t have stood steadily if I wanted to, but that was a different matter
entirely.

With a breath, I looked over at the pile of blood-soaked wipes and bandages he’d made and used the very last of the stored-up power I had. I couldn’t blaze it the way I wanted to, but I could get it burning.

“Fuego,” I whispered, about as loud as I could manage, and a small flame started burning. I fed it some of my will and saw spots behind my eyes. I was suddenly leaning against John, and I didn’t remember how that had happened. I could see the pile burning steadily, and that was what mattered. The fire alarm was going off, and we ignored it. I waited until the last of it had burned and there was just a pile of smouldering ashes.

I swayed forward, and realized something else.

I was falling asleep.

The combination of the drain of magic, the end of the adrenaline rush, and the soothing feel of being cared for was giving my body signals to rest. I couldn’t have fought it off if I wanted to.

I was almost out when Marcone picked me up himself and carried me to the car. I didn’t remember the drive back to the house, just Hendricks drawing back the sheets as John set me on the bed. I hissed when my sore back hit the cool silk – and since when were my sheets silk? – but it wasn’t enough to bother being aware for, and Marcone’s hand in my hair and quiet words lulled me back to a dreamy drowse.

Chapter End Notes

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I was out of bed the next day, unwilling to stay still when there was work to be done. Frank had shown me just how vulnerable I could be without magic, and I needed to fix that. I couldn’t exactly take my gun everywhere – I wasn’t one of Marcone’s men, and I didn’t want to be – and it would be a bit suspicious to walk around wearing Kevlar.

The places my magic was affected were limited. A really rainy day, a fast-moving stream or river, or a pipe with running water I stood over for an extended period of time without actively working to hold onto my magic.

Running water didn’t exactly negate magic, although the result was effectively the same. It was more like running water washed it or cleansed it from living beings. I didn’t quite understand the mechanics, but I knew what the result was. Creatures from the NeverNever, unless they were extremely strong, couldn’t cross running water because they were held together by magic.

Some wizards could work with the magic in water. There was magic in water, and something about the way those wizards thought let them reach into that constantly changing and shifting river and find something steady.

My mind didn’t work that way, so I would need to find an alternate solution.

I spent most of the day in the lab, working with Bob. I had a few scraps of cloth from an old shirt I had ripped up, and I was using them to test spells and potions. Until I was certain I wouldn’t blow myself up in the process, the spells wouldn’t go on my duster. Each layer of spellwork had to be tried separately to make certain it would work the way it was supposed to, and then together with the spells already laid down to see if it would interfere with or weaken the protections already there.

If I got caught with my shirt off again, it wouldn’t do squat. But that wasn’t likely to happen.

Hendricks walked in just before dinner, his face sour. “The doctor will be here soon to look you over,” he said.

“They did that yesterday.”

Cujo nodded. “This is just a minor follow-up, since they couldn’t be certain how well their work would hold up. The boss will help with the ongoing.”

“What ongoing?” I demanded. They wanted to look at my back more? They were only cuts. They’d heal.

Cujo stared at me for a moment, as close to surprised as I was likely to see him when he wasn’t
threatening me. “A man took a knife to your back,” he said slowly, as if each word took thought. “Those wounds will need cleaned and bandaged daily. As will the abrasions on your wrists.”

“Daily? “They’re just cuts,” I said. I had felt them all day – particularly in the afternoon, hunched over the notes I was making – but I would survive.

“Don’t you care about how they’ll heal?”

I shrugged. I’d never been big on babying wounds, and Ebenezer had left me to my own devices unless the injury was bad or infected. There was one time, when I had broken my arm, I had gone to a hospital. They had cast my arm and then had a hard time removing the cast. Not a pleasant experience, but Ebenezer had seen me through it.

Even then I’d only seen the doctors a few times. Certainly not daily.

“Those wounds could get infected,” Hendricks said gruffly. “And the doctor wasn’t sure if the butterfly bandages would hold or if you would need stitches.”

I’d never had stitches before. It may seem strange, considering my age and the trouble that sometimes followed me, but causing malfunctioning medical equipment was a good reason to avoid hospitals. I would wrap wounds until they healed and eventually, in time, the scars would fade. If I had ever needed stitches, I didn’t know it.

“Dresden?” Hendricks asked. He was frowning.

“Do me a favor,” I said, hoping to distract him. I used some superglue to fix a piece of ripped cotton to the wall. The potion had set into the cloth about a half an hour before, and I’d been finishing the spellwork with permanent marker when Cujo arrived. “Once the glue dries, shoot that.”

He scowled. “If I fire a shot in the house-“

“Warn Marcone, or whatever, if you have to. I’m not sure mine will fire after all the spells in here. I’ll have to clean it again.” Another thing on my to-do list.

Hendricks was staring at the bit of cloth like it might bite him, then he went out into the hall for a moment and started talking on the radio.

It might not have been the best of ideas to let Hendricks – who clearly didn’t like having me around – test the most recent result with a gun while I was in range. The last test had withstood knives, but not after a few hits. A gunshot was a more practical – and faster – test, but I wasn’t sure it was ready for that stage yet. I wouldn’t know without testing though.

I also had a shield around me before he came back in the room.

“Why am I shooting a piece of cloth?” he asked, even as he pulled out his weapon. It looked like one of those newer pieces I couldn’t rely on, and I kept my gaze on it as he walked towards my side of the room, opposite the target.

“Just testing some spells,” I said. “You know. Research.”

He grunted, not quite certain, took aim, and fired.

I whistled, impressed. The gun hadn’t made much noise – much less than I expected from such a close range, though it was still loud – and the single shot had landed dead center in the middle of the square.
Even better, when I went to look at it I could see a dent in the wall, but the cloth was whole. The bullet hadn’t passed through it. I finally found the bullet itself on the ground under the table; it was smashed.

“What’s it mean?” Cujo asked. He hadn’t put the gun away, but it was pointed towards the floor and the safety was back on.

“That I need to learn to sew,” I answered. And make a few potions, but they’d be easy in comparison.

The spells would be harder. I’d need them to last, so marker wasn’t going to cut it – even permanent marker. I’d have to stitch it into the lining.

John very deliberately looked me up and down when I came into the room. I don’t think he was checking me out because he thought I looked good, though. He was looking for injuries.

The doctor was new. He had the black hair and facial structure of someone Asian, and seemed relaxed with Marcone, chatting with him while they waited for me. His accent was from somewhere in the southern United States, and he wore jeans and sneakers with a polo shirt, a very casual look, with a backpack of supplies resting against the side of the couch.

In comparison, the doctor from last night had been overly nervous and formal.

“If you’ll take off your shirt and sit down,” the doctor said, “we can get started.”

“Don’t you think I should at least know your name before we start pawing at each other?” I asked.

“Sorry,” he said, chuckling a bit. He stood up to face me and held out his hand. “I’m Doctor Uzuki Takamora – but most people call me Oz. And you’re Harry Dresden, the wizard.”

I took his hand and shook it. “No offense, doc, but the last guy who asked me to take off my shirt stuck a knife in my back. I think I’ll wait a bit before we get that far.”

He nodded, though he didn’t look pleased. “In that case, shall I start with your wrists?”

I sat down in the empty space on the couch next to the doctor, and he sat down to rummage through his backpack. I faced him as I rolled up my sleeves, noticing there was a Hendricks-shaped shadow holding up the wall in the corner.

The pristine white bandages from this morning were stained. They had yellowed close to my hands, where they had gotten splashed with soapy water, and there was an ink splotch on one where I’d set it on my notes before the ink was dry. There was also blood.

The doctor cut the gauze away and frowned. “You should take it easy until these heal a bit more,” he said. “You’ve bled through the bandages.”

He pulled out a cottonball and a brown jug. “This is just some disinfectant,” he said while soaking the cottonball. “I’ll leave the bottle here. If these start to look red or irritated, use the disinfectant. You’ll also want to change the bandages any time they get wet or you see blood through them. Leave your wrists unbanded for a short amount of time each day – but not while you’re out in public or doing anything with your hands. When you change the gauze is the best time, just wait a few minutes before wrapping them up again.”

It looked like Marcone was taking mental notes by the dozen, and I scowled as the doctor brushed
the wet cotton against my skin. It stung a bit, and bubbled. “That’s the medicine clearing out a minor infection – it’s completely normal for scrapes like this,” he said. “Nothing too troublesome set in.”

He finished with one wrist and set it on his lap before moving to the other. He moved carefully, not really looking at anything other than my hands.

“Once it’s finished bubbling, pat dry the area with some spare gauze,” he continued, going back to my left wrist to dry it. “And a word of caution – only use this disinfectant on your wrists or any small cuts or scrapes you may have. It’s not safe for larger wounds.”

“What do you mean, ‘not safe’?” John asked. “Will it hurt him?”

“Not likely – well, it will sting if there’s an infection it’s burning out. It’s not meant to be used internally or in large doses, however. With larger wounds there’s a risk that it could enter the bloodstream, especially if too much is used.”

“Does it matter?” I asked. “He said not to use it on my back, so I won’t use it on my back. End of story.” It seemed completely unnecessary to have everything explained so thoroughly.

The doctor didn’t seem to be phased by my sharp words to Marcone. “Most people like knowing why we give instructions,” he said. “Particularly if it’s about the well-being of someone they care about. I’ve grown used to indulging them. That is what they see me for.”

“The great and powerful Oz,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Giving out peace of mind with those hearts, brains, and courages. All I need is some ruby slippers and I could wish my troubles away – you got any of those stashed in your bag?”

“I’m afraid not. You’d make a poor Dorothy anyways; you’re far from lost in some strange world. I don’t think ruby slippers work in your own living room.”

If only he knew. This world was as foreign to me as the land of Oz.

“He’s got the figure for a scarecrow though, doesn’t he?” Marcone asked, cutting in. “Except I think you already have a brain.”

The doctor finished bandaging my wrists again before he said: “If he does, he’ll let me see his back before it gets worse. What do you think, Harry?”

I rolled my eyes again, not amused. “It’s not like I have much choice. You aren’t leaving until you see it.” I pulled my shirt off, watching the doctor as I did. Marcone and Hendricks I wasn’t worried about. I could almost forget that Hendricks was even there, he was so quiet.

The doctor was the unknown.

“Give me the scissors,” I said.

“What?”

“You want the bandages off, right? I’ll cut them from the front and then you can take them off.”

Scissors weren’t knives, but they could be painful. Not that he could do much with John and Cujo breathing down his neck.

“You do realize someone will have to help you with this daily?” Oz asked. “You won’t be able to treat your own back.”
“I’ll take care of it,” Marcone said, joining the doctor in front of me, sitting on the coffee table. “Turn around, Harry,” he said as he put a hand on my knee and squeezed gently. “Trust me.”

I huffed, and deliberately knocked his hand off as I turned around and blocked them both out.

What followed was uncomfortable, to say the least.

At least he convinced the doctor not to stitch me up.

I left Marcone talking to the doctor as soon as I was able. I’d like to say the wounds hurt because of the treatment, but there actually wasn’t much difference between before and after.

I was uncomfortable, and I ached. Yeah, about the same.

Hendricks gently grabbed my elbow as I started to head to the lab. I may have jumped a bit; I hadn’t realized he was following me. What’s more, I hadn’t realized he was capable of anything less than roughly throwing me against walls. Other people, sure, but not me. “What?”

“You’re supposed to be resting,” he said. “You overdid it this morning.”

“I need to clean up-“

“I helped you do that before we met with the doctor, remember?”

I had hoped he’d forgotten. “I’ll stop if it hurts,” I tried. I would too, if it hurt any worse than I thought it should.

“No,” Hendricks said. “No more work today.”

“Then what exactly am I supposed to do?”

His grip tightened on the inside of my elbow for a moment; he hadn’t let go. “Read a book,” he suggested. “Watch a movie. Take a nap, if you want.”

He stepped closer when I frowned at his choices. “If you won’t do it for your own sake, do it for the Boss. He’s already rearranged his schedule to help your treatment – you can afford to be generous in return.”

“I don’t care about his precious schedule.”

“You should,” he growled. “If he pisses off the wrong people because of you, the Boss won’t be the only target.” He squeezed my arm again briefly, and I didn’t think the action was voluntary. Cujo didn’t like to think anyone had the balls to go after John Marcone, but Marcone wasn’t the only fish in the sea. He probably wasn’t even the biggest. He might have been smarter than a lot of the other thugs, though. “I’m sure you can guess which, of the two of you, the men are more likely to protect.”

He had a point. While they did follow me around on occasion – male and female, they were all Marcone’s “men” – they would always protect their boss first, not me. John was the one who had their loyalty. “I don’t need their protection,” I said, though it would help if I knew what they protected me from.

“The evidence suggests otherwise.”

“Red wasn’t exactly busting down the door the other day, either,” I snapped. “What was his name? Drake? You want to explain to me how he just happened to step away just when Frank was ready to
stick a knife in me? How he was gone long enough for me to be drugged and tied up, and for John to get across town?” I was starting to get angry. It just didn’t add up – why hadn’t Red been trying to help if that was the whole point of him following me into the room? How had Frank heard about – well, that method? And just why had Frank suddenly decided he needed to give me a tattoo now, so badly that he couldn’t even wait to do it the ‘right way’?

He’d mentioned a few times that John liked to mark those John considered his. Frank had even suggested some places to go to get a good – what had he called it? Ink job. Normal places, where people did that kind of work for a living. It wasn’t until the last time –

The ring. He’d mentioned how easily it could be taken off, and aside from Marcone there was only one person who’d seen me without my engagement ring recently.

“Hendricks, did Frank know Rex?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Hendricks answered. “He may have seen Rex as a client once or twice, but nothing more than that. Why?”

“Just thinking,” I said. “Who called Red?”

“Drake?” Hendricks asked.

I nodded.

“That was my fault. I was warning him that-“ he stopped abruptly, and wouldn’t look at me. He never looked me in the eye, but now he was actively avoiding looking at me altogether.

“That what?” I demanded.

“We found out Frank had been seeing Bianca’s girls again. About a month or two ago, he actually saw Bianca.”

“Well that explains the primitive tattoo method,” I said. Bianca had a grudge against me, and while it wasn’t her style to get revenge through someone else, she wouldn’t have passed up the opportunity when it was presented to her.

She was also a vampire who had probably lived long enough to see when people actually used those methods.

“The police found drawings of the tattoo Frank was attempting to make in his apartment,” Hendricks was practically snarling. “He had several different designs. He’d been practicing for a while, but we don’t know if they were all intended for you or just a hobby. We also can’t determine how long he’d been planning the knife.” His grip was almost tight enough to leave a mark.

I shuddered briefly. I could guess what happened: Bianca mentioning it off hand sometime after sex, when Frank would be too blissed on vampire saliva – a very addictive drug – to question why. Frank getting pissed that John and I weren’t the picture-perfect happy couple. Frank researching art that would mark me and remind me of my place.

Hearing that I had taken off my ring one day when I was angry, and getting angry enough to give me a ring I couldn’t take off. Remembering how he could do it with supplies he could sneak around.

And who knows how many of Bianca’s girls – or how many times Bianca herself – had gently helped the idea along, shoving Frank’s already unstable attitude in the right direction.
Was he a victim?

No, each decision would have been his. Vampires couldn’t work magic, and mind magic slick enough that no one would notice oddities in his behavior would be well beyond anyone they could hire. No, Bianca had just given inspiration to the method; she couldn’t have predicted when, how, or if he would act.

“I told Drake to go to the surveillance room and review the past few hours and report, to see if Frank had done something odd to the room without tipping him off. He gave us some rather different news; you were out cold and being restrained. John and I were already on our way to see you as a precaution. Drake ordered the gym downstairs cleared and security ready to take down the room, but he met with resistance. He did manage to secure the recording for the police, but the head of security wasn’t convinced there was anything – nonconsensual – going on.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Right.”

He shot a brief glare at me before continuing. “The man who prevented Drake from getting to you was arrested on site, and our lawyers are already working on the case. He’ll stay in jail, I assure you. He won’t even have a chance at making bail.”

I closed my eyes. “How many people know?”

“That you were hurt and the Boss defended you? That he killed to protect you? The police. The doctors who treated you. Everyone who works for the Boss. The media.”


“John is an influential person, with a great deal of political presence. He is friends with people who would seriously question any attempt to cover up the situation. It was too public, too many people saw something strange - and our only evidence for defense showed the Boss taking the shot. We didn’t have the time or the resources to deflect attention. Of course the media found out. A few News programs are using it as a story to promote gun licenses and the right to carry weapons in public. Others are claiming another solution should have been possible, but when pressed admit that such technology doesn’t exist yet. They fault John for not trying to talk it out first, despite how damning the sound bytes we have are. The voices supporting the Boss are louder. He’s being hailed as a hero, if it makes you feel better.”

It didn’t make me feel better. Not a bit. I’d helped him gain more public approval and public support.

“It’s also highly likely he’ll never be able to run for governor now.”

That did make me feel better.

“Go rest, Dresden,” Hendricks said after a pause, finally letting go of my elbow. “And don’t worry about Frank. We’ll take care of it.”

I wasn’t certain I wanted him to, but I had too much to process now to really argue. “Where’s my books?” I asked. I didn’t have a TV to watch, and a nap was out of the question with all the information buzzing about in my head.

“Actually, if you’d prefer, the Boss remembered you seemed interested in that science fiction series that was playing at the hotel – he set up a TV in the den with the videos if you’d prefer.”

“If I say no?”
“I’ll pull the books from the closet for you. I’ve already got someone looking for a bookshelf to put in your room.”


February is, supposedly, the month of the most romantic day of the year. Flowers, hearts, and pink frill line every store front and sidewalk in preparation for Valentine’s Day and little baby cupids.

The Feast of Fools, as Bob calls it. I never did get the full story of Saint Valentine from him, but let's just say that he wasn't exactly the kind of boy you fell in love with. He wasn't a cute little winged baby or the son of a love goddess, either. Actually, according to Bob, the closest thing there is to Cupid is a vindictive faery, and he’s currently vacationing somewhere warm in the NeverNever.

As usual, I got the typical requests for love charms and spells and potions, all politely worded, all just as politely refused. Most of my income actually came from Marcone's men, once they were brave enough to come and speak to me. At first it was typical stuff – talismen against danger, demons, and fae; shields; minor charms for protection. Not that they knew what it was. One in particular asked for a talisman by saying “could ya, you know, get me one of those things to keep the nasties from throwing me inta walls wi’” and then wiggled his fingers. I did what I could for the non-magical morons, and a bit more for the morons with a bit of talent (though I doubted they would never be able to properly use it). I found great pleasure in telling Marcone’s people that they would never be able to throw me against a wall with anything other than brute strength.

I told everyone the rules of the council, though I didn't tell them who set those rules or who enforced them. I made it simple: you break the rules, you die, because that's just the way it works. Then I spelled it out so even those with half a brain cell could understand: you want to mess with someone, do it the old fashioned-way – or with a gun.

My best idea came from, surprisingly, Hendricks. I still have my doubts that he was the one who came up with the admittedly not-so-sub-par plan, but hey, it worked.

I planned magic lessons. Simple ones, for those with little to no magic and didn't know how to deal with the things they were facing. I held them at the park. It wasn’t exactly neutral ground, but it was open and easily accessible to those who wanted to come.

Since apparently healing back wounds meant you couldn’t drive - at least in the eyes of John Marcone - for the first lesson I got chauffeured there by a lackey who stayed for the lesson. Billy and the Alphas kept away the jokers and the troublemakers; Murphy showed up with one of her coworkers, a few minor-talent witches showed up after I got their call, Hendricks came to his own party and brought with him two more of Marcone's men and Red.

I couldn't blame Red for wanting to figure this stuff out. He still had the cast on from his last encounter.

The lessons were simple, and the plan was to hold them once a week. I could fit two for February: How to Identify Werewolves 101, and Recognizing Potions and Why They Taste Like Crap. I also had enough time to vaguely plan for lessons like How to Strengthen House Wards (including Why You Don’t Let Strangers In) and How To Survive Vampires, Red Version. I might even plan on a White Version – although a Black Version would be two simple words: You Don’t. I still needed to work with Bob on some details, and I had to be careful about what I said so as not to piss off the council, but things were looking up. No one had mentioned the January payment, and I hadn’t looked at the ledger, but it was possible I would make February’s.
Teaching could never pay off the load on its own, but the classes would get me a few steps closer. It was also easier than waiting on cases or PD filler work, even though Murphy still scowled every time she saw my wrists. I think she was still mad at me. The Alphas fussed over me as much as they always did now – I was clearly part of their pack though I wasn’t certain how I fit in – and everyone paid five dollars for the thirty minute to one hour session.

It also reminded me there were still people out there who cared, even if we weren't really friends.

I wasn’t Marcone’s property either. It was important to remember that. No matter what images Frank had tried to carve into me.

“Good Morning,” Renee greeted.

I smiled at her. I’d avoided discussing Frank with Murphy by simply getting straight to business. I don’t think she liked it, but I simply did not want to talk about Frank at all. Hopefully Renee would be the same. “Good Morning,” I said. “Karrin said you had some more work for me?”

“Filing again,” she said. “I’ve arranged it with the Boss and Karrin—” it took me a startled moment to realize she meant her Boss and not Marcone “—and they’ve agreed to let you help out up here about once a month, unless we get a lot of backed up paperwork. Is that okay?”

I shrugged. “Work is work. It doesn’t have to be glamorous.”

“Oh – and Karrin said you had started giving magic lessons?”

“Yeah,” I answered, surprised. “You interested?” She didn’t seem like the type.

“Not really, but if you get a schedule typed up I’m willing to pass it around the office. I don’t think many will be interested, but some of their families might.”

I nodded. “I’m no good with a computer, but if I write up a list then I’m certain I can find someone to type it up and print it for me.” Murphy, maybe, or one of the Alphas. Or if all else failed, one of Marcone’s people. “Make it clear, however, that some of the people at these lessons really do believe in this magic. These aren’t stage tricks.”

Renee nodded. “I’ll make certain they know to save the fruitcake jokes for someplace private.”

“You think I’m a fruitcake?” I asked.

“No,” she answered, “but I think anyone who actually believes all this magic stuff can’t be living completely in the real world.”

I stood there for a moment slightly stunned. “I guess I should get started filing,” I said. “It’s not going to sort itself.”

Renee nodded. “Oh – and Harry?”

I paused for a moment, and didn’t look back at her. “Yes?”

“I just wanted you to know we were all appalled by what happened to you a few weeks ago. I want to reassure you that you are safe here in the offices, and you can call the police if you ever feel you are still in danger. We are here to help.”

“Thanks,” I said, suddenly feeling a bit more miserable. I really didn’t want the reminder of the cuts on my back. They were treated every night, I didn’t need reminders every hour that I’d completely
failed to defend myself. “I really should get started. Have a nice day.”

I didn’t move until she left, still trying to figure out what she meant.

“It’s not sufficient,” Marcone commented, counting the cash I’d handed over. “This doesn't even cover expenses.”

I shrugged, not looking at him. “February's slow.” Most of the money I did have came from Marcone – his own money filtering back to him in an odd way. I suspect he already knew this, and that just made it worse.

As busy as I had been the past few weeks, I hadn’t made much profit.

“I have heard rumors that you’re teaching classes to my men on how to protect themselves from magic.”

I shrugged. “I teach classes. Sometimes your people show up.” I didn't get any more detailed than that. I didn't want to.

“Well,” he said, “between the two months and the supplement the classes give my men, I can give you a break this month. Instead of ten percent, we'll say seven. You are protecting my investments, after all.”

I would have argued, but I needed whatever break I could get.

“While you’re here, I have potential catering parties for the reception lined up, and I thought you might want to take the time to look over some of the menus with me before we sample their wares. We also need to take a look into a few places for the ceremony to be held, so that proper security can be set up and invitations can be mailed. It will be an unofficial ceremony of course – the legal paperwork is being processed in Hawaii, which will be the first stop on our honeymoon.”

I waved him off. “I have work to do.” Like checking my blasting rod.

“Very well. You do realize that you can stop working and stop making payments any time you like, now that we’re to be wed,” Marcone said, not looking up from his paperwork. “I can take care of you.”

“Will you stop adding interest?”

“No.”

“Then no. I'll keep paying.”

Marcone nodded. He was making notes on something. I didn't care what, but it felt like he wasn't paying much attention to me. I clenched my fists and debated leaving.

“Perhaps you would be willing to make a deal,” he offered after a few moments.

“I seem to have bad luck with those,” I bit out. “The last one left me tied to the wall.”

It was a harsh reminder of the ordeal with Frank, and Marcone finally stopped sorting through papers and put down his pen to look at me directly. The unease about our so-called relationship had quieted – dead bodies tend to do that – but that didn't mean Mr. I-Control-Everything was happy about what happened. He’d taken time every day to inspect, clean, and bandage my back - and still did - but he hadn’t brought up Frank since it happened. We actually very rarely talked, even though we now saw
each other every day.

Frank had been an old friend and an old lover of John’s. Marcone had assured me Frank himself wouldn’t harm me, and that assurance had been false. I still had trouble understanding why John Marcone had killed a former lover for me - a man he had trusted, probably more than he trusted me.

“While I am regretful of what happened, I hope you understand I intended to give you a gift. I never wanted you hurt.”

I didn’t say anything. Though the bandages were gone from my wrists, I still had the marks from pulling against the ties until the skin broke. I hadn’t felt it at the time, but the damage had been significant. The doctors had thought both my wrists and back would scar.

They wouldn’t. It would take time, but the marks would fade like all the others. Marcone didn’t know that, though, and the guilt he felt over them was almost a tangible presence in the room.

“I have tried to remedy the situation. I got you the best doctors available and paid all the costs myself. I had the room cleaned so thoroughly the police gave me a hard time even with the video footage.”

“Money doesn’t fix everything,” I said, staring him down. “You paid doctors to fix me up and paid janitors to scrub the room. Big deal.”

“I take care of you every night.”

“Because it’s better PR for you, or cheaper.” It was probably a mix of both. Or maybe he was just trying to show - again - that he didn’t want to ‘hurt’ me.

“Because I-”

“You put me in that situation,” I said. “If you didn’t try to make up for it, your adoring public wouldn’t be so adoring. I hear they’re calling you a hero now.”

He winced. “What else could I have done?” he asked. “Not given you the gift? I wanted you to have something to take away the stress you were under. I trusted him, and he hurt you. I walked into that room and saw you tied to the wall, afraid.”

“I wasn’t afraid,” I cut in, making certain that point was clear. I had been angry, not afraid. Not of Frank, at least.

“You threw Drake into the wall before you knew who he was.”

Maybe I had been acting on instinct a little. It hadn't been a small amount of power for the situation either. “That doesn't mean I'm eager to try any of your deals again soon,” I finally said, “I’d like to stay on topic.”

“Understandable. The deal, however, is simple: spend every night in my bed with me for the month and I will pay 3% of your interest - no matter how much you can contribute in addition.”

I frowned. It was too simple, and Gentleman John Marcone was no true gentleman. There was a catch in there somewhere. “That's it?” I asked. “Sleep in the same bed as you and get a pay off. No requirements that I let you touch me or kiss me or anything of that sort?”

“No, Harry,” he said. “Of course not. I do expect proper sleep attire, though. I may be less generous if you come to bed all bundled up. Takes the fun out of it.”
On the months I couldn't make payments, which were more than I cared to admit to even my closest acquaintances, it could be a benefit. A benefit like one given by the fae, and just as treacherous. I didn't trust Marcone, and being in the same room as him while I wasn't on alert wasn't a position I cared to put myself in. Stars, was I really considering this?

I took a deep breath to give myself some more time to think. There is really only two good times for business for me, and one of those was the entire month of October. The other was when strange killings cropped up and Murphy called me in. That didn’t happen often anymore, and wasn’t likely to happen before August. There might be a few jobs, but not many.

Boxers and a shirt wouldn't be horrible, and it would be a payment every month instead of nothing. If he considered boxers and a shirt proper sleeping attire, the highest would be 7%, not ten. There was some room there for interpretation, and I had a feeling I would fall on the short end of the deal if I asked.

“I want this new deal in writing,” I finally said, keeping my head high and pretending that I wasn't selling myself.

“Are you certain?” John asked. “At the moment I’m offering this deal unofficially and separately because of the nature of the terms. Should we put this into writing, you could go to jail for this arrangement alone, if it was ever revealed to the police.”

“So could you.”

“But I have lawyers who know how to word such contracts, and enough money to make bail until my name is cleared. Think for a moment. Aren’t you rushing?”

He was acting like a protector or teacher or something. Like I was supposed to learn a lesson because it would be good for me. But the contract itself wasn’t what I really wanted: “I want it made explicit that nothing is expected from me aside from sleeping in the same bed.”

Marcone chuckled lightly. “Harry, if you wanted anything explicit, all you had to do was ask.”

When he said it that way, it sounded dirty. “I'm leaving.”

“Don't forget about dinner with Rex. Try to be polite to him this time. I’ll leave the catering menus in the kitchen tomorrow morning. Let me know what you think.”

I grit my teeth and walked out of the room.

Rex’s home turned out to be just as fancy as Marcone's – that is to say, it wasn't. It was big, but not decked out in all the expensive and elaborate decorations like they show in movies. The tables in the foyer were cheap, breakable pressed wood deals. The floor was tile. The walls were painted in a cheap base off-white. There wasn't anything glass until we passed into the living room, where there was a single mirror, and then to the dining room, where a fancy light fixture hung. It was simple, cheap, and easy to clean or replace.

“You must be Mister Dresden,” a woman greeted. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. We didn't shake hands. Instead, she had given a short curtsy, and I nodded my head to her. I will admit to feeling awkward. I'm used to treating a lady with respect, but this was a bit much.

“Gentleman Marcone, if you’d have a seat, my husband will be out shortly,” she said, confirming her
status as Rex's wife. “Would you like anything to drink before he arrives?”

“That would be appreciated,” Marcone answered. “Harry, come sit with me.”

It was going to be a long night. Marcone had taken my hand in the car and held it for most of the ride, rubbing his thumb along the engagement band. He'd also made some small talk about the wedding plans, until I finally told him that he should plan it himself, since all I needed to do was show up.

That hadn't gone over very well, I could tell. The silence had been enough to tell me that, I hadn’t needed the tightened grip. It wasn’t like I could go anywhere.

Sitting beside Marcone at the dining room table wasn't much different than sitting beside him in the car; he took my hand and held it, and talked of matters I thought were best left unsaid – what I would wear to bed that night, what my plans were for the next few days, and what I was planning on doing with Frank's gifts. Somewhere in there, Rex's wife dropped off some wine and left, as much a waiter as any of the other staff. I hadn't seen them yet, but I was certain they were watching us play our game.

It wasn’t a surprise that Marcone knew I still had Frank’s ‘gifts’; privacy in the house of Marcone was hard to come by. “Throwing them away,” I said in answer to his question. It wasn’t like I was going to use them.

“That seems wasteful.”

“I find them disturbing.”

“Only due to the situation they were received in, I’m certain,” Marcone answered.

“Are you telling me you want me to keep gifts your ex-lover gave me?” I asked. “He probably poisoned the wine he shoved at me.”

John hesitated for a moment. “Who told you Frank was an ex-lover?”

“He did,” I answered. “Why? Are you going to deny it?”

“That he and I had sex once upon a time is a fact, though I wouldn’t call us lovers. A few nights in high school spent drunk and horny with an equally drunk and horny male willing to let me experiment does not exactly equate to a lover.

“I will admit, though, that he certainly did have a way with his hands, even back then.”

I cut back my reply as Rex walked in.

“Harry, John, it's good to have you here,” he greeted, his grin slightly more crooked than usual. I smiled at him as I mumbled some greeting and watched for his wife. “I do hope you will enjoy dinner; Anna is overseeing the final preparations. Now, tell me about this wedding you're planning. I hope you haven’t had many difficulties?”

I made a mental note of his wife’s name and tuned them out, looking around the house as much as I could without appearing inattentive. I hadn't felt any threshold when I entered, and assumed the house was set up as a base of operations or a safehouse. Even Marcone's had some threshold; Rex hadn't any, and there wasn't any indication this was a place of business. We hadn't seen much of the house, granted, but it wasn't large, and given the space needed for bedrooms, bathrooms, and the kitchen, there wasn’t much space for a study or meeting place.
Even if Rex didn't see this place as a home, his wife would, especially considering what he had told me about his views on how a spouse should behave. Her will alone should have made some sort of protective force around the place she considered home.

That meant it was likely a safehouse and not where they actually lived, or a very recent buy. Which meant he didn’t trust Marcone with the location of his actual house. It seemed rather unfair, since John wasn’t making any noticeable effort to hide his own home.

“Harry isn't too interested in the planning, I'm afraid, and we'd both like it to be a simple affair. I've hired a planner to take care of the smaller issues. A Mrs. Charity Carpenter, I believe.”

I nearly jumped at Marcone’s words, my grip reflexively tightening around his hand.

“Harry?” Rex asked, “something wrong?”

I smiled. “No, nothing. I was just wondering what was keeping your wife,” I said. “It seems to be taking her a while.” I wasn’t about to talk about Charity around Rex; I wasn’t sure how Marcone found out about her and brought her in, but it wasn’t going to be a pleasant talk I would have with him later.

“No need to fret. She's likely just having a small disagreement with the cook.”

“Perhaps I should go and check on her,” I said, moving to stand. “Just to make sure she's all right.”

“No need, Mister Dresden.” Rex's wife was already walking in holding two glasses, and behind her were two waiters who were pushing serving trays. She leaned over to kiss her husband on the cheek and handed him a glass. “I'm sorry to keep you waiting, but the chef was running a bit behind schedule.”

I sat down and looked away.

I crossed my arms as the car pulled away from the drive and glared at Marcone. Just sitting next to him was making me angry. “Just what do you mean by pulling Charity into this?” I asked.

“She hasn’t officially accepted my request, of course, but I thought it might be pleasant for you to have a familiar face around,” Marcone said with a slight smile. “She was surprisingly shocked at discovering your engagement to another man, though her husband had mentioned you were soon to be wed. I believe she said it explained why she had not yet received an invitation, and that it was just like men to not think about the time a girl needs to find a proper dress. She also fussed on her husband for not supplying her more details when she discovered he knew about your partner.”

“I don’t want her hurt by this,” I told him. I didn’t want her involved at all, especially not if she was expecting a child as Michael and Charity thought. She would be heavily pregnant by the time the wedding came about, and I had had no intention of inviting her. It was entirely possible she could have the baby at the reception - and what kind of mess would that make of things?

“It’s a wedding, Harry. No one is meant to be hurt.”

I scoffed at that and rolled my eyes. Probably not the best move, but I couldn’t keep from making it. “Tell that to all the divorcees out there.”

Marcone raised an eyebrow. “Are you expecting to be one of them?”

“A wizard thing?”

“Not particularly,” I admitted. Some wizards did get married, like my mother had, but they also typically waited until later in life. Too much to do, and beheadings to avoid. “It just hasn’t been a priority.”

“And now that it is, you aren’t planning on making it last,” John concluded. “You won’t honor your vows.”

“I’ll honor them because I’m a man of my word. That doesn’t mean I’ll enjoy making them.”

“Should I worry I will be a divorcée in the foreseeable future?” John asked. “You still haven’t answered that.”

I shook my head. “You’re more likely to be a widower,” I said. “Are you certain you want to marry me? I have more enemies than friends - and you won’t have any protection against them.”

“That hasn’t been a problem yet.”

“Only because it isn’t official, and we’re not-” I tried to think of a word that sounded less damning, and settled on: “-bonding. You’re aren’t a target yet.”

“Maybe we should start, as you say, bonding.”


“Would you believe me if I said I love you?”

“No.”

He frowned, looking away. “You’re still recovering from your ordeal, and it’s been a busy day. We should check your back before retiring for the night.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

And that, right there, was why John and I weren’t a good couple.

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Month 12: March

Marcone knew I was looking for a second -third?- income. I tried to keep as many of the applications from his scrutiny as possible, but he seemed to have a radar for when I was trying to hide something. They weren’t exactly high-class jobs. Fast food joints, coffee houses, one hotel, and a janitor at the convention center. I hoped he wouldn’t kill my chances, but he was just as possessive as ever and would probably think these jobs beneath me.

March first was the first night I spent in Marcone's room, and I thought he might want to discuss the applications. I was tired and nervous, which didn't explain why I was the first one in the bedroom nor why, at one in the morning, Marcone still was not there. As expected, the bed was quite large and the sheets were silk – and probably custom-made, as the bed was an irregular size.

The clock on the bedside table read two-thirty when I felt the bed dip and the sheets slide over my bare legs. I was facing away from him, so I couldn't see what he was doing, but I had the shield
bracelet ready just in case. It was going to be a long night.

True to his word, Marcone hadn't touched me at night, although when I got up in the morning he did eye what I was wearing rather thoroughly. I couldn't help but notice he looked as impeccable as ever, even as I suspected he was completely bare under the sheets. I didn't look. Anyone who calls me a liar gets beat with a stick. Repeatedly.

I dressed quickly, grabbing a series of rings I had been working on. They would store kinetic energy each time I moved until I released them. They hid the fact that one of the rings I wore was an engagement ring; that was the one ring I didn't dare put any magic on. The mix of intent, purpose, and desire could be big trouble. Magic like that is complicated and volatile, and I'd just as soon not blow myself up, thank you very much.

It didn't take long to get back to 'my' room, shower, and change, which meant that I was in the beetle and heading to town in less than an hour. My first stop was a small tea and sandwich shop that was hiring part-timers. It would take about thirty minutes to get there if traffic wasn't heavy, meaning I could use some of my dwindling cash to buy breakfast before my interview. I was meeting up with Murphy in the afternoon to discuss possibilities on a new case that had come up. It wasn't much, but it would pay.

Maybe I wouldn't have a huge debt when I got married, if I managed to make some profit.

The end of the first week of sleeping in Marcone's bed, I went to visit Mac and have myself a decent drink. I deserved it. I hadn't been sleeping well, and I knew I was getting crankier each day. I had managed to get the job at the corner coffee shop waiting tables. The cost of the uniform came out of my first paycheck, and I could only work twenty hours a week at most for the first three months. June was when they did their yearly review, so I might get a raise or more hours then.

Hopefully I could keep the job that long.

I managed to spill the beans over the magic lessons after two bottles of brewed courage a la Mac, and fended off Susan's advances at least twice, reminding her both times that I was in a committed relationship, and no matter how much I disliked it, the answer was still 'no.' Making out with sexy reporters with curves in all the right places who managed to corner me when I wanted to get drunk wasn’t going to endear me to my future - whatever Marcone was.

“It's not my fault you changed your numbers and your apartment,” she pouted, leaning back. The move showed off her cleavage nicely.

“All you had to do was look in the phone book,” I told her. “It's never stopped you before.”

“Oh, come now, Harry, don’t be silly. You think I haven’t tried that? You’re always out, or unavailable. Besides, you know how things were after that whole mess with the werewolves. I haven’t been able to land a good story since. No one likes a reporter whose evidence disappears. I still don't know where that tape went.”

I smirked. I had an idea – well two. Neither would be a place she could go up to and ask for the tape back. “You know magic doesn't work well with those sorts of things,” I told her.

“I'm short on scoops,” she said finally, honestly. “Can't you help a girl out?”

“I'm short on jobs,” I told her. “So I guess not.” Well, maybe not short on jobs, but short on the kind she would be interested in. While the investigation business wasn’t doing well, the lessons weren’t
bad and I still had the coffee shop job. Who knew people tipped so well? Even though the pay was crap because they expected you to get tips, it evened out, and I was making a decent amount for the first time in months. It wasn’t massive - it was only part-time - but it was something.

“The supernatural world is being quiet for a change?” Susan asked. “Interesting. Any idea why?”

That sounded like a reporter. “No comment.”

She scowled. “Fine. Maybe I'll just write about how the only self-proclaimed wizard in Chicago is shacking up with the local gang lord.”

“Don't,” I told her shortly. “Seriously, don't mess with Marcone. It's not good for your health, or mine.”

“So that engagement ring is just for show?”

“Susan.”

“Fine. I'll figure out what's going on my own way. I will figure it out though, Harry.”

“Whatever,” I told her, hanging my head and taking another long draw of ale. I didn't have the heart to tell her that there wasn't a story to be found.

I let out a sigh, took my order pad, and walked over to where Hendricks sat, calmly pecking at a hand organizer. I was tempted to break it.

“Good afternoon, welcome to Half Moon Café. How can I help you?”

“You can get me a bowl of the soup of the day, a cup of coffee – black – and a slice of carrot cake for dessert. Also, you can quit.”

“I'll have the coffee right out,” I said, jotting the order down. “Be grateful I’m not allowed to spit it in it. Also, not a chance.”

The manager was watching me as I walked back and handed over the order. “Is there a problem?” he asked. “The customer’s scowling.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Hendricks was frowning, not really scowling, at the device in his hands. I’d seen him angrier at locked doors. At least he wasn’t breaking things or slamming me into a wall. “He’s a jerk,” I said aloud. “He works for my fiancé, and he doesn’t like me.”

“In here, he’s a customer.”

“He just told me to quit my job and be a trophy husband. Actually, it’s not the first time.” The first time he’d actually told me to be Johnny’s boy-toy, but it was close to the same thing.

“Wait, your fiancé’s loaded?” one of the waitresses asked. It was my first day sharing a shift with her, and I was having a hard time remembering her name. It seemed rude to call her ‘blondie.’ “Who is she?”

“None of your business,” the manager said. “Go make sure your customers have refills.”

With a pout, the blonde waitress obeyed.

“As for you – Mr. Marcone did happen to call today and make certain you were settling in properly.
I told him you were. So if that’s his aide over there checking up on you, you’d better give him your best service.”

“It’s just Hendricks. He’d probably have a heart attack if I smiled at him.”

“If you give him something to complain about, Mr. Marcone might decide you’d be better hired elsewhere. Then I’ll have a heart attack trying to find a replacement. Again.”

“Right,” I said, taking the cup of coffee handed to me. “Does that mean I can spit in his cup? You know, since I know him and everything.”

“No,” he said.

“Spoilsport.”

It was becoming habit to stop by Mac’s a few days a week, even if I didn’t plan on drinking. He always had a spot for me at the bar, and would listen if I needed to talk.

I also got to see Susan. She’d made Mac’s a hangout trying to spot her next big story, and Mac allowed it so long as she didn’t bother anyone or cause trouble.

I was there when she walked in, a can of soda half-finished in my hand and Mac drying glasses nearby. It didn’t take a minute for her to find me.

“Hey,” I greeted as she walked up. “You’re out late.”

She smiled, leaning forward for a moment to kiss my cheek. “It’s not too late for a handsome man to be out,” she said.

I could feel the heat in my face. “I’m still engaged,” I told her. “Hasn’t changed.” The ring was cold against my skin.

“You’re also still a friend – at least, I hope you are,” she said. “And friends treat their friends to a nice dinner when she realizes she’s been insensitive. Let me?”

I looked at her. She was still beautiful, and still one of the few people I’d soulgazed with. Unlike Marcone, however, I had never understood what I saw in Susan. She was always looking for a story, always willing to use people to get one, but she was also desperately seeking love and care.

Her soul was a mess of contradictions.

“Just dinner,” I said.

“And some wine,” she smiled. “For old time’s sake. Come on – I know just the place.”

I slid the can back towards Mac. “Guess I’ll see you later, Mac.”

He was watching Susan carefully. “Be careful, Harry,” he said.

That was rather odd. When Mac said something, which was rare, it was a good idea to listen. What was I supposed to be careful of, though? Unless he was worried about what might happen to Susan if John found out. “It’s just dinner,” I told him quietly.

Mac grunted.
Susan linked our arms together. “Dinner and talking,” she said. “We need to catch up.”

Dinner with Susan, at some point, became drinking with Susan. Which became dancing with Susan and more drinking and kissing in a back room.

John was a buzz in the back of my mind the entire time. Susan’s kisses were gentler, lighter, and I dove into her mouth searching for more. It was hard to remember why this was a bad idea with her lips ghosting across my neck, her hands on my belly, and the feel of her warm, soft skin over mine.

We ended up, at some point, going to her apartment. I remember falling against her sheets – rough, scratchy cotton – without a stitch on me and moving against her in a rhythm that was incredible at the same time that it just wasn’t enough. We fell asleep a tangled mass of limbs, her head on my chest, still trying to remember why we giggled every time I said John’s name.

I woke a few hours later with a headache the size of Chicago and a feeling of panic. I wasn’t supposed to be there, and I couldn’t have done what I thought I did with Susan, but all evidence said that I had.

Marcone was going to kill her.

I dressed quickly, wrote her a note asking her to get out of town for a while, and found a taxi.

Maybe, if it wasn’t too late, he wouldn’t find out.

Of course Marcone noticed when I slid into bed smelling like smoke and ale. “Been out drinking?” he asked. I hoped he couldn’t smell Susan on me. Her perfume was strong.

“Wizard bar,” I told him, turning to face away from him. It was where I started, at least. “Mob bosses not welcome.”

“Really now?”

I curled up in the silk sheets and ignored him.

“Should you really be wasting your money drinking?” he asked.

“What do you care?”

“You are my future husband. I expect a certain standard of behavior from you.”

“Does that mean you're going to stop fielding my business calls?” I asked.

There was a pause. “I see you've been talking to that reporter. Susie, I believe it was?”

“Susan.”

“Yes, Susan,” he agreed. “I would prefer it if you didn't talk with that... woman.”

“Sh-e's the one who managed to help with the clearing up of the werewolf issue last October, and the one who gave me that leather jacket I happen to like. She’s the one who bought me dinner.”

“If those are the gifts you want, I am more than happy to oblige.”

“No thanks. Your gifts come with price tags.” I wasn't really in the mood for talking with him. My
stomach was queasy and my head ached. I was ready to sleep, and I would have left if it wouldn’t have made the last two weeks of staying in bed with him mean nothing.

His hand touched my shoulder. “Not all of them do.”

I smacked the hand away. “Don't touch me. That's not a part of our deal.”

“Eventually it will be,” he said, eyes narrowing. “You know what's involved in a marriage.”

“Yes, but that doesn't happen until after the wedding,” I snapped back, then tried to calm down. It wasn’t like he could tell, and I didn’t usually yell at him for a small touch like that. He’d get suspicious if I protested too much. “Keep your hands to yourself tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Eventually, I'll have to put up with you. Tonight I don’t have to. I don’t need more reasons to throw up.”

“More reasons?” He touched my shoulder again, angling to see my face. “You're drunk.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Only a little,” I protested. “I got a cab home, don’t worry. Didn’t drive.”

He sighed. “A proper fiance wouldn’t get himself drunk until the bachelor party.”

“Yeah, well, I bet a proper fiance would love her future her husband and be all ga-ga over the wedding dress and choosing bridesmaids.”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t be drunk and avoiding me, would you?” he asked.

I think it was just a rhetorical question. I just wanted to sleep. I don’t know why I responded: “If I loved you, you wouldn't have brought me here.” The man was annoying that way; if I had wanted him, he wouldn’t have wanted me, it was that simple. Susan had looked wonderful with that pout on her lips, and she had known it. She’d known I’d wanted her. She’d shown me what I was missing. If I hadn’t been tied to Marcone...

Well, a lot of things might be different if I wasn't where I was.

“Why'd you do it?” I asked. “Why the kidnapping, why the blackmail?” It wasn't making much sense, and my tongue was loose enough for me to ask outright. “Why not just ask?”

“Because you would have said no,” Marcone answered. “I saw something I wanted when I looked into your soul, and I couldn’t let you refuse just because of my reputation.”

I wasn’t surprised; I’d known he wanted something he’d seen in me for a while. “So what did you see?” I asked. Then I laughed before he could answer. “You know, most wizards would consider talking about the soulgaze taboo. It’s like sex. What do you think?” Tired, but still drunk enough to keep talking anyways. Talking too much, apparently.

“I don’t think you want to know the answer to that.”

He was right – I didn’t want to know. Not really. It wasn’t something a wizard talked about.

“Something wrong?” Billy asked, looking around the park. His hand was on my arm, and I leaned into it a bit.
“No, not really,” I answered. I’d been looking for Susan. I hoped she was smart enough to leave town. I’d left her a note saying as much, but I didn’t know if she actually would. If I found out Marcone was after her, I knew what I might have to do. It would hurt my pride, but I’d do what I could to protect her from my mistake.

“Unless you’re waiting for someone else, I think we’re ready to start.”

I nodded and joined the group at the picnic tables. Georgia was lazing on the ground in wolf form, pretending to be a large dog. Murphy was in the back, biting her lip and watching me with concern. I recognized a few others.

The lesson passed by in a haze. Payments and tips were made. I sat on the bench and stroked the fur on Georgia’s neck as they left.

“Hey Harry,” Karrin greeted when it was just us and the two Alphas. “You okay?”

“Fine. Why?”

“You seem sort of – mellow. Did something happen last Friday?”

My head snapped up at that. “Last Friday?”

“Marcone called and asked if I knew where you’d been Friday night. Said you came home acting strange and smelling of beer and perfume, but you’d left the bar you said you were at several hours before you returned home. You hadn’t had a drop of alcohol before you left, either.”

I closed my eyes and breathed deep. “How much does he know?”

“So something did happen?”

“Stars, Karrin, I’m trying to protect a friend. How much does he know?”

I’d startled her, but she recovered quickly. “He knows you left with Susan Rodriguez fairly early in the evening, but that’s all so far.”

“Shit.”

“She’s out of town on a lead for her job, however, and I don’t think he’s been able to reach her.”

That was an relief. I wouldn’t need to start distracting Marcone just yet if he wasn’t certain he needed to go after her. He was figuring things out right now, but he couldn’t get far. It wasn’t like we’d done it in public or anything like that.

“Did Marcone do something to you?” Billy asked. “He’s been near you a lot more – his scent is beginning to mix with yours – but it doesn’t smell like sex.”

It’d been long enough that the smell of Susan would have faded. I hadn’t considered that. “He’s been treating my cuts,” I said, “and we do sleep together – but that’s all we do. Sleep. He hasn’t touched me like that. We haven’t even kissed since – since I got cut.”

Billy nodded, accepting the answer.

“I was out with Susan, we got a bit drunk, and I got back late,” I explained. “It was a mistake. Nothing big.”

“You certain?”
I nodded. “I’m just tired.”

My payment wasn’t short that month, though it wasn’t enough to pay the rent by itself. As loathe as I was to admit it, I would have been short if I hadn’t gotten the second job, and sharing a bed with John had helped keep me above water. Johnny had really been a gentleman – albeit, a naked gentleman – in bed. He made no moves to molest me with more than his eyes, and made no further inquires after Franks gifts.

Bob wasn’t half so polite.

“Honestly, Harry, you’re being far too squeamish. I’ve been reading up –“

“In gay porn romances,” I cut in. It didn’t stop him.

“-and a number of men actually enjoy this type of thing. You can be stimulated from the inside, you know, if the other guy knows what he’s doing. There’s actually quite a market for it – I’d be willing to try a few of these new things out if I had a body; there wasn’t really a market for sex toys back in the day, you know. We had to make our own until the Romans came along, and theirs were sadly very basic. I could tell you the basics, but the field has really expanded since I last looked at the male side of the playing field.

“I’m willing to do more research if you’d like – find a few young college boys –“

“No Bob. Just… no.” That was wrong on so many levels, I couldn’t even begin to count them.

“Oh come on – I bet you’ve never really played with yourself that way, and wouldn’t you like to find out how you like it before your wedding night?”


Reluctantly, Bob did as he was told, but not before muttering about ungrateful wizards and how he just wanted to have some ‘good old-fashioned fun.’

I waited for the grumbles to die down before I fed Mister a bowl of burger meat and half a can of soda. I hated that Bob was right. If this kept up, I would be marrying Marcone and on the wedding night? I would have no idea what went where how. It was time to stop acting like a coward and start acting like a wizard.

Wizards were always prepared.

Chapter End Notes

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“What’s this?” I asked. There was more food on the dining room table than would ever be necessary for two people - more than enough for ten people, even.

Hendricks had pulled me from potion-making to eat, supposedly, lunch. He hadn’t mentioned it was lunch for a crowd.

“You didn’t say what you liked from the menus, so I had the caterers deliver and set up samples,” Marcone said. “I thought we could taste them.”

“I don’t have-”

“You’ve holed yourself up in that workroom far longer than reasonable. We haven’t shared a meal in weeks - months, even. I realize you feel it necessary to continue with your work and I will not stop you from pursuing it, however that work should not take over your life. As much as I disliked your visits to your wizard bar, at least you were spending time relaxing. Since the incident with Miss Rodriguez, you haven’t even touched the ale stored here at the house.”

“There wasn’t an incident.” I still felt guilty. Ever since I was little, I’d believed that intimate relations like that were meant for strong, committed relationships. My father had loved my mother; Michael loved Charity. I had loved Elaine. While there was the potential for love with Susan, I couldn’t pursue it or share a life with her in the future, so I shouldn’t have given into the urges alcohol had made seem reasonable. We had both made a mistake. Telling John that wouldn’t make him leave her alone, though.

“There is no incident.”

“Susan and I had dinner together. We shared a few drinks, and spent some time together. I hadn’t realized how late it was when I got back, or how tipsy I’d gotten,” I finally said. All the truth, with only a few key points missing.

“Since then you haven’t gone out except to work.”

“Because I’m afraid of what you’ll do to her! Stones, Marcone, but you’re a possessive bastard. It’s not exactly a news flash. I got home late and look at what you’re doing - going after her like she tried to kill me or something!”

“I’m more worried about the ‘or something,’” he muttered. “If she tried to kill you, you would have been able to defend yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That sometimes you aren’t as careful as I’d like you to be if there isn’t a life on the line. If you’d wanted to spend time out on the town and get drunk, I would gotten you a driver. And a more comfortable establishment. And someone to monitor the situation in case she tried to exploit it.”

I snorted. I couldn’t help it. “Of course she was going to exploit it. She’s a reporter. She wants a good story. Unfortunately for her, I didn’t have one she could publish.”

“Is that all she wanted?”
I felt a lump lodge in my throat. “I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not her.”

“She tried to pursue you.”

“I told her ‘no,’ if that’s what you’re worried about.”

His eyes narrowed suddenly, and while his jaw was working he didn’t quite seem to be making the words flow. I couldn’t read him. His fists were clenched so tight he was white-knuckled; his breathing was harsh and almost shallow. Then he took a deep breath, composed himself, and spoke. “The food’s going to get cold,” he said, reaching to pull out a chair. “Please, have a seat.”

I didn’t know what had just happened, but I had a suspicion that I hadn’t just bought Susan a Get Out of Jail Free card. It just felt odd; I won’t claim to be able to read Marcone accurately most of the time, but now he was even more cryptic. The sudden transformation from speechless anger to calm and polite was not something to take lightly. Skills like that had made him the Gentleman.

I walked around the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down. I didn’t need him to start being gentlemanly, not after we’d just - well, whatever that was.

John didn’t sit in the chair he’d pulled out either. Instead he walked around the table and sat down next to me. “Where shall we start?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t even know what most of this is,” I admitted.

“Once upon a time, I didn’t either,” Marcone said. “Don’t worry though. You don’t need to know the name of the food to enjoy it, and I’ll send the caterer our preferences. Here, try these.” He pulled over what looked to be a plate of appetizers. “Crabcakes.”

They didn’t look like anything special, and tasted okay. Bite-sized and slightly greasy, they seemed like something more at place in a cocktail party than Marcone’s dining room.

“They aren’t true crabcakes, of course - they’re miniatures meant to be served while the guests gather for the reception dinner, if we choose.”

“Aren’t you going to try one?” I asked.

“I’ve had them before, and don’t particularly care for them,” he said offhandedly, sliding me champagne flute with water. “To clear your taste buds. Would you like to try the shrimp cocktail next, or the bruschetta?” He set each in front of me on clean, white plates, and moved the crabcakes to his far side.

With a sigh, I reached for the shrimp. Not all the food set out could have a fancy name, and maybe I’d actually find something worth eating.

It had been an odd ‘lunch,’ to say the least, and there had been enough leftovers for dinner as well. But I hadn’t been able to shake off the odd feeling I kept getting from Marcone while we ate.

It was almost like he was sad.

That didn’t make sense. He was Gentleman John Marcone, criminal scumbag. He got mad, he got even, he bloodied your nose when you called him names and had enemies that swam with the piranhas. Either that or someone worked really hard to make those deaths ‘natural.’

And now he was getting into bed much earlier than usual. The criminal underworld apparently
stayed up late and got up early, if Marcone’s usual sleeping habits were anything to go by. If I hadn’t started napping before he got into bed, I wouldn’t get enough sleep to function; I had no idea how he managed. I didn’t want to ask, either.

I could feel him staring at me, like an itch between my shoulders. It wouldn’t let me drift off to sleep.

“Did you really tell her no?” he asked.

I sighed. I couldn’t help it. “I didn’t think you’d be the insecure type. Insanely possessive, yes, not insecure.”

“I’m not insecure,” he countered, “and that’s not an answer.”

“Yes, I told her no. Several different times on several different occasions. She respected that. She took me out to dinner as a friend to apologize for not backing off sooner. Then we had drinks. We both got a bit tipsy. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“It is.”

“Why?”

“Because you won’t do the same with me.”

I stared out into the darkness of the bedroom. The lights were, obviously, out. We weren’t kids anymore, we could face our fears and sleep in the dark. Well, we coped with the dark at least. I don’t know how well we faced our fears. A few hours ago, I might have even said Marcone didn’t have any fears. That wasn’t entirely accurate, though.

He just faced his fears inside those cabinets that organized his soul.

The only light in the room came in through the blinds, from Chicago - which always gave off some light even after the sun went down. The house itself was quiet except for the occasional rustle of the sheets. I had let Mister outside to roam, certain now that he could find his way back to what was our living space, so I didn’t even hear him pacing the floors after dust bunnies. I was just me and John Marcone. Alone in bed.

“You essentially go out on a date with another woman without a second thought,” he said quietly, “but I have to bribe you to simply share a meal with me. Except when Nathan bribes you instead.”

I could have told him that Hendricks didn’t bribe me - he bullied me - but my mouth didn’t quite want to form the words.

“Why me?” I asked him, like I had so many times before in my head. “Why not someone like Hendricks?”

“Nathan is like a brother to me. I love him, but not like I love you.”

How could he possibly say that? It wasn’t like he really knew me. We’d only been living together - for almost a full year. I didn’t know the exact date, but I knew it was close.

“Go to sleep,” I said, hoping he’d let it drop.

He leaned closer and I felt his lips on my shoulder. I shivered at the ghost of a kiss against my skin. “One day, I hope you believe me.”
“Go to sleep, scumbag.” I just didn’t know what to do when he said things like that.

The PD had limited my exposure to ‘dangerous’ cases, but Murphy was a tough girl and she knew she could call me. I hadn’t yet gotten those communication devices together - I couldn’t find a way to make them reliable - but I still had a phone.

I hadn’t paid close attention, but I was starting to notice life had gotten better for her. She had a bigger office and a new gun, at least, and I think the extra stars meant a promotion.

She was also getting more cases – some related to magic, some not – and a better solve rate as a result. They’d finally let her put some information about magic in the database; the werewolf and demon basics had been some of the first, with a big note reading: “Whether you believe in magic or not, if the criminals believe it, this information is useful.”

I had a feeling she’d only been able to update the database because she’d made it sound like magic isn’t real.

But it was still useful. It was good to know a guy wouldn’t attack you if he thought you were in a magic circle, or wouldn’t run if he was in one. The magic was true regardless.

The current case had set the PD scrambling for any clues, and Murphy had called me in. She’d told me we would be working with non-SI officers up front; SI was only helping because of a few unusual features. That didn’t exactly give me warm fuzzy feelings, but I would help if I could. And then she told me the details.

Kidnappings and murders. Little girl kidnappings with gruesome deaths. No wonder the call came through; it wasn’t just Murphy being a tough girl.

Marcone must have flipped his lid when he heard about this case. Gentleman Johnny was particular about who messed up his turf, and having his current boy-toy help the police probably made me look more like his. Not that I wouldn’t have helped anyways, but it was clear Marcone hadn’t protested my involvement with this particular case, maybe even insisted on it. I was playing into his game, helping to enforce his rules - but at least I was actually helping people.

Murphy had led me into a conference room with three other detectives and handed me a stack of reports from the morgue, complete with photos of the autopsy and the crime scenes. There weren’t any details on the suspects or any leads, they’d even left off any possible theories they’d had; all I’d been given were the facts of what they’d found.

Seeing those photos was like watching a horror flick played out before your eyes. Full color, close enough that you might feel the blood splash on you if you weren’t careful.

I rubbed my temples when I finished, feeling like I was spreading blood between my fingers. I had to explain to three men with guns that there wasn’t an easy way to find their answers. Murphy, at least, already knew what sort of time frames I worked with.

“Some of this is right, and some might be wrong,” I finally said. “I’d have to do some research to be sure on the wrong bits, but it looks like he’s trying to summon someone.”

“Even you admit he’s only trying?” one of the officers smirked.

“He’s still alive, therefore he hasn’t summoned up anything mean and nasty,” I said. “Demons who like human sacrifice tend to eat their summoners. Unless you expect Satan to be on a diet when you invite him home for dinner.” They were grown men and would have pummeled me for saying so,
but I still insist the sounds coming from at least one of them was muffled giggles. “This guy messes up enough times and he’s bound to either get it right or lose faith and start killing just for the fun of it.” That was a lot of dead bodies.

I had to clear up one aspect, since there were enough photos to clearly display it as a concern. “I’m fairly certain he’s not raping them,” I said. There weren’t even cracking smiles anymore.

“The report said there was bruising, even if there wasn’t any - fluids,” an officer stated, face serious, stumbling over the last word.

Murphy hadn’t officially introduced them to the other officers, though they all knew who I was, and I wasn’t going to ask. Some people are funny about names with us wizard folk. I wasn’t going to tell them it’d be less dangerous for her to say their name. It wasn’t worth it. The one who had spoken was sitting in the middle. The one on the right had a nervous giggle, and the partner on the left had a permanent sour look on his face. Not exactly the most open-minded of detectives, if that was enough evidence for them to decide on the facts.

“Crass as it sounds, you don’t ruin a virgin sacrifice by having sex with her,” I said bluntly. “And you don’t take a chance the girl’s been with someone else. He’s probably checking to make certain they’re still – uh – innocent, and not being very gentle about, you know, checking.”

“Jesus,” sour-face swore, his frown getting deeper.

“Jesus likely doesn’t have very much to do with this,” I said. “He tends to frown on the whole human sacrifice thing.”

Middle-man made the sign of the cross across his chest quickly and glared at me. Giggles was pale.

“These aren’t just generic sacrifices, but I can’t tell who he’s trying to summon,” I said and nearly bit my cheek. This was where I started getting away from common magical knowledge and into specifics. A lot of those details I wasn’t exactly supposed to share, though technically I was only speculating. I couldn’t prove anything, and I hoped they wouldn’t ask me to. The Council would quite literally have my head.

“You mean he’s looking for someone specific?” Murphy asked.

I nodded. “Anyone with a brain always goes for a specific demon, even if it’s just a specific type of demon. You can’t complete the summoning ritual otherwise. I don’t know who this guy is after, since details on demons are pretty rare. It’ll take awhile to figure out. This is pretty specific stuff, not handed out in some dummy’s guide.”

“This guy found it,” sour-face noted.

“Yes, but he knew what to look for. I know the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice, but what I know of their practices ends there. Or it could be a hell-hound, or Cerebus, or Ba’al, one of the Egyptian mystics, or someone I haven’t heard of. Right now, all I know is it’s a bad guy who likes human sacrifice. It narrows the field, but the field is still big.”

Sour-face and his companions nodded their understanding, but it was Murphy who spoke: “Do what you can without spooking him. We don’t want him going underground.”

“I’m more afraid he’ll do something stupid.”

“What do you mean?” giggles asked.
I pointed to one of the crime scene photos. “This type of work takes time and devotion. It’s sick, yes, and I’m probably going to be throwing up for a half-hour when I get home, but it’s still something he took his time with. He had to consider what might mess up his lines and the summoning requirements, and what would give him the most power.” Not that he could actually use any of that power. “If he gets desperate, he’s not going to be as careful. And he might make up for the fact that the sacrifices aren’t perfect by doing several, one right after the other. That’s the kind of stupid you need to be careful of.”

And if the idiot actually managed to perform a summoning successfully, we’d all be in deep trouble. I’d have to actually visit the crime scene to know for sure; there weren’t any specific locations in the files, but some of the photos looked like places I’d seen before. I didn’t think he had the power to be a magical danger, but it was always possible. He was enough of a threat without magic that I hoped that theory held true. “Where did you find the bodies?”

“We’re not permitted to tell you,” sour-face said.

“I’ve visited crime scenes before.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he countered. “This isn’t SI. We don’t take consultants to crime scenes unless absolutely necessary. You aren’t going.”

I looked at each man, and felt both disappointment and relief. Relief because they were taking this seriously, but I think my shoulders sagged under the weight of their disbelief. This guy wasn’t big as far as magical killers went - he wasn’t anywhere near another Shadowman - but I could see echoes of Renee’s thoughts in the detectives. They thought magic was for fruitcakes. If this killer really did have power - and he had belief in spades, it seemed, it was just a question of focusing it - then they could be in danger.

“Look, I know this sounds like a load of bull, but your killer thinks he can really summon something, and that’s the important part. Whether you believe it or not is, at this point, irrelevant. He does.” Middle-man and sour-face, at least, were looking interested, and nodding. “He’s choosing to terrorize people.” From what I could see in the crime scene photos, the locations were run-down but fairly public. The bodies were meant to be seen. “Demons love that kind of thing. What kind of people do you think are in hell? Imagine them and then make them ten times worse. That’s what he wants to bring into this world, and he really thinks he can do it.”

There were certain generic facts about summoning I could tell them, but I didn’t think it was a good time. For once, I stopped and didn’t put my foot in my mouth at the PD. I would write it up and send it to Murphy, and she could pass it on.

I needed the actual location of the killings to know more. I needed to see the actual altar, the actual circles for containment and protection, the actual ceremonial knives that were used. They could tell me a lot more about the killer, this demon, and how much protection I might need to lay down to prevent more little girls from going missing. Not to mention that they might contain a sample I could use to actually track the man down.

I really was going to heave at some point. I only hoped it was away from prying eyes.

“That kind of person can hide in plain sight,” I stumbled out, “because their belief in the magic they cast is just as sure as the belief you hold in whatever God you worship. To him, you’re the one who’s insane because you don’t believe.”

“So how do we find him?” Giggles asked.
That was tricky. “I can give you more details when I find out who he’s reaching for, but look for ceremonial knives or an old building that someone’s been into recently. He would have moved a table or something similar there for an altar - stone slabs are a bit hard to come by nowadays - and it’s probably not near running water.”

“Running water?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t work well with magic. Standing water is a bit different, but most water moves at some point - even the lake has a tide. He might be at the waterfront, but not over the water.”

“You’re not really eliminating a lot of places,” the man with the sour face grunted, looking angry. “You have anything else useful?”

“The knives would probably be the better bet - it would have a been a large purchase, or someone buying several within a short time frame. He would want a new knife for each girl. He’s also very likely a male, and not a female, based on the victims.”

“Why’s that?” Murphy cut in. “Aren’t sacrifices usually young girls?”

“Yes, and they are usually killed by a male priest. It’s more about balance, desire, and symbolism than gender. Besides, women are less likely to sacrifice children; men are less attached until they start having their own. Women try to get away with sacrificing something smaller first - and unless you’ve found a cache of dead dogs and cats you’re not telling me about…” It was unusual that he would put the bodies on display, since there wasn’t any ritual I knew of where it was necessary, but that could be part of his delusions.

“Maybe we should check up on you,” Sour-face said. “You know an awful lot about this.”

I could feel a chill go down my spine, like he had cursed me. “You don’t know me, and you don’t know my past.” He couldn’t have. Only wizards and fae could have known, and he wasn’t either. And I hadn’t told anyone about Justin. “I’m not a child-killer. You are free to investigate me all you like – lock me up if you want – but while you do there will be a killer out there, sacrificing little girls, and you won’t be any closer to putting him behind bars.”

“You could still provide information from inside a locked cell,” giggles said.

“If I was pulling information out of my ass, sure I could. Stars, you’re dense. I can’t ask the air how this works, I’m not that good. I have to research, and this type of research isn’t something that can be found on a computer. Most people who use it can’t go near technology anyways. We tend to fry it.”

“I’ve vouched for him, Matthews,” Murphy snapped. “And I can vouch for the computers too. He killed three of my monitors, and one tower.” She was smiling. It was good to see her smile. “What did you think we did, play baseball with them?” She shook her head. It also felt good to have her on my side again, and not wondering what I was hiding from her. “Enough. Harry, will this guy do anything strange? I’m not going to go in there and find him calling his stove the sacred flames of Hell or anything, am I?”

I shrugged. “Hard to say,” I said, knowing what she really wanted to know. Could he actually summon a demon. “I don’t think he’s that far gone – and he’s looking for a creature, not sacred fire, so… probably not.” Before Marcone, I would have flat out said ‘no;’ people can act pretty stupid, but a person was usually smarter. I’d since learned a person can adapt a ‘people’ mentality when things don’t go the way they want. I wonder if the guy had voices in his head? “You might watch out for animals though - dogs, most likely. Vicious ones.”
Sour-face rolled his eyes. “Are we done with this wonderful wealth of knowledge yet?” he asked.

I shrugged – again – and stood. “I don’t know, but he’s through with you. Murphy, I’ll call you if anything immediate turns up, otherwise I’ll get you a report as soon as I can. I should have the basics ready by tomorrow, and I’ll let you know if this is going to take longer than expected.”

“Tomorrow?” she asked. “That’s pretty quick for you.”

I shrugged. “Work’s slow right now, so I don’t have any other cases. I’ll need two or three days to get the details, because there’s some things I just can’t rush, but I should be able to get you some basics.”

She nodded. “We’ll take that.”

“Later, then. I’ll see myself out.”

She nodded, and looked ready to hit something. I hoped it wasn’t me.

Hendricks picked me up from the PD in a shiny new SUV that would probably never see a speck of mud. I wasn’t sure what excuse Marcone was using now, but I was sure it was just an excuse. He wanted his men to chauffeur me around.

“Where to?” Hendricks asked.


Someone new was in the passenger seat, and looking at me with concern. He just kept staring.

“Is there a problem?” I snapped.

“You look pale,” the new guy answered.

“You don’t eat enough, work too much, and spend too much time at the police station,” Hendricks cut in. “If you need it, there’s a bucket in the back,” he added in a quieter voice. “The Boss was worried.”

“About what?” I asked, ignoring the bucket remark. I wasn’t certain I wouldn’t need it.

“About you. The case.”

“Yeah, well, you can tell him it’s normal vanilla insane,” I said. “Or as normal vanilla as insane can be.”

“Either way, I’ve booked you some time at the firing range for next week.”

“Why?” I asked. Hendricks didn’t go out of his way to do something for me unless that something would, ultimately, benefit his Boss, Gentleman Johnny Marcone. I’d yet to figure out just what their relationship was, but it was closer than just Boss and Henchman. Maybe John had been right with his ‘like a brother’ comment; sometimes Hendricks acted more like John’s big brother, worried for his little brother’s well-being. Other times he was the gruff Cujo character from our first meeting. I never knew when he’d fly off the handle in John’s defense, but it seemed everything he did was for Marcone.
“To help you de-stress, and so I don’t have to shoot holes in the Boss’s walls next time you want to test something,” Hendricks said, answering my question as if it should be obvious.

I guess he was still sore over that.

“You know, you didn’t have to shoot it. I could have done it. I may have missed a few times, but I would have gotten it. And there wasn’t actually a hole in the wall. Just a dent.”

Hendricks didn’t flinch, but I could see the frown on his face from where I was sitting. “There shouldn’t be any shooting in the house,” he said. “It’s a hazard. And I don’t like having to plaster over the bullet holes.”

He took a turn rather more sharply than necessary, and I had to brace to keep my stomach where it was meant to be. I barely had time to wonder why Hendricks might have experience with holes in the walls.

“I hope your time at the PD was well spent,” Marcone said as I walked into the bedroom with only a towel around my waist. My stomach finally said enough when I’d reached John’s bathroom - ours now, I guess - and I had hoped to wash the smell of vomit from my nostrils with a quick shower. I’d been semi-successful, since I could still taste it a bit in the back of my throat. I hadn’t had time to dress yet.

Cases like this one made me feel dirty. The shower helped to clean up the physical unpleasantness of having lunch revisit the land of the non-digested, and it helped slow my thoughts down and process. It didn’t wash away the memory of those photos.

I tried not to feel naked as I went to the dresser to find some boxers and pants. “What are you doing home?” He wasn’t supposed to be back for hours, usually not until well after sunset. I’d been hoping to question Bob and rummage around the few books I had to eliminate a few possibilities. Hendricks had already left, so I’d thought I’d have the time relatively alone. If I could narrow down a general location, I could send Bob out with Mister and maybe get some answers. It would be safer for them after sunset, so I had a few hours to find the area.

“I thought you might find the details of the case upsetting,” Marcone mentioned, interrupting the thought, “and I was right. It also seemed a good time to introduce you to someone, if you’re feeling up to it.”

I snagged by last pair of clean boxers and a pair of jeans with a hole in the knee, slipping both of them on under the towel and hoping I wasn’t showing anything off. “I’m not sure if I can survive any more of your friends, especially more like Rex.” Something about the man just seemed off. Besides, I wasn’t overly fond of anyone who thought I should behave like a happy little homemaker wife. Pre-50’s technology might work better around magic, but that didn’t mean all wizards subscribed to the ideal 50’s family.

Gentleman Johnny chuckled a bit, his eyes fixed on me when I chanced a glance at his face. “Rex is a bit more traditional than most modern men,” Marcone said. “You should feel privileged he bent his rules enough I didn’t have to fight with him over where you fit.”

“I’m bursting with joy, you just can’t see it.”

“Sounds messy.”

“Undoubtedly.”
“You will be pleased, then, that this newest acquaintance will not need to bend traditions and morals
to accept you as my partner.”

“Too bad. I’m waiting for one of those stuffy old traditionalists to have a heart attack at my less than
suitable behavior.”

He was grinning when I turned to face him, buttons on my jeans done up and no other excuse not to
be face-to-face. I tossed the towel on the floor and crossed my arms to help hide my shirtless chest. “I
believe they’re made of sturdier stuff than you give them credit for, but that is yet to be proven.
Unless you wish to join me more often? It would certainly be no trouble to bring you with me to a
few of my dinner meetings, and I could introduce you,” Marcone offered.

“No thank you,” I said, hopefully keeping my voice stern. “I have enough to do as it is. The case,
remember?”

Marcone nodded, the teasing smile fading. “Of course. When should I arrange to have you meet my
girl?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I’ll have time. I’m a very busy man. Killers to track down, that
sort of thing.”

“This weekend, then?”

“If the case lets up.”

“If it hasn’t by this weekend, then it is doubly important that you take a break to meet this person.
You will need more time to stop and process than a ten-minute shower will allow, at the very least.
And - I want us to spend more time together.”

I hated that he was right. Not about the together part, but the needing to stop part. “Who is this
mysterious girl, anyways?” I demanded. “The mistress I’ll need to share you with?”

Marcone smirked again, and his stance changed a bit. Less of a tiger lazing about and more of a
hunter scenting prey.

I felt very much like prey. Stars and stones, but my mouth gets me in trouble.

“I didn’t know you were the jealous sort, Harry,” Marcone said, and hell’s bells, even his voice was
smiling. “Envious of the other women in my life? I assure you, they are far less interesting – though
the one I wish to introduce you to is likely far more permanent than any other person in my affairs.
Yourself included.”

A girl more permanent than a future husband? I was trying to leave him – get out of the marriage
entirely, even – but still… “That sounds ominous.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning on letting you go anytime soon,” Marcone soothed. Fae in my bed,
he soothed like I needed it or something. I hate that tone. It sent shivers down my spine that were
purely out of revulsion. And it was cold without a shirt. Honest.

“Sounds worse,” I said, turning to the closet and grabbing the first shirt my hand found and pulling it
on.

Suddenly, Marcone was grinning wider and in my personal space, helping me to settle the shirt on
my shoulders. “Maybe it’s not as bad as it seems,” he said. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”
He kissed me. With tongue. And I wasn’t even getting paid for it.

I was a bit breathless when he pulled away, his hands somehow having found their way into my hair and making it more of a mess than usual. Mine were fisted in his pristine shirt, making wrinkles just to tick him off. I could still taste him on my lips.

“I have to go to work,” I said, very carefully not stuttering, and nearly ran from the room. Anyone would have.

I had almost, in that moment, found John Marcone arousing and attractive beyond just a physical reaction to a stimulus, and that was reason enough for any man to run for his safe, normal, routine work of chasing down molesters.


The problem with John Marcone, I decided, was that I couldn’t just feel one way about him. I hated what he did; sex, guns, and drugs weren’t meant to be traded and sold. It happened, and I couldn’t stop it, but I didn’t have to like it or encourage it.

Marcone was a part of that trade, but he had standards. And if it was going to happen there was no doubt Marcone’s standards were the most moral, for lack of a better term. As the biggest fish in this part of the sea, Marcone made certain his people were protected, they were healthy, and everyone else got dead.

Gentleman Johnny never made bad deals, and made sure his buyers weren’t psycho killers who would harm his city. He had turned down high-paying offers because the men were scum.

And he never dealt in human slavery. He cracked down hard on child abuse.

All of this made him a criminal, but an arguably moral one. One that would need some pretty heavy dirt against him before the PD started to consider raising charges.

He was also one hell of a kisser.

I still didn’t like living with him. Being in his personal space every night, living in the same house for months, a year in his space and in his debt made me question just how naive I was to think the world could run without crime. I’d be out of job, for one thing. And after giving a few of those uncomfortably pleasant and not completely innocent kisses myself…

I was a very lonely man with very physical needs, and few prospects other than the criminal Marcone, and the few prospects I did have weren’t exactly available.

Susan was gone. I don’t know where, but she was. John was still looking for her, and the look in his eyes when we’d talked about her said he wouldn’t give up.

There was sympathy there, which I didn’t understand. Sadness. Longing. I don’t know what else.

It confused me.

I wasn’t entirely certain why he was still looking for her. As far as I knew he hadn’t found anything, and I hoped it would stay that way.

Though I feared what Marcone might do to Susan, he seemed to be showing his good side to the police force for the moment. If nothing else, Marcone’s influence had proven Karrin was better off
with me where I was, and I wasn’t going to risk her career – or her life – over a few less than lonely nights. If I had evidence against Marcone I might risk mine, but I didn’t have anything I was willing to bet my life on.

Meaning I would continue to share a bed with John Marcone and hope that he kept his attitude gentlemanly.

If it were just him, I wouldn’t object to the physical side. But he came with a business I wanted no part of. Came with rules and publicity and guns.

“You know, Boss, you glare at that vial any harder and it might break into tears,” Bob cut into my thoughts like a glass of ice water.

“Well?” I asked. “Did you find anything?” He’d been out looking for traces of magic at the crime scenes, riding along with Mister, my 30 pound cat who had just crashed into my legs and was glaring at the skull. They were a good distraction.

I rewarded Mister with a full can of coke-a-cola in his water dish, which he immediately left to lap up.

“Where’s my reward?” Bob asked. “Do I get to find out why you’re wearing a shirt that isn’t yours? Is Johnny-boy good between the sheets? Details, Harry! Details!”

“The crime scenes, Bob,” I reminded him. He’d been out all night, hopefully narrowing the field down. “Focus. Worry about my shirt later. Or better yet, not at all. What did you find?”

“Not much,” Bob said, somehow managing to convey a shrug, quite a feat for someone with no shoulders. “I was able to trace the latest victim back to the waterfront, but that was more from Mister’s nose and clever deductions than anything else.”

“What do you mean?”

“The area stank like dead fish,” Bob elaborated. “And not the kind cats would go for - sick dead fish. There was room for an altar in several of the buildings down there, but I couldn’t get a good look. Either the guy doesn’t have power or he hasn’t worked anything recently. A few sunrises would be enough to wash away any lingering magical traces.”

“That’s not much to go on.”

“Sorry, Boss, but it’s out of my field if it’s not magical. I can’t even begin to understand the minds of most mortals. Too many straight lines going in the wrong direction.”

I snorted. “You’ve dealt with the fae too much.”

He didn’t disagree.

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Luckily for me, John was already gone when Bob had returned. I quickly ate a bowl of cereal from the kitchen - some whole grain thing that tasted funny - and called a cab to meet me a few blocks away. I slipped out the gate, avoided the guards watching the house, and went to visit the potential crime scene.

Bob was right, the place did smell like dead fish. It was right on Lake Michigan, where somewhere along the line someone decided a rock wall was a good idea to hold the water back. Or to keep the road from collapsing into the water, it was hard to say.
The buildings were mostly businesses, about half of which were closed at this time of the morning.

It was early, and if I wanted to avoid more of John’s hovering, I should have been heading back to the house. I’d considered leaving him a note, but really - it wasn’t like I had to report in to him all the time.

I’d spent most of the night on the case, but I still didn’t have any trace of the killer to lead me to him or his altar. There weren’t any obviously deserted buildings nearby that might have housed a dark ritual, either. In fact, the setting was incredibly wrong for a dark ritual. Often, the victim would be screaming for help, and the area was too populated - too many potential witnesses.

There was a reason dark magic was done in deserted areas, away from ordinary citizens. The further from society the ritual was held, the less likely it was that a vanilla mortal would stumble across your hidden torture chamber.

And if people thought you were an upstanding citizen yourself, they were more than willing to hand over their children. No one questioned when Elaine and I didn’t make it to school sometimes, or when we showed up with bruises in some pretty obvious places. We were always ‘training,’ which seemed as good an excuse as any to the other adults. It was just as likely the little girls’ mothers weren’t questioning why their little girls were missing right away.

And then it clicked. This wasn’t where he was making the sacrifices - it was where he was getting his victims.

The smell of dead fish was faint to my nose, but it must have been overwhelming to Bob for him to think the murders had been nearby. I took a tentative step towards the water’s edge when Toot suddenly flew right into my face.

“’za Lord! You can’t go that way!” he shouted.

I blinked. It was highly unusual for Toot to be in this part of town, and even more unusual for him to interfere with anything unless he had been specifically asked to. This soon after sunrise, I was surprised he hadn’t flown to the NeverNever.

His hands were planted firmly on his hips and he was about three inches of indignant pouting. It seemed he’d fashioned a sword from a pen cap, and was wearing a thimble for a helmet.

“Why not?” I asked, holding out my hand so he could land on my palm.

Toot didn’t weigh more than a feather, so when he landed I felt like I was holding a ball of yellow glitter in the air. Pixie dust fell off of him in little waves, but it wasn’t the kind that could make you fly. I’d already asked.

“It’s dangerous,” he said, “and you aren’t prepared!”

“What’s over there that’s dangerous?” I asked.

Toot bit his lip, seemingly unsure.

“I’ll buy you a whole pizza, Toot,” I said, hoping I could get one cheap.

His eyes widened. “A whole pizza? Just for me?”

I nodded. “Just for you.”
“Promise?” he asked suspiciously.

“Promise, promise, promise.”

Toot hesitated only a moment more before zipping up to my shoulder and whispering in my ear: “One of the guys who sells the fake magic powder spilled a bunch in the water when the cars with the shiny lights showed up,” he said. “It made everyone in the water sick - even the kelpie!”

That was the source of the dead fish, then; a drug dealer getting rid of the goods before he went to jail. Typical. I felt sorry for the kelpie. They didn’t typically visit areas as highly populated as Chicago, but they weren’t particularly smart either.

“Thanks, Toot,” I said. “One more question: what are you doing here?”

“That’s a very good question,” a familiar voice asked, and Toot hid himself in the collar of my duster, his glow dimming. “What are you doing here, Dresden?”

I planted a smile on my face as I turned around and saw the sour-faced detective on the case. “Good evening, officer,” I said. “Out for a stroll?”

“I asked what you were doing here.”

“Trying to find your killer, of course. You did hear me when I said it was my only case, right?”

“I heard you,” he grunted. “But that doesn’t explain how you ended up here.”

“Someone complained about the dead fish,” I said. “Since it’s a bit unusual to have so many in one place and I didn’t have any other clues, I figured I’d check it out. By the way, you may want to get someone to test that water quality - looks like someone threw their trash in there.”

“And how do I know that ‘someone’ wasn’t you?”

“Because I wouldn’t have told you?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t worry, ‘za Lord,” Toot whispered in my ear as I tensed. “I’ll go get your sporting partner. He’s close.”

I panicked for a moment, thinking he was going to get Susan, but I didn’t have a lot of time to spend on Toot and his strange behavior. “Believe it or not, it’s the truth. I heard a report that something unusual was happening here, and I came to check it out.”

“So you had no idea all but one of the missing girls wandered away from their caretakers within a mile of this very spot?”

So I was right - this had been where he got his sacrifices - but this wasn’t the time to feel proud about it. “I suspected it was some place similar to this, yes - a shopping district where parents would be distracted and kids could easily wander off - but I didn’t know it was here until you just confirmed it. You wouldn’t give me the details, remember?”

“And yet, despite not having details, you still wind up at the scene of the crime.”

It was one of the police’s favorite theories that the criminal always returned to the scene of the crime. Unfortunately for Chicago, so did a hundred other people. “I’m not the only one. You’ve got at least ten or twenty shops here about to open up within the hour. This place is a quaint little strip of over-
priced stores and local tourist traps that will be crawling with people in a few hours. Since you’ve now confirmed the girls were taken from this area, I can guess that they were the daughters of some upper-middle class families. No one rich or well off, because that would have made the news, wouldn’t it, officer? Stemming from that I can guess that they weren’t found in the dresses they wandered off in. They weren’t fancy enough for the type of people who like to shop here.”

“I’m taking you in,” sour-face said, reaching for his cuffs.

“On what grounds?” asked another unfortunately familiar voice.

I glanced to the side and there was Marcone, Toot peeking out from his suit’s breast pocket with a wicked smile on his face.

Hell’s bells.

“Mister Marcone,” sour-face greeted. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” I hadn’t known the two had met before, but from the way sour-face’s frown grew I didn’t think the meeting had been friendly.

“Detective Umbridge. I’d say it’s nice to see you again, but it appears you are - yet again - harassing someone associated with me. Granted, Harry is much more than an office employee, but I would hate to make yet another complaint.”

“This has nothing to do with you, Mister Marcone. I suggest you keep it that way,” sour-face - Umbridge - commented, not at all friendly.

“I’d have to disagree,” Marcone said, and suddenly he was at my side with one hand around my waist and the other lifting my hand up so he could kiss it. “Harry is my fiancee. If you mean to arrest him, I will know what charges you plan to lay against him.”

“Kidnapping and murder,” Detective Umbridge stated coldly.

I may have yelped a little. “You can’t be serious?” I asked. “No one’s going to believe that!”

“Why not?” the detective asked. “We only showed you the photos, but you had a courier drop off a nifty little packet this morning with a fair amount of details on how those girls died. With no information, you show up at the scene of the kidnappings. You’re crazy enough to list yourself as a wizard in the phone book, and as the only wizard in the area you are the only suspect with ties to the occult. That should be more than enough for a search warrant.”

His eyes were narrowed, and he was grinning. I don’t think it mattered to him whether I was his man or not, he’d get what he wanted: a search warrant for Marcone’s house.

“Even if someone approves such a search warrant,” Marcone said calmly, “it won’t be you searching the house, Umbridge. And you won’t be arresting Harry.”

“And why is that?”

“Because we’ve complained to your supervisor again,” Red said, leaning against the wall of a business that had yet to open its doors. “They’ve determined that you’re too close to this case, and are pulling you off. You should get the call shortly.”

“And we’ve complained about the business you’re driving away,” yelled an older man, slamming his cane down on the hardwood step that led to his second-story shop. “Every day coming in and harassing customers, asking if they’ve seen those poor girls, if someone suspicious was around - you’d think you’d never heard of the word ‘polite’!”
“You don’t even have the good manners to buy a drink when you come in and sit at one of my tables for hours on end,” complained a woman who looked to be in her mid-20’s. “I need those tips, man, and I don’t think my boss likes it much either.”

Without me realizing it was happening, Detective Umbridge had suddenly become the center of a large circle of unhappy citizens.

John’s arm squeezed my waist. “I want you off this case,” he said quietly while Umbridge was distracted. I glanced at him and realized Toot had already flown off, though he was probably watching from somewhere close.

“No,” I said firmly. My first real case in weeks, I wasn’t going to jump ship when it got a bit rough.

“They are not far from arresting you, and they can hold you for 24 hours before even charging you—”

“And another little girl might die if I don’t help.”

Marcone’s grip tightened as he fought with indecision. “You don’t slip off from Drake again. At the very least, he will give you an alibi.”

I glanced over at Red. He’d recovered from getting thrown into the wall fairly nicely; if I hadn’t known already, I wouldn’t have been able to tell. He also looked determined to keep staring at me for the foreseeable future. “Fine,” I said. “But he keeps his distance and stays out of my way.”

“Has that ever been a problem before?”

“No.”

“Then don’t worry. Drake knows what he’s doing. Ah - it looks like the fine detective just got his phone call.”

“Did all these people really have problems with him?” I asked. “I thought detectives were supposed to be discrete.”

“He was, for the most part,” John chuckled. “He just chose the wrong shops to be discrete in.”

Another reason Marcone wanted me on the case then: it was happening on his turf.

“I guess that’s why you were close,” I muttered. It didn’t explain Toot, but if Marcone had businesses here - and it seemed he did - then it wasn’t inconceivable that he’d just been around.

“I actually had other business I was attending to,” he said instead. “But that can wait. Would you like to join me for breakfast?”

My stomach clenched a bit, telling me that bowl of cereal hadn’t been enough. I wasn’t that hungry, though. “I already ate.”

My stomach growled. The traitor.

“Not enough, obviously,” he smiled. “Come, the detective’s busy. We’ll eat at Missy’s; she makes wonderful pancakes.”

Between writing another, more detailed report for Murphy in my best handwriting possible, looking up clues on the child-killer, and dodging Marcone as much as possible, I somehow forgot to make a payment at the end of the month. Thankfully I remembered to show up at the café, but I’d been
getting dirty looks all week for looking a bit more on the scruffy side, and my hours had been cut back.

Which meant I didn’t have much of a payment even if Marcone asked for one.

He wasn’t asking.

I shifted awkwardly on the bed again, and heard him sigh. “Harry, please, lie still.”

I tried. I managed not to move. Even when it became clear I wasn’t going to be sleeping and could get up and get some work done – maybe a potion or two – I didn’t. I hadn’t made a payment, and it’s going to sound ridiculous, but I felt like I owed him something. The idea made my skin crawl, and it wasn’t like I wasn’t going to pay him back anyways – plus interest – but it felt awkward leaving the unpaid amount, well, unpaid.

The end of the month had come and gone. It was May. I was behind.

“Whatever is the matter?” Marcone demanded.

“I’m not moving.”

“No, but it’s hard to sleep with you as tense as a board over there. Is something wrong with the wards?”

“No.”

“Has someone broken in?”

“No.”

“Is something from your side of the world about to come over and inflict bodily harm?”

“No,” I answered, wishing I could say yes. It was almost always true enough.

“Then what’s the matter?”

I couldn’t bring it up myself. “Just thinking,” I finally said. “Can’t sleep.”

For a few moments, John didn’t say anything, and I thought he was going to let it drop. “The case is getting to you,” he said abruptly. It made me a bit sick to my stomach, but I didn’t contradict him.

“Here.” I was confused for a moment, until I felt an arm around my waist and a second slipping under my pillow.

“I thought we agreed no touching,” I said, uncertain where to move. Forward would pitch me off the bed and back would plaster me to his naked front.

“You did read the clause that stated touching was permissible in certain cases, correct?”

I nodded. He had written up something of an agreement for me, leaving out the part where I got paid. We’d both signed it, agreeing to share a bed but not to touch - except by accident - unless it was agreed on by both parties.

Except for one clause. “Illness, injury, or other ailment,” I said, and turned my head to glare at him. “I don’t think this counts.”

“I think this could be considered an ailment. Insomnia is considered a disease,” he countered. “Just
rest, Harry. Go to sleep. Imagine I’m someone else if it helps.”

It did. For the first time in years I slept comfortably. I tried not to think about it too much.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Summary

Many thanks to everyone who has given kudos, commented, and helped this story along. I know it's been a long journey, and I hope you'll stick with me until we get to the end of it!

Chapter Notes

I handed the revised report over to Murphy and let myself fall into the chair opposite her desk. “I don’t get it,” I said. “Why can’t I see the crime scenes again?”

“Because you’re suspect and Umbridge thinks you’ll show up anyway.”

“Forget Umbridge – why aren’t you showing me the crime scenes? You know I need something to work with if I’m going to get anywhere.”

Her eyes lifted briefly from the report. “Because you’re a suspect, and yesterday you managed to find the scene of the kidnappings without help.”

“He has the potential for power, Murphy. Not a lot, and he probably can’t summon anything, but he knows enough to be dangerous.”

“It’s not my case, Harry. Besides, you’re only a consultant. You’ve gotten the same information any other consultant would have access to.”

Everyone wants to see the scene before someone else messes it up. I know, I get more by being there first too. Usually, though, I’d get to at least see it, even if I wasn’t one of the first.

“At the very least, if you find him, I want you to take some precautions.”

“I’m listening,” she said. She put the report down on her desk and stopped reading to look directly at me. “After all these years – and several murders – it apparently takes the deaths of children to get you talking.”

“I could get in trouble for telling you things,” I said. “Stars, Murphy, I want to tell you, but I have to be careful.”

“Fine,” she said, her voice short. “What did you want to say?”

“Draw a circle around him when you find him. Doesn’t matter how – chalk, salt, anything will work – and make certain he sees you doing it. Circles contain things. You can’t break the circle, though – no one steps over it or rubs it or touches it. Once the circle is broken he’ll try to fight.”

“Won’t he try to break it himself?”

“He might,” I admitted. “You’ll need someone to pretend they believe in magic, and pretend to believe they’re actually laying a circle. If you’re willing to trust me that far, I’ll come and lay one
down myself.”

“I think we can handle putting a little chalk on the ground.”

I nodded. I’d had to offer, though the chances of her accepting were slim. “The circle’s power will fade at sunset and sunrise – sunrise will completely wipe it, sunset isn’t as strong.” Sunrise was about new beginnings, a very powerful, natural magic. Sunset was more about endings, but the strength of that magic had faded as less people saw sunset as an end to the day.

“Anything else?”

“If he’s any good, the circle won’t do anything at all. Circles contain magic and magical creatures. He’s a physical creature - a mortal - so it will only keep him from throwing magic at you until he crosses it. Don’t tell him that, though, and you might get lucky.”

“Gee, thanks,” she almost laughed. “That makes me feel so much better.”

“You still mad at me?”

“I wasn’t mad at you,” she said. “I still don’t think you’re telling me everything, but I’m not mad about it.”

“So what are you mad about?”

With a grimace, she slid a piece of paper across her desk. I picked it up, and realized the problem. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. It was delivered to my office here.”

“So, my wedding.”

“To the Gentleman.”

I hesitated a moment before saying: “About John.” I had to tell her. The whole point of me going through with the marriage was so I could help her while paying John back. Okay, so it was mostly so I could pay John back, but I didn’t want to make it easy for him.

Besides, I owed it to the kelpie.

“I’m listening,” she said, leaning forward a bit.

“The scene of the kidnappings – it was on his turf, I guess, or at least he was nearby doing ‘business’ while I was there. A few days ago, your cop cars scared one of his drug dealers into dropping the shipment into the lake right where Umbridge found me. I’m not sure how long ago it was, but it was long enough to kill some fish and make the visiting fae sick.”

“Visiting… fae?” A confused frown formed between her eyes. “What kind of fae?”

“A kelpie. And before you go making connections, kelpie do not kill children. Especially not like this.”

“And why would I think that?”

“A few old legends.” They actually had killed children in the past, but that had been pure accident, from what I could understand. The kelpie weren’t very smart. “Kelpie are shapeshifters, but they’re mostly just like playful dogs. Except they’re horses that live underwater most of the time.” There
were a few legends where the kelpie ate humans, but those were rare. According to Bob, they probably weren’t accurate either. Though he wouldn’t answer when I’d asked what the kelpie did eat.

“And you think this one has nothing to do with our case?”

I shrugged. “It’s sick, so it’s probably just moping around the lake – or maybe it moved to the NeverNever. Either way, it’s not capable of the thought it would take to kill like this guy does. They’ve got the attention span of a three-year-old and about the same amount of focus. They like children because they like to play. Any deaths they cause are because they forget humans need air to breathe.”

Murphy nodded. “And your boyfriend’s drug-dealing employee made it sick?”

I shrugged. “Not intentionally, but there’s got to be something there you can use, right?”

She sighed, leaning back. “Not really. We can check the water and pull up what we find, but even if the drugs are still there and partially intact, the water will have washed away any evidence we might find. We can watch the area, but it sounds like whoever it is already knows we’re there. I’ll let Narcotics know we think someone dropped a load in the lake, and they may be able to match it with a manufacturer – but that’s only if there’s enough left to work with. We can’t press charges on behalf of a sick fae against an unknown suspect. Even if we open an investigation, there’s barely enough information here to investigate!”

I shrugged. “Maybe you’ll get lucky?” I asked.

Murphy rolled her eyes.

When I finally made it to the bedroom, John had already settled in for the night. The room was a bit warm, and he’d let the sheet slip down his chest, exposing a set of firm muscles, a slight tan, and strong arms.

How he managed to tan under his suits I still don’t understand.

He was awake, and I turned my back to him and started to change. It wouldn’t be the first time he watched me get ready for bed, and I wasn’t as nervous when it happened anymore. It wasn’t like the few times he caught me coming out of the shower; for one thing, I was considerably more decent. He never saw me completely undressed even then, though I had snuck a peek at him a few times. I had once considered Marcone a handsome man, arbitrarily speaking. Seeing him in fewer clothes didn’t change that opinion, unfortunately.

Tommy Tomm had shown the rough life of a mob enforcer through his scars. Marcone didn’t have those rough, puckered marks. His scars were smooth alterations in skin color, patches of skin that never grew hair or tanned, and pin-prick marks from stitches and surgeries.

Compared to them both, my body was an untainted child’s, never showing signs of single scrape or fight. Even the burns from the night Justin died had faded to almost nothing. The knife wounds from Frank had healed to a few discolored rough patches. I was never certain if it was a good idea to let John see those or not.

I could change elsewhere if I wanted, but - well - I felt awkward protesting when he had less clothes on than I did. He never approached me or made suggestive remarks, so I was fairly certain he wasn’t going to start jumping me at a bit of exposed skin. Probably.
“Are you feeling better tonight?” he asked suddenly, startling me.

Just because I was less nervous didn’t mean I wasn’t nervous. Marcone typically kept his mouth shut when he made it to bed first, and I did my best to forget he was there. It wasn’t like it happened all that often. His hours were worse than mine.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you feeling better? Last night you were considerably upset. I was hoping you felt more at ease after discussing the situation with your police-friend.”

I shook my head. “Lieutenant Murphy hasn’t had any breaks in the case yet. It’s pretty much at a stalemate until the guy makes another move. I might be able to do more if I had access to the evidence, maybe if I could trace the crime scenes, but I’m not permitted,” I growled. It still grated a bit. Murphy used to show me crime scenes before -

Before Victor Sells. Before she started considering me a suspect in cases.

The fact that I couldn’t blame it entirely on Marcone was disappointing.

“You shouldn’t worry so much,” he said. “Patience is a virtue.”

“Says the man who scheduled our wedding less than a week after I agreed.”

“Says the man who can barely kiss his fiancee even though they share the same bed. You wear my ring, but you’re more distant now than when you first moved in.”

“Did you ever consider that I may not want this?” I asked.

“Are you saying no?” he asked in return. “You are free to walk out that door at any time. I won’t force you to stay.”

“But you want me to.”

“Yes.”

“I hate you.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

I sighed, closed the dresser drawer, and finally crawled into the bed in just my boxers and the lightest t-shirt I could find - one that had also suffered a few holes over the years. It was warm, and I didn’t want to sweat all night. Still, I had to warn him: “No touching. I will leave.”

“Very well,” he agreed. “Do I at least get a good night kiss?”

I scowled, and turned my back to him. “What do you think?”

He settled down to watch me. I think he was still watching me when I fell asleep. He didn’t touch me though, and I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

Murphy and the detectives found their child-killer a week later, thankfully before he managed to traumatize another young soul. One of the detectives even thanked me for the advice on how to deal with him.
"You were right," he'd said. "We drew a circle in chalk around his cell when he got to chanting, and acted like we all knew what we were doing, and hell, it didn’t do a thing but he shut right up, plopped himself down on the floor and sulked."

Half the men in the PD were still calling me mad behind my back, but at least they’d been a little quieter once word spread.

"Charity is getting anxious about your tux, Harry," Marcone said, interrupting my thoughts. "She’d like to set a time for the fitting."

"I already had one," I said. It’d been embarrassing. It was, apparently, easier to take in the seams on a suit that was too large around the middle than to try and lengthen the legs on one that properly fit in the waist. Unfortunately, one of the seams the man had needed to take in had been the one along my crotch.

"You need a second, to ensure the alterations were correct, as well as a third closer to the wedding in case there have been changes."

The lightbulb in the ceiling light of the sitting room finally decided flickering wasn’t enough, and went out with a soft pop. The room was left in darkness, and I winced. With a muttered spell, I lit the candles I’d already laid out in preparation for the inevitable. I can’t remember telling Marcone about how magic and science didn’t get along, but the man had gotten enough hints to see the point. Instead of cuddling in front of the t.v. and watching the screen flicker, we were playing checkers. I hadn’t been paying much attention to the game, and was losing horribly as a result.

John was sitting in the easy chair, face shadowed in the flickering light and dollar-green eyes hidden by the darkness. I could have met his eyes without fear of soulgazing – such magic only happens once, unless a person undergoes a significant, often traumatic, change – but I didn’t. Mister butted his head against my chin, his large paws almost hitting someplace delicate as he shifted to rub himself against me. I liked to think he was offering me comfort, instead of begging for attention for himself.

"I never could understand why technology fails in your presence, yet all my sources agree this is normal for any sort of magic," he said.

I glanced at him for a moment, just enough to notice him staring at the lamp and the candles lighted around the base. He had more than one source, then, and none of them were me. He seemed to test theories with me rather than ask me outright. "Magic and science don’t mix," I said. "It’s why I stay away from hospitals."

"You do well enough with your pistol."

"Most of the time. It doesn’t always fire. But it’s also older. Anything before World War Two has a fair chance of working most of the time. Less science-y stuff, more simple reactions. Magic doesn’t change the way a wheel moves or blade falls."

He was quiet for a moment. "You’re still upset about the case," he said, changing the topic as he reached to make another move.

I couldn’t say he was wrong, because that would be a lie. I’d avoided mirrors even more than usual; my apartment hadn’t contained a single one, but Marcone’s house did. I had covered or removed the mirrors in ‘my’ rooms long ago, but I wasn’t in those rooms anymore. I’d covered up the one in Marcone’s master bathroom last week. The one in the hallway I’d thrown out two days ago. I’d found one in the guest bathroom yesterday and painted it over.
Hendricks had looked at me a bit like I was crazy.

I told him he’d thank me when he wasn’t running from demon-spawn and imps in the middle of the night because the mirror had let them through.

“You’re not sleeping well,” he said when the silence continued a bit too long. We weren’t comfortable enough with each other to let it last.

And it was true, too. I wasn’t sleeping well. It didn’t help that Marcone cuddling up to me and ‘comforting’ me was the best sleep I’d had in weeks. He was a mafia lord, the uncrowned king of Chicago. Chicago wasn’t a pretty city. Everyone knew the stories. Knew someone who knew someone who had disappeared. Or a woman who had been beaten. Child labor and sweatshops still worked in the underground, far from the eye of the government and labor laws, under the table and out of sight. Whore houses disguised as escort services ran as legit businesses. It all happened.

And John Marcone had a hand in it all. He knew what happened, and what he didn’t run himself he allowed to run. He had that much power - more than the governor, probably. For all I knew, he’d gotten the man elected. And it was in Marcone’s arms that I had slept deep and hard and true, without dreams.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Marcone demanded.

A command I could have ignored. I didn’t. He’d asked about my sleepless nights often enough, I wanted to give him some reason, if only so he’d back off. “There’s one less scumbag on the street, yes, but there are more I can’t stop. Kids I can’t save.”

“No one can save the world,” he said softly. “Trust me, I’ve tried.”

He was right, I couldn’t save everyone. But I could damn well feel guilty when I saw the world falling to pieces around me.

“You never got to meet my special lady,” he said, again not letting the silence drift too long, “and I think it’s far past the point where we should be spending some quality time together. Tomorrow I have some appointments I can’t miss, and a few meetings to attend. The day after, Saturday, I will arrange for us to spend together before meeting this person. If you will arrange to have both days free, spend all forty-eight hours in my presence unless I require otherwise, and present the proper behavior of a fiancé, I will see that last month’s interest disappears.”

“And this month’s,” I said. “Forty-eight hours is two days. I want two month’s interest docked. One for each day.”

“Depending on your behavior. As always, payment is variable.” With a few quick jumps, he captured the last of my pieces.

Marcone stood, his money-colored eyes watching me. “I know this might seem like a lot to you, Harry, but I would appreciate it if, on Saturday at least, you attempted to enjoy yourself. This is not meant to be a burden.”

Where were my witty comebacks? My attempts at banter? I couldn’t actually be sulking, though wizards are known to be good at that.

In the end, Marcone left without my promise.

I looked at Mister and frowned. “You’re lucky you’re a cat,” I said. “No one asks you to play nice.”
I attempted to mentally prepare for spending two days in John’s company and still “enjoy myself.” That meant several hours in meditation. For some witches and wizards, meditation is a handy way to clear the mind and relieve burdens. For others, it allows them to go over information and see things in a new light, free of emotion and bias, boiling things down to simple facts. For a select few, it can actually allow them to get in touch with their inner selves – probably something like meeting subconscious Harry, when I was being hunted down by various versions of lycanthropes and three shakes away from going barmy. Subconscious Harry had saved me, in a way, but I had only been able to reach him because I had already surpassed most of my limits and had, quite literally, passed out due to sheer exhaustion and pain.

Mediation, for me, was a handy way to fall asleep. I wasn’t very good at it. Several people, including Uncle Justin the Not So Wise and the handy skull-spirit Bob, had attempted to guide me in it, Justin going so far as to try and Influence my mind and make the paths easier to follow.

I’d bulked against that instinctively, hurling up shields. He hadn’t tried again, and the shields had fallen apart. I wasn’t skilled in mind magic, so most wizards aren’t even taught how to protect themselves. Those who learn are those who are attacked.

I couldn’t meditate the way he had tried to teach me. I had to find another way. I started by setting up a table with candles in my previous bedroom, locking the door, and then taking a shower. Long and cold and cleansing, I washed the magic from my body and let the water beat some relaxation in my shoulders and neck. When I was finished, I toweled off briefly and then went into the bedroom, laying the towel down and then sitting on it, naked. I whispered a gentle spell to light the candles, settled myself into the traditional folded-legs pose, and closed my eyes.

Then, instead of emptying my mind as instructed, I thought. I didn't much like it, but I did it anyways.

I thought of Murphy, and how much better she was doing now that I was out of her life. I didn’t resent her for it, exactly, but some gentle poking revealed what could be considered envy. Marcone hadn’t chosen her for consort. She was safe now, though. Perhaps not completely shielded from the Never Never, but she knew about it and the council and was willing to pick up the phone and call me if needed. And Marcone wasn’t hounding her or sicking Internal Affairs on her.

I thought of my debts, huge mountains of money I still owed Marcone. I would pay it back, eventually, and being married to Marcone – John, I was going to be married to the man and I should call him John – meant I could pay them off quicker.

And I was going to be married to him. There was no avoiding it now. There was too much I owed him, no other way to settle the payments, and though I continued working it was clear he didn’t want me to clear my debt until after the vows were made. He wanted to be married. To back out now would be like painting a huge target on my back and asking my godmother if she’d like to hunt.

I didn’t know why he wanted to be married, but if Gentleman Johnny wanted something then he was going to get it. That much had been made abundantly clear. He had said he loved me, but I couldn’t believe that. He was Gentleman Johnny Marcone. I’d seen his soul. It wasn’t sunshine and unicorns - it was ruthless and predatory. Not exactly a nurturing environment for love.

But Toot had flown to John when he thought I needed mortal help. Was that just a recognition of John’s mortal power? Or something else? Just how close did the fae watch me?

I hadn’t meant to get distracted by thoughts of Toot. I would have to investigate that connection a little more thoroughly - and question Toot the next time I saw him - but I needed to settle my thoughts on John first.
I would have fought against his collaring and obsessing and probably burned this place to the ground attempting to leave if I thought he was truly evil. Like Justin, and maybe Rex. I had enough contacts that I wouldn’t be homeless and wanting, and though his threats were nothing to scoff at. I could handle it. I wasn’t someone to throw idle threats to.

Which led me to the thought that, yes, John Marcone was kind of a good man. I didn’t want to think about this too much, but it was there. He took care of his own, as he had with Tommy Tomm, Red, and Spike. He got rid of threats to those who were ‘his,’ even if it meant killing one of his own as he had with Frank. He’d taken a huge risk when facing down the werewolf variations, and had shown tolerance of my place in the Alpha’s pack. Had shown huge tolerance of their nagging and watching, though it meant he had to be more careful around them. He gave me the freedom to see who I chose when I chose, and didn’t try to lock me up or make me do tricks or - worse - commit murder. I felt one of the knots in my back noticeably loosen.

The Alphas were different. It seemed I shifted from being their Alpha to being one of the pups. Not that they had any. Yet. One day they would do as I asked without question, facing down fae I’d rather not encounter at all, and the next they’d be bringing me casserole and cupcakes as I settled down for my ‘lessons.’ Then we’d be laughing together as we played D&D and I rolled a complete miss.

In a way, my relationship with them was more complex than my relationship with Marcone – stars, John – and I didn’t see them half as much. Especially now that John was making the effort to see me at least once a day, even if it was only for a few minutes before bed.

It was going to be a while before I was relaxed enough to ‘enjoy myself,’ I could tell. It made me squirm a bit, uncomfortable. I didn’t like looking at myself.

Unfortunately, Marcone’s day started bright and early. I found myself showering and dressing much earlier than normal office hours required (as in, it was still dark out when the alarm went off, and daylight was just hinting at the horizon when we left). I don’t think he was listening to my grumbles as I got in the car, but then again, neither was I.

Hendricks was driving, and the first thing he did was drive us through a Starbucks. John treated my not quite happily awake self to coffee and Danishes. They may have had some fancy name, but believe you me, they were coffee and Danishes. I didn’t jump when he reached forward to get them from Hendricks and I saw his shoulder holster. After a few weeks of more constant exposure to the fact that John carried weapons nearly all the time, it was starting to become normal. I didn’t think he’d stab me in the back of his caddy, anyways. That was probably what the gun under his pillow was for.

Yeah, I hadn’t slept at all for a few nights after I discovered that little tucked-away tidbit, and I still sometimes had trouble if I thought about it too much. I’d considered moving back into my previous room, but - well - I’d been sleeping in the same bed as Marcone for long enough I didn’t think he’d use it on me without warning.

Our first stop was the Red Rose. I almost choked on my coffee. “Red Rose?” I couldn’t help but blurt out. “You can’t be serious!”

Marcone raised an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“You do realize it sounds like a demented flower shop, right?”

“While I would object to using the term ‘demented’ about any of my establishments, it could be
argued that the shop does, indeed, sell some rather unique flowers.”

“Yeah, of the human and female variety.”

“Human slave trading isn’t roistered until next spring, when the flowers - both male and female - are fully in bloom.”

“So for now you merely rent them?”

“By the hour.”

“You don’t really sell them, right?” I had to ask. He’d sounded sarcastic, but you could never tell. Hell, he’d called me a consort and then arranged to marry me. The sneaky bastard. Besides, my sense of pride would be mortally offended if he did sell them and I didn’t report it.

“Of course not. All the women who work for me are free to come and go as they please, provided they do not share details that have been deemed classified by the establishment and do not spread rumors or reveal anything about their clients told to them in confidence. They may also, at any time, decline a client, which should please your sense of chivalry. Although they are not paid if they do not work, and will be asked to leave if it is determined that they are not producing a profit. They cannot stay in the establishment for free, after all. They are escorts, not freeloaders.”

“Can’t have the girls getting too picky, huh? No searching for your one-true-love in the Gentleman’s den,” I said as I followed him out of the car.

“It is, in fact, a privilege reserved for only our best working girls to be able to decline clients at leisure. Those girls are considered ‘on call’ and do not stay in the Red Rose. We have established a system to match clients with girls who have similar preferences, so that the girls may feel comfortable with their clients. All girls also undergo regular medical examinations by approved doctors, and proper precautions are required at all times. If anything suspicious appears, the girl is asked to leave and her pay terminated until the situation has resolved itself as, for obvious reasons, they cannot remain on staff.”

“Thanks for the lesson on how to run a high-class prostitute business,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee, which had gone cold. “It’s good to know you’ve got systems for your illegal ventures.”

Marcone smirked. “They are escorts, not prostitutes. Any intimate relations that occur are strictly off the books. Besides, I very much doubt that the system would have matched us together, and that would have been a shame.”

I blinked my eyes at him in what I hoped was a coy manner. “Why, Gentleman Johnny, I don’t know what you mean.”

He slid a keycard through some sort of lock, and there was a click at the door. When he pressed on the bar, the door opened, and I did my best to keep my magic contained so it wouldn’t mess with the electrics.

“You certainly have many of the attributes I would have specified,” he continued. “Tall, dark-haired, slim, good sense of humor, and a certain lack of fear of people who can kill you. I don’t believe the system would have paired me with a male escort without some further adjusting.”

“Let me guess, you don’t cater to those kinds of people.” And I was a better actor than I thought if he thought I didn’t fear people who could kill me. There were still moments when John himself had left me with more fear-induced witty comebacks than sensible thoughts. At least I hadn’t hit him yet.
“Of course we do,” Marcone said, bringing me back to the current conversation. “They, however, are given special consideration and paired by hand. We don’t leave such delicate matchings to the system.” Marcone said, inspecting a room that appeared to be a cross between a bar, a lounge, and a business suite. The couches were plush and comfortable looking, there was a counter along the far wall behind which was a well-stocked bar, and on the walls hung photos with tacky sayings like: ‘Achievement: You can do anything you want to when you have vision, determination, and an endless supply of expendable labor.’

“How encouraging.”

“The Red Rose, of course, does not cater to every need, and we do serve as a true escort service for almost any event. Those with more business-related needs are directed to Executive Priority. Those with more extreme tastes, or those who pose a potential risk, are asked to visit Miss Bianca, as some of my men still do.”

“Trust the vampires to serve every need. And if they get rid of a few bad apples, well, that’s not your problem, right?”

Marcone raised an eyebrow at me, and I did my best to wake up a bit more and keep up with the conversation. “You seem to believe I would use the vampire’s establishment in such a crude fashion. I assure you, Harry, if there is anyone I have a problem with, I have my own men I can deploy.”

“How wonderful for you. I’m guessing those were the men you were going to send out to avenge Tommy Tomm? Bianca’s services didn’t work too well for you at the time, if I recall correctly.”

“His death was an unfortunate and costly accident. I was lucky to have you to send out and rectify the problem, though I do regret being unable to send my own men after a supernatural problem. It was, in fact, his death that revealed the need to expand our defenses, as well as a need for, shall we say, healthy competition with Bianca’s girls? To keep hers discreet and healthy, that is.”

“Not to mention alive,” I muttered.

“Indeed. I am also still not pleased with her assumption that you committed the crime, so we avoid utilizing her offers as much as possible.”

“So why are we here?”

Marcone – *John, I’m supposed to be calling him John*, I reminded myself – smiled. “To open up shop for the day.”

Trailing after John as he went around town and “opened” various shops – either his most profitable or ones he wanted to check up on, I had yet to discover which – was interesting, to say the least. I hate having to agree with the man, but I’d become a bit too stressed over the past few months and it was beginning to show. Escorting him around town without having to think too much was both informational and somehow relaxing.

I was surprised to find that all of his staff knew me by sight, though I hadn’t met the majority of them before. I also, apparently, had VIP access to all of the offered services - well, with one exception. I was the escort, not the escorted.

On the plus side, I hadn’t set any buildings on fire or caused too much damage to the cars. There was the unfortunate death of the cooling system, but it was still early enough in the summer season that opening the windows wasn’t too uncomfortable. I wasn’t finding anything I could take to Murphy; John could be frustratingly legal in his businesses.
I stopped trying not to tick him off. I’d reminded myself several times during my meditation that I was going to be married to the man, it was inevitable now, and if he was going to marry me then he was going to marry me. Wisecracks and all. I wasn’t about to spend the next few years of my life as a tense, paranoid shadow of myself.

Which also meant opening up around John’s associates when he brought me to meetings. Stars, he was the one who brought me, he could damn well accept what I brought to the table.

“Hell’s bells, man, you can’t be serious,” I muttered at the rather unfortunate gang leader I was about to be introduced to. “Haven’t you ever heard of a gym?”

The man was pudgy, to say the least, and not at all happy with what I had said. Apparently, though, he was happy enough to ignore it. “Boss Marcone,” he said. “Didn’t think you’d come yourself.”

“And why is that?” John asked. “You’ve had three months to provide proper payments, and have yet to provide a suitable explanation to any of my associates. Of course I’d want to see the situation for myself to assess whether or not we can continue working together.”

“Work? He actually works?” I tried to keep my voice low, so it didn’t drift too far in the garage. Why Marcone had garages I wasn’t sure. Maybe the man was a mechanic at heart. Or maybe he used it as a cover to plant car bombs.

Or maybe he just didn’t want to bring me too close to anything I might fry with my magic.

The man almost growled at me, but the sound was lost in the sound of some equipment his lackeys were using to repair what looked like an old sports car.

“We haven’t had the business,” the man said. “If we can’t sell, the payments drop.”

“And why haven’t you had the business?” Marcone asked. “Haven’t been letting everyone out to drink every Friday night on company funds, have you?”

The way the man’s face went a bit red indicated he probably had, but he shook his head no anyways. “Customer’s been slow coming. New shop down the street. Started ‘bout five months back.”

John made an acknowledging sound. “And they run a better business than you. I see. Well then, if any of your men can withstand the physical test and complete the necessary training, I might see fit to allow them to remain in my care as security guards. As for this place… my men will be by this afternoon to take our payments from your stock in trade. I wish you good luck in your future endeavors, but I’m afraid we simply cannot continue providing you with either goods or contacts.”

I froze for a moment. I was definitely more than three months behind on my payments, and John hadn’t started selling my organs yet. He’d continued paying my bills, feeding me, and restocking the more mundane of my supplies - including some of my clothes. I wasn’t sure what that meant. He’d make more money on others, surely; I wasn’t a very good investment. He was losing more a month on me than on these workers, when you included the wedding preparations.

John’s hand on my arm steered me out of the garage, and I let the thought go. It would take more than I had to understand John Marcone; I would just have to wait and see what he would do. Still, it would be a bad idea to let the thoughts linger.

I waited until we were out in the daylight again and Hendricks was opening up the car door to ask: “What does he really do?”

“Repairs cars,” Marcone answered.
“He mentioned selling product.”

“They also operate a small by-order-only operation of reselling local alcohols, soft drugs, and sundry products,” John said. “They originally sold from a bar not too far from here, however their predilection for drinking themselves stupid meant they were escorted out one too many times, and were asked not to return. It seems another group has begun selling where they failed – a group much less inclined to the overweight biker image you just witnessed.”

“Soft drugs?” I asked.

“Yes. One use is not likely to get a person addicted, and proper use does not severely hamper judgment and functionality. As with many things, the problems stem from overuse and dependence. They are also legal to purchase from any store, though our rates are considerably cheaper. Cigarettes, tobacco, and the like.”

“And how much should I bet that you don’t know and own the new group suddenly putting this one out?” I asked, stretching my long legs out in the back of the car. It was Marcone’s car, so they actually fit and my head didn’t miss the headrest when I leaned back.

John raised an eyebrow, his look almost surprised. “Why, Harry, didn’t you know gambling is a fool’s hobby?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “It may be a fool’s hobby,” I said, “but I’d be willing to bet you run the gambling house. Making profits off of fools.”

“Of course,” he answered. “That’s what makes it such a good business.”

Chapter End Notes

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John hadn’t asked me to dust off the suit, so I wasn’t expecting him to take me anywhere fancy on Saturday. Following him around as he worked on Friday was stressful enough without worrying about how shabby I looked next to a five-star personal escort. Still, I wouldn’t have been surprised to pull up next to a nice restaurant, a theater, maybe another opera that he actually wanted me to watch. Date-like settings scaled up for the local rich mob boss.

Even without thinking about it, guys had a list of date expectations. Had I been dating Susan or another available lady-friend, I would have treated her to the nicest dinner and show I could afford. I was, arguably, in that lady-friend position. Sort of.

It was a bit early for a date, but John had a tendency to ignore custom when it suited him. I’d been moved in with him and I hadn’t known the man for a week, if that isn’t ignoring custom then I don’t know what is.

The Lincoln Park Zoo was so far off the list it took me a moment to realize why we were there. It wasn’t exactly the place where gangs loitered and drug deals went down, unless my guess was outdated, but I would have expected those over a date here.

Surprisingly enough, it was fun. I’d never simply walked through the zoo. I’d once helped out when one of the monkeys had begun setting displays on fire and acting possessed (or a close approximation thereof), and a few years ago, I’d managed to keep their big cats from mauling every human who came close, but I’d never stayed. I’d never really had the time or desire. Marcone was taking both of those out of the picture.

Once I realized what we were doing I expected a crowd of kids young enough to be fussy and impatient, but it must have been early enough that their mothers were still trying to herd them out of the house or take them to soccer games or something.

“Where to?” I asked, pausing once we had passed through the main gate. While I had been to the zoo before, I’d mostly gone around the back entrances and “Authorized Personnel Only” areas. They hadn’t exactly hired me for a stage performance or an exorcism, this was a date.

John took my hand and led me forward, not bothering to hide a pleased smile. “We’ll start with the cats, I think - and then the seals. We can follow the path from there until it circles back, and then either see the wolves or stop for lunch before seeing the other exhibits.”

“Sounds like you expect this to take all day.”

“I do,” he said, “or at least most of it. I have some special visits lined up, and I’ve made arrangements for the zookeepers to be available if need be. They were very accommodating.”

“Please tell me you aren’t threatening to put them under a mound of debt unless they jump on command.”

“Of course not. I made a very generous donation which they are in no way obligated or expected to return, and they are showing their appreciation.”

If only I had been so lucky.
We’d made it to the tiger exhibit, and I was finally able to release his hand so I could lean on the rail and see the tiger. He was lazing out in the sun, idly flicking his tail and looking both regal and lonely. There was absolutely no reason why I had needed to let go of John’s hand to see him.

I heard the click not long after; when I turned to look, John held up a camera and smiled. “It’s traditional to take pictures at the zoo.”

“Those had better be of the animals,” I said. “Not me.”

“Why not you?”

“I’m not very photogenic,” I answered. “I might break your camera.”

“Then I’ll just have to buy a new one.” He didn’t seem disturbed by the thought. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll take pictures of the animals too.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ll do what you want,” I said. “I just don’t see why you’re wasting the time.” I looked back at the tiger. There was a second tiger in the enclosure, one I’d missed on my first look. He’d laid down on his side next to the other tiger, just now getting ready for a mid-morning nap.

When the camera clicked again, I ignored it.

John made good on his promise for special visits. I guess money and influence can get a lot in the city. I’d never had enough of either for the VIP treatment we were receiving.

A litter of red wolves had been born in the zoo a few months back. Breeding programs were apparently very expensive, and John had made a strong argument for seeing just what his donations were funding. While none of the animals were easy to breed in captivity, the red wolves were the only animals the maintainers had felt comfortable exposing to someone without a degree in zookeeping. They had been handled the most often, and were still young enough and small enough to be considered non-threatening.

The zoo had built a small enclosure next to the wolf exhibit where the pups could still see and smell the pack, but were separated from it by a double fence. This kennel-like area was away from the typical visitor’s areas, hidden by a clever mix of trees and buildings.

Once the gate had been secured, the brown-haired zookeeper entered from the side of the enclosure away from the main exhibit. I followed her, while John stayed back.

“You’re not going to see them?” I asked.

John shook his head. “You go on. I’ll watch.”

“They’re feeding the pack in the other enclosure, so we have time,” the zookeeper said. I didn’t exactly want to duke it out with Marcone in front of her, so I shook off the uneasiness threatening and followed her to the middle of the special area. “I’m going to take them one-by-one to the scales to weigh and measure them. They’re small enough right now that they can’t hurt you, but let me know right away if they try to bite or scratch you.” They were already a squirming mass of fur around me, sniffing me and rubbing against me. Some quickly lost interest and started tumbling with each other again. I carefully sat down in the midst of them and let my hands wander out.

The zookeeper seemed nervous, like a mouse in the den of a cat, but the pups were ignoring her. “We check for ticks and bugs daily,” she said, “but there’s always a chance we’ve missed something. Please remember to get checked out at a first aid station, and to wash thoroughly before eating
anything - and that means with soap and disinfectant. And please see a doctor if you experience any unusual symptoms in the next 48 hours. And-"

“Perhaps you should weigh the pups before feeding time is over,” John suggested.

“Right. Sorry. This is highly unusual. I don’t get many visitors,” the zookeeper - I finally spotted a badge that read ‘Anna’ - replied. “Don’t mind me.” She grabbed the smallest of the pups and went over to the scale.

I had a lapful of pups while she was gone. While some of the pups had mostly lost interest in the strange tall man sitting with them, they didn’t see any reason not to rough-house across my legs or play tag with my shoelaces. They weren’t rough; mostly they were only curious. More often than not they were tripping over each other or intently watching flies before attempting to pounce.

They weren’t very big, either. Mister was bigger than they were, though it looked like they were well on their way to outgrowing him.

It was easy to ignore the snapping of the camera when there were cold noses trying to sniff up my pant legs, or little paws getting caught in my pockets. One little fellow seemed particularly interested in staring at my nose for some reason.

Once the zookeeper had finished her measurements, she set out bowls of food for the pups before watching me wash up - and disinfect, and wash up again - before leaving.

“Was there a reason you wanted so many pictures?” I asked. John had snapped enough to fill an album, at least. He had brought an older-style camera, not a digital one, and the pictures had a chance of surviving. There was a whole bag of film some bodyguard was lugging around out of sight, in case he needed it. He’d gone through a lot of trouble just for some snapshots.

“They were cute,” he said.

In the interest of staying civil, I didn’t press.

“I believe it’s time for a souvenir,” John said as we approached one of the zoo’s over-priced, save-the-animals shop. “Any and all that you like. My treat.”

“I’m not a thirteen-year-old on her first date,” I told him. “You don’t need to overdo it.”

Marcone raised an eyebrow. “I am well aware of both your gender and age, but that doesn’t mean I can’t indulge in tradition."

I shrugged, and let him guide me inside with my hand tucked in his arm like we were in a movie. I felt like a properly escorted lady from the ‘50s, minus the dress. Very awkward.

The store was about what I expected: overpriced and stocked more with children’s toys and shirts than anything else. John managed to find a keychain I didn’t object to – “for the beetle” – and guided me over to a huge display of stuffed animals.

“I still feel like a decently aged man,” I said, “even if you insist I’m only eight.”

“As much as I might have enjoyed seeing you at eight, I much prefer you decently aged,” Marcone returned, easily finding the toy meant to represent the wolves I’d played with earlier. “This is a gift for someone else, although I would not object to purchasing one for you if you are feeling childish. It seems you are getting younger by the minute.”
Not for me? I couldn’t see him giving it to Rex, either, or his biker gang, or any of the ‘girls’ I had
met yesterday whom he’d barely glanced at. Or Hendricks. Or Red. Or, well, anyone. “Who’s it for,
then?” Plushies weren’t really his style.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he answered. “Did you want to choose one? So you don’t arrive
empty handed.”

As confused as I was, I followed his suggestion and started examining the toys. Judging from the gift
he was getting, it was for a child or a woman who liked cute and fluffy. There were some cute bunny
toys, but if it was for a boy instead of a girl, he might not appreciate it. The elephants were much too
stiff to be played with if it was a younger child. The penguins were nice and I might have chosen one
of those, but before I could pick up the little tuxedo animals I saw the tiger.

Gentleman Johnny Marcone had the soul of a tiger, and the power to match. I should have shied
away from the toy for that reason alone. I’d known he was a beast, calculating and ruthless, from the
moment our eyes met. I also knew that he had secrets – secrets a tiger could never possess – and
regrets.

I hadn’t made a move towards the cotton-filled doll, but Marcone must have noticed me staring at it
because the next thing I knew I was holding it in my hands and feeling a soft, light ‘fur.’

A tag noted that the zoo participated in the Tiger Species Survival Plan, and gave a few brief facts
about the animal formerly known as the Siberian tiger. From Russia. Active at night. Large territory,
and typically solitary.

I thrust it back into Marcone’s arms. “Get that for whomever. I’ll wait outside.” If they liked
Marcone, they would like the tiger. At least, that was my reasoning.

If he said something, I couldn’t hear him. And when he came back outside he didn’t ask about my
choice.

I guess I must admit he can be a gentleman when he wants to be.

It’s one thing to completely restore a yard after an angry loup-garou and a bunch of hexenwulf tear it
up. It’s a completely separate thing to recover – mentally and emotionally – from being strung over a
pit as a piece of live bait for one very hungry mythical animal. Typically, after such an assault to
one’s pride, the bait in question would do everything in its power to avoid the would-be predator. If
the bait survived.

John Marcone confused me because, as we sat together in the back of his car and he showed me the
photos that had survived, I began to notice he had a certain fondness he had for the ones where I was
with the wolf pups. He had been nearly torn apart by a loup garou; he should be wary of the animals,
not fond of them.

It was slightly disturbing. John merely tolerated the Alphas; I didn’t want to think about what it
meant that he saw me as some sort of wolf-buddy. I wasn’t a therapist, I couldn’t figure it out.

“There are, of course, duplicates for your own, personal use,” he said, handing me another stack of
photos to sort through.

Of course there were. And the one-hour photo stop was probably still puzzling over the black, empty
shots about a third of the film had produced. “Why the rush, anyways?”

Marcone smiled. He’d been doing that a lot today. “A few are for the person we’re going to visit.
There are frames under the seat, we need to pick which to display.”

That was a bit unusual. “Are you sure your girlfriend wants to see me everyday?” I asked. “She might burn them. I don’t really need that kind of negative vibe.”

Marcone’s smile was still soft, and a bit creepy. It was as if he actually had a heart, and knew how to use it.

That was unnecessarily cruel. Of course he had a heart. Of course he knew how to use it. He had a threshold. A small one, but it was there. And he protected his own. He cared about something, at least.

“She won’t burn it,” John answered. “I think she’ll be very grateful to you. These two, I think, will work best.”

I plucked the photos out of his hand. One was of me, sitting on the ground at the pup enclosure next to the wolf Exhibit. One of the wolf pups was standing on his hind legs with two paws planted firmly on my collarbone. I had one hand under his rump and the other on his back. It was looking me in the eye, curious, and I was smiling.

In the second I stood looking out at the bears, my hands on the exhibit rail and leaning forwards a bit to watch one of the animals.

“I’m not sure I understand,” I said, handing the photos back. “And I don’t like you keeping secrets. You’re almost as good as a wizard at that.”

“Only almost?”

I made a noise of agreement. “A wizard’s got more to keep secret, so we get more practice.” I just wasn’t as good at keeping things like want and disgust secret. Or keeping sarcasm quiet. Or lying. “Can’t have mortals running around wild with all the knowledge we have, now, can we?”

“And how much is that?”

“Enough to fill several books I’ll never write,” I answered. “There’s a reason we don’t just jot this stuff down.”

He had fit the photos inside two frames, and I realized we’d stopped in front of a hospital I’d never seen before.

“Uh, no offense,” I said, “but it’s already after dark. I think visiting hours are over.” I didn’t mention hospitals didn’t like me much. He already knew.

John simply smiled. Again. I got the impression that he was pretty happy about meeting this girl. Or maybe it was just my imagination playing tricks on me.

Yeah. Right.

I hadn’t realized when Marcone said ‘his girl,’ he really meant his girl.

“Harry Dresden, I’d like you to meet Annalise. My daughter.”

Marcone had a daughter.

She was in a coma.
She was his daughter.

Hell’s bells.

I was sitting down before I realized John had guided me to a seat. “I don’t understand.” I tried very hard to keep my magic contained and my voice level. There was a lot I hadn’t understood during Marcone’s 48-hour work-and-date, and confusion doesn’t sit well with wizards. Particularly when they are in the middle of it. “Your daughter?”

“Not by blood, but close enough.”

“Her parents –“

“Dead,” he said, voice thick and heavy, weighted. “My fault, I’m afraid. As is her current state.” It sounded like he hadn’t forgiven himself for it yet. After the soulgaze I’d shared with him, I didn’t think he would anytime soon.

“What happened?”

“Her mother was a very dear friend. I was young, just rising in the ranks of the undesirable. The shooters were aiming for me, and didn’t care who was in the way. Unfortunately, they weren’t very good drive-by shooters, though they may have fared better if the car wasn’t moving. I lost my wife in similar circumstances. In both cases, I made certain the killers were brought to justice.”

In other words, he’d killed them.

“Why-“ I had to stop and consider my question for a moment, to be respectful of the child in the room with us. I’d heard stories they could sometimes hear what you said. “Why did you bring me here?”

John sighed, sitting down on the bed. “Modern medicine can’t wake her. The introduction of magical opportunities creates options I’m currently researching. Not all of these options are pleasant.” As in, not all of them were “good” magic, and as such were forbidden by the Council. Not even Marcone could get away from the White Council, and he didn’t even know about them yet. “One thing I hope to gain from our partnership is knowledge more reliable than what my own research can provide. I can find every magic book in the city, Harry, but I have no one who can tell me what is and is not true.

“I do not expect you to heal her. From what I understand, it requires too much power and risk for me to chance losing you in the process. But I would like your help in finding out if it can be done.”

He had a point, but verifying facts and researching were a far cry from marriage. And while I could steer him away from sealing his own death and likely my own, I couldn’t heal her. I wasn’t good at healing. Despite what he said he would expect it sooner or later. “You said one thing…”

John nodded. “When she wakes, she will need two parents. Not just one. And, should my line of work prove too dangerous, she will still need a parent.”

I let out a laugh. A sick, dry sound. “I’m not a parent, Marcone, and a good deal too dangerous to be a ‘mom,’” I said. I had no illusions about where I fell in that family set-up. “I’m an orphan who’s had his head messed with one too many times. Hell’s bells, most of my youth was spent with a man trying to use me for dark magic. A man I killed. I’m not parent material.”

“You think I am?” John asked. “You think I would choose poorly when considering who might be her sole caretaker? There are forces in the world I can’t protect her from, but this is one decision I
can make."

I looked at him, avoiding his eyes with the years of practice one gets when one is a wizard. We could not soulgaze again – at least, not without considerable effort on my part – but habit and good sense told me not to take my chances. John Marcone was still a dangerous man, even if he was a father. Perhaps because he was a father. “I’ve seen enough to know you don’t take risks like this.”

His face softened from the tense frown. “Or perhaps you underestimate yourself. I’ve seen the sort of man you are, too. I can’t approve of your business sense, but your common sense and survival instincts are to be commended. As are your moral inclinations and your chivalry. She will not lack for financial reasons; I have seen to that. You will be able to provide her with what I can’t.”

‘Chivalry’ was a term about as outdated as ‘consort.’ People might have an idea of what it means, but it was just a vague idea. No one used the term anymore because there wasn’t anyone who fit the vague notions. Still, I had an idea of what he meant, and I guessed my actions might be loosely termed chivalrous. I still couldn’t let a girl pay for a meal without feeling guilty. Even if the girl had been Marcone’s own flesh and blood, I would have done my best to save her. I wasn’t a firm believer in the whole ‘sins of the father pass on to the son’ thing. Screwed with a guy’s sense of justice.

“I’m not asking you to heal her,” Marcone said, and stars, the man could lie well. “I’m asking you to be a parent to her once we’re wed. It isn’t something I can force, particularly since no one is aware of my connections to her. So this is a dealbreaker.”

That’s what he said, but there was a layer of steel in his words. He wanted to be able to force the issue. He wanted me to heal her.

I didn’t think I could.

“Hello Anna,” John said, brushing a few strands of hair from her face. “I’m sorry for not visiting sooner, but I brought your new Dad with me. And we brought gifts.” He tucked the stuffed wolf under the blankets with her, in the crook of her shoulder, and balanced the tiger on the headboard so it would be watching over her. All done with the ease of practice. “I also brought some pictures to cheer you up. So you’ll be able to see your Dad even if he’s not here when you wake up.” Despite saying it was a dealbreaker, he acted as if I had already agreed.

It clicked, suddenly, that Marcone couldn’t be her father. He couldn’t leave pictures of himself here or signs he’d been taking care of her. Not if he wanted her to live. There couldn’t be connections between him and Annalise. He was a target, and that made her one. I, on the other hand, provided a barrier that made visiting relatively safe.

He couldn’t visit his sick daughter in broad daylight, but he could visit his husband’s adopted child. Something about that was just depressing.

I hadn’t realized how lonely John’s world really was. Maybe he couldn’t just go out and get whatever girl he wanted. Maybe he worried she wouldn’t live long.

Maybe he had to have a clean, organized mind so he could cope.

More likely, he was a father getting revenge on the world that had hurt his little girl the only way that really worked.

And that I understood.
I’ll admit, I didn’t make the connection right away. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about Victor
Sells, Three-Eye, and the night the Doom was lifted from my shoulders. I had more than enough to
think about without dwelling on the past.

“You lied to me,” I said, standing in his office the next day. Why the man went to his office on a
Sunday, I don’t know, but it’d taken me a half hour to get here. I’d stewed in my car the entire way.
This office looked the same as the last time I’d shown up; the little trinkets were still there, but he’d
added a few pictures of me to the mix. Apparently, I was protected enough to be shown off. I didn’t
recognize all of the pictures, though a few were from the zoo yesterday.

“I don’t know what you mean, Harry,” John said, raising an eyebrow and flicking his hand. It
seemed an odd gesture until I realized Red was leaving the room. Red still didn’t like me much, but
he showed up for every magic ‘lesson’ I taught.

“Annalise,” I said, hearing the door click shut. “Her name’s Amanda. You lied to me about her and
about her parents.” The lights flickered. Whatever it was about wizards that made technology curl up
and die around them, it was working to my advantage.

“No, I didn’t.”

“You’re still going to lie about it?” I asked, releasing a small wind spell that scattered all the papers
on his desk. Every light popped at once and the room dimmed considerably. The only light came
from the window on one side of the room, a fading glow as the sun was behind a high rise across the
street. Marcone didn’t seem phased, which just fueled my anger. I wanted him frightened, or angry,
or defensive. Anything but the calm, cool liar sitting in front of me. “Have you forgotten? I met her
mother.”

“The woman you met was no longer her mother, and no longer my dear friend. Why don’t you sit
down?”

I didn’t, and after a moment Marcone sighed.

“I was just rising to power then, and not all were happy with my progress. I was young, and naive. A
drug gang wanted in on my profits and didn’t see me as particularly threatening. I was gaining
respect, but I was still just a small fry. They believed they could kill me and take my place. They
attempted a drive-by, so the police could be avoided. One of them hit Amanda.

“From there the story gets a bit more complicated. Mr. Beckitt went a bit mad for a while. He
attempted a fist fight with me, and lost. Mrs. Beckitt was more sullen, and depressed. Suicidal, even.
She went to the hospital one night and took Amanda off life support.

“The nurses were able to sedate Mrs. Beckitt, and the doctors saved Amanda.

“I had Amanda moved and her name changed. I let her parents, and everyone else, believe she had
died. When her parents tried to sue, the hospital provided the tapes showing Mrs. Beckitt turning off
machines in Amanda’s room.

“With a bit of work, I was able to get the case out of the courts and Mrs. Beckitt into counseling.
Since then, I have been out of contact with the two. You know more about what happened to them
with the Three Eye situation than I do.”

I waited. Perhaps expecting more, or, well, I’m not certain what. I inspected his story for lies. It fit
with what Murphy had told me, it fit with those dead eyes, but it still felt wrong. It lacked something.
I didn’t know if I could believe him. There was no one left to confirm or deny his story.
I can show you the tapes, Harry. They are in storage, but you can see them.” He didn’t sound pleased. He was probably worried I might mess with the evidence.

I turned and sat down in the only other chair in the room, silent.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to see his version of proof.

I stared out the window and watched Marcone’s reflection collect up the scattered papers. On occasion, I tried to scoot a paper under a desk or cabinet with small spells, but marcone found them all with ease. I hadn’t expected him to get down on his knees and collect the pages himself, even more startling was the pop of aging joints as he stood, stretching out kinks in his muscles. After essentially staring at him for an hour, I decided two things. One, just because he was a mafia boss didn’t mean he got to slack off on the paperwork. Two, I was going to take him up on his offer to watch the security footage.

Marcone was accommodating.

A half hour and an uncomfortable car ride later, I was sitting in someone else’s office watching a small black and white screen. I almost didn’t recognize the woman screaming about a better life and evil doctors poisoning her child. But the woman was Amanda’s mother, there was no mistake. Marcone looked different himself, almost like he was scared and scarred on the inside. His face was in his hands where he sat in a chair in the corner, pulling himself together, watching the helpless child as doctors and nurses rushed around the room.

There was a bit of static in the tape for a moment, and I glanced at the John on the screen. That hadn’t been me.

He was whispering something. A prayer, or a plea. Faith power. Who was he praying to?

“They said it was a miracle she survived,” John said where he physically stood beside me. “She was stronger than they thought. Now they doubt she will ever wake up.”

“Do you pray for her?”

“I’m not a church-going man, Harry.”

“But do you – or rather, did you pray for her?”

“That night I did what any desperate man would do – desperate men pray. Not all prayers are answered.”

But I had strong suspicions someone had heard and answered John’s whispered pleas. I had my doubts it was God – for Michael or Charity, blessed people who wear their faith in Him openly and proudly, He might have, but not for Marcone. Not for someone who only prays in desperation. God doesn’t usually work that way. I thought. I wasn’t exactly a church-going man myself. God hasn’t really done much for me. ‘Suffer not a witch to live’ was still a common mindset.

“Who did you pray to?” I asked. Maybe he’d dug into that well of faith and God had answered.

“Anyone who would hear my plea.”

“Dangerous,” I said. There were several fae and demons who would have taken him up if they were in the mood. They would take one soul for another. Trades like that happened sometimes. “Did you notice anything odd?”
“No,” Marcone said, turning off the tape when it was clear Amanda – Annalise – had been stabilized. “But I wouldn’t have noticed much.”

“There’s static on the tape.”

“It’s always been there. It puzzled the judge, and everyone who has watched it since, but the tape was examined and was found untampered. It’s believed there was dust in the machine as it was recording.”

This wasn’t the time to voice my doubts about their science. What god – or demigod, or fae – would have answered the call of a rising mafia gangster when he was pleading for the life of a child? And why hadn’t they asked for something in return? Exchanges were typical of this sort of experience, that’s why so many came out of it preaching a new faith, spreading the word, converting others. But I couldn’t see the other half of John’s exchange. What he’d given for her life.

“Will this change our arrangement?” he asked.

I shook my head, staring at the black screen. It changed many things, but I was in too deep to back out now. I had no clue if Marcone would be generous if I tried – in fact, it seemed like he would be more inclined to make me suffer for the trouble. I might not survive such an attempt. I knew too much.

“Do I need to ask for proof?”

I didn’t move my eyes from the TV. Even if it wasn’t playing anything, it was better than looking at Marcone. “If I tried to kiss you right now, I might throw up.”

John shook his head, and I watched his reflection, unable to look at him directly. His hand rested on my shoulder and squeezed. I wasn’t sure what that meant. “You can’t do anything the easy way, can you?”

“And what was the easy way?” I asked, just barely keeping myself from moving out from under his grip.

“You could have said ‘no.’”

It had been a long time since I thought about Rex. He was one of Marcone’s associates and aside from any information I could pass on to Murphy, he was mostly in the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ category.

Killers didn’t make good conversation pieces at dinner.

Rex was not a man to cross, as our first meeting had shown. He also wasn’t a man to use, as was apparent from the small fiasco that had been my attempt to get information about John. I had a feeling he saw me as amusing and that was about it.

To make a short story shorter, I wasn’t pleased to find him in the middle of the living room on Tuesday afternoon. Marcone didn’t mess with the threshold much; I’d discovered after digging through his drawers the business he did at home was non-essential paperwork, and my ‘office’ was really more of a lab. Neither of us met with others here. I made my appointments at the clients’ homes or a public location nowadays, since I’d given up my official office. Marcone’s bodyguards came in and out, but only a select few.

As far as I knew, Marcone wasn’t due back for several hours. I was a bit bruised from a fall from a
second-story balcony – my shield and coat kept me from serious damage, but a second-story fall wasn’t a walk in the park for anyone – so I wasn’t in the mood to entertain. The troll I’d banished could confirm it.

I’d spent the last hour explaining to a little girl why she couldn’t bring trolls home anymore, and why they were dangerous. I think the only reason she was still alive and undigested was because she’d told it she was bringing him home to meet her friends. She hadn’t mentioned her friends were imaginary, and trolls aren’t particularly smart. The troll had sat in her room, diligently waiting for them, and occasionally throwing stuff around.

For three months.

Her mom had called me because she thought the apartment was haunted.

Rex was staring at me like he showed up in my living room everyday, so I pushed thoughts of little girls and trolls back. “John isn’t going to be home for a while yet, I don’t think,” I told him. In case he missed the memo or something.

“Do you always come home bruised and dazed?” he asked. “Seems as if John isn’t taking good care of you.”

“He does well enough on his side of the fence. This one was on mine.” I had admitted John did ‘take care’ of me, at least, in his own special way, while clearing my head during meditation just before our date. He didn’t do much to hide the criminal side of the city from me, nor his part in it, but he did make certain no one killed me in my sleep. Or that I got any physical evidence to pass on. Murphy hadn’t even been able to find the body of the guy Rex had shot.

“Still playing around with your little magic tricks?” Rex asked.

“The 300 pound troll I just send back to the NeverNever states magic is real, when he’s coherent enough to speak. And he’s duller than a rock.”

Rex gave me another one of those stupid crooked grins, his face tilted as if I were a bug being examined, curious and insignificant all at once. “Harry, Harry,” he chided. “What entertainment you are. I never said magic wasn’t real. I asked if you were still playing around with your magic tricks.”

The last I’d heard, Rex was wondering how many of those ‘magic tricks’ were real and how much John knew – unless it really was just a ploy to get me in the car, even on that level. He’d wanted me to be a cozy little housewife with bonus male attachments.

I hadn’t reacted well.

“So do you believe in magic or not?” I asked.

“Aren’t wizards supposed to be subtle?”

“Aren’t you usually less of a dick?”

His eyes narrowed, the grin receding. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t the best idea to insult the guy, but I wasn’t really in the mood to be polite.

Then Rex sighed. “You’re about as subtle as a brick,” he answered. “I see no harm in answering your question, however impolitely it was asked. I believe in some forms of magic. I hope that satisfies you?”
“Not really.”

“Then I suppose you will have to remain unfulfilled. I came, however, to pass on my condolences to you.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. It’s an adrenaline response, I swear – heartbeat speeds up and all that jazz. “Why would you need to do that?”

“I heard about your daughter,” he said. “So tragic. John’s helping her to get proper care now, of course, but I can understand why life became so difficult for a man like you.”

It was because of the girl, not because something had happened. Hell’s Bells, I had been worried for a moment. It wasn’t good that he knew about her, but she wasn’t dead yet. “You leave her out of this,” I snarled, hoping I was angry enough to make him back off. No one deserved Rex’s attention.

“Ah – the angry father’s wrath, I suppose. How charming. I had no plans to harm the girl, but now you’ve got me interested.”

How in all of the NeverNever and living world did he know about her? Marcone wouldn’t have been spreading the word so soon, though he would have moved her away from doctors who knew him but not me. Maybe there had been a loose tongue along the way. That wasn’t like John; he would have paid his people well, and plugged any possible leaks. “What would it take to make you less interested?”

He seemed to pause and think. “Some associates of mine are getting together for a little archery tournament I’m holding,” he said. “I invited John, but apparently it’s on your date night, so I couldn’t convince him to attend.”

“I’ll tell him to show up.”

“Of course, it would be more fun if you came along and competed with the others. Seeing as how you have such poor luck with guns, archery would be easier for you, don’t you think?”

I frowned. “I would just need to compete?” It was too easy.

“Well, there is the small matter of the prize – the latest shipment from my company.”

“I don’t need guns,” I said. “As you’ve pointed out, they don’t always work well for me. Just stay away from Annalise.”

Rex smiled. “There’s no need for you to win, then. The prize will go to one of my associates. And likely end up on the streets. In the hands of children like yourself. Not that it’s any of your concern. You don’t need guns.”

I clenched my teeth. I sucked at archery. It would take me all week to maybe get up to par, if I found a spell or two to help. But I couldn’t stick my neck out and promise a win, either. “I’ll show, and I’ll compete, and you keep your mouth shut about the girl – no notes, memos, messages, hints, or anything of the sort. You forget about her.”

Rex smiled. “Fair enough. For now. And hey, if you win, those guns are worth a pretty penny. They sell quick, too.”

Marcone could take them. Would pay me for them.

And I would become part of his criminal world.
No thank you.

“You know where the door is. Please show yourself out.”

John came home early that night. I was still nursing a few bruises in the bathroom when he came in, and I had left the door open. It didn’t occur to me to close it until he was already in there with me, and at that point it was too late.

“Trouble at work?” he asked, taking the cream I had made earlier in the lab and rubbing it onto my shoulder, where I had been trying to reach.

“A bit,” I answered, wincing as the bruise stung. “Just a bit rougher than usual. Nothing unexpected.”

“I see.”

I waited for a moment to see if he would say more, but he just moved on to the next bruise.

Looked like it was up to me to bring it up. “Rex stopped by today.”

The hand paused. Either John hadn’t been aware or he hadn’t been expecting me to mention it.

“He said you declined an invitation to his party. I told him we’d be there.”

“And why would you do that?”

I didn’t answer right away, which was a mistake. He knew something wasn’t right. Instead of answering, I asked: “Why did you decline?”

“Rex does not keep suitable company,” John answered. “While Rex himself is an admirable host and coworker, he does not restrain himself to more polite dealings. I expect there will be some sort of ancient-style tournament, followed by drinking and cards.”

“Archery,” I answered, though it wasn’t really a question. “He asked me to participate.”

“And I expect you said yes, though you’ve never held a bow in your life.”

I didn’t have anything to say. It was the truth. Stupid, yes, but the truth.

“You really are a difficult man, Harry.”

“I’ve already said we’d go. I didn’t say for how long,” I reached for the shirt I’d brought in with me, tugging it on over my head. In bold, black letters it read: “The apocalypse is coming. Run.” One of the Alphas had gotten it for me, for some holiday I couldn’t remember. “We can leave after the tournament.”

Marcone sighed. “I expect to be reimbursed for the trouble.”

“Rex said you mentioned a date night.”

John raised an eyebrow. “And so you agreed to, what, escape your husband?”

“I got mad, alright?” I snapped. And I had, that wasn’t a lie. “Maybe I didn’t like you going around making plans about me without me.”
“And you, oh great wizard, cannot spot an excuse when you see one?”

I took a deep breath and considered. Marcone and I had never had a pre-arranged date night. Not one that stuck, anyways. But I couldn’t tell him that Rex knew about Annalise either – not yet. This was my problem at the moment.

“It’d be rude to back out now,” I said instead. “If he wants you there so badly, what can it hurt?”

I knew it was a trap, and I’d have to go prepared. Marcone would probably have his own version of protection as well.

John shook his head. “How easily you fall into his traps. This is the second time Rex has maneuvered you into position. Are you allowing him? Should I be concerned for you? Or did you forget that until your debt is bad, you belong to me?”

I saw red for a few moments, and heard the bathroom lights pop out. The electric razor ran under the sink for a few minutes before puttering out, and some of the fire alarms started blaring in the hallways.

I probably blew the water heater as well.

“I don’t belong to you,” I said, keeping my voice as low and level as I could. It wouldn’t help if made him seriously mad. “I owe you a debt. That’s all. Money.”

“And you don’t have the money to pay it off. We agreed I have you in exchange.”

“Only as much as I’m willing to give.”

“It seems like you’re willing to give a fair portion.” He was close. Too close. I could feel his breath on my neck. “Kisses. Cuddles. In a few months, sex as well. And promises to love and be faithful to me for as long as we both shall live. Remember that part of a wedding, Harry? Charity’s making it traditional.”

I don’t think I stammered out an answer, but I tried.

“You aren’t going to lie, are you Harry? Or should I go into your lab and find that skull, and see if he can talk to me, tell me how to make you mine?”

He only wanted me to cure Annalise. He wasn’t really in it for the sex. That was just a bonus. Right?

“You better get used to being mine, Harry. I don’t plan on letting you go anytime soon. If I have to rack up your debt further, I will. I’ll make you pay for the wedding, if need be. It is, traditionally, at the expense of the bride’s father, and yours is sadly unavailable.”

“Why?” I finally managed to ask.

John pulled back, and he looked… I don’t know how he looked. I was beginning to realize I wasn’t all that good at reading beyond the surface where John was concerned, and he could manipulate those surface looks at will. “Because I want you, and you want me,” he said. “There need be no other reason.”

“But I don’t want you.”

“You don’t?” he asked, his hand ghosting across a half-hard erection. I backed away quickly, and I swear I did not squeak. It was a mouse. Honest.
And the erection was just a physical response to heightened emotions. It had nothing to do with Marcone. I’d been angry, he’d been close, and I’d just let out a bit of magic that for whatever reason hadn’t touched him. Certain responses were expected.

“Let’s go to bed,” John said. “We’ll go to Rex’s little party this week, and we’ll discuss reimbursement later.”

I was glad when he left, until I remembered I would be sharing a bed with him.

Some days I just couldn’t win.

“It’s more complex than I thought,” I told Bob a few days later. I had visited Annalise a few times, building up a reputation in the hospital as a doting father, and had made certain no unexpected visitors had been by.

I also insisted she be kept away from other patients, in an isolated room. I tried to make it homey, taking some of the carpets and tapestries from my old apartment to put some color into the mix. Some had been hung on the walls of the mansion a while back, but not all of them. I bought some sheets and added a few brighter colors to the mix. The doctors thought I was nuts, until I told them Annalise was going to be happy when she woke up, and drab grey walls, bland tile floors, and crisp white sheets did not a happy child make.

They backed off. Apparently I play doting father well. Or crazy.

“What’s the matter Boss?” Bob asked. “We knew it’d be complex, but it was just mental trauma and nothing more.”

“I did, but that doesn’t make sense. There’s something else.” Something put there by whomever had heard Marcone on that night and had decided to interfere. Someone powerful enough to keep a child alive for a few moments. Something that could put a shield around her mind to keep her from being hurt, and keep her as sleep until Marcone danced right. Who would get downright angry when it realized Marcone didn’t have faith in gods or demons or fae, but not angry enough to release the hostage. Or someone who had forgotten about her - or maybe had been taken out of the picture?

“Someone’s locked her out,” I told Bob. “It’s the only thing that makes sense, but I can’t figure out who. Or how.” That’s why we’d decided it was just mental trauma, but it didn’t fit.

“Is anyone following John?”

“About half of Chicago. Why?”

The skull rattled in semblance of a shrug. “If someone’s keeping the kid asleep to mess with Marcone, someone’s gotta be pushing him in the right direction. Someone not human.”

“It can’t be Bianca. She’s far too direct about what she wants. She wants revenge on me, not Marcone, and she didn’t know about Annalise until recently. I’m not even sure she does now. My Godmother must know about my connection with Marcone and how it’s progressing, but she hasn’t made any moves. And she couldn’t have known this would happen back when Annalise was injured.”

“There’s still a lot of fae out there,” Bob pointed out. “Not to mention demons, gods, messengers, the White Court, or another warlock.”

I shook my head. “Not another warlock,” I said. “They would have come right out and challenged Marcone, or demanded something. Besides, this is delicate work, and warlocks are usually power
Messengers were just what they sounded like: the messengers of the gods. Since gods didn’t like to interfere with humans directly — there was usually a lot of fainting, swearing, panicking, and confusion when they did — they sent messengers. Angels, animals, spirits, whatever they could pay or maneuver into doing as they wanted. “That still leaves a lot of possibility. It would need to be someone who knew Marcone years before I knew him.”

“That’s not something you’re going to find out hanging around here. You’d have to ask Johnny or his friends.”

“I don’t know any of his friends. Maybe some people at Rex’s thing.”

“So you’ll need to impress some strangers, then. Your archery skills are abysmal, though. I suggest you practice that archery spell. It’s only a teaching spell, mind you,” Bob reminded me. “It won’t make the arrow hit the target any better, but anything would be an improvement at this point.”

“What good is it if it won’t help me hit the target?”

I’d already asked, and I already knew the answer.

“It teaches proper form, Harry. You can’t do anything without form. Once you get that down, you need is stamina and eyesight. Granted, I did know a man once who could shoot blind. He was a pretty interesting fellow. He had ears like a fox, so it wasn’t surprising he could use them well. Took years of practice, though, and you only have a week.”

Chapter End Notes

Original Post Dates:
9/20/2010 (First Half - Original Chapter 14)
10/10/2010 (Second Half - Original Chapter 15)

First Major Edit: 10/14/2012
“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Mister Dresden,” the snooty little man said, shaking my hand. “I’ve heard quite a few rumors about you. Should I get used to calling you Mister Marcone?”

“Dresden is fine,” I said, smiling as well as I could manage. “I might think you’re asking for my fiancé if you started calling me Mister Marcone.” John Marcone was currently next to the refreshment table returning our empty glasses while he chatted with another slimeball he’d briefly introduced to me. He’d been right; Rex’s friends were mostly the scum of the criminal world John tried to rid Chicago of on a daily basis. Even though I hated to admit it, John was trying to keep the worst of them away from me.

There really were a lot of people worse than Marcone.

“Well that would be a shame. Your partner is quite the businessman, and I haven’t heard your name outside of his connections. Is it a family name?”

“It was my father’s, and presumably his father’s.”

“I see. Well it is good to see Mr. Marcone finally settling down. Maybe he’ll leave some work for the rest of us now,” Snooty said with a smile.

“Are you short on work?” I asked, glaring at Macone and hoping he felt the daggers I was mentally throwing at his back. “I hope that’s not a reflection of quality.”

“Of course not, but you know how it is now. Aren’t you facing the same problems? How long have you been in the trade, anyway?”

Rex thought I wasn’t subtle, but he hung out with these creeps? His choice in friends was disgusting. This particular little snot belonged under a rock, and I couldn’t figure out how he’d made his way into Rex’s sunny backyard. “I’m not particularly ‘in’ these trades. My work is a bit different,” I told him, and it wasn’t quite a lie.

“Oh?” Snooty seemed interested.

“I work as a detective. Paranormal Investigations.”

He frowned, backing away as if he’d just caught a whiff of something foul. “You mean, all that hocus-pocus, disappearing into the night stuff?”

“Less of the hocus pocus, but that’s the basic gist,” I answered, returning my focus to the less than stimulating conversation.
Where was a Mac Truck when I needed to push someone under it?

“My specialty is finding the things that disappear into the night. They aren’t always alive.” A lot had never been living the way this man would think, and I didn’t feel like sharing the details. And maybe, just maybe, he’d think twice about committing the crime if he thought I would be finding the dead bodies he’d left behind.

Or maybe I’d have to see if they still had railroad tracks I could tie him to.

“I don’t suppose you’ve done any work of particular interest?”

“I’ve worked with the police on several cases. Paranormal cases,” I reminded him. The easiest way to get rid of scum like him was to be honest. “Tell me, have you ever seen a body where the heart has literally exploded out of the chest? Or watched a man be strung up over a pit as bait for a wolf the size of a minivan? Or maybe you’ve seen someone come after you with a six-foot glowing sword?”

He swallowed. “I’ve never seen anything of the sort, no,” he said.

“Then you don’t need my business,” I told him. “You might be better off talking to my fiancé.”

“Yes – I think I will.”

Marcone was chuckling behind me as the man scurried off. “You shouldn’t spread rumors, Harry. It isn’t good for business.”

“You aren’t good for business,” I countered. “And I don’t want his. Besides, every word I said was true. Maybe I should find a decent faery ring and watch him trip into it.”

His arms came around me, and I hissed out: “Must you?”

“Don’t look so displeased – ah, there’s the pout I like to see,” he said into my neck. I was taller than him, making the stance a bit awkward, but I reluctantly pulled my arm away from my body and around his shoulders to make it less so. “I’ve talked to Rex, you know, and he’s sorry for the worry he caused. He’s agreed to allow me to participate in your place.”

“How generous.”

“Why didn’t you mention he’d brought up Annalise?”

I looked away. “It didn’t seem important.”

“Harry – you know she is.”

“I had it taken care of.”

“Maybe.”

“What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey John, Rex all but threatened Annalise if I didn’t get you to come to his party’? That would have gone over real well.”

“I would have understood.”

“Would you?”

He sighed. “This isn’t the place,” he said. “We mustn’t appear to be fighting around such company.
We’ll discuss this later. Why don’t we kiss and make up for the moment?”

I wondered if my face looked as incredulous as I felt. “That line doesn’t actually work for you, does it?”

He leaned in to whisper: “Kiss me and look like you mean it, I’ll knock 500 off.”

He wasn’t usually so blatant, but he was stressed and unhappy. I trailed my lips across his cheek until they met his, and then I set to trying to make his knees feel weak. The plan was to make him forget where he was and who was watching, letting him get a taste of how I felt around him: uncomfortable and out of place.

Although I was perfectly aware of the onlookers, I didn’t mind appearing to be the gay wizard. Those who mattered weren’t here, and would have understood anyways. I wanted our current audience to see Marcone’s weakness – to see he wasn’t all-powerful, just a tiger in a tiger’s skin and subject to the same desires. I wanted Marcone to see his own shortcomings.

Kissing wasn’t one of them. I wasn’t moaning, or digging my hands through his hair, or anything embarrassing like that, but it was probably pretty damn obvious I was enjoying the moment. Marcone, at least, knew it wasn’t a gun in my pocket.

When Rex cleared his throat and we pulled apart, I was shaking a bit and my breathing was a bit more ragged than usual. Marcone, the bastard, looked as immaculate as ever. It wasn’t fair. “My apologies,” he told Rex, keeping one arm around my waist. “Harry was feeling a bit neglected over here by himself.”

I took a deep breath and turned to face Rex myself. “I didn’t mean to make such a spectacle of things,” I said. “We both got a bit carried away.”

“No matter,” Rex smiled. “We are, after all, at a party – but I believe it is now time for the main event. Would the participants or their champions please suit up.”

“Champions?” Trent - a tall and slightly wide man with a growing beard and mustache – asked. “I never heard nut’in’ about any champions.”

He never heard nothing about good English, either, but what else could you expect from criminals?

“Champions are those invited guests who are not required to participate, but have agreed to take up the challenge for someone else. For example – Mister Dresden agreed to attend the function, but has little archery experience. So John has agreed to be his champion and participate for him. If anyone else would like someone from their organization to take up the mantle of champion, they may, but the rules remain the same. Only one shooter per group, and the shooter must remain the same throughout the tournament.” He carefully didn’t say gang; I guess the term was offensive, or something.

Truth hurts.

Marcone had scored another three bull’s eyes in the last round, a perfect score by any mortal standard. Maybe I could call up the Erlking; I’m sure the Lord of the Hunt would give him some challenge. “Is there anything you can’t do?” I asked quietly as Marcone walked over with his bow in his hand.

“I’m certain you could provide me with a few examples,” John answered, adjusting the leather protecting his arm from the string’s backlash. I had a big enough bruise to know it didn’t do much of
anything. “In fact, you could even say you are an example.”

I snorted. “You have enough skills already. You don’t need to bulk up your resume.” I handed him another arrow, but he didn’t accept it. Instead he waited until I’d half-met his gaze and then gave the piece in my hand a pointed look.

I rolled my eyes, but obligingly kissed the metal arrowhead without voicing any protests. “I’d say it was purely superstition, but I know how those things work,” I said. Faith had power, after all. Even if you believed in something as silly as a superstition.

Marcone gave me a polite smile. “However it works, it appears to be more beneficial to me than to you. I’ve yet to nearly shoot myself in the foot with one of your arrows,” he said.

“It was only once,” I grumbled.

“Harry, it’s an arrow. And a bow. I’ve yet to figure out how you managed to do so much unintentional damage with such a simple weapon. And Richardson said he’s never coming near the house when you’re practicing again, unless absolutely necessary.” He paused, then continued: “Richardson is an ex-marine.”

“Well that explains it,” I said. “He’s used to getting shot at by guns. Normal-dangerous is scary.”

“You couldn’t be normal if you tried, though I will agree that you are more dangerous than expected.”

“And yet you’re marrying me.”

He smiled slightly, a curving of his right lip that made me think of a wildcat Ebenezer used to have who could only raise the upper lip of her mouth on one side. She’d had some sort of accident and knocked a tooth out of alignment. She’d looked kind of scary. “Since when is marriage a safe venture?” he asked.

He didn’t wait for an answer. Which was a good thing, since I didn’t have one.

I wouldn’t have predicted John would win the little competition. I expected Rex to have it rigged in his own favor, as seemed the norm among the current population of this party.

Maybe he’d been just as surprised as I was by John’s skills. He hadn’t been named ‘champion’ until after we arrived, so Rex may not have been prepared. I wasn’t prepared. John had watched me practice a bit, given a few pointers, but I hadn’t seen him shoot anything but a gun before.

It showed how little I knew about John Marcone. I know the bit of his soul I’d seen, but his past was bottled up pretty darn deep. Considering my own past, it probably made us even. I didn’t like that. Wizards are supposed to be wise - it’s practically in the definition - and I didn’t feel wise around Marcone. I felt like a teenager fumbling around in the dark without even a match.

Marcone, by comparison, was every inch the calm collected adult. Armed with a gun and a blackberry and more hidden knives than I could count - including several in our bed - he was also dangerous. Currently, he was firing arrows for the final round. Shooting a bow might be old-school, but it was still deadly in his hands.

His opponent was good. Marcone was better.

“You think the wizard’s interfering?” someone muttered.
I rolled my eyes. “The wizard is right here, and he can hear you. I also can’t hit the broadside of a barn. Ask John. His bushes still quiver in fear of my stray arrows.”

Gus, another man I’d met earlier, chuckled. “Don’t mind the Dragon over there. He’s named for his grumbling, not his intelligence.”

“Could you help him?” the one named Dragon asked. “You claim to be able to do magic.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

Dragon started yelling, calling foul and cheat while pointing at me, drawing a vast amount of attention to himself. He froze when an arrow buried itself in the ground just shy of his right foot. I think it actually carved out a bit of the sole.

“If you continue to insult my fiance,” John drawled, “the next arrow will go through your heart.”

Dragon’s jaw worked, but no sound was coming out. I decided to spare him the trouble. “I need to visit the little wizard’s room anyways. Hurry up and finish, would you? I’m getting bored.”

John nodded, and I escaped indoors. When I heard the cheers and applause less than ten minutes later, I snuck a glance out the window and saw John getting congratulated. I almost laughed.

I stayed inside a bit longer, not caring that I should have been there to accept the reward and well aware Marcone was going to rag on me about it later. He was the one who had won, he could deal with it.

I may not have predicted John winning, but you didn’t have to be a wizard to know that we were going to have a discussion about it on the way home.

“You really aren’t in a position to be turning down the offer,” Marcone was saying.

“It’s dirty money.” He’d offered me a large sum in trade for the guns. Too much to go unnoticed if anyone took a close look at my accounts, though I’m sure John had an explanation ready if I danced right for him.

“Money is money,” Marcone argued, shrugging. “Unless it’s been tossed in the mud, there’s no such thing as dirty money. Can you really afford to be picky about who pays you?”

“I don’t know,” I drawled in a poor imitation of the wizardly ‘wise voice.’ “Maybe I should go find a street corner and offer myself up as a cheap lay. How much do you think I’d make at 50 an hour?”

Marcone’s eyes narrowed and his fists clenched for a moment, causing his knuckles to pop. I’d never go through with it - not unless it was the absolute last resort - and he knew it. Still, I’d made him angry. “You’d be arrested before you got your first client,” he said calmly. “Maybe some time in a cell would remind you there’s a husband waiting for you at home who’s willing to meet your needs so long as you meet his.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I said. He did. To him, it was a simple even exchange. Only the fact that I hated it complicated the trade.

Maybe if I wasn’t a wizard, it would be different. Maybe if he weren’t taking one of my firsts, or maybe if it only meant something to the scumbag it would be different.

But I was just a particularly difficult notch on his bedpost.
“I don’t want your money.” I didn’t need to hand him blackmail material. I didn’t need to give in.

“Legitimate payment for services rendered - or in this case goods provided - is expected unless this is meant as a gift. In which case, this is a very expensive ‘thinking of you’ card for someone with your bank account.”

“I’m not going to start getting my name mixed up with gun trades.”

“So what are you going to do with such a large number of currently serviceable weapons in your possession?”

I shrugged, and looked out the window. “Fire them?”

“They’ll stop working the moment you need them the most.”

“How do you know? Hex them yourself?”

“No, but if you’re still firing after the first shot then your situation is not improving.”

He had a point there. Things always went downhill after the first shot. “Just keep them,” I said. “You did a favor for me coming to the party; take the guns in payment and we’ll call it even.”

“You have no sense of business, Harry,” John sighed, shifting slightly in his seat and stretching his legs. “You pass up so many opportunities to pay off your loan quickly, I have to wonder if you really want to pay it at all.”

“I’ll pay it honestly,” I told him. “I don’t need your gun trades. There’s no need to touch the loan with this mess. You won the guns, you keep them. I have my own. I don’t need more. Enough said.”

“You shouldn’t even need yours, since my men have been following you on any serious case you’ve taken.”

I could feel a muscle start twitching in my jaw. “They what?” I’d noticed I was never really alone on the streets, but they were Chicago’s people – the streets had very rarely been empty before Marcone, and it wasn’t any different after he’d shoved himself into my life. Since when had the normal street people become hired bodyguards?

“Trouble follows you, Harry. You need the protection. I recently discovered you’d been thrown out of a second story window last week.”

“Technically it was out of a bedroom. I didn’t go through any glass.”

“You were still thrown out of a window at a height more than potentially injury-inducing. You were lucky not to break something. I saw the bruises, and you can’t deny you were lucky. I don’t know how you weren’t hurt worse. You have enough scars on your back, there’s no need to add more.”

“Those scars are a result of your interference,” I reminded him. “If not for you, I’d only have bruises.”

“It was an unfortunate accident.”

“So was the unexpected bedroom eviction.”

“Still, if you continue to take on such work I’ll be tempted to add hazard fees to your loans.”

The spasm was getting worse. It wasn’t quite a snarl wanting to break loose, but it was close. “Isn’t a
man supposed to be paid extra for taking on hazardous jobs?”

“I’m not your employer for those jobs,” John said, smiling, leaning back in his seat. He looked more like the Godfather than I remembered. Better looking, but still – Godfather. “With each hazardous job you take, you have an increased risk of injuring yourself – have injured yourself, on several occasions – thereby lowering your efficiency for the jobs where I employ you. You also increase the chances you will earn a lower income in the future due to serious injury, thereby increasing the possibility of becoming incapable of paying your loan to me. While you do have the benefit of a temporarily increased pay, you are shorting me in the future, and not just monetarily. There is a chance physical injuries could inhibit your ability to serve as my husband.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I do not joke about the welfare of my family,” John said as his green eyes focused on mine. For once, I didn’t try to look away. We’d already shared a soulgaze, he couldn’t see any deeper into me.

“You just force them into doing what you want.”

“No one’s forced you, Harry.” His mouth was turned down in a frown, and I realized I had my hand on the door handle. I drew it away casually and scooted backwards in my seat until I could feel the cushions against my back.

“You paid my debts for me, and now I have to pay you,” I argued.

“You had a chance to turn down the loan or renegotiate.”

“You asked me to marry you!”

“You said yes.”

“What else was I going to say?”

Marcone gave me an odd look, as if I had somehow turned into a six-legged dog. “You could have said no.”

“You could have not asked.”

“It’s not unusual to want to marry the man you desire.”

“It’s unusual to pay him to kiss you.”

“I wouldn’t have to pay you if you weren’t so stubborn.”

“So I should just let you take what you want? Not likely.”

“That attitude is precisely why I need to bribe you for what should be freely given.”

“You kidnapped me!” I shouted, drawing Hendricks’ gaze for a moment. “Am I the only one who remembers that?”

“You were free to leave when you chose. I believe you left rather quickly, actually.”

“You drugged me and took me to your house.”

“I feared you were becoming unduly stressed, and action needed to be taken. Like now, you had your hand on the door handle of a moving vehicle and appeared to have every intention of jumping
onto the street. At one later instance, you actually did, so my concerns were not unfounded.”

I pulled my hand away from the door again, cursing the bad habit I had around Marcone and his fancy cars. We both knew he hadn’t drugged me because I had a tendency to prepare for the worst in his car. Unfortunately, proving him wrong would be difficult.

“That door is child-locked, by the way,” Marcone pointed out. “Even if you wanted to do so, you couldn’t open it.”

“You’re scum, you know.”

“If you’re still referring to the incident in which I first brought you into my home, you must know it does not happen often, and there are very few I allow within my living space. You were compensated for your time and trouble.”

“And we all know the world revolves around you, right?”

“Which is another point; you choose the oddest things to pay me for,” I said, glaring at the back of Hendricks’ head.

“They’re called dates, and we haven’t had a proper one in quite some time. Perhaps a bowling night? I’ve been considering allying with a local gathering place somewhat calmer than a club. The Varsity is good for the college crowd, but it’s not the best place for a conversation. You could choose the place, of course, and it doesn’t have to be bowling.”

“I have no idea why you would even consider something like that.”

Marcone frowned. “It’s a popular activity, from what I hear. Very little electronics, mostly physics, so it’s not frequented by the younger generation, who mostly play on computers and gaming systems now. Nathan’s grandmother used to be on a team in the bowling league, and still plays on occasion. I thought you might enjoy the activity. I want us to spend more time together.”

“I don’t think you really understand your situation, Harry,” he said, and he had this gleam in his eyes telling me I really didn’t, even though I sort of did. Right now, Marcone had control over me in more than just a limited way. Wizards were compelled to keep their oaths, and while I may not have given my solemn word I would pay John back, I’d signed enough forms I may as well have. I’d kept telling myself he was the one in the dark, but I couldn’t even keep the lie in my own head. I’d tried to forget he was as good at keeping secrets as most wizards, and for the most part I simply didn’t think about it. His secrets just weren’t the same kind of secrets as mine.

“You agreed to marry me and from what I understand you will keep your word and fulfill all the duties required despite your misgivings. I am giving you the opportunity to have a marriage of friendship and alliance and maybe even love instead of a marriage of convenience and meaningless sex.”

“You trying to tell me you want the happily ever after?” I asked. “Because I have a faery godmother, and that’s not how it works.” I couldn’t suppress the shiver running up my spine at the thought of Lea, my faery godmother who would love nothing more than to turn me into one of her hunting hounds. There certainly weren’t any Cinderella stories there.

“I know what I want,” John said, “and I’ve lived with not getting what I want before. I’ve also learned to get what I want through unconventional methods.

“I want you. If needed, I could make your debt last for as long as you live,” Marcone said, leaning back casually and draping his arm over the back of the seat. “No one would question it. I could add
on any number of fees, hospital bills, car repairs, not to mention the damages you’ve caused to the security system and the trauma to some of my men. All just to keep you near me. Unless you give me good reason to do so I won’t, but I could. You can work as hard as you like to pay your debt, but you don’t leave until I say so.”

“And if I choose not to pay at all?” I asked, feeling my face heat. I crossed my arms and huffed out a breath of air, feeling trapped. I could rip the door off the car with a blast of air or the force from my rings, child lock or no child lock, but it wouldn’t get Marcone out of my life and would probably cause more trouble than it was worth. “If I can’t pay it off until you’re satisfied, why should I bother?”

“I thought I made it clear I’m not after the money,” John said.

“And what do you want?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

It really wasn’t. The things he compensated me for - movies, dinners, sleeping in his bed, kisses, and all those little things I didn’t like to think about - didn’t gain him anything. They were dates, not business deals, and I wasn’t acting like some trophy wife for him. He maneuvered it around so legally he hadn’t paid me for anything illicit. He was treating me more like true date than a man in his debt, at least on paper. If I hadn’t owed him so much, I would have thought he was trying to woo me, but you don’t court a man by cutting off his income.

He kept saying he knew what he wanted - me, my body, time together - but I still didn’t know what that meant. “It really isn’t,” I finally answered him. “What do you get out of this arrangement?”

For a moment, a look of frustration crossed his face. It was as clear as day, and brief enough I almost missed it. “I get you.”

“An unwilling bedmate. I fail to see what you actually get from that.”

“I get you,” he repeated, a somewhat resigned tone creeping into his voice. “Let’s leave that aside, for now, and discuss what you do understand. The money. A reliable source tells me magic will compel a wizard to complete any serious promise, and your word given three times is as good as a solemn vow.”

It seemed Gentleman Johnny was well informed. I wanted to know who his source was, but that would be like trying to wring water from a rock, and I wasn’t Moses. Instead, I’d have to settle for what I could argue. “I haven’t given you my word three times.”

He smiled, and looked like a shark. “Haven’t you? Discounting the instance of your so-called kidnapping, since it could be construed as only a verbal agreement and not a promise, you gave your word at the Full Moon garage, after our kiss. Later, you signed a written contract confirming your verbal promise.”

“He smiled, and looked like a shark. “Haven’t you? Discounting the instance of your so-called kidnapping, since it could be construed as only a verbal agreement and not a promise, you gave your word at the Full Moon garage, after our kiss. Later, you signed a written contract confirming your verbal promise.”

“Only one,” I said, not telling him that was enough for me. I would pay him back because I hated owing him. I hated knowing he owned me in any small way, like somebody’s pet dog. He took care of me well enough, but he was always holding the leash, and I always knew he wanted something in return. It grated a bit, though, that I had so easily given my word so many times to someone like Marcone even at that point.

“Later, when the contract was signed again to work in the details of your interest discount, when you began sleeping in our bed.”
I shifted, and I felt the leather of my duster slide on the seat and bunch at my back. I hadn’t thought of that as a second promise, but in a way it was. It was an expansion of the first, but it was also reaffirming it. Promising the same thing a second time. I had insisted on the written version, though it hadn’t explicitly stated why he was paying off part of my interest. If I remembered correctly, he was paying part of the interest so long as I complied with ‘pre-arranged terms.’ “Okay, twice. But you don’t have a third.”

If anything, the grin turned even more shark-like. I half-expected to turn around and see little bunnies cowering in fear. “The marriage contract,” he said. “You have yet to sign it, but you’ve said we are engaged several times. More than three. Which gives me a verbal promise we will wed. And means you will sign the papers, as required for a marriage.”

“I have not yet given that promise,” I said, gritting my teeth. I’d hoped to get out of it, actually, but he was right – I’d said, reluctantly or not, I would marry him, and I was his engaged, and I’d as good as given my word in completing the ritual. Backing out would have consequences for and from Marcone, Charity, Michael, and others. Including Susan. I’d worked hard to make Marcone forget about her, but I had a feeling he was simply holding the memory in reserve. Men like Marcone didn’t easily forget things like women who stole their men. As much as I thought about backing out, I knew I wouldn’t.

“You will, which is as good as.”

I hated his cat-and-mouse games. It sounds weird for a detective, but it’s true. Things like this were easier to see and predict and explain when they weren’t happening to you. “What do you want, Marcone?”

“I want you to come over here and kiss me like you are trying to seduce me.”

“I’m not very good at seduction.”

He spread his legs a bit, opening himself up so I could slide into his lap like a good little wizard. I could almost swear his smile softened, losing the shark-like edge, but it was probably just wishful thinking. “I’ll give you plenty of opportunity to practice, then,” he said.

I jumped when the phone rang, scattering butterfly wings across the table. A few days had passed since Rex’s party, and I hadn’t received a call since. I certainly hadn’t been expecting one this early in the morning.

“Watch it, boss,” Bob said with a wince. “Those things are delicate, and we need them whole.”

“I know,” I muttered as the phone rang again. I cleared my throat, picked up the receiver, and said: “Dresden.”

“Good morning, Harry,” came an all too familiar response.

“It was until you called,” I answered. Normally John would say good morning while I was still in bed, give me a brief kiss on the cheek, and I wouldn’t hear from him again for the rest of the day. I was quite happy with the arrangement, and less than pleased with his reversion to bothering me while I worked.

“Now is that any way to treat a customer?” John gently scolded. I could see the smirk on his face, even if he wasn’t here.

“If you have a job for me, then why are you calling me in the middle of the day when we live in the
“Possibly, if I had known last night, I would have told you,” John replied. “Or maybe not, since you seemed very busy in your lab. I hardly saw you. And I didn’t want to disturb your rest this morning after you had worked so hard last night.” There was a certain ‘yeah, right’ tone to his voice reminding me of a surly teenager who refused to believe his parents.

I closed my eyes and let out a breath. “Fine. I ignored you last night, and you have a job for me. I’m listening now. What’s the job?”

“First I want you to have lunch with me.”

“No.”

“Yes, or the job goes to someone else.”

“What’s he saying?” Bob hissed, jaw rattling on the shelf. “Is it a booty call?”

I glared at the skull, silently hoping he’d take the signal and shut up. “Fine. I’ll meet you for a business lunch. To discuss business.”


“A personal lunch,” Marcone was saying, his voice not loud enough to drown out the spirit of Air and Intellect I was about to beat the spirit out of. I wondered briefly who had been adding to his collection recently, but it wasn’t really a mystery. Not when they were all steamy gay romances.

At least he hadn’t tried to give them directly to me again. Although I wasn’t sure sneaking them to Bob behind my back was any better.

“-to tell me what you’ve been doing lately, and arrange future lunches,” Marcone was saying. “Maybe we could even find time to share a few dinners, as well. Have you decided on an avenue for bowling? Or are we doing something a little different?”

“I haven’t been bowling in years. I don’t even know if there are allies anymore.”

“Of course there are,” John answered crisply. “I’ll draw up a list for you to choose from. Drake should be arriving soon, and he’ll pick up the Chinese food on your way here. He’d also like to know when you’re going to have new classes lined up - I thought maybe you’d like to give one on basic protection, since it was missing from the list I was provided. Would you like to discuss this as well? After lunch, of course.”

“You’re a scumbag.” I hung up on him.

Sometimes I forget Drake was the redhead who had gotten mixed up in the whole Frank mess. The scars on my back were still healing, but Red had recovered from his injuries and was already back on his feet. He mostly hung out at the back of my classes alone or drove me around when the Blue Beetle was in the shop. Lately, it seemed like my car had a permanent parking space at the garage.

Red didn’t wait for me to come to him. He knocked politely on the entryway to my lab and watched me pick up the last of the delicate butterfly wings from the table.
“What’re those for?” he asked.

“Pixie dust.”

“Really?” He seemed skeptical.

“No. Pixie dust comes from pixies, and can’t make you fly any better than normal dust. These are for a potion.”

“To make you fly?”

It took me a moment to realize he thought he was being funny. “Haha. Your sense of humor is astonishing.”

“I think so. We need to get going though. The Boss is expecting you.”

“He can expect all he wants, but it doesn’t mean I’ll be there.”

“If you’re really busy, I can call and say we’ll be late. If you’re just putting away butterfly wings I have permission to drag you out. The Boss’ll buy you more.”

My lips turned down in a hard frown and I gave him the same look I gave the mules Ebenezer used to keep on his farm. “Do you really want to try that?”

He shifted on his feet again and put his hands in his belt loops. It was a move Gentleman Johnny would have done deliberately to show off the handgun at his hip. Red had the same handgun and the same pose, but the casual move on him looked more like mimicry than deliberate threat. “No, I don’t,” he said. “The Boss’ll yell at me if I have to. He doesn’t like it.”

I sealed up the jar of wings and set it in a dark corner where the sun wouldn’t bake them. “He’s not so scary.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s the Boss,” Red said, shrugging.

I rolled my eyes. “Wonderful logic, there. Yes, he’s the Boss. He’s also a scumbag who couldn’t be bothered to eat lunch at home, like a normal person.” I grabbed my duster from the coat rack. It had once stood next to the front door, but I liked it better here where it could serve as a makeshift staff if need be. Right next to my actual staff and a rune-covered hockey stick I kept as back-up.

“You won’t need a coat,” Red said. “It’s hot enough you’ll roast with an extra layer.”

“It’s not because I’m cold,” I said. “It’s so I don’t get shot.”

Red frowned. “I thought that was my job.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like to take chances.”

“It’s a coat, though. And a weird one at that. You going to explain how it keeps bullets away in one of your classes?” he asked. “Because I don’t see how leather’s going to help much. Unless you plan on dying of heatstroke first.”

“No,” I said flatly. “That’s advanced magic for wizards only. I’m only giving you crumbs. You try the crumbs and find some magic, then you come see me for more.”

“Well I think your crumbs are getting stale, and boring. I could talk Mr. Hendricks into getting us an air-conditioned room at no charge if you get some new material in.”
I eyed Red suspiciously. I’d once kept pamphlets at my old office for people who were wondering or just discovering they had magical talent. It was hard to tell, since magic was based a lot in faith and will, and some other mysterious aspect I had never quite pinned down. Anyone could believe enough to work a small spell, potentially. I mean, look at Victor Sells. “Why do you want to know?”

“Call it saving my own hide,” Red said. “When the Boss’s squeeze can throw you into the wall with his brain, you want to know how he did it. And I don’t want the instructor to die of heatstroke before I get the answer.”

“I’ll think about it,” I muttered. “But it sounds like you’re trying to bribe me, and I don’t think I like that.” It sounded exactly like his Boss, actually, which was not a role model I would have chosen for anyone.

Red didn’t even bother to knock at Marcone’s office. Then again, his hands were full and John was expecting us.

It wasn’t Marcone’s personal office, but it wasn’t exactly public either. Marcone had chosen a small conference room with about four chairs, a table, and a phone for our lunch meeting. One wall had one of those dry erase boards and colored markers. I’d considered getting one for my lab before, and decided against it.

Paper was easier to use as a firestarter.

Red put the boxes of Chinese on the table and laid out actual plates, silverware, and chopsticks, then did something with the phone to tell Marcone it was ready.

Apparently John already knew because his hand landed on my shoulder and he said from behind me: “I can see that.” He kissed me on the cheek lightly while he turned the power off on his phone. “Hello, Harry.”

I didn’t know how to respond to him and it must have showed. Red gave me an exasperated look and said: “I promise not to hurl if you kiss him, just don’t throw me into the wall again.”

I turned and gave Marcone a quick peck on the cheek - much shorter than the one he’d given me - then moved quickly towards a seat at the table. “Let’s eat,” I said, heaping a generous portion of fried rice onto my plate.

Red shook his head and left, closing the door behind him, leaving me alone with Marcone and four or five Chinese takeout meals.

“Hungry, I take it?” John asked, sitting beside me.

I shrugged. “It’s lunch time.”

“It is,” John said, helping himself to some sort of fried pork. “And what has occupied your morning? More lab work?”

I nodded, sticking a wonton in my mouth so I didn’t have to answer.

“You spend hours alone in there, and I know jobs have been regretfully scarce for you lately. Couldn’t you spare a little time for your future husband?”

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” I asked, dipping a piece of chicken in the sweet and sour sauce.
“I meant for wedding plans. Mrs. Carpenter and I had to choose and mail out the invitations without you. I can have a sampling of flowers sent to the house, but I’d still like you to help make a choice.”

“I tasted the food, which was fine, and I got my fitting. It’s not like we need a big party or anything.”

“But it is a party,” John said as he carefully poured soy sauce over a portion of white rice. “Our party. We’ll need to choose music and decor. A section of the backyard should suffice, well away from the house so no one wrecks the place. Or we could choose another place - I’d say a church, but I don’t know how much favor we would get for that. Mrs. Carpenter would most certainly object.”

“The backyard’s fine,” I said, snagging an eggroll.

“I’ll have someone clear out an area then, and arrange for seating and a reception area. We’ll need photos taken, as well, and to choose a photographer. I thought, in addition to the average photos, we might also get a few taken at the zoo. And with Annalise, of course.”

I stabbed another piece of chicken with my fork and dipped it in the sauce, popping it in my mouth to avoid a reply.

“I’ll need to find a willing priest, which shouldn’t be too hard. I’ve already interviewed several, but they either weren’t available, couldn’t travel, or weren’t quite the standard I’m looking for.”

I replayed what he had said, and there were a few details that weren’t adding up. “Didn’t you say you sent out the invites?” I asked. He would have needed to know where the wedding was going to be?

“Yes, and it would have been terribly inconvenient to relocate, but it could have been done. Have you finished the lab work you were conducting? If so, you could accompany me to see Father Matthews this evening.”

“Still busy,” I muttered, shoving a forkful of rice into my mouth.

“What a shame. We will have to arrange time to spend together - an activity or a movie, or even just a night in. It doesn’t have to be bowling, if you object. There are also some available golf courses, or maybe going to a game. I’d have to look to see who’s in town, but there should be at least a local team playing something. Or maybe you would prefer to spend the time taking dance lessons before the wedding?”

“Dance lessons?” I asked after swallowing another mouthful of rice.

“Of course. The bride and groom always share the first dance at the wedding, and often more.”

I think I choked on a bean sprout.

“Please tell me you didn’t just ask me to check the Varsity for ghosts.” Marcone and I had finished eating, the table had been cleared, and now he was making notes as we discussed the job he wanted me to handle. The pad of paper I had was still blank.

“Of course not. We both know no one burned to death that night. I need you to investigate the rumors of a ghost at the Varsity,” Marcone said, stressing ‘rumors’ so hard I think he felt it in his teeth.

“And what do you expect me to find? Gossip isn’t exactly an easy trail to follow.”
“I’m not concerned about who is spreading the tales or who started them. I can figure that out through my own methods. I want you to check the building to find what is lending credibility to the gossip. Whether it’s a drafty window or a stray pixie, I want you to find out.”

“Fine,” I said. “If you pay one hundred an hour.”

“Fifty.”

“Seventy-five.”

“Fifty.”

I frowned. “I think you missed the class on negotiating.”

“And you missed the lesson explaining the customer is always right,” Marcone said with a smirk. “Fifty an hour, and my men will provide you with all the notes we’ve compiled on these rumored encounters. You’ll even be able to go through the building before it opens and have a drink on the house when you’re finished.”

“You could easily afford one hundred an hour,” I said, leaning back in my chair and feeling it tip onto two legs. “Why should I settle for less?”

“Why should I pay more? Fifty an hour - but I’ll make a one-time offer for you. Let me hold you while you sleep tonight, and I’ll pay seventy-five an hour for inspecting the Varsity tomorrow morning. Do we have a deal?”

“I’m not working on your schedule, and I’m definitely not sleeping with you for a pay raise,” I grumbled, looking away.

“It will only be sleeping,” Marcone said. “And a goodnight kiss. I need your answer.”

“Fine,” I snapped, letting the chair fall with a solid ‘thunk’ which nicely emphasized my displeasure. “Yes. But only sleeping,” I replied, mimicking his tone.

“And a kiss.”

I rolled my eyes. “You always take one anyways.”

Marcone grinned. “That’s a yes, then?”

“Yes, all right?” I muttered. “Do you have to rub it in?”

Marcone put his hand on my arm, rubbing my wrist through my sleeve. “It’s not a bad thing, Harry. You’re much too tense. This is as much for you as it is for me.”

I glared at him and stood up, pulling my arm from his grasp. “If we’re finished here, I’m leaving.”

“I thought we could also discuss your classes. I had some general ideas for content I thought you might wish to include. Also - I just remembered - I had some small wall candelabras commissioned for the house. For authentic taper candles, since electricity disagrees with you. I thought we could put a set in the bedroom, bathroom, and living room.”

“And the lab,” I said.

“I’d rather not encourage more late hours there. You spend too much time working as it is.”
I’d been hoping work would keep me up late and make the night short, but it seemed I wasn’t to have so much luck. Nine o’clock on the dot and John was at my door and asking how long I would be.

“I’m working,” I told him, putting a little extra shove into the mortar and pestle I was using.

“This long past office hours? No one is that devoted to their job. Not unless they’re avoiding something.”

“I don’t keep strict office hours.”

“You will tonight,” Marcone insisted gently, as if it was inconceivable I would do anything else. “You stayed in your lab late last night; tonight you need your sleep.”

“It’s only nine—”

“Harry,” John interrupted, his voice reprimanding. And like some little kid with his hand in the cookie jar, I winced. “You have ten minutes to get to the bedroom or you’ll find yourself locked out of it tonight and without a job tomorrow.”

He turned and left, an angry snap to his movements and a clipped, almost military precision in his stance.

“I’d get going, Boss, if I were you,” Bob said. “The rose powder will keep. Your lover won’t.”

“He’s not my lover.”

“You gonna sleep in here tonight?” Bob asked. “Give up the first real job you’ve had in days - weeks? All because of your monstrous pride, and those silly little moral hang-ups that keep you from getting laid?”

“It’s not pride,” I said, rolling my eyes and crushing the petals. “It’s dignity. And self-respect. I’m not some streetwalker he can pay to state his lust, and I’m not a child he can order around.”

“I don’t think he wants a streetwalker or a kid. Well, maybe he wants you to lean a bit closer to the streetwalker side, but that’s more of a trophy wife thing than a prostitute. You lack a certain - I don’t know - flair - for a prostitute.”

“You mean I don’t overdose on makeup, cologne, and accessories?”

“Nah - you hide yourself too much. Even today, those lads and ladies know what they have and are proud of it. You’re more like some porcupine rolled up with its spines pointed straight out. Not very good for attracting customers.”

“All the more reason why I should finish and not let him order me around.”

“Really, Harry, it’s like you two have been dancing around in the longest drawn out foreplay I’ve seen since the middle ages.”

“It’s not foreplay. He’s just on some power trip and treating me like a kid.”

“The way he looks at you? I doubt he thinks it’s a kid he’s ordering around. Though - can I watch?”

“Watch what?” I asked, pausing to stare at the skull with glowing orange eye sockets surrounded by romance novels.
“Whatever game you’re playing tonight? Are you finally going to let him have some? I want to watch him spank you for being late, then watch him baby you all night. Or is it the teacher thing? Can I watch him make you squirm naked in a desk while he teaches you about sex ed, and then demonstrates-”

“What!” I shouted. It was a shout not a squeak, I swear. It may have sounded like a mouse, but I was a man.

“Page thirty two - second book on the right, the one with the broken spine.”

“I am not taking advice from romance novels!”

“Why not? It’s not like you have a lot of experience in the field to draw on,” Bob drawled. “Also, your ten minutes are dwindling fast. You’d better get going if it wasn’t in the plan to be late and get spanked.”

“Stars,” I hissed, putting the partially powdered petals in a jar and sealing it. “Stay in your skull,” I muttered as I ducked out of the room.

The bedroom I shared with Marcone was upstairs and down a few hallways. It had taken me some time to learn my way around Marcone’s house, because the place was almost literally a maze. There were at least two or three different ways to get to each room, and most had more than one door (and some of those doors were hidden in the walls). Granted, for some rooms the second way out was a window - my lab and the bedrooms were prime examples - but even that felt like part of the maze. The very first room I had woken up in was the exception, not the rule.

John looked up from unbuttoning his shirt as I slipped in the door.

“Glad you decided to join me,” he said. He took a careful look at his watch. “And with thirty seconds to spare. That’s cutting it close.”

“I was working,” I told him again. “I couldn’t just drop it and leave.”

“I don’t need to hear your excuses, Harry,” he said, and I’d almost grown used to him calling me by my name. He used it far too often and made it sound far too intimate. “You made it on time. Don’t spoil tonight more.”

I couldn’t think of an answer to that, so I just stood there. I stood there staring at his open shirt with Bob’s voice still saying ‘spanking’ and ‘sex ed’ in my head. And I couldn’t help but notice that even with grey hairs and a dissatisfied frown between his eyebrows, he did still look - just a little - sexy.

“Aren’t you going to undress?” he asked.

“What?” I felt the blood drain from my face for a moment as I wondered if Marcone had taken a liking to Bob’s books. Bob was a Spirit of Air and Intellect, so had pretty much a photographic memory. He wouldn’t need to break the spine on a book to reread it-

“For bed,” Marcone said, interrupting the thought. “You can’t sleep in your jeans, and that shirt is filthy.”

“Oh,” I answered, mentally breathing a sigh of relief. “Right.”

I stripped down to my boxers, as usual, with my back to him. I could feel him watch me for a moment before returning to his own preparations. I put on a clean t-shirt and slipped into the bathroom.
Johnny-boy must have already brushed his teeth, because his toothbrush was wet, as was the tube of toothpaste. I grabbed my own, squirted on a good glob, and set to work making my pearly whites shine. I had almost brushed my gums raw before I spat out the last of the minty-fresh foam and decided I couldn’t delay it any longer.

Marcone was already in bed. I slid under the covers on my side and waited.

And waited.

“If you scott any closer to the edge of the bed, you’ll fall off,” John said lazily, his voice slightly laughing. “Come here.”

“You’re mad at me,” I countered. “How do I know you won’t push me off?” Or stick a knife in my back. I knew he had one under the pillow, and at least two under the mattress. Along with a gun.

“I’ll be even angrier if you continue to avoid me,” he said in a whisper. “Do you really want to risk it?”

Sighing heavily, I slid myself closer to the center of the bed until I could feel the dip he made in the mattress. “There.”

“Closer,” Marcone commanded. “I get to hold you while you sleep, remember? Put your head on my pillow.”

I would have argued more, but I was currently laying on a hill in the mattress with my head between the two pillows. If I didn’t move until after I fell asleep, it would just add fuel to Marcone’s desire. “I think you need a new mattress,” I complained as I felt his skin brush against mine, his arm heavy across my waist.

“We’ll go shopping for one soon,” Marcone promised. “Then we’ll break it in on our wedding night. We’ll christen it with our first time together.”

I winced a bit, realizing we’d also be christening it with virgin blood, of a sort, and knowing just how eager Marcone would be after waiting so long. I couldn’t exactly count on him being a Gentleman, and I still didn’t see how he was going to fit. I could feel him, and he was bigger than what few little looks I’d taken had indicated.

“No rush,” I said. “It can wait.”

Marcone rubbed his nose in my hair, smelling it or something. “It can wait - but I don’t know if I can.”

I was half tempted to elbow him in the belly. I didn’t though. Instead I kicked him in the shin. “You’re a Gentleman,” I reminded him. “You can wait.”

He just laughed and kissed my cheek. “I think you’ll be worth it,” he whispered. “Now where’s my goodnight kiss?”

I hesitated, taking a breath, then turned and kissed him. My lips actually landed somewhere on his stubble-filled chin, but it was still a kiss. “Goodnight.”

“A proper kiss, Harry,” John said. “You aren’t five.”

I turned my face sideways and stuck my tongue out at him.
Which was probably a bad idea, as he decided to try and swallow it.

A few minutes later I was on my back, panting, and very aware of a certain pressure between my legs - and also an answering pressure against my hip. Neither was going to help me sleep at night, I knew that much.

“Goodnight sweetheart,” he said quietly as I tried to catch my breath.

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” I panted.

John smiled and pulled me closer. “Sleep tight.”

I very much doubted I’d be sleeping at all.

Chapter End Notes

First Edit: 12/29/2012
Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience in waiting for this chapter to be completed. Your comments, kudos, and continual support really do mean a lot to me.

I'm also both happy and saddened to say this fic is going to be drawing to a close soon. Depending on how the next few scenes pan out, there will either be one more chapter with an epilogue or two more chapters an epilogue. It has been an amazing journey, and I thank you all for taking it with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I was awake when John woke up. I’d only managed a light doze for a few hours; most of the night I was too worried about moving to rest. It wasn’t that I was uncomfortable, really. It was more that I was too comfortable, and that made me uncomfortable. I didn’t want to be comfortable in his arms. He was a criminal. He was all but actually forcing me to do what he wanted. There were ways to get out of his deal, of course - a wizard could disappear into the NeverNever for a few hours and be gone from this world for months or years - but there were dangers with those options I wasn’t willing to face.

My godmother, for example.

Before his alarm went off, I felt John move and silence the ringer. And then he was just... holding me. I don’t know if he knew I was awake. If he did he didn’t say anything.

He let out a heavy sigh before pulling gently away, kissing my cheek, dressing, and following his daily routines. It was hard to stay relaxed and still when I felt him pull his weapons from the mattress and check the ammo in his gun. I had to force myself to keep breathing, keep my eyes closed, and not scramble for the shield bracelet on the nightstand. Marcone was probably already wearing his version. He had found it completed on his nightstand one night when I decided it was complete enough (though he couldn’t use it), but I hadn’t been able to make myself give it to him. I started to relax as he turned away to put on his socks and shoes.

In less time than it took for my eyes to drift open and closed again, he was leaving. Within three breaths I was asleep.

“Somebody had a good time last night,” Bob said as soon as I walked into my lab. I hadn’t slept enough, but I only had an hour to get ready for Marcone’s ‘job.’ I could take a nap later. “Details, Boss – details!”

“What are you on about?”

“See for yourself,” the skull said, turning towards the open window.

I should have realized sooner someone had been there because I never left the window open. I blame my poor observance skills on lack of sleep. But no matter how many times I rubbed my eyes, the vase full of long-stemmed red roses wouldn’t go away. They’d even been sprayed with a fine mist of
water and were stunningly bright against the light of the morning sun.

“I can use them in a potion,” I said, shrugging it off.

“Enjoy them a bit first! Then dry the petals out,” Bob suggested. “Don’t powder them. And save the stems. You should press at least one.”

“They’re just roses.”

“These were given, Harry,” Bob said with an eye roll. “The meaning’s different. You could make one whopper of a love potion with just one fresh petal.”

“No love potions – or lust potions,” I added when it looked like Bob would protest. “I may just throw them out like the last ones he sent.”

“You’re such a prude,” Bob muttered. “You won’t let a guy have any fun. It’s not like I can go out and actually use them.”

“Then why tempt you? Besides, the last time I made a love potion it went horribly wrong.”

“Only you would call the experience ‘horrible.’ I happen to like beautiful women rubbing themselves all over me. Feels delicious.”

“Feels better when there isn’t a lizard spitting deadly acid at you.”

“Minor distraction at best,” Bob shrugged. “What you needed was a bigger circle, which isn’t a problem here. Sex magic can do wonders, you know. Even blast a giant acid-spitting lizard, if you aim it right.”

“Or explode your heart out of your chest.”

“Power a hundred different spells.”

“Or start one fire.”

Bob hesitated. “I thought we weren’t talking about that?”

I whispered a spell and lit all the candles in the room at once, then sat down in the chair. “We’re not.”

“You brought it up.”

“I need a way to – to contain my magic when –” I couldn’t say it. I’d finally admitted in my head it was going to happen, but I couldn’t say it.

“When Johnny-boy finally makes an honest man out of you?” Bob asked. “I doubt someone’s going to burst in and start beating the shit out of you with John on the watch.”

“I’m more afraid of what I’ll do to him,” I admitted.

The skull frowned, an amazing feat without any skin. “Don’t think I quite understand you,” he said.

I hesitated, thinking before I answered. “I don’t feel safe. He sleeps armed. Stars, he wouldn’t need to be armed to kill me,” I said. I picked up the glass jar of rose petals I hadn’t finished powdering the night before due to Marcone’s – John’s – ultimatum. I don’t think he would have really locked me out of the bedroom if I’d been late, and he certainly wouldn’t have shot me for finishing. I don’t
think he would have, at least, and there was the problem.

I didn’t know where the lines were.

It’d been so easy before. With Elaine and with Susan I knew the boundaries. Then again, those were probably poor examples. Both relationships had ended badly.

“Sometimes I go to bed and I don’t know if I’ll wake up in the morning,” I said, swallowing hard. “I wonder if he’ll kill me. Other times, I wonder if I’ll kill him.”

Bob didn’t say anything, and when I looked up to see what he was doing, the orange light had faded from the skull. “You picked a fine time to go to sleep.”

A cleared throat had me spinning to find Cujo staring at me with a scowl on his face. “Boss said to give you a ride.”

“I don’t suppose my Beetle’s in working condition?”

“Oh, it works,” Cujo said. “Always has. We just like to keep an eye on you. The Boss just plays along.”

“It’s a car.”

“Belongs in a circus.”

“That’s just a matter of opinion.”

We arrived at Varsity on time and with little fuss. Cujo stayed silent in the front of the Caddy and directed his heavy frown towards the radio, which currently would only play a single country station with a host talking about giving away tickets every other song.

I had brought only the basics with me: some chalk, a revolver, my blasting rod, my shield bracelet, my amulet, and my duster. It was probably a bit much for investigating a building for ghosts when I already knew there weren’t any there, but you never knew when a gun fight would break out around Gentleman Johnny Marcone. For all I knew, there really were ghosts at the club. Ghosts who weren’t happy the first Varsity had burned down.

Ghosts aren’t what most people think they are. Ghosts aren’t the spirits of the dead left behind. They’re more like an impression or a copy made at a very specific moment in time. They don’t change, they don’t have memories, and they are typically very harmless. They usually stay in one place and repeat the same action over and over and over again.

If something happened to interrupt the routine and the impression was strong enough, they got angry. Those ghosts could make themselves heard or felt, and sometimes could move small objects. Enough belief in a ghost could change the routine slightly.

On very rare occasions, usually helped along by some stray power they picked up, they turned deadly.

Spirits are different. They don’t have a physical body of their own so they possess people, animals, or objects. Sometimes they wander around without a ‘house,’ but outside the NeverNever it’s dangerous for the spirit. Without a body, they have a very limited ability to affect the physical world. As far as I know, spirits are created without a physical body, though I’m a bit fuzzy on the details.
The general idea of spirits and ghosts being one in the same is true to an extent, but also very wrong.

I had a feeling Marcone had neither in his building. It was a wild goose chase. The rumors were too varying and too strange to be a ghost, and lacked the markers of a loose spirit. There had been more ghosts popping up recently, and they had quite a bit of power for ghosts, but they had history.

All John’s ghost had was some cold shivers.

After an hour of probing the nooks and crannies of Marcone’s college bar scene, I turned up exactly nothing. It was quiet and empty, which was a bit creepy, but there was nothing worse than a few spiders building their webs outside the back window.

“You’re an absolute waste of my time,” I told John when he finally walked in. I’d had to walk through every room with Hendricks dutifully dogging my heels, the big lug unsatisfied with me declaring the place clean after being inside for only five minutes. I’d finally drawn a chalk circle in an upstairs storage room and said a few words meant to keep spirits from settling in the area. It certainly wouldn’t keep them away if they wanted to be there, and it wouldn’t prevent them from passing through (so to speak), but it seemed to make Cujo happy.

I hadn’t noticed him calling Marcone, but he must have. The timing was just too perfect.

“You found nothing?” John asked.

“Not even a drafty window or a creaky floorboard,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“How unfortunate.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” I told him.

John motioned towards the bar. “Have a seat, Harry. Varsity does not officially open for a few hours yet, and I brought lunch.”

He went behind the bar as I sat and poured us each a shot of something rum-colored while Red put some paper bags with an Arby’s label on the counter and walked away. At some point Hendricks had also left, which meant Marcone and I were alone.

“Arby’s?”

“It was convenient,” Marcone explained. “Not my lunch of choice to pair with alcohol, but still acceptable. It’s best not to drink on an empty stomach.”

I swallowed the shot, a single mouthful of burning liquid I threw back and barely tasted. “I prefer ale,” I said as I set the glass down.

John nodded, reached under the bar, and pulled out a bottle of Mac’s brew. He took the cap off before setting it on the bar, letting it clunk on the wood. “I had a few bottles brought here in case you stopped by.”

I touched the bottle hesitantly, unsure about the development. Who in their right mind goes out and buys special beer and stores it at a bar just in case his fiancé happens to stop by? Then again, John Marcone obviously wasn’t in his right mind when it came to me. I mean: Arby’s and rum. That right there should have said it all.

The ale was cold though, just the way I liked it, and Mac’s homemade label was clear and familiar. I
hadn’t been there in what felt like years, not since Susan, and the taste was good. Strong.

Marcone joined me on the customer side of the bar and reached into one of the Arby’s bags as he sat down on the stool next to me. “Help yourself,” he said. “We can send out for more if you’re still hungry later.” He set a roast beef sandwich in front of me, still wrapped.

I took a long sip of Mac’s brew before opening it up and digging in.

“So, now that you’ve confirmed Varsity isn’t haunted, how do you explain the continuing rumors?”

“Everyone loves a good ghost story,” I told him around a sloppy mouthful of food. “The best way to get rid of those is to have some tabloid print a story on it.”

“And how will that help?”

“Because no one believes them. It’s a tabloid, so it’s rumors and legend and made-up tales, not truth.” I shrugged, and took another bite before continuing. “You could even have them run it in a positive light – mention some young soldiers stopping in for drink, or a pretty lady who dances in the corner. Spin the rumors in your favor.”

“Wouldn’t that disturb the ghosts?”

I stared at him for a moment, confused. “What ghosts? You don’t have any.” The bastard was also managing to somehow eat an Arby’s sandwich without getting sauce all over himself, which wasn’t fair.

“But we are creating ghosts, are we not?”

I shrugged again. “At best all you’re creating is some cold shivers running up someone’s spine. There’s not enough belief in rumor to create a ghost just willy-nilly.” I took another long sip of my ale and wondered when I’d finished half the bottle, and when I started using words like “willy-nilly.”

John pushed another sandwich my way and included an order of curly fries. “So your expert opinion is to fuel the rumors and turn it into a marketing scam?”

I frowned. “I didn’t say to scam people. Just run an article with the truth: there’s no indication of a ghost as rumors suggest. The pretty lady you see dancing in the corner is usually very real, and often made prettier by alcohol. The young soldier sitting at the bar drinking a beer is usually very real, and pays for his drinks. Rumors of a ghost visiting every third full moon cannot be verified.”

“Could I verify my fiancé, a well-known paranormal investigator, has checked the premises and not found any signs of paranormal activity?” he asked, shifting closer.

I looked away and took another gulp of alcohol. It burned going down. “If you want.”

The conversation stalled, and I had to wonder if hadn’t expected me to agree. He seemed to be stumbling a bit, not as prepared for this conversation as he normally would be. Either he was surprised by my answers or something was distracting him.

“The flowers were a bit much, by the way,” I mentioned, remembering my own distractions this morning.

“I thought you would appreciate the sentiment.”

I frowned. “I’m not into being rewarded for a completely awkward and uncomfortable night.”
John raised an eyebrow. “Uncomfortable?”

I felt a bit of heat rise to my cheeks and fought to keep it in check as my insides rolled into bundles of nerves. I had been hot and bothered after his goodnight kiss, and so had he, and I didn’t really want to bring a discussion on mutual lust to the table. “Like I said last night, you need a new mattress.”

“Ah – so it had nothing to do with the way you were trembling as I held you.”

“I was not!” I nearly shouted, and I could not keep the fire from my face. Stars, what sort of man shakes like a rabbit in his sleep?

Marcone gave me a level look, saying without words he did not believe me. “You would have me doubt my own senses? I held you, Harry. I know what I felt. The question is what caused such a reaction. Anger? Fear?”

I stood from my stool and turned away from him, making certain we never touched. “I don’t have to listen to this.”

“Is it too much to hope it was lust?”

I paused, hesitated, uncertain what to do. “You could have any girl you wanted, Marcone,” I said, feeling the weight of our engagement ring. “You still have time to find one you like. You can still back out. Why go after me?”

“Because I did find the one I like, and he’s not a girl.” I could feel him watching me.

“Let me guess. Me.” He still thought he loved me, or at least he was pretending to be in love with me.

“Yes.”

“There were other ways to show you cared,” I muttered. “If you really do.”

“Are dates and flowers and gifts not enough? You won’t permit me to show affection the way I want; you won’t let me kiss you without bribing you for the privilege.”

“I meant the kidnapping and the loan,” I growled, still not facing him. “I meant trapping me in your games.”

“How else do I keep you with me?” he asked, sounding serious. “How else do I keep you safe?”

“You don’t.”

“That was never an option.”

“It was always an option.”

“I love you.”

I shook my head, glancing back at him briefly. He was still sitting at the bar, the half-eaten sandwich on the counter next to the empty shot glass. “Your idea of love is different from mine, then.”

I was at the door before he spoke again. “Be careful, Harry,” he said. “More so than usual.”

John didn’t usually issue warnings like that to me. I didn’t answer him, but the fact that he was bothering to warn me instead of just sticking more guards on the job made me nervous.
Just what was going on?

As luck would have it, my fairy godmother showed up just as I dodged down an alley and out of Cujo’s sight.

I wasn’t sure which was worse, him or her.

Scratch that, Lea was worse. Cujo just followed Marcone’s orders and Marcone had morals. It would be awkward after running out of the Varsity, but not deadly.

“Hello Godmother,” I said, making certain the way back out of the alley was clear. I couldn’t just ignore her, but I could make sure the encounter was over as quickly as possible. “What brings you here?”

“I’ve heard some rather disgusting rumors,” Lea said, spitting out the word ‘disgusting’ like she could barely stand to speak it. Even perched atop a dumpster she still managed to look regal, clean, and every inch a friendly faery merely scolding an errant child. “I’ve come to see if they hold merit.”

“And you came to see me?” I asked. “I’m flattered, but you didn’t have to trouble yourself.”

“The rumors were about you, godson,” she said, floating down from her seat and appearing to fly for a moment. She looked me up and down for a moment like she could see right through my clothes and then proceeded to brush some invisible speck of dirt from her clothes. “Rumors you are about to bind yourself to a person of power spread through Winter, and they do not please me.”

“Don’t tell me you came to talk to me about my sex life,” I said, crossing my arms, “because it’s a little late for the birds and the bees talk.”

Lea waved the idea off. “I care not who you sport with; such trivial matters are of no concern to me,” she said, walking towards me and laying a light hand on my sleeve. “I came to remind you there is a previous claim on your services. Or did you forget you swore to be mine?” Her grip tightened as she pressed on, a sharp, cold pain starting at my wrist and spreading up towards my elbow.

“I swore no such oath and you know it,” I told her. I held back a wince as the pain suddenly doubled, and I deliberately didn’t try to pull away. She wasn’t angry yet - not really - but trying to run away would make her furious. “Don’t twist my words.”

“You swore I would have your service as my hound!”

“I did promise to be your hound,” I admitted. I had promised after all. “But I did not promise to serve you. I did not say when I would be your hound, and I did not say how long I would stay your hound. Besides, you failed to completely fulfill your end of the bargain so I have no reason to completely fulfill mine.”

“You lived, my task was complete,” she snarled, ripping her hand away to blast the brick of the building beside us with Winter’s power. A fair-sized circle of bricks were coated in ice, and there wasn’t any sign it would start melting soon.

“Elaine didn’t.”

Lea laughed. “So naive, my godson, even now.” Her laugh was light and sweet and filled the alley like a peaceful, airy snow. “So innocent, still, of the world.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Obviously, she and I had different ideas on what innocent was.
She had a grin on her face and sharp eyes focused on me, like a wild animal sighting prey. “You’ll find out in time,” she almost sang, her smile growing.

“Leave, Lea,” I told her, not willing to play her games. “I’m not telling you about my love life, so back off.”

Lea continued to grin, looking coy, and dutifully backed away. “There’s no need for me to pry. You may sport with this mortal all you wish. You have my permission to play. You do not, however, have permission to bind yourself to him. You would not like the consequences if you tried.”

A car backfired in the street, and instinctively I turned my gaze away for a moment. Not completely stupid, I raised my shield around me in a complete dome to protect myself from her and from any possible mundane dangers. Both had the potential to be deadly.

The car had pulled to the side of the road and the driver was currently cussing it out and slamming the door shut as he pulled out a cell phone. When I turned back around, my godmother was gone.

“I hate when you do that,” I muttered. It wasn’t all that difficult to figure out; she’d frozen some part of the man’s engine to cause it to fail knowing the noise would distract me.

I swear I heard her laughing.

With a sigh, I left the alley and went to find Cujo. I could barely feel my arm, and there was no way I could handle the Beetle’s stick shift with only one hand. I just had to convince him I wasn’t actually hurt. If I came back injured not even an hour after John’s warning I would probably end up on the receiving end of some world-class worry.

I raised an eyebrow as Hendricks stopped the car outside the Emergency Room and turned off the engine.

“If you want me to visit Annalise, you’re at the wrong door,” I told him. “Unless something happened. But if something had happened you would have brought John. So you must have simply gotten confused.”

“Or maybe you got confused and thought when the Boss said ‘be careful’ he meant ‘immediately go get hurt’.”

“Who said I was hurt?”

“You volunteered to be driven home instead of driving your so-called car. Either you are injured and incapable of driving or you hit your head. Either way, you’re getting checked out,” Cujo said. He effectively ended any argument I might have by getting out of the car and closing the door.

A few moments later he opened my door and asked: “Will you walk in yourself or shall I fetch a gurney?”

I got out of the car and glared at the red-headed muscle-man. “This really isn’t necessary.”

“I’d believe you if your right hand wasn’t blue and if you had managed to move your right arm when you got out of the car.”

“You’re too observant,” I muttered.
“What happened?” John asked. He was on his knees on the sitting room floor, pulling away the bandage to check my forearm. The doctors had said to keep it wrapped for a few days mostly because they couldn’t figure out what to really do. They couldn’t figure out what was wrong so they had no idea how to treat it. The best idea they could come up with was ‘bandage it.’

“It’s nothing big,” I said. It really wasn’t. My godmother wouldn’t leave me incapable of using my arm for long. A short time, yes, to punish me for not dancing to her little tunes, but she wouldn’t leave me vulnerable long.

“Three doctors failed to diagnose the injury, you can’t move your wrist, and the best explanation I get is that it looks like a case of localized frostbite!”

Seemed like an accurate enough description of my afternoon.

“It’s late summer, Harry. How did you get hurt like this?”

“A minor misunderstanding with a winter fae,” I told him. “It was bound to happen eventually. Probably not the last time either.”

“Who was it?”

“None of your business.”

“Harry.” His voice was almost a whine. He was kneeling between my legs - which must have been hell on his knees - and still holding my hand. His money-green eyes were focused on the discolored skin.

I could understand the doctors’ confusion. Lea hadn’t given me frostbite; she’d frozen the skin and some of the muscle of my arm. The edges of the wound were actually starting to darken with frostbite, but the skin itself was pale and hard and the lowered blood-flow to my hand was literally turning my fingers blue. I would have to wait for my skin to thaw, and it was going to hurt again soon. At the moment it was mostly numb and cold.

“It’s on my side of the world,” I said. “I can handle her. I’ve been dealing with her since I was probably twelve. With any luck, you’ll never meet her.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

I opened my mouth to speak and froze. There were several things he could do - delay the wedding, cancel the wedding, serve Lea in my place, cancel the loan, admit to his crimes, end his criminal activities - but I didn’t think I wanted to ask him to do something like that. I knew what Lea would do if I married John and ignored her warning, but I couldn’t tell John what he could do to stop it.

“Harry?”

“No,” I said. “You can’t do anything.”

Ghost stories.

Just the idea of them actually happening the way fiction writers would have you believe made me shiver, but that's not the way ghosts work. They aren't pieces of souls reaching out from the afterlife, they're reflections of the last moments of a person's life, and there'd been an increase in the number of these afterimages popping up in the big city. Nothing scary about that, at least not from a magical point of view.
Only about one out of ten calls that I get about ghosts are real. More often it's a faulty air duct, raccoon, nesting mice, or something equally mundane. In the past few weeks, the number of phony calls had doubled, but so had the number of legit ghost concerns.

Trouble was, I wasn’t getting those legit calls. So I wasn’t getting paid for them.

I found most of the dangerous ghosts through Michael or through rumor. I started taking ghost suspicions more seriously, even getting desperate enough to look at the tips flooding into the Arcane’s pages. Something was stirring, and it wasn’t something warm and fuzzy.

So it was with great reluctance I inspected house after house for lost children or wounded soldiers trying to get home. The number of grandmothers worried they were haunted was disturbing, but it stood to reason they wanted their children home and safe. And I made a few dollars. Not much, but some.

I expected my next job to pay a good deal more, considering who had called. If nothing else, I should get hazard pay just for meeting him.

Rex was dangerous. I’d seen him turn around and shoot a man – a colleague – without a shred of guilt or remorse; it would be stupid not to be cautious when dealing with him, and on an off day I might even admit to being slightly afraid of the man.

Rex was just bad news.

The waitresses had tiptoed around me and gossiped when they thought I couldn’t hear, wondering where my fiance was. Or maybe asking what had happened to Cujo. It may not have been the brightest idea to meet Rex at the job I’d been fired from; I’d already asked the waitresses to try not to bother me three times. I wanted them to have as little contact with Rex as possible.

Right now, though, the man didn’t look very dangerous. “What happened to you?” I asked as he limped to where I sat waiting for him outside the small café.

Rex waved my question off as he settled himself in the chair. “I made a bad gamble,” he said. “When you play big boy games, you get in big boy fights.”

I let the remark slide. Rex liked to play games, but he wasn’t going to win me over with a sympathy vote. “Why did you want to see me?” I asked instead, hoping to speed things along.

“Anxious, are we?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “If only I were still so young and eager.”

“You said it was important,” I reminded him. “If you’re just here to goof off, I’ll leave.”

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic, Harry,” Rex complained. “We have time. You just wait here a moment longer, and I’ll fetch myself a cup of coffee and use the men’s room.”

He stood up and limped off before I could protest.

“Explain it to me again, Harry. And use small words,” Murphy said, rubbing her temples.

“I was at the café drinking a cup of tea. I was meeting Rex.”

“Rex – the man you claim is a drug dealer and a weapons trader?”

“I’m only guessing on the drugs. I know he sells weapons illegally.” I didn’t care if I was on record – Rex had gotten me arrested and the damned crooked smile was going to pay.
“And how do you know this?”

“He told me.”

“So you agreed to meet with Rex knowing he was a weapons dealer?”

“Yes.”

“Care to explain why?”

“He said it was important, and he has threatened my daughter before.” I didn’t stumble over the admission.

“Your daughter?” Murphy asked, clearly startled.

“Yes.”

“You don’t have children.”

“If you look at my file, I think you’ll see I do. She’s in a coma – defenseless. Helpless.”

Murphy’s face softened. “What happened at the café?”

“Rex sat down, joked around, and got up to get a coffee and visit the men’s room. He didn’t say why he wanted to meet, and he hadn’t even sat down long enough for the waitress to notice him. I figured he had other things to tend to first.”

“Other things?”

“He was limping, and bruised. Looked like he’d been on the bad side of a fist fight.”

Murphy nodded but didn’t take any notes. “What happened next?”

“About five minutes later, I’m being cuffed and carted off because the K-9 unit found the C4 at my table.”

“Is the C4 yours?” she asked sincerely. She really didn’t know.

“No.”

“Was it there when you sat down?”

“No.”

“Did Rex bring it with him?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Then how do you explain a duffel bag full of C4 – enough to level a few buildings – just casually lying at your feet, with your name stitched onto the bag?”

I sighed. “I can’t.”

“Who chose the cafe as a meeting place?”

“I did.”
“You were obviously there first - was the seat prearranged, or did you choose when you arrived?”

I bit the inside of my cheek for a moment to keep from wincing. “We agreed to meet at an outside table, but not a specific one. I just picked an empty seat.”

The door opened and a scowling officer with short, crew-cut black hair and a gun on his hip came in. “His lawyer’s here,” he said. “And his fiancé.”

I looked at my hands, cuffed on the table. “It’s really not mine, Karrin,” I said softly. “And off the record: I don’t think it’s his, either.”

She nodded. “Let them in, then.”

Marcone had barely waited for the invitation. “Good afternoon, Lieutenant. I hope you aren’t unduly stressing my partner.” He frowned when he looked closer. “Are the cuffs really necessary?”

Murphy shrugged. “He can probably get out of them himself.”

“Irrelevant. I believe you are using unnecessary force to restrain an innocent man who has made no attempt to escape. He also recently injured his right arm and wrist. We can supply the doctor’s report and you cannot have missed the bandage wrapping his arm from elbow to palm. My fiancé and I will need time to discuss the best course of action with our lawyer, and I believe we are due time alone with the man for legal counsel. Could you ensure Harry is no longer handcuffed like some brute while we attempt to resolve this civilly?”

Murphy shrugged, and unlocked the cuffs. “I’ll be in the observation room,” she said. “Since Harry’s presence means the recording devices won’t work, your conversation will be private. But we will be watching.” I rubbed my wrists as she stared at Marcone for a moment, then turned and left.

Marcone waited until she was out of the room and the door was completely shut before putting a hand on my shoulder and asking: “Are you okay?”

“I’ve had worse,” I told him, pulling the sleeve down on my duster. “Why are you here?”

Marcone actually knelt down next to my chair to watch me. “I was listed as your next of kin and emergency contact. Apparently the paper-pushers around here are actually on time today.”

“You mean someone tipped you off.”

John smiled. “Your manager called Nathan when you were arrested. I’m sorry it took so long. I’ve heard what the staff think happened. Who was it?”

“Rex, I think. I just can’t figure out how.”

“What have you told the police?”

“The truth. Problem is no one else saw Rex.”

Marcone frowned. “You won’t say anything else. The evidence against you is circumstantial – it’s not even your full name on the bag, just ‘Harry’ – and they have no case if they attempt to say you were using it. You have no background in such weaponry.”

“They’ll pull my gun permit.”

“And that matters because?”
“Because I like to be able to defend myself if necessary!”

Marcone shrugged at my comment like it didn’t matter. “We’ll get you a new one, in time. Until then Drake can accompany you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Your answer to everything: add a bodyguard.”

“If you didn’t escape from them constantly, it would work,” he scolded.

“Yes, but your men would be traumatized.”

“Too late for that,” the lawyer muttered. The voice made me do a double-take.

“Cujo?” It couldn’t be. But it was.

Hendricks nodded.

“You’re a lawyer?”

“You act surprised,” Hendricks said. Well, duh. Men like Cujo typically didn’t get fancy degrees or office jobs. They had guns and bullying to do. “I write contracts for land deals and construct wills when we’re short-handed, but I’ve studied most areas of law and have occasionally helped our criminal law team.”

“Next you’ll be telling me you read philosophy books for fun.”

“Not usually for fun – but there have been a few cases where they made good research materials.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“Hey Harry,” Billy greeted, sliding up next to me after I’d ended the class. “How’s it going?”

“Been better,” I admitted.

“Yeah, we heard about the mix up at the restaurant.”

“Cafe,” I corrected. “How’d you know about that?”

“Georgia has a class with a girl who’s the sister of one of the waitresses, I think,” Billy said shrugging. “Either that or she’s a roommate. They talk, and news travels.”

Hell’s Bells. I guess that was why no one was here but for the Alphas and some of Marcone’s men. I thought maybe they’d gotten bored, or maybe I’d moved beyond what they could believe. I hadn’t thought word would spread so quickly. “What do they say?”

“That you’re dangerous.”

I let a small laugh escape. “They’re right.”

“Well you’re still welcome to join us for Sunday’s D&D game. You missed last week.”

“You sure?” I asked. “It isn’t creepy to invite the guy who was arrested over for a friendly game of spells, dice, and fantasy?”

“Of course not. We need the muscle. Georgia set up the next dungeon, and you know hers are the toughest. We may not even finish, and have to pick up later.”
“I’ll see what I can do,” I said, smiling a bit as one of the pack in wolf form set his head on my lap. I scratched his ears and watched the tail wag.

Mister would tolerate the dog smell if I bribed him with a coke and a burger.

“I think your ride is waiting for you,” Billy said, nodding his head towards where Red stood next to the caddy, trying to look casual.

“He can wait a few minutes,” I said. “I think this guy wants to play some fetch.” It was just a coincidence I happened to have a tennis ball in my pocket. Promise.

We didn’t exactly have romantic plans for the night, but John liked us to eat together as often as possible. Which usually meant I’d finish working, get in the car, and be dropped off at a fancy restaurant without menus.

The restaurant of choice for the night was probably Italian. I don’t know how Italian the chef was, but the place seemed to be trying hard. And whatever fancy name they gave it, I had a plate of spaghetti in front of me.

“How was class?” John asked as he took a sip of his wine - something fancy, dark, and expensive I would guess. I had asked for soda since this type of place wouldn’t carry beer.

I shrugged. “It was class.”

“Nothing interesting happened?”

“No one dropped any C4 at my feet if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You were delayed,” he pointed out.

I shrugged again. “No one told me I was on a schedule.”

John shook his head and smirked. “No schedule, I was just curious. I could ask Drake, of course, but I was hoping to get closer to you - not your chauffeur.”

“You sure?” I asked. “If you’re not careful, I might sic my faery godmother on you.” She was already suspicious enough as it was.

But I wouldn’t really do it. No mortal deserved Lea’s attention, not even John Marcone. Knowing about her might give Marcone something to chew on for a while, and if I told him about her problem with the upcoming events, I might even buy myself some time before the wedding. Maybe I would even get lucky and his other sources would know a way to get her to back off.

“So you really do have a faery godmother?” John asked, curiosity spiking, his wineglass held halfway up from the table. “Truly?”

Marcone didn’t know it but this wasn’t the first time we’d discussed Lea. She had been the Winter Fae who had frozen the skin on my arm. I now had a marbling of bruising on my forearm which hadn’t completely healed when the ice had finally melted. Of course, it had only been a week and while wizards heal better than mortals, we don’t actually heal any faster than anyone else.

I didn’t want his pity, though. Or his sympathy.

“I have a godmother, same as a good portion of the population,” I said, finding myself reluctant to actually talk about her. I wasn’t really sure Marcone would survive her attention. “My mother just
happened to choose a faery who has a very warped sense of safe and protected.” I still don’t know why my mother chose Lea - I don’t consider it a kindness to have a faery for a godmother - but that was an answer I wouldn’t find anytime soon.

“From what I understand of the fae, they all have a very twisted idea of values.”

“You’re not wrong,” I took a bite of spaghetti, chewing as I spoke just to annoy him, “but class is over and you’re on the wrong lesson.” I swallowed and took the opportunity to look him over. He’d dressed nice. He fit in with the classy surroundings and the wine glasses and conceited air. I looked like someone he’d picked up off the street. Which was basically true. “You didn’t bring me over here for a magic lesson anyways,” I commented, swirling more noodles on my fork. “You can wine and dine me all you want and I won’t get it. Just say it.”

John rolled his eyes. “I just wanted to indulge a bit. You’ve been busy lately.”

“Going on wild goose chases for little old ladies,” I muttered.

“But it brings them such comfort,” John teased.

“You are such a scumbag,” I said, rolling my eyes. Only he could make it sound like I was having tea parties with grandmothers every afternoon.

“And you like it.”

What?

“I said you like it,” John repeated, and I realized he had actually made sense of the strangled sound that had escaped my throat. He had on a black suit with a matching black shirt and black tie and his money-green eyes were looking at me like he would devour me at any moment. “You want me to be the criminal scumbag, because it gives your someone to hate for everything that goes wrong, or that you don’t want to happen. And I’m okay with that. I’ll play the role of the monster while you play the role of the captured princess.”

“It’s not a role, Marcone,” I grit out. “Stars and stones, these are people’s lives you’re playing with.”

“I assure you I am quite serious about our relationship,” Marcone said. “And I am quite serious about any lives I might affect. You call me a criminal, but I am simply providing a service. You just happen to think the service I’m providing is morally wrong.”

“I’m not the only one, I’m just the only one willing to say it to your face.”

Marcone smirked. “Really? I thought you were just thinking of pet names.”

“I ought to string you up and feed you to the sharks.”

“It was a werewolf - I believe your report called it a loup-garou - and you already helped me escape that fate,” he replied. “More proof you like me, even just a little, perhaps?” he asked. I felt his knee press against mine under the table. “If you like, I’ll let you play the knight in shining armor again.”

I put my napkin on the table and leaned back. “I think I just lost my appetite.”

“What a shame,” Marcone drawled, leaning forward. “I was just starting to whet mine.”


“Still protecting me?”
Protecting me - and everyone else for that matter. From you.”

Marcone laughed lightly, a gentleman’s chuckle.

I hadn’t been joking.

I eyed my phone suspiciously as it rang. Between my magic interfering with the lines and John’s boys screening my calls, it wasn’t often the private line in my workroom rang anymore, and I wasn’t particularly in the mood to go chasing after another false ghost. Either someone was handing out my card to little old ladies on Bingo nights or Marcone’s men had been referring me to their grandmothers.

If it was Marcone, I’d hang up on him. Dinner last night had been enough.

On the third ring, I picked up the phone and greeted “Dresden” with the hope I didn’t sound too eager.

“Hey Harry.” Karrin’s voice was soft on the other end of the line. She had to work hard to earn respect on the force, surrounded by males in a male’s job. It wasn’t often she sounded soft, and it was only when she was about to deliver bad news.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Are you safe?”

“I’m not the one in trouble here,” Murphy shot back, though there was little humor in her voice. “Your situation is not improving.”

I swallowed hard. “You didn’t find Rex.”

“Oh, we found him.” There was a pause, and I wondered if she expected me to actually ask her what was going on. It wasn’t like her. Finally, she continued: “A security camera across the street showed him approaching the cafe.”

I frowned. That sounded like a good thing. Nice, clean evidence freeing me from the accusations of trying to blow up the city streets in some sort of strange form of revenge. “Then what’s the bad news?”

“He didn’t have the bag.”

I sat down in the wheeled chair and planted my elbows on the table, my free hand pinching my nose as I tried to reason through what she was saying. “It doesn’t make sense.” Since when did C4 just randomly show up on the sidewalk? It wasn’t like you could just go and buy the stuff at the grocer.

“No, it doesn’t make sense. We have crews going through hours of footage, but we don’t have 24 hour coverage of that area, and the bag was pretty generic except for the name stitched onto the tag. You didn’t have the bag either. Officially, the charges have been dropped and you have the apologies of the department.”

“Unofficially?”

“You’re still a suspect. You’re no longer permitted to work as a consultant or as an assistant in the office, even if you’re fully cleared later.”

No more filing. No more cases. No more work.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “It was a small miracle they let me hire you when I did. Your record
wasn’t exactly the cleanest.”

“It’s not your fault,” I told her, rubbing the hair back out of my eyes.

“There’s more,” she said. “I need you to come down to the morgue.”

“The morgue?” Murphy certainly wouldn’t be inviting me there on a whim, and she had just said I was no longer working for the PD. It was possible she would hire me on outside the PD, but not likely. Not when I was connected to Marcone. Which could only mean one thing. “You want me to identify a body?”

“Officially, I need you to.”

Rex had certainly seen better days. He’d been living those days, so I don’t think anyone would dispute it. He’d looked better before he died.

“I need you to identify him,” Murphy said gently.

I turned to face her, putting my hands in my pockets. “Rex,” I said. “An all-around pain, and dangerous. Who killed him?”

“You know I can’t discuss an ongoing investigation with you,” Karrin said disapprovingly. “I just needed you to see him and confirm him as your mysterious ‘Rex’.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, this is Rex. Could you at least tell me his real name?”

“You’re taking this really well.”

“I wasn’t close to the man,” I said, maybe a bit defensively. “I don’t even think his wife was close to him, and I’m not sorry to see he’s gone. People like him? They don’t stop being dangerous just because they’re in jail. Even dead he’s probably causing someone trouble.”

“Let me walk you to your car,” Murphy said as she held the door open for me. I allowed her the small win in our ongoing race to show the most courtesy. I still believed in treating a woman like a lady; Murphy believed in being her own person, opening her own doors, and paying for her own meals.

It was kind of hard to be courteous to the lady when she was the escort.

“Do you think you’re in danger?” Murphy asked quietly once we were alone in the hallway.

“From who?”

“Rex’s killer.”

I had to think about it for a moment. I hated how often I had to pause and think recently; I used to have the answers ready at a moment’s notice, but ever since Marcone things had been muddled. “I don’t think so. Rex hung out with criminal scum. What would they want with me?”

“One of them wants to marry you.”

I had to actually stop in the middle of the hallway and force my jaw to work. “You think-?”

“To protect you?” she asked. “I wasn’t always in SI, Harry. I’ve seen worse. I can’t prove it, but I know he’d do this much and more to eliminate a threat to one of his own. You were the one who
said Rex had threatened your daughter, and indirectly threatened you.” She paused, and looked me over. Leather duster and all, I didn’t think I looked like a man who needed protecting. “If you become a threat to him I don’t know what he’ll do.”

I swallowed hard, and took advantage of my long legs to move closer to her in a few steps. “What do you mean?”

She turned and kept moving, her eyes darting along the hallway. “We’re talking organized crime, Harry. They don’t like loose ends. If Rex’s wife had cheated on him, she’d find a knife in her back,” Murphy said. “He wouldn’t have thought twice about seeing her cuffed. For people like Gentleman Johnny, we expect this sort of behavior. We look for it to try and find moles. But this thing with you and Marcone is different. He acts like he actually likes you.”

Which apparently was just as baffling to her as it was to me.

“So what now?” I asked.

“Now I figure out who killed Rex and you go home and try to stay out of trouble. Watch your step, Harry. Use the protection you get from Marcone. If this wasn’t your fiancee there could still be someone out there who’s after you, and Marcone can keep you safe when I can’t.” I’m sure it hurt her to say it, but Murphy was a tough girl. She didn’t hesitate to admit she couldn’t save me from everything. “Most of all I just want you to be careful.”

“I was born careful.”

“You were born causing trouble,” she shot back, giving me a small smile. “And you still are.”

“I haven’t caused trouble in years. Trouble finds me, not the other way around.”

“I would argue with you, but I don’t think we have time,” she muttered. We’d arrived at the Blue Beetle, which I had only gotten back after promising not to go down any more dark alleys alone and after having three different doctors look at my wrist to ensure it really was recovered from the brief shock it’d received - or at least I think that’s what they’d finally agreed on, though none of the doctors had been able to explain what had happened and I wasn’t about to enlighten them. I now had a tail who was watching me closely, and if I ditched my private stalker I had promises of house arrest to wheedle around. John was determined not to, in his words, let me do anything stupid.

“It’s not trouble following me,” I said as she followed my gaze to the black ford truck my latest bodyguard favored. “But it is troublesome.”

“Use it,” she said again. “I know he pressures you into doing what he wants - turn it to your advantage. You used to be good at that.” She turned to look at me again, and there was a frown between her eyes. “Just be careful,” Murphy said, sighing.

“I promise,” I said. “I will be as careful as I can be while you sort this mess out.”

I hoped I could keep that promise.

The thing about having bodyguards around all the time is they like schedules. They don’t like it if you just feel like going somewhere different or taking a different route. They definitely don’t like it if you decide to just take a drive or go for a walk to clear your head of clutter. There were departure points and destinations and you always took the quickest route from A to B.

After only a few days with Marcone’s bodyguards, I envied the freedom Mister had. He was a 30-
pound cat who could do what he wanted when he wanted, and nobody messed with him. After over a year with Marcone’s bodyguards, I still envied Mister’s freedom. And I most certainly hadn’t gotten used to having someone watch me every time I stepped out of the house.

Though I had to admit I had gotten used to the house.

In a way, John Marcone was the same as his bodyguards. When he found something he wanted he found the quickest way to obtain it and did what he needed to in order to make it his. He was taking the same track in our relationship, as reluctant as I might be to use that term. He was trying to find the quickest way from strangers to lovers and I was still looking for trolls under the bridge.

Trolls can be very dangerous if you aren’t careful. They can usually be sated by a small fee - a rabbit or goat leg will usually suffice - and are incredibly dim-witted. They have enough strength, however, to make the Hulk seem like an ant in comparison.

I hadn’t found any trolls, exactly, but I was sort of hoping for one when Red showed up and said it was time to pick up Charity for more wedding plans.

Sometimes there just aren’t enough monsters to beat the crap out of you.

―

“Honestly, Mister Dresden, you’d think you’d be a little more interested considering this is your wedding we’re planning,” Charity nearly growled at me. We were looking at cakes, and I’d never really thought about the whole tradition of shoveling pastry in your spouse’s mouth much. I’d thought it was more something done on a quiet night in the kitchen just before bed. And I’m not talking about going to bed to sleep, if you know what I mean.

It wasn’t the sort of thing you did in front of a group of people at the reception just before you went to bed and everyone knew what you would be doing when you got there, cake or no cake.

“Stars, Charity, I just want it over.”

“Pardon me?”

I shook my head at her sharp tone. “I don’t really care what the cake looks like, or the flowers, or the tables, or what they serve. I just want to show up.”

Her face softened a bit. “Michael told me, you know. He thinks it’s a shame.”

For a brief moment I thought she was talking about my arrest. Then I remembered my last conversation with Michael hadn’t included that little tidbit. It had been about, of all things, love. “Yeah, well, I never really had the option to marry for love anyways.”

“That’s not what he meant,” Charity said, huffing slightly. “Honestly, Harry, you need to look in the mirror a bit more.”

“I don’t like mirrors.”

“Well maybe you should start.”

There was a pause and I had to admit: “I boarded up most of the ones in the house. John keeps a small one to shave, but most of them were taken down and broken.”

Charity stared at me with her mouth open for a bit, and then gently pushed me into a corner where we wouldn’t draw attention from the pastry chef. “Have you ever considered, Mister Dresden, that
you might be more than a little paranoid.”

“It’s saved my life more often than not,” I told her. “And Michael’s, by the way. You used to dabble in magic. You know what a mirror can be. What can come through.”

“I also know a wizard like yourself knows how to seal a mirror to prevent dangerous things from coming through. Or was it not you who coated the mirrors in my house with your magic and our faith?”

“It’s not like that-”

“Isn’t it? You’re not afraid of mirrors. You aren’t afraid of whatever demons mirrors could let in. You’re afraid of looking at yourself. You’re afraid to see how much he cares for you, and you for him.”

“I don’t care for him. Not like that.”

“Then why, exactly, did we avoid all the lemon cakes? Or did you not blab out: ‘John doesn’t like lemon’?”

“It’s not the same.”

“Why?”

“It just isn’t.”

“That’s not an answer,” she scolded, one hand on her large belly. I sometimes forgot she was pregnant.

“Maybe you should sit down. Look at cake designs or something,” I suggested. “Didn’t you say this was supposed to be done weeks ago?”

Charity put her hands on her hips and stared me down. “This conversation should have happened weeks before that,” she said. Eight months pregnant - Michael was scary-accurate - and she was still every inch a force to be reckoned with. “I will not sit down until you tell me why considering his taste for food is less care for him than his consideration of your silly mirror problem.”

“You think he cares for me.”

“I know he does,” she countered. “His way of showing it is a little unique, but he’s trying.”

Charity didn’t know about the kidnapping or all the details of our engagement. She didn’t know I’d agreed while some messed-up lycanthropes were trying to kill me. “He wants to keep me safe,” I told her. That much was true, he just went very overboard.

“What’s so wrong about being protected?”

“He’s John Marcone-“

“And you’re Harry Dresden. The more someone pushes you to do something, the less likely you are to do it. I distinctly remember telling you several times to leave my husband out of your little escapades, and when he spends time with you he is not to come back covered in blood. Yet just yesterday you took him with you to investigate something and when he came back his shirt was soaked in it.”

“It wasn’t his.”
“Not the point,” she snapped, unwilling to let me cut in. “The point is that you’re too busy protesting what’s going on to look at yourself and wonder why in the world you haven’t just said ‘no.’ Don’t tell me you couldn’t have walked away if you really wanted. Don’t tell me he held a gun to your head while you promised to marry him. I will not believe it. You, thick-skulled moron that you are, still would have said no.”

I winced. Sometimes Charity hit closer to home than I really liked. I guess it came with being a mom. Charity was right, I had blindly stood up to bullies even with my life on the line. John Marcone was just different.

“You’re a wizard,” she snapped. “You’re supposed to be good at looking underneath the underneath, or whatever the saying is.”

“Beyond the obvious,” I said. Obviously I wanted to pay off the loan, but that wasn’t what she meant. I needed to look beyond John’s obvious motives because he was the one pushing for more. Obviously he wanted to keep me. John was a cold, calculating mob boss with a habit of picking on one poor wizard. Underneath the mafia-lord was a dark secret, one he wouldn’t let anyone see.

His dark secret, so far as I knew, could have been Annalise. He certainly cared for her enough, was ruthless for her at times, and had taken enough precautions with her you might have thought she was made of glass. But the really important part wasn’t whether she was his secret or not – he had one. He wasn’t all cold and calculating; he felt shame, and regret. He was human, not an animal-like killer. Animals – tigers – don’t feel regret. They don’t understand it in the same way. If a litter of kittens dies the mother will abandon it and just make another. Marcone would ruthlessly tear apart any who got in the way of restoring a child, and then have little burials when he failed.

Marcone liked children – which even further baffled me because I couldn’t give him any.

Then again, I couldn’t give him any, and therefore the potential children were not at any risk. They couldn’t get hurt. I was ‘safe.’

Beyond the obvious - the obvious was that he wanted a husband, a trophy, a prize. The not so obvious?

He wanted, perhaps, a father for his daughter. To be a father to his daughter.

“I need to go,” I told Charity, slipping her the cash Marcone had given me. It was a bit wadded from being in my duster pocket, but it was still cash. “Stay with Red. He’ll keep you safe until Michael gets back. Get something chocolate.”

And then I left. I needed to see Annalise again. I needed to think. I needed to stop being a pushover and start being a wizard again.

I needed to connect the dots, which had become much more difficult with Marcone swirling through my head and making me dizzy.

Chapter End Notes

All but final scene first published: 2/21/2013
Chapter Notes

A lot of the scenes in this chapter may sound very familiar. That's because a good portion of the plot follows *Grave Peril*, with few changes. Please don't sue me; I know that these scenes, essentially, are not mine. They belong to the author, who is very good at his work. Thank you, Jim; this is in no way meant to be an infringement of your copyright.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The hospital was quiet. I always expected more noise, more rushing, but this was long-term care and not the ICU.

Annalise’s room looked the same as it had last week. I’d put some *My Little Pony* sheets on the walls and added *The Princess Bride* to her bookshelf. As often as I could, I’d been reading to her. At first it was my own research and then I’d realized the doctors were wondering if they could ban me for reading it. I’d switched to children’s stories.

Someone had moved the plush tiger into her arms so now it looked like she was holding both toys and there was a vase of lilies next to her bed she hadn’t had last time I visited. Overall she looked about the same. Looks could be deceiving, though.

I sat down in the visitor’s chair, reached under her bed, and pulled out the little demon who’d been trying to hide.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, putting a bit of faith into my words and into my amulet, which began to glow with a dull bluish-white light against my chest.

The demon recoiled. He looked remarkably like a human child. Not all demons resembled humans, but there were some who found it easier to manipulate the world wearing a human shape. Few chose a child-shape but it wasn’t impossible. “I ain’t done nothing!” the demon swore. “Honest! I was just lookin’ in on ‘er!”

“And why would you need to look in on her?”

The boy looked like he was about to cry. I took a moment to wonder if, like Toot, this particular creature of the NeverNever wore his emotions on his sleeve or if he was acting. It didn’t really matter. He was spying on Annalise; he was a clue to how I might be able to get her back.

“It’s my punishment, okay,” the demon pouted, lower lip trembling. “Let me go.”

With a bit of wind I gently closed the hospital room door. If anyone looked in and saw me terrorizing what appeared to be a child – even if he was a demon – Marcone would kill me. “Don’t play games with a wizard, demon,” I said. “You belong in the Down Below. If you want to live long enough to see it again, I suggest you start answering my questions.”

The demon let a small smile show, at odds with the tear forming in the corner of his eye. “Even knowing there’s a camera in this room?” he asked. “I wonder what your friends would say about you.
harassing a kid?” He’d lost the child-like accent, his voice deepening to more adult tones that clashed with his child-shaped body.

“They’d have the same question I do: Why are you here?”

“I already said it’s my punishment,” he pouted, jutting his bottom lip out.

“Punishment for what?”

“Screwing up her miracle, of course. The little brat was my last offense – she got me kicked out of heaven! And now I have to watch her until she dies. And I can’t even help her along, either. She’s just an empty shell now, but apparently accidentally losing her soul was some sort of big deal.”

No wonder the little demon looked so human. He’d only recently become a demon after being kicked out of heaven, and probably hadn’t even seen the Down Below yet. It was a part of the NeverNever angels rarely visited.

The bigger question, however, was: “How do you lose a soul?”

Loud pop music was drumming through the speakers and it seemed like every teenager in the building was moving to the music. They were mostly attempting to dance while waiting for their turn to bowl. In reality they looked like a pack of spastic puppies. I had to do a double-take on several to be sure they weren’t having seizures.

I don’t remember ever being as excited about bowling as they were. Someone needed to cut back their sugar intake.

My uneasiness was only partly because of the loud venue and teenage crowd. Even the fact that this was a ‘date’ had skittered to the back of my mind as I wondered if I could tell John what I’d learned about Anna. That girl was his baby, even if she wasn’t biologically his baby. He’d be devastated.

I had already left my coat at our lane because the alley was warm; getting anxious only made it feel warmer. It had nothing to do with the fact that John had bought – actually bought, not rented – brand new bowling shoes for me for this – well, I guess we were actually calling it a date. Half the floor space was reserved for us to give us some privacy, since I wouldn’t let him buy out the whole alley. And there weren’t going to be any interruptions from John’s cellphone or his men, who he’d let use one of the reserved lanes to play a few games.

Probably so the teenagers didn’t wander over by mistake.

I wasn’t getting paid for this, so it was probably the closest to a date John and I had ever been on. And I was thinking of crushing a very important dream of his. I felt bad for him. He wanted me, a wizard with no prospects who didn’t trust him and owed him large sums of money, and his little Anna would probably never wake up again.

After ordering two sodas – as much as I hated it, this was a date – I carried them back over to our lane. “I still can’t believe we’re actually doing this,” I muttered making certain John could hear me over the music. He’d successfully set up the scoring monitor while I was gone, and I was helpfully keeping my distance.

“How do you lose a soul?”

“Bowling.” Dating.
“Something wrong with bowling?” John asked, taking a long sip from the cup I’d handed him. He didn’t even hesitate, though a curious look crossed his face once he got a taste. “Coke?”

“There are kids here,” I said. “We shouldn’t drink beer.”

“Of course. Would you like to start, or do you need some pointers?”

I grinned as I set my soda down, picked up the bowling ball I’d chosen, and threw a strike.

Bowling is mostly physics. There are some outside factors I still found impossible to predict such as lane warping, variable arm strength, and the other bowlers, but I’d mastered the basics long ago. Strikes were still uncommon for me, yet I couldn’t help gloating a bit as I walked back to Marcone. “You won’t win against a wizard.”

Marcone’s eyes lit up a bit. “Oh really? How about a little wager then?”

I stepped back, immediately wary. There was no way he could be good at everything, and I was a fair bowler. I wasn’t the best, but I had been good back when bowling was a regular event for me. “What kind of wager?”

“Simple enough you don’t need to be scared of it,” he laughed. “I promise you it will have absolutely nothing to do with money.”

“Or any intimate favors,” I added immediately. “I won’t have you getting carried away.”

“You think your kisses could make me get carried away?” he asked with that damned smirk on his face. “Because if so, you think right.”

“Your wager, Marcone,” I said, looking away and crossing my arms. My ball rolled back up the ball return and knocked against his custom-made piece. “I want to win something tonight. What do you have I could possibly want?”

“Information,” John answered bluntly. “The wager is simple. It’s more of a game, really. For every strike you get you can ask me a question I must answer honestly. Every time you fail to get a strike, I get to ask you a question you must answer honestly.”

I wasn’t too fond of John asking me questions. There were some questions I didn’t want to answer and just as many I actually couldn’t. But for the chance to ask him questions – to find his sources, find out what he knew, find out what he was doing – that was a golden opportunity I might not get again. If I was careful, I might even find something I could use to gain some leverage in our relationship and make some demands of my own. “If you ask a question I can’t answer?”

“Why couldn’t you answer?”

“Some questions are dangerous.”

Marcone didn’t look pleased, but there were some things I couldn’t say. The council would have my head if I told a mortal too much about magic. They let me get away with telling mortals who had already been exposed only because messing with their minds went against the Laws.

Finally, John said: “If answering a question puts your life at risk – your life, not mine – you must say so, and answer a different question.”

I could work with that. Anything which put Marcone in danger would put me in danger by association. That would eliminate most questions I didn’t want to answer, and all the ones I couldn’t.
It wasn’t what I wanted, but I could work with it. “You have to play the same game,” I demanded. The more questions I could squeeze out of him, the better. There was no way he could throw a perfect game.

John leaned back against the plastic chair and shrugged easily. “I’m more than willing to play,” he said. “And since you just got a strike, I believe the first question is yours.”

I gave myself a moment to think. If I rushed asking the question, I might end up asking something useless. “Aside from me, who else provides you information on magic?”

John raised an eyebrow and regarded me coolly. “All business then? A shame. I have pulled information from many sources, including books and rumor. The most substantial knowledge comes from a woman calling herself Sigrun Gard, who works for a security company here in Chicago. She was quite vexed to learn you and I were living together.”

The name wasn’t familiar. I wasn’t sure if Marcone was attempting to show himself as desired by the woman or if her unhappy confusion confused him. Maybe I was some sort of security risk. Whatever the reason for her vexation, I knew she was no ordinary security guard.

John stood to take his turn, knocking down only four pins. “Your question again,” he said, still smiling. He didn’t look concerned at all. I almost thought he’d done it on purpose.

If I had known we were going to have a Q&A session, I would have written a list. My mind was blanking. There was so much I wanted to know, and I couldn’t decide which question was important and which wouldn’t matter. “What non-humans are you in contact with?”

John considered. “Miss Gard, of course,” he said, “and her employer, Donar. I haven’t met ‘Toot,’ however we have left messages for each other.” That was a bit startling. I didn’t realize Toot could read human script. Then again, Toot’s idea of a message wasn’t necessarily a letter. “Bianca, of course,” Marcone continued, “and those of her house. She still holds a grudge, you realize.”

“She’s a vampire,” I pointed out. “She has a long memory and a great deal of patience.”

“Indeed. I do not believe there are others you would consider non-human. Shall we continue?”

I nodded, and he threw a spare. “As that was not a strike, I believe you have another question.”

It was going to be a long night. I hoped this would be worth it. “How do you and Toot communicate?”

“Nathan delivers a pizza to the alley where you requested it be sent previously. He states a condition or request and leaves the food. He never sees anyone, but we know they hear us. One ongoing request is to keep an eye on you when he is available. If you are in danger, he brings one of your rings to me. He has not let me down yet – except maybe the instance with your arm.”

“ Тоот couldn’t have done anything even if he saw, which I don’t think he did,” I said, defending the small sprite. “He wouldn’t have a chance against her. She would have killed him without a thought.”

Marcone nodded. “I understand your concern. He does not watch you constantly, so I had assumed he was elsewhere.”

“He’s a pixie. He probably was,” I said, rolling my eyes. I stood and grabbed my ball, lining myself up for another good shot. I hoped for a strike.

I thought, for a moment, I had it. The last pin wobbled.
It didn’t fall.

I turned to Marcone.

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked.

“What?”

“Your favorite color,” he said again. “What is it?”

It was inane. Meaningless. Completely personal. The sort of thing you asked friends when you were planning gifts or doing something silly. Everyone had a favorite color. Except –

“I don’t know.”

I really didn’t. Why didn’t I have a favorite color? It was an easy question.

“I’ll make it easier,” John said, his voice soft enough to just barely be heard through the music.

“When I say ‘color’ what’s the first one that comes to mind?”

When he said it? “Green,” I answered honestly. “Like old dollar bills.”

His eyes.

“I don’t want to play anymore.”

John’s brow furrowed. “We’ve barely gotten started. We’re only on the second set.”

I took a sip of my soda, stalling.

“Surely you’re not afraid of a few little questions,” he pressed. “Your questions were much more dangerous than mine.”

“Not the point.”

“What is the point?”

“It’s not your turn to ask questions,” I pointed out. “Or do you agree not to play anymore?”

John leaned back and motioned towards the ball return. “Go on then.”

There was only one pin but I completely missed. Gutterball. I turned to Marcone and waited for him to ask again.

He changed his question. “Why are you upset?”

I had to consider how to answer his question. There were a lot of reasons, many of them personal. “I don’t like answering questions about my personal life,” I finally said. “I don’t like talking about it, and no one likes hearing about it. If you’re going to ask personal questions, I don’t want to play.”

John considered me for a moment. I was fairly certain he couldn’t take me apart with his eyes, but he was making a good attempt. “There is no point to this game if I can’t ask about you. Unless you want to change to strip bowling, in which case I believe we need to clear out the teenage occupants. And the workers. And my men.”

“You can’t clear out the bowling alley,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And there’s no such thing as strip
bowlings.”

“There can be such a thing, but I’m not sharing you if that’s the game you want to play.”

“You can ask about me,” I conceded, rolling my eyes, “just don’t ask stupid questions like favorite color!”

“I assume that means we are to continue our game?”

I gave a single, sharp nod. I could get too much valuable information from him to stop now. Just because I didn’t like answering questions didn’t mean I wanted to stop asking.

He stood up and took his turn. I winced as he threw a strike. “A less personal question,” he said. “Is there anyone, aside from myself, you owe a debt to?”

I glared at him. “You said this wouldn’t have anything to do with the loan.”

“It doesn’t,” he said as he kept a careful eye on me. “Let me rephrase: Is there anyone, human or otherwise, to whom you currently owe anything?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “And to tell you more would put us both in danger.” My grandmother could not in any way be considered forgiving.

He conceded, and I stood to take my turn. It was going to be a long night.

By the time we finished our game the teenagers on the other side of the alley had been replaced by an older crowd. It was late, but not late enough to call it a night. Even if had been, we lived together. Going back to the house wouldn’t give me a private place to think.

And I had a lot to think about. Not only the answers John had given me but the questions he had asked were also on my mind. After my protests John had stayed away from inane questions about my likes and dislikes. His questions hadn’t been any less personal even if they were more factual.

Had I ever had a boyfriend; had I ever considered another profession; where had I traveled outside Chicago; who took care of me when my father died...

That one had been the hardest. I ended up simply telling him I had been adopted by a man named Justin and he’d adopted another girl as well. When he asked where Justin and the girl were now, I’d told him they were dead and I didn’t want to talk about it.

He didn’t push.

I don’t know what bothered me more: that he had asked or that he’d stopped when I’d told him to.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asked as he slid into the car beside me.

“I certainly hope they’re worth more than a penny,” I said.

“Depends,” John replied. “Are they about me?”

“In a way.”

“Are they about my charming good looks?”

“I didn’t realize you were a narcissist.”
“You bring out the best of me.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

One eyebrow rose and his mouth quirked up in a grin. “Would you rather you brought out the worst in me? Because I can always take you home, tie you to my bed, and have my wicked way with you.”

“You could try,” I said. I wasn’t entirely certain he was joking. He may have been trying to, but it was Marcone. If he wanted to he would.

“I would succeed, but it wouldn’t be half as much fun as you in my bed willing and wanting.”

“You’re living a fantasy if you think that’s going to happen,” I snorted.

“I’ve got you there willingly already,” he said, hand slipping into mine. “If you let me, I could make you wanting as well.”

“Wanting what? A bullet to the brain?”

“I should certainly hope not,” he chided, tugging my hand closer until he could clasp it in both of his. “Is my touch so intolerable?”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t shot myself yet.” Of course, that was before I laid eyes on Agatha Hagglethorn.

For a moment I watched Michael and Charity walk away together while I stood there alone. Then I stuck my hands into my pockets and turned away. I was jealous as hell of how well they matched each other; it was as simple as that. They didn’t have to work to make it work.

The married thing, I mean. John and I would never have what they had. Even if we had a more conventional relationship, I would be looking at Michael and Charity and craving what they had like a starving man craves food. I couldn’t even fool myself into thinking John was the cause of my problems, either. None of my previous relationships had really worked, and Marcone hadn’t had a hand in them. I couldn’t blame it on the women; somehow I always seemed to be the one to mess it up.

John was watching me from the door of the waiting room, taking me in from head to toe. He was far from being a woman, as he proved time and again. I was tired and sore, and didn’t really care that I wasn’t supposed to like him because he was a guy and because he dealt in shady business. I had escaped from my faery godmother. She had noticed the engagement ring, of course, and noticed something was different, but I’d made it out alive, and I wasn’t a mutt globbing drool while I licked my own butt and waited for my lady’s orders.

“They make a good couple,” John said quietly, nodding to Michael and Charity where they stood together. Charity was busy dabbing at some of the blood on Michael’s shirt.

I shrugged. “They love each other,” I said. “And they’re good people.”

“So are we.”

I sighed. “Can we not do this right now? I need to get some sleep. Agatha was stubborn.” And a bit crazy, but she was a ghost. A bit of crazy wasn’t unusual.
“Don’t you think you should get checked out first?” John asked.

I shook my head and yawned. “Look, I’ll let you look me over personally once I’m in bed. I really don’t care right now. Unless another ghost is threatening the patients, I want to go home.”

Something flickered across his face too fast for me to identify, and I couldn’t begin to guess what crossed his mind just then. Annoyance, maybe, because I didn’t want to play his games. Or maybe anger at being dismissed. He probably wanted me to think he was eager to look me over, but I doubted he was that concerned. I certainly wasn’t good enough to look at for him to be lusting over battered bruises and exhaustion.

I sighed and brushed some strands of hair caked with dried sweat out of my face. John smiled softly as I did and said: “As you wish.” He steadied me with a hand under my elbow and led me outside to where – of course – Cujo stood waiting next to the Caddy.

“My car’s at the impound,” I remembered. “We’ll have to pay for it-“

“Later, love,” John said. “You wanted to rest, remember?”

I didn’t complain. Maybe in the morning I would, but right then I was more concerned over whether or not I could take a nap on the ride back to the house.

It was a very pleasant nap until the vampires showed up.

The pair of too-pale supermodels were leaning against the railing and sucking face like they had all night.

“Friends of yours?” John asked as he helped me out of the car.

“You better hope Cujo has enough bullets,” I muttered even though they could easily hear me. “They’re vampires.”

“You wouldn’t dare harm a messenger of the Vampire Bianca sent in peace to deliver an invitation,” the male of the pair smiled. He nuzzled the other vampire’s neck and let a bit of fang show in a cocky grin. “Bianca said you’d be nervous, but the risk of a diplomatic incident between the Vampire Court and the White Council would curb your fires.”

There was only a risk of a diplomatic incident if he was sent as an official Harold, and he hadn’t announced himself as one. He was just as dangerous as Bianca. I turned my face away so I only saw the pair out of the corner of my eyes. “Don’t look them in the eye and don’t let them lick you,” I told John.

“Lick me?”

“Their saliva’s a narcotic, and addictive,” I warned him. A little louder, I addressed the vampires: “It only takes one to be a messenger.”

“We were on our way to a tennis match,” the male said. “Doubles. If you like, we’ll play against you and your partner after our game.”

“No thanks,” I said, getting a grip on my blasting rod. My staff was still in the car, but my rod was in my pocket. “We’re not really tennis players. Who are you, and why are you really here? Names first, please.”
“My name is Kyle Hamilton,” the male said, licking a stripe up the female’s neck. “This is my sister, Kelly.”

“Do you always molest your sister like that?” Cujo huffed. I was pleased to see he had his gun aimed at the pair with his arms braced on the car.

“Impudent mortal!” the girl hissed. “I should have your blood for that!”

“But you won’t,” I cut in. “Because he is under my protection and if you harm any under my protection, I will make certain the White Council retaliates. And even if they don’t, I’m within my rights to seek my own vengeance, vampire.”

The girl pouted. “But I’m hungry!”

“You’ll have to forgive my sister,” Kyle said, pulling her close to his side. “She’s on a diet.”

“You’ve yet to state your business,” I snapped, trying to bring us back on topic and not think about how ridiculous it was to put a vampire on a diet. Was there such a thing as low-fat blood?

“Ah yes. I have an invitation for you and your intended from Bianca. Official Court Business,” he added crisply.

I hesitated. If it was official, it was serious. I wanted no part of it. But official was also political, and I couldn’t just turn it down. If I tried, I could start a war. “Lower the gun, Cujo,” I said. After a nod from John, Hendricks lowered the gun and walked around the car. He didn’t holster it.

Kyle spoke slowly and clearly. His spiel was obviously memorized. “The Vampire Court extends a formal invitation to Harry Dresden, Wizard, as the local representative of the White Council of Wizards, to attend the reception celebrating the elevation of Bianca St. Claire to the rank of Margravine of the Vampire Court three nights hence, reception to begin at midnight.” He paused to pull a crisp white envelope from his jacket, a smile plastered on his face. “The safety of all invited guests is assured by the assembled court.”

“So you’re acting as official herald, then?” I asked, stepping a bit in front of John. Kyle had to say he was the herald before he came closer.

“I am,” Kyle said, nodding.

Close enough. “Then bring me the invitation.” The pair of them began to move, and I immediately raised my blasting rod and muttered a word, glad I had it ready after the mess with Agatha. The end began to glow with a bit of power. “Not her,” I said. “Just you.”

In the dim light, Kyle’s eyes looked completely black. And they were sharply angry despite his smile. “Well, Mister Dresden, aren’t you the little lawyer nowadays. I guess we have your fiancée to thank for that.”

“Leave him out of this,” I bit out. “You’re the herald, Mr. Clean. You’ve license to deliver and receive messages. You’re granted safe travel so long as you don’t start any trouble. She doesn’t, and she doesn’t have to. She’s not obligated to keep the peace. No one has to die tonight.”

They both hissed at me, a sound which wasn’t entirely human, and Kelly’s hands fist on her brother’s jacket. In a move faster than any human, he was in front of me and thrusting the envelope into my space. I took it in my free hand.

“You’re business is complete,” I said, not looking away from his sister and not moving the blasting rod
“You better be there, Dresden,” Kyle snarled, backing away. “My Lady will be upset if you don’t attend.”

“Leave,” I said again, “before I decide you need assistance in vacating the premises.”

They hissed at me again, then they were gone in a blur of tennis whites. I waited for a few moments, extending my senses out until I couldn’t sense them anymore. When I was sure they were gone, I lowered the blasting rod and let the magic fade, then leaned back against the nearest surface. I felt John’s arms slip around me as his chest propped me up, and tried not to think about it too much.

“Hell’s fucking bells,” I breathed, almost falling. John’s grip kept me upright, but my legs felt like jelly.

“Let’s get inside,” John said. “Can you walk?”

“You aren’t going to ask about the wonder twins?”

“When we’re safe and you’re rested, you can explain,” he said. “It sounded like politics, so it may take some time for your non-political brain to process.”

“Are you insulting me?” I asked.

His mouth twitched. “Just making a point. We need to get inside.”

“Agreed,” I said, and forced my legs to hold my weight once again.

The next morning John was missing. It wouldn’t have been unusual under normal circumstances, but let’s face it: last night had not been normal. I’d been run ragged by a ghost, narrowly escaped my godmother, and had a close encounter of the non-friendly vampire kind.

The invite was missing too. Except I knew where it was: with Marcone.

Lucky for me, I found Cujo in the kitchen inspecting the contents of the fridge. “Where is he?” I asked.

“Out.”

“I’m serious, Hendricks. Vampires are dangerous. Where is he?”

“Out,” Hendricks repeated. “He’s not with them, though, so you don’t have to worry. He’s got five men and Miss Gard with him.”

“Which won’t save him if he goes poking his nose where it doesn’t belong!”

Cujo closed the refrigerator door, leaned against it, and let a crooked grin spread across his face. “You worried about him Dresden?” he asked. “Worried he got tired of you being such a frigid nag he went and found someone to take care of all his needs?”

“This isn’t because of sex,” I snapped, feeling my face heat. “And even if it were - I am not a frigid nag!”

“Really? Sure seems that way from here. Won’t put out, barely touch him, always arguing - I still don’t understand why he puts up with you. I’d say it would have to be because of the sex, but I
know what the Boss looks like when he’s getting some. He’s not getting any, by the way. I think you’d both relax a bit if you were.”

“How’d you get to be such an expert?” I asked, crossing my arms. “Were you the former girlfriend?”

“No. I shot that one.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “What?”

“The skank was trying to double-cross us with some out-of-state drug runners. I shot her. She really got around, too, as it turns out. The Boss was furious.”

“Are you going to shoot me when he’s done with me?”

“I doubt it’ll be an issue. He’s put up with you for this long and you won’t even sleep with him. He won’t be done with you.” He had a look of distaste, his mouth pursed as if he’d swallowed something sour, but his voice was sure.

“Doesn’t answer the question.”

He sighed and shrugged. “Depends. Probably not. I don’t think you know enough to get him in jail, you can protect yourself enough you won’t be kidnapped easily, and you don’t have the connections to run with gangs or thugs. You’re too honest, so you’d more likely go through the cops anyways, and we’ve got everything legit so it’s not a problem. Though I’d be happier if you stayed out of jail yourself.”

“It was his friend who put me there.”

“Which is why he got you out. The Boss is fair, Dresden, but he’s not a machine.”

I frowned, watching the football-player-sized man glare at me and stare pointedly at my crotch. He didn’t need to; I knew what he meant. It was the other part which had me thinking back to Rex’s corpse and Murphy’s warning. I could believe her theories were valid before, but I wasn’t sure she was right. I didn’t really know how involved Marcone had been. “How ‘fair’ is he, Cujo?” I asked. “Fair enough to kill a man already beat half to death?”

“Those C4 blocks weren’t set to go off,” Cujo said, his mouth a thin line, “but they could have been. It was meant to be a warning. When a rabid dog starts threatening you, we put it down.”

“Rex wasn’t a rabid dog.”

“Just mad.”

“Did Marcone do it?”

Hendricks didn’t answer right away, watching me. “No,” he said finally. “It was someone else’s revenge. But they did invite the Boss to watch.”

I shuddered. He’d basically given his blessing, then.

I couldn’t let him go to that party. I had three days to convince him it wasn’t a room full of targets - it was a room full of predators, and he was easy prey. He might be king of his little jungle, but if he threw his weight around with Bianca he’d be killed.

That could work in my favor. The wedding was in six weeks, it was possible Marcone wouldn’t live that long if we went to the party.
But Marcone was the killer in this relationship, not me. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t even let it happen by proxy.

“Pancakes?” Cujo asked, pulling out a mixing bowl.

“Not hungry,” I muttered, turning away.

Once again we were having take-out in one of the conference rooms. John insisted on feeding me and on spending time with me. It was easier on us both when we combine the two.

"I hear you’ve taken someone else under your protection," he said he cut into his chicken. "Am I to see this as something common now?"

"That girl was out of her wits," I said. "What was I supposed to do?"

"You could have sent her to me. Or to Murphy."

"As if that would help," I snorted. "She's not afraid of vanilla mortals."

"Did you need to provide her with your shield bracelet?"

I winced a bit. Marcone saw the bracelets as a matched set, another sign of our engagement. "It will help her," I said. "She needs it more than I do."

"You leave yourself vulnerable."

“Only in the short term,” I said. “I can make another bracelet. I can’t make another Lydia.”

He set his fork down. “And if you need the protection at Bianca’s reception.”

“I’m not going, and neither are you.”

“I certainly plan on attending. I was invited after all.”

“The invitation was for me.”

“And your intended, Mr. Marcone,” John said. “You should have read it closer.”

“It’s a bad idea-“

“And not going is a worse idea. If you make clear you plan on attending and then show, she will have no reason to attack you. If you advertise you do not plan to attend she will find some way to coerce you. If you do not make clear what your intention is, she will find some way to ensure your attendance. Just look at what happened with Rex.”

I bit my tongue and stabbed my fork into the green beans. He was right. Rex had manipulated me into attending his tournament fiasco and Bianca would have no problems pulling the same tricks.

“You can’t go,” I said. “The host is only obligated to make certain no one thinks you’re food. They could poison the drink, there could be a drive-by shooting, any number of things could go wrong and there wouldn’t be a political backlash because only the mortals would die.”

“So you’re back to protecting me?”

“Reluctantly.”
“Have you not considered that I could help you?” John asked gently. “This is a political game, which is my forte more than it is yours. Remember, I’m a gentleman.” He winked as he said it, like it was our little secret.

“You’re a bastard.”

“My parents were legally wed,” Marcone responded. “At least for a time.”

“Neither of us should be anywhere near Bianca’s party.”

“On the contrary, this is the perfect avenue for reminding the vampire how much she owes you.”

I blinked. Like some demented gerbil wheel, my brain kept replaying his words until I finally blurted out: “She what?”

“Owes you. For your services.”

“Bianca hates me. She doesn’t owe me anything.”

John pushed away the food we obviously weren’t eating and leaned forward in his chair towards me. “She hates you, yes. But just because she hates you doesn’t mean her obligations are null and void. You seem to be unaware of the substantial reward she offered for the wizard who killed Ms. Stanton.”

I raised an eyebrow. “If I remember correctly, she believed that wizard to be me.”

“Yes, but she was smart enough not to use your name. As it was you who killed Mr. Sells, whom is openly recognized by many of my contacts as the killer of Ms. Stanton, the reward should have been provided to you. Ms. St. Claire failed to give you what you were due. She owes you.”

“I didn’t do it for her.”

“No. But wouldn’t it be nice to know she’s prevented from outright attacking you?”

“It’s not worth it,” I muttered, looking him in the eye. “You don’t know vampires very well, or Bianca, or you’d never consider putting that sort of pressure on her. She’ll start being sneaky about her revenge. And her gifts – they could be worse than her threats. The last thing I want is for her to give me some poor college student to have for dinner, vampire style.”

“I will be careful, I promise,” John said, squeezing my hand. “We won’t die, and we’ll gain a few allies. It’s all politics.”

“I hate politics,” I sighed.

He grinned. “I know.”

After lunch with John I went to see Annalise. I knew now she couldn’t hear me when I talked to her, but I’d grown used to sitting by her side when John was presenting me with a difficult side of himself. She reminded me he wasn’t completely bad.

And maybe if I made progress with her I could distract John from both the party and the girl I’d tucked away in Father Forthill’s chapel.

I closed the door behind me this time before I sat next to the bed. I didn’t really expect the little demon to reveal himself again, but I didn’t want to be interrupted if he dared to show himself. There
were quite a few questions I had for him.

I sighed as I collapsed into the bedside chair. The honest truth was that I was tired. I was sore after battling Agatha, and from all the ghost-related problems cropping up in general. I was tired of the constant battles with Marcone, even if most of them only happened in my head.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kill the guy or save him, but my better nature usually wouldn’t let me consider letting him die.

“I never thought I’d feel so worn down,” I told the girl. “Wizards have very long lives. We heal faster than vanilla mortals, which somehow lets us keep going longer. By the council’s standards, I’m hardly more than a child.”

I snorted at the thought. “I was old enough to be killed, though. Or kill, if I tried to be a warden. I’d hate that job though. I’d up like Morgan. A big stick in the mud at best.”

Leaning back in the chair, I propped my feet on her bed and looked around the room, wondering how crazy I looked in my cowboy boots and black leather duster. “You would think, being this great wizard and all, I could find one little lost soul. It would help if I knew you were really out there. Or if you were still in Chicago. Or what you looked like. Anything about you would help, really.”

I waited a moment, but the demon didn’t take the bait. I hadn’t really expected to see him when I’d only caught him once in all my visits to John’s mystery girl, but it had been worth a try.

The next step would be to get with Bob and figure out a plan. I couldn’t summon the demon, not without his name, but maybe Chauncey would be able to help out there. Bob would know if it was even possible to reunite the lost soul with her body, and if she could be found. He’d know what could go wrong, too. Nothing could be accomplished without her soul, however. Even if I managed a shell that would “wake up” her body, it would be an empty shell without her soul. And I only had one link to that: the child-like demon.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew Red was very carefully poking me with the end of a cane while the nurse watched him, stupefied.

“Time to go,” Red said. “Lieutenant Murphy needs you.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

A lot of the scenes in this chapter may sound very familiar. That's because a good portion of the plot follows *Grave Peril*, with few changes. Please don't sue me; I know that these scenes, essentially, are not mine. They belong to the author, who is very good at his work. Thank you, Jim; this is in no way meant to be an infringement of your copyright.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Charity looked about ready to burst out her baby right then and there. She wasn’t due for another eight weeks yet she didn’t seem the least bit concerned. Unless she was giving birth, she’d already made clear she would be attending the wedding no matter what.

“It’s not like I’m asking you to pick out curtains or anything,” she said, rolling her eyes as she crowded me towards a rack of CDs. “Those already match the decor anyways, I presume. What I’m saying is that you ought to expand your wardrobe.”

“I don’t need to impress my husband,” I grumbled. “He knows what I wear.”

“Yes, and you’re content to just laze about and let him look better than you. You don’t need to look good for him. You need to look good for yourself.”

“I’m fine with the way I look.”

“Oh really?” Charity asked. “And you never wanted to, say, put on something special and silky and soft just to feel sexy?”

“I don’t need to be sexy for anyone-”

“Don’t be silly,” she interrupted. “Every girl needs to have a day where they wear a lacy black bra and a sinfully short dress just to feel good about themselves. Men are no different except in the clothes they put on. A black silk shirt, some tight leather pants, and some stylish boots might do wonders for your outlook on the day.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’d feel ridiculous.”

Charity sighed. “If you’re going to stick with the cowboy look, Mr. Dresden, couldn’t you at least go for a version that doesn’t wear ratty shirts?”

“It’s not ratty,” I told her, scanning the shelves and hoping she didn’t try to take me clothes shopping next. “Do you really think John looks better than me?”

“I know he does.”

“That’s cruel, Charity.” I frowned at her as I picked up a CD, quietly hoping I wasn’t ruining it by touching it.

“Truth hurts,” she quipped. “Get used to it. Do you really want pop music at your wedding?”
I sighed. “Aren’t you the wedding planner so we don’t need to do these things?” I asked, putting the CD back.

“I can’t exactly have the band play ‘here comes the bride’ now, can I?” she asked. “You have saved the rehearsal dates, right?”

“Probably. Unless someone gets eaten first.”

“Just because vampires knock on your door doesn’t mean they want to eat you.”

“Says who?”

“The vampires.”

I let out a small laugh, unexpectedly loud in the nearly-empty store. “I didn’t realize you had such a sense of humor.”

“I didn’t say to invite them in, now, did I?” she asked, smiling. “The Lord protects us, but that doesn’t mean we have leave to be stupid.”

“Amen,” I said in agreement, just to irritate her.

Charity’s lips formed a tight line and she glared at me, but she was holding back a laugh.

“How about this one?” I asked, holding up a CD for a band I’d never heard of before.

“Only if you plan on going to a rock concert for the reception,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Maybe you should leave the initial sorting to me and choose from what I’ve already gone through.”

“Maybe you should just pick it out?”

“Oh, just hush and go find something for your first dance together. Even you should be able to manage that.”

I wondered if she’d let me pick ‘Eye of the Tiger.’

We’d narrowed down the choices by the time Michael came to pick us up. Or rather, to pick up Charity and I tagged along when he did, leaving my driver behind. After trying to drag me back to John’s after I saw Micky Malone, the man deserved it. I still couldn’t believe he’d taken me to meet Charity instead of letting me work on the case. Apparently ‘no leads’ was the new code for ‘plan the wedding’. It wasn’t until we were in the Carpenter’s driveway and Charity was waddling inside that I got the chance to talk to Michael alone.

“I need to check up on Lydia,” I said. “Could you drive me?”

Michael nodded. “In a few moments. Let me get Charity settled first. She’ll want lunch soon.”

It really was only a few minutes before he was back outside and we were cruising towards the church. “What do you know?” he asked.

“Something attacked Malone this morning. Something nasty.” I described the outside, the dead animals, and the overall sour taste to the scene. It still gave me goosebumps, and that wasn’t even considering what was inside. Swallowing thickly, I told him about the barbed wire wrapped around Malone’s soul, and the painful way I’d needed to remove it.
I was glad there wasn’t anything in my stomach. Michael’s truck didn’t deserve to have my vomit in the footwells.

“Father be merciful,” Michael prayed under his breath, making the sign of the cross. I had no doubt he actually was praying. “Will he recover?”

“Physically, I don’t think he was all that injured. He’ll be tired for a while, feeling wrung-out, but otherwise okay.”

“Emotionally?” Michael asked, observant as always.

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them when I saw Micky’s face snarling back at me while his soul screamed. “Someone really fucked him up, and it’s going to take him a long time to get over it.”

“Language, Harry.”

“Sorry.”

Michael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Is this connected to the ghost problem?” he asked.

“I have no idea.” The ghosts had started stirring up several months back and Michael had called me up to warn me. Then the problem had simply disappeared - until a few weeks ago. “Maybe.”

“What about your invitation?” Michael asked.

“Bianca wouldn’t dare,” I said, certain it was true. “First, it’s not her style. Second, I’m an invited guest and she can’t openly attack me. Attacking anyone under my protection can be seen as an attack against me, politically.”

“Did you declare Micky under your protection somehow?”

“What?”

“You gave the girl your bracelet and informed others of her status. It is well known you protect her. Does Bianca know Micky is also under your protection? Does she even know about Lydia?”

“Lydia, definitely,” I said. “I told her herald, at least, that I would retaliate if they hurt any under my protection. Lydia has my shield bracelet, so that’s obvious.” Micky, however, was another matter.

“You might also consider she has not openly attacked you. Even if this thing - whatever it is - attached Micky on her orders, she is capable of denying her involvement.”

Of course the vampiress was capable of lying. But it wasn’t really her style. If Bianca was going to torture me, she’d want me to know who was behind it as a matter of pride.

A matter which fell to the back of my mind when we pulled up to the church, navigating around what was left of the parking lot.

“Hell’s fucking bells.”

“Language, Harry.”

I don’t remember driving back to the mansion. I must have, because I hadn’t trusted Red not to call John the minute I started walking around with tuning forks to dowse for Lydia, so I’d snuck out the
back and borrowed Fr. Forthill’s mini-van. Then I’d found Lydia, sprung the trap, and got beat to the Down Under and back. At least, that’s what it felt like.

Lydia. The vampires still had Lydia.

I was somehow in the bedroom with Mister’s purr rumbling through me. I could almost feel myself vibrating with the movement where I laid on the bed. It was both a welcome pleasure and an unbearable pain.

Suddenly, Mister was gone. I heard the door lock and opened an eye to see John watching me carefully, approaching slowly.

“Go away,” I heard myself mutter distantly.

He didn’t. I felt the bed dip where he sat next to me, and let out a hiss when his hand gave the lightest of brushes over my neck. I couldn’t help but let out a small whimper of pain.

He turned on the bedside lamp, and I reacted instantly. I curled up on my side and hid my face from the light, shielding my eyes.

It hurt. The light was dim, but it might as well have been the sun.

“What happened?” John asked softly.

I breathed steadily, trying not to whimper unnecessarily. It wasn’t manly. “Symptoms?” I croaked out. “Need to know my symptoms.”

He looked into my eyes for a bit, then said: “Your pupils are blown, nearly fully dilated. You appear to have a fresh second, possibly third degree sunburn only on part of your neck and jaw, in a distinct stripe. No blisters, but definitely beyond a first degree burn. Very localized and almost glowing, it’s so red. You have the shakes, most likely from shock.”

“Any bites.”

“What?”

“On my neck,” I clarified. “I need to know if either of them bit me.” The words tumbled out a mess, but it seemed John understood. He carefully moved my face around as he inspected both sides of my neck, my adam’s apple, and finally the nape of my neck.

“No signs of any puncture wounds.”

I felt my body sag in relief, almost melting into the mattress. I couldn’t exactly remember why, but I remembered getting bit was bad.

My body throbbed with pain, even after such relief. I simply ached. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, feel it in my temples. Each throb rose with lust and fell with burning.

“What happened?” John pressed again. “Can a doctor treat these?”

I looked at him for a moment and realized I had a hard-on. And John was practically in the bed with me.

I may have giggled in childish delight for a moment, I’m not sure. John was certainly looking at me oddly. “Vampire saliva,” I managed to get out. “Feels so good it hurts.”
He seemed startled, and I closed my eyes. I breathed, ignoring his questions, and tried to block out the pain – and the pleasure. I tried to focus.

Marcone’s hand on my shoulder had me on my back with my body arching off the mattress for a moment as a scream tore through my throat.

“Harry!” There was fear in that voice. Fear I didn’t understand. He was Gentleman Johnny Marocne, what did he have to fear?

“Go away,” I whispered as loud as I could. Then, before he could say anything to contradict me: “Leave the door open.”

I don’t know why, but it felt wrong to have shut Mister out the way John had. I couldn’t remember why it was important, but I wanted the door open.

John obliged with opening the door, but he didn’t leave my side.

I focused again on blocking out the drug, on thinking.

On trying again to solve the riddle of Lydia.

I hissed as John slowly worked the burn cream into the area where I’d been slimed. The dazed pleasure was gone from the drug now, leaving me with only a nasty burn and an occasional desire to hump something. It was particularly awkward around the one man who seemed to be able to sniff out my uncomfortable urge.

“It’s already healing remarkably,” John commented, his fingers lightly ghosting over my throat. “It may not feel like it at the moment but it is noticeably better than earlier.” He’d taken off his coat - likely to prove he didn’t have any knives in his hands - but I still watched him carefully.

We were in the car on the way to the precinct. I had to find Murphy and John, damn him, insisted on coming along and fussing. “Can’t Cujo go any faster?” I asked. “I don’t think I could break his fancy car right now if I wanted to.”

“What?” Marcone’s voice was low, almost a growl.

“Look, it doesn’t matter, we’ve just got to find Murphy yesterday - this thing will be after her next.”

“Maybe you should let it.”

“Stars, what are you on about now?” I snapped. “Murphy hasn’t done anything to you!”

“She’s come between us,” John said. “She sends you on dangerous cases. You know this thing is going after her next which means you’ve learned something about its motive. It’s attacked Micky Malone, you, and now will probably target Karrin Murphy. All signs point to either a future case or a past one. In both scenarios you are injured because of a connection with the police. With her. Even this burn came from vampires working for Bianca, and she would not hold such a grudge against you if Miss Murphy had not called you in to solve a murder.”

“Bianca’s misunderstanding wasn’t Karrin’s fault. Besides, if Murphy hadn’t called me in for the case I’d be dead,” I told him. “Wizards have their own crime-solving force. I was the primary suspect. They don’t hold trials, and they don’t need proof. Not in most cases, anyways. I was lucky he had enough doubts to let me try and solve the case.”
“Still, I think you would have fared better with my offer. A vacation in Hawaii would certainly have been more enjoyable than puking your guts up in the bedroom.”

I winced at the reminder. There hadn’t been much in my stomach to throw up, but I had somehow managed. “Sorry about that,” I muttered. My belly was still sore.

Though that could be the hunk of chi the bastard nightmare had stolen from me. Ever since Bob had pointed it out, I’d wondered if it was lingering cramps from puking or if I could actually feel the missing magic.

“We’re here,” Cujo announced.

I almost flew out of the car, calling over my shoulder: “Stay here!”

I hesitated at the entrance to the cemetery. I was alone – I shouldn’t go in there alone. John would be mad.

He would be mad no matter what. I’d practically run away, after all. It wasn’t exactly on purpose. I’d called to warn Michael about sleeping, found out Charity had stepped out for a moment, and it felt wrong. I’d booked it over there without even a note in order to help Michael search. He’d been asking the retail clerk if he’d seen her when I saw it.

Charity following my form into the graveyard.

I couldn’t help but think that it just wasn’t fair. The Nightmare had stolen my form and was attacking my friends and I’d already killed the thing once.

Somewhere in the darkness, Charity screamed.

I ducked inside the cemetery, blasting rod in one hand and my staff in the other, and felt the immediate difference. It was like the scene in Indiana Jones - the one in Egypt where his lady is being carried off by the bad guys and Indy is slogging through the crowds trying to find her – except the crowd seemed to be twice as thick and wasn’t exactly physical.

I let a bit of will flow into my amulet, the symbol of my faith, where it hung around my neck and felt some of the crowd back away a few paces. “Charity!” I called out.

A short shout, cut off unnaturally, to my right drew me further into the graveyard. The spirits pressed in around me as they sensed my fear, and I shivered from something a lot more primal than cold. There are reasons mortals fear graveyards. I don’t pretend to know all of them but my hind-brain had plenty of zombie movies and horror films to feed me, the bastard.

Charity was on her back on a bier inside a marble monument made to look like a Greek temple. Her teeth were bared, her hands clenched over her swollen belly.

And standing over her wearing my face was the Nightmare.

It was a good likeness, I guess. I don’t see my own face much, but the basics were there. Murphy had believed it. Charity had.

“Wizard,” the Nightmare said in what I guessed was a greeting.

“Demon,” I responded. It wasn’t good to provoke the demon with a pregnant wedding planner on the line, so I cut back any snappy conversation. Besides, I’d heard arguing with yourself was a sign
of insanity.

“Is that what I am?” it asked with a toothy grin. “Interesting. I wasn’t sure.” Then it raised one hand and pointed a finger at me. “Goodbye, wizard.”

“Harry?” John was kneeling before me, mopping up some of the blood from the gash in my head with a moist paper towel.

“How’d you get back here?” I asked. I was in the hospital’s emergency room, and while it wasn’t the first time he’d found me in a hospital it certainly wasn’t our living room.

Marcone smiled. “A few well-placed words,” he answered. “Is this blood yours?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see a wound.”

“Did you miss the huge cut the rock made in my face?”

“Apparently.”

Instinctively, I raised a hand up and brushed it across smooth skin. “Impossible.”

“You have a faint mark. I don’t remember seeing it before, but it certainly isn’t deep enough to bleed.”

This was a step beyond merely blocking the pain. This was healing – intense healing.

“Harry-“

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I need to find Michael.”

John scowled. “You need to see a doctor. If this blood is yours, it came from somewhere.”

“It’s been taken care of,” I said. I looked at the bloody towels he held and frowned. “Charity went into labor. I need to know she’s okay.”

Marcone put all the bloodied towels in a plastic bag and then inside a briefcase. “I’ll dispose of this. Go up one floor and down the hall. You should pass Stallings on your way. Mr. Carpenter shouldn’t be far beyond him. Mrs. Carpenter is still recovering.”

I didn’t have the energy to argue about the blood. I didn’t trust John with my blood normally, but it would lose its connection with me as it dried and he wouldn’t dare risk me with other dangers around.

And just maybe he would find someone to track me with it if things went sour. As they inevitably would.

But don’t tell him about that.

Cujo set dinner down on my lab table and calmly checked my pulse as if he found me lying on the floor in a sprawled heap every other day of the week. “They haven’t killed me yet,” I grinned at him.

“No, but it looks like they made a good effort,” he growled. Or at least that’s how I interpreted the
rumble coming out of his chest. The words were a bit fuzzy until he got to: “What happened?”

I shrugged and let him help me to a sitting position. “I called it up. The Nightmare. It’s gone now, though – can I have that sandwich?” I was suddenly starving. John was in the doorway when I finished gulping down the last swallow of a Coke, the smug bastard. I need to find out how he did that.


I shook my head. “It had help. Someone helped it away. I put a binding on it first, so it shouldn’t be as dangerous.”

John’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of binding?”

“The kind which means it can’t go after Charity. Or Michael. Or Murphy.” Or the baby. The newborn baby. The one that might not live. Because of me. “I limited its targets.”

“Limited the targets – to yourself, I presume?” John asked.

I nodded.

“So it will come after you exclusively now?”

“Yeah,” I said, grinning widely. “I had to do it last minute so I couldn’t put too much thought into the specifics, but so long as I’m alive it can’t go after anyone else.”

“So long as you’re alive?” Cujo asked, his fingers twitching. John already had his hands in fists by his side.


Marcone’s fist flew and made an impact – and a hole – in the wall.

“You know I think that’s the first time I’ve seen you lose your calm, cool, godfather-face,” I said as I watched John’s forehead crease in an angry frown, his eyes blazing. “Glad I wasn’t the wall.”

“You know, I didn’t exactly plan on dying.”

John turned to face me, his face stuck in a perpetual frown. “Then what is the plan? You have another trick up your sleeve, perhaps? Because I’m not leaving you alone to summon more demons in our house.”

“Nope – you’re leaving me alone so I can go to a party.”

Of course John Marcone wouldn’t accept my idea as it was. Of course I wasn’t alone when I walked into Bianca’s. And of course we had to run into, of all beings, my godmother.

"Mr. Marcone," my godmother greeted. "I must say it is a pleasure to finally meet the man who is stealing my godson's loyalty from me."

"Stealing?" John asked, sounding surprised. "My lady, I don't even know your name. I can assure you I have never intentionally taken anything of yours. If your godson's loyalty has wandered
perhaps you should look to the cause and not for the person he has adhered to in your absence.”

My godmother smiled. “It is only a brief indulgence. His dalliance with you is nothing but a passing
fancy, or maybe a simple obligation. Fleeting, and surely entertaining, but nothing more. Though he
does have good taste. You are, as the mortals would say, somewhat handsome,” she reached out to
ciaress his face and my hand snapped out to grab her wrist before her skin met his.

It was like a jolt to the gut. I almost laid down right then and there to undress her and worship her the
way she ought to be worshipped. Who cared if Bianca and the others saw? It was where I belonged.

I saw myself looking up at her as I lay at her feet, her hand in my hair rubbing soothing circles as one
would a pet they were fond of. I felt myself filled with relief, with peace, with absolute clarity
because I knew I belonged at her heels. It was the complete absence of pain and worry. My body
trembled from pure joy at the absolute lack of hurt.

I had never realized how much pain I carried constantly. How heavy the burden of morality was.

“It will always be as such with me, my poor little one,” Lea said sweetly, her voice almost another
drug.

I wrenched myself away at the utter lie and stood panting against John, my nose buried in his neck.
His arms wrapped around me, a barrier against my godmother. I couldn’t completely tear my gaze
away from her, and it wasn’t just because I was afraid of her.

It would be so easy to give in. So simple to just lay at her feet and give her what she wanted. She
would comfort me and care for me.

But it would be a lie. Marcone cared for me more than Lea ever could. She wasn’t capable of caring.
I could be her good little dog without worry and carry out unspeakable atrocities, or I could make the
hard choice. The right choice.

I could make my own decisions, live with the consequences, and know that at least I wasn’t living a
lie. Peace had its own prices, and I wasn’t her puppet.

“No, Lea,” I finally managed to grit out.

“You already made the bargain. You need not continue to suffer.”

“I have a job to do.”

“You only hurt yourself,” Lea said. For once she sounded concerned. “Why suffer when I can ease
the pain? Do not continue to hurt yourself.”

“Because there will be less for you to take if I continue, right?” I snorted. “Someone already beat you
to that.”

“You will heal. Under my protection, you will nicely.”

“Bullshit. I’ll be lucky to heal at all with the crap you’re putting me through right now.”

Her laugh was like bells, soft and merry. “I’ve worked no magic on you this night, godson. Though
I’m tempted to spank you for your language, the only magic affecting you tonight is your own.”

“Harry,” John said. He kept his voice low. His arms tightened for a moment around my waist. “What
does she mean?”
“Nothing,” I said quickly. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“You think so little of our bargain, godson?” Lea demanded in an almost growling tone. “To be one of my HellHounds is to hold a place of honor in the courts. You made the bargain, dear boy, and got more than you deserved. In time, you will comply or your own magic will destroy you.” Suddenly, her voice softened. “Don’t waste yourself, godson. Come to me. Leave the mortal behind.”

I wavered, unsteady on my feet, as something in me said: ‘Yes, go to her. Worship her.’

I tried to speak and felt my tongue trip over itself, conflicting words trying to force themselves out at the same time.

“You can end his suffering?” Marcone said, looking at Lea. “This is your doing?”

“He causes his own suffering,” Lea answered. I hoped Marcone wasn’t trying to look her in the eye; he was smarter than that. Then I wondered why I was concerned. “But yes, if he comes to me and fulfills his end of the bargain, his pain will end.”

“So you are to blame for his current state,” John said bluntly. “You demand he fulfill his end of the bargain now, and by doing so cause him pain. I fail to see your point, Lady. You have no need for him to serve you now. We are at a party under truce; you are not under direct threat, and Harry certainly is no threat to you. Perhaps I misheard when Harry told me the Sidhe were patient.”

It was only slightly, but the urge to crawl into her lap eased.

“You would make a deal, mortal?” Lea asked.

“We are at a party, Lady. It’s hardly the place to negotiate a deal. Hardly the appropriate place to demand favors be repaid, either. Our host may be insulted if we ignore her to such an extent,” John pointed out. “Already you’ve made a few of the other guests restless.”

I wasn’t certain who he was referring to, but the desire to submit – just be a good boy and submit – faded a little more.

“Another time, mortal?”

John raised an eyebrow. “Lift your demands from Harry for this night and we can discuss the situation at another time and place.”

She smiled. “I suppose one more mortal night of running won’t lessen him too much,” she said. Her gaze switched to me, and she let out a mocking laugh at where I was almost on my knees and clutching at John just to stay upright. “Fare thee well, godson,” she told me with voice filled with delight. “Enjoy your lover while he lasts.”

John kept his eyes on her until Lea had disappeared completely into the crowd. “Harry?” he asked.

“Now you know why an oath made three times is as good as fact,” I blurted, my mouth spilling the information without official permission. “Stars, if that’s self-inflicted, I hate to see what happens when she really puts the pressure on.”

“Is it self-induced?” John asked carefully.

“I’ll need to research more. I’ve delayed promises before and not had any urges like that.”

“Like what?”
“Like wanting to lay down and let her have her way with me – the same way you want to have your way with me.” I frowned. “Or similar, at least.”

“Perhaps it has already moved beyond the normal stages,” John remarked, “or is she not the one who nearly froze your arm off?”

“That was a warning,” I told him bluntly. “To her, it was like a light slap on the cheek.”

“For the wandering loyalty, I presume?”

I shrugged. “She prefers it when I owe her. Keeps our relationship balanced in her favor.”

“So I see. You seem to have asked quite a few favors of her, to owe her so much.”

“Not really,” I muttered. “Just one rather large one.”

“Should I be worried of others demanding favors be repaid?”

“Lea is the only one here I owe anything to - aside from you - and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Then we should leave,” John decided. “Before she changes her mind about being repaid.”

“That’s what I said before we got here,” I muttered.

Of course, it wasn’t exactly that simple. I still had work to do.

——

“Harry,” John whispered. “What’s going on?”

I clenched my teeth and scanned the crowd. They all knew what was coming and were waiting in silent anticipation. Most were barely watching the stage; all eyes inevitably found their way towards me. Didn’t I feel lucky? “Guess my tombstone was right,” I muttered. I didn’t know what was going on, but I could guess the basic plan: put the wizard between the proverbial rock and the hard place and watch him squirm.

“What?”

Bianca was smiling at me, but I was more interested in what she had with her. “That sword is one of three swords of the cross. Supposedly made with one of the three nails from Christ’s cross. And yes, I mean ‘Christ’ as in ‘Christian Son of God’. If you believe that sort of thing. Point is, she’s going to use it against an innocent and basically destroy it.”

“It’s just a sword.”

“Yeah, maybe. Doesn’t matter, I can’t just let some innocent bystander die because I couldn’t be half-assed to make a stand. Stars, John, I’m not heartless.”

Attendants were bringing out a cloth-covered bundle and set it on the floor before jerking off the cloth. I jerked back in response, startled. It was Lydia. They’d trimmed her hair into an elegant cut fit for a sacrifice and cleaned her up a bit. She wore a halter-top and shorts of black Lycra which made her seem less of an innocent lamb and more of a sensual morsel.

She was beautiful until you looked closer at her face.

Her eyes were glazed in a drug-induced haze and she hung limply between the two attendants like a sad doll, her lips drooping slightly.
“Lydia,” I told Marcone - just in case he missed the memo.

Bianca was laughing, joking with Marva, but I was focused on the crowd - vampires dropping their wine glasses and sliding out of their jackets to bare their fangs at me in a slow smile which was not yet a threat.

“Dresden,” Thomas murmured, moving closer as he pushed Justine behind him. “Don’t be stupid. It’s only one life and a sword.”

“It’s a life under my protection and a sword stolen from my friend - a sword which cannot be remade.”

“Trust, Harry,” John said quietly. Then his voice was loud and clear and addressing the worst person he could: Bianca. “I can only assume, Miss St. Claire, that you have a death wish.”

The vampires recoiled almost as one, confusion spreading across the room. He’d succeeded in getting their attention at least, for all the good it did him.

“Excuse me?” Bianca hissed, face twisted in fury.

“That girl you have just had your men bring out to kill as a demonstration of your new shiny toy - you are well aware she is under my fiancé’s protection. Even if you removed the bracelet she wore, he has made it more than clear to your herald and to others. You were also warned that if she were to come to harm we would seek retaliation from the beings who caused her hurt. Yet you very blatantly just showed the entire room you have the girl in your care. She has been drugged to the point where she cannot voice her status and her protection has been removed. And while she is in your care in this vulnerable state, you are about to allow another to take her life. I ask again: do you have a death wish?”

“I am not the one to kill the girl,” Bianca snarled. “Nor am I the one who took her.”

“No, that was your herald,” I said, causing a few whispers and raised eyebrows. Apparently Bianca wasn’t keeping all of her people in the loop, and we were stirring up some trouble. Not nearly enough were doubtful enough to back off, and I don’t think any of them would object to snacking on a wizard and his intended.

What was John doing? He couldn’t talk his way out of this.

“You may not have taken her personally, but you commanded she be brought out. Those are your people holding her. And that is your gift about to draw her blood. It seems very clear you are challenging us, but I can’t figure out why. It must be you have a wish to die - why else would you strike the ones to whom you owe a great debt?”

“What debt, mortal?” Bianca hissed, still standing tall and looking as cool and sexy as any made-for-TV vampire.

John smiled slowly. “Wasn’t my fiancé the one who found and killed the wizard who murdered Jennifer Stanton? She was one of your girls, someone under your protection. At great risk to himself, and even after you had the gall to accuse him of committing the murder - quite an insult, if you ask me - he pursued and killed the wizard who had done you harm.”

A few more were looking uncertain, one or two backing off into the shadows, but not nearly enough. They’d been promised a fight and they were going to get one, no matter how fancy John tried to twist his words.
Marva, ignoring the bulk of the proceedings, drew the holy sword and arranged Lydia with the back of her throat bare for the cut.

I drew the sword from my cane.

The vampires rushed in.

I’m a bit fuzzy on the details of what happened after the fire. John claims I actually died for a few moments.

I didn’t feel dead. Everything hurt.

But he looked scared. Not a good look for a mafia man.

There were only a few minor burns for the paramedics to deal with, and John had disappeared somewhere. Red, after a time, took me back to the house.

The scumbag hadn’t told me he’d managed to get Lydia out. He hadn’t told me she was resting in a guestroom with Michael watching over her.

The bastard.

Then it turned out Lydia wasn’t really herself.

I hadn’t heard when John had returned, too busy with Nightmare Possessed Lydia, Battle Style. I certainly hadn’t known he’d brought a guest.

“Hello Godson,” Lea greeted. She was seated primly in our living room lazy-boy chair with her hands folded in her lap. A husky sat at her feet like a statue, hardly even moving to breathe. “Have you come to join in our negotiations?”

Negotiations? For what? And why was she inside the house? “You are not welcome here,” I told her plainly.

“How rude,” she huffed. “I was brought here to barter a trade, and I am not welcome?”

“Other venues were offered,” John interrupted. “And it was stressed we would prefer such talks occur in a place of business, as is proper. It was only at your insistence that we met here. It was made very clear to you before you arrived that you would not be welcomed or invited. You are here on sufferance only, Lady.”

That, at least, was a relief. If John had invited her in we both would have been in dire trouble.

Lea frowned, her eyes narrowing in a look which was very close to hate. Lea wore hate like a gown, and she wore it well. “You suffer me? It is I who suffer the pitiful manipulations you attempt. It is I who suffer your continued attempts to take my godson from me-”

“IT is you who try and barter services never owed to you,” I cut in. It might make her angry, but at least she would be angry at me and not at John. “I know what you try to imply I promised to give you, but I agreed only to be a hound at your side – nothing more.”

John glanced at me sharply, a wicked grin across his face. “Yes, darling, we both know you are a stickler for details. Fortunately for you, it is only those details left to agree upon. The Lady has agreed to conduct the trade; we are now haggling over price and conditions.”
“What trade?” I think the floor moved a bit under me. I know my stomach fell somewhere unpleasant. There was never a good trade made with the sidhe – especially not one of Winter.

“I shall be her hound in your place,” John said calmly.

“No.”

“The deal has already begun.”

“I won’t let you.”

“You don’t have a choice in the matter,” Lea said sweetly, smiling. “Unless you wish to make a better offer. In which case, I will still accept your loyalty and your service until your dying days, starting now.”

“I-"

“-will not accept such a trade,” John finished for me. “It seems I have a need to discuss matters with my partner. We will resume negotiations when you have had time to consider my offer, Lady, and until such time as we have come to an agreement, please remember your promise not to interfere with Harry’s upcoming bonding ritual.”

Lea’s hands were clenched tight, the knuckles of her fingers turning an even paler white than usual. “Your terms are unreasonable.”

“And yours are equally unacceptable. Now please leave our home.”

There was a layer of frost on the carpet when she left, probably the most she could manage without her full strength. John’s threshold wasn’t the strongest, but it was growing. I’d also added my own shields to the mix some time ago, and I had continued to build on those shields so we weren’t completely unprotected.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I hissed when we were alone. “You’re trying to barter with Lea? Are you suicidal or just stupid?”

“I could ask you the same,” John said, leaning back in his seat and looking years older suddenly. “I must say, it took me a while to put all the pieces together.”

“What pieces?”

He sighed and stood up. “I need a drink. I think Nathan put some whiskey in here somewhere.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“I’m deciding how to answer,” he countered as he poured himself a generous tumbler full. “Thirsty?”

“No.” There was still so much to do, and he wanted to drink?

“Hmmm,” John answered, sipping on the drink and closing his eyes.

“What is going on with you and Lea?” I demanded.

“You mentioned a faery godmother more than once, and you had also let slip she had a very warped sense of protection,” John said. “The second was not long after a ‘misunderstanding’ with a Winter Fae. It was not hard to find out the Winter faeries were talking about our upcoming wedding. It was difficult to wheedle out of them the reason why it mattered. Even after discovering your godmother
was the Lady, it wasn’t exactly crystal clear. Not until I discovered you had made a promise to her and our wedding interfered with her plans.”

“It was my problem to deal with.”

“Until she decides to kill you?”

I winced. I couldn’t say I hadn’t considered the possibility, but death by my godmother’s hand was a fate worse than all of Dante’s nine levels of Hell – and that was before she finally killed you. “Lea likely wouldn’t go that far considering I’m her godson,” I said. “She has responsibilities, and I’m valuable to her.” Until I got married and my bond to her was weakened, possibly even broken. Then I would be a betrayer and she would come seeking the worst kind of vengeance she could imagine. And faeries have very big imaginations.

If I was lucky, I would die in my sleep when she froze my heart. It wouldn’t hurt much, I don’t think. I was hoping she’d make it peaceful, since I was her godson.

“She may not kill you directly,” Marcone agreed. “The fae are tricky beings, I’ll grant you that much. She would hurt you though, and I don’t want that to happen. You don’t deserve to be hurt.”

“And what do you think she’s going to do to you?” I asked, almost yelling. “She’s not going to settle for you laying at her feet all day like some pampered lap dog! Even if she can’t coerce you into doing her will – and that’s a strong if! – she will make you watch things that go on in Winter. Things to make you sick and make you want to rip her apart, and you won’t be able to do a damn thing to stop it because you are bound to be her hound! She will change you. The NeverNever isn’t like Chicago.”

John didn’t say anything, just watched me and sipped on the whiskey.

“Stars, are you even listening to me?” I demanded. “If she doesn’t kill me, she’ll kill you. And if she doesn’t kill you, she’ll rip apart your soul. She’s hurt children!”

“I know,” John said calmly, still watching me with a look on his face I couldn’t decipher. Somewhere between pity and pain and sadness, I think. “I know because she hurt you.”

“That’s-“

“My problem now,” John said, once again finishing my sentence with words I would not have chosen. “That’s the beauty of being a couple, Harry. Sharing burdens.”

“And if it’s a burden we shouldn’t share?” I asked. “You’re a mortal, John. Vanilla mortal. Outside the marked paths, the NeverNever twists in ways even wizards don’t understand. You could serve Lea a year and come back with only an hour past. Or you could serve her only a day and find a hundred years had gone by for the rest of us.”

“Nathan has instructions that I am to be declared dead and everything is to be left to you if I do not return in a year,” John said. “Everything, including this house, will be yours. My men will continue to protect you of course, and they have been informed not to expect you to take my place if I am ever absent. You are not a part of such dealings and I do not want you to be. What happened with Rex was a mistake.”

“You’ve just got everything wrapped up with a neat little bow, don’t you?” I asked.

“Not exactly as planned, but within acceptable parameters, yes.”
I snorted. Inelegant, but effective. “Maybe you should consider this in your ‘parameters’, then,” I told him. “If you serve Lea and somehow manage to come back alive, my deal with you is off.” I looked up and caught his eyes, holding the money-green gaze without backing down.

“If you make a deal with Lea, I won’t marry you.”

I wanted to punch him in the face, but that wouldn’t have helped matters at all. So I left.

I still had a girl to save.

Chapter End Notes

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I don’t like hospitals. To be fair, I don’t think they like me either. Because I’m a wizard I sometimes let my magic try to stop all the annoying noises without really thinking about the fact that it’s medical equipment trying to monitor someone’s condition. As I slowly drifted awake and heard the constant beep-beep-beep of the heart monitor I just wanted it to shut up. It’s difficult to concentrate will and focus through a haze of drugs, but the annoyance made it easier. The monitor was, after all, the only thing I could really hear.

Of course, the failure of the machine brought doctors and nurses rushing to see me. I hadn’t really thought that far ahead when I sent a little spark of magic at the noisemaker.

I must admit the details of the past few days had become a bit blurry overall, and a bit jumbled. I remember telling John off for bargaining with Lea. Telling him I couldn’t marry him if he was striking deals with my godmother. Rushing out after the Nightmare. A trip through the NeverNever.

Nearly killing myself – that was pretty clear. Bartering with my Godmother over terms. Giving myself the antidote.

Flames and fire and touch. Pain. Not necessarily in that order.

“Harry?”

“I’m not talking to you,” I told John firmly. My voice was thin and my throat raw, but I made my point.

“Smoke inhalation will make breathing – and talking – difficult or a while. Don’t take the tubes from your nose. They help you breathe.”

There were tubes in my nose? I couldn’t feel them, not really. The irritation was behind a fog of what was likely morphine. Or something stronger.

“Can you open your mouth? I have ice chips. They’ll help your throat.”

I opened my mouth to say ‘no’ and he set a chip on my tongue before I could voice the protest. It felt so good, I just let out a sigh and sank deeper into the mattress as it melted away.

“Harry?”

“Tired,” I told him.
“Rest then.”

I didn’t need his permission.

The next time I woke up it was Michael next to me and I wasn’t nearly as fuzzy. They’d either scaled back the drugs or I’d already started metabolizing them faster. “You okay?” I asked, though the words blurred together a bit to sound more like “Yo’kay?”

“I’m not the one on a hospital bed,” Michael said without the slightest bit of sarcasm.

Very carefully enunciating my words, I said: “If it weren’t for the painkillers I could leave.” Maybe. With assistance. There was still something in the background which could be shock. I couldn’t tell if I’d gotten my mojo back but I must have in order to shield myself from – fire, so much heat, pain.

I looked at my wrist, wrapped neatly in bandages. Yeah, probably shock.

“Don’t, Harry,” Michael said. I couldn’t tell if he was telling me off for thinking I could leave or telling me not to dwell on what was likely to be a severely damaged hand. My fingers were even neatly bandaged. Michael rubbed one big hand over the lower half of his face and looked even more stressed than when Charity had given birth.

Which reminded me. “How’s the baby?”

He smiled. A genuine smile. “Healthy. They released Charity earlier, and little Harry.”

“Little Harry?” I asked, feeling a blush creep across my face. “Really?”

Michael nodded. “We agreed. Well, Charity suggested and I couldn’t think of a better name,” he teased.

“I’m surprised she’s even willing to speak my name, much less name a kid after me.”

“You saved her – saved them both,” Michael told me. “It was our honor.”

A man wasn’t supposed to blush, but when Michael says things like that it just happens. Most people say stuff like that because it’s expected and I can just brush it off. Michael, though, he means it.

“Are you okay?” he asked again. “If you need to rest, it’s okay.”

“I’ve been resting more than I really need to,” I mumbled. “Damn meds.”

“You need them, and rest,” he insisted. “What they did to you – it’s just horrible. Knowing you, you wouldn’t have told a soul if the doctor’s hadn’t found out. Perhaps this is why the sword is leaving me,” he continued, his voice softening. “I can’t forgive them for this.”

I frowned, not quite certain what he meant. What had the doctors found? That I had poisoned myself? Michael knew that. He may have even told them what to look for to get the excess out of my system. I had done that to myself, though. “You can’t?” I asked. It was just so – unlike him. Michael could forgive anyone even while he was sticking a holy sword through their gut.

“I don’t believe I am fit to be a Knight anymore, though that is for the Lord to decide. I felt such hate when I heard. I’ve never felt anything with such force. Harry, I’m so sorry I wasn’t with you.” He looked so lost and it felt so very deeply wrong.

“I’m not. I’ll heal. You wouldn’t have been so lucky.”
He didn’t look impressed. “John knows.”

“Knows what?”

“They raped you. Several times.”

I swallowed. Closed my eyes again. It put some of the conversation into perspective. The immediate denial started in my belly and came out sounding like: “How?”

I heard him shifting, uncomfortable. “He had the doctors run tests. Insisted on it quite firmly, actually. He said he had reason to believe they had attempted to drug you previously and that you had come home in pain and desperately lusty, but would not allow yourself to be tested or for charges to be pressed on your behalf.”

I nodded, though I didn’t remember the thought of charges coming up. More like Marcone wanting to send his own enforcement squad. Some of the wires on me tugged as I moved around, trying to get comfortable on the itchy sheet. “Vampire saliva. Everything becomes dreamlike and distant, like sound breaking on sunlight, and all you can think about it how good it feels even when it hurts.”

“Harry-”

“It makes you want sex,” I said. “Makes you willing to do anything for a few soft touches. You don’t really think while you’re on it, you just feel.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I don’t remember much aside from feeling really good for a few brief moments and then shaking in pain and waiting for the next brush of skin against mine.”

“John has agreed to postpone the wedding,” he said.

My breath hitched for a moment at what seemed like a change in topic. It was the tube, I swear. “I’m tired,” I told him.

Michael made a sound of agreement. “I’ll stay until you fall asleep.”

“My wrist is burnt, not my legs,” I snapped at the hovering John trying to help me inside.

He backed away from my elbow, but didn’t stop hovering. It was his own version of mother-hen treatment where he stared at the injured party until they gave in to what he wanted and then he looked smugly superior.

He’d have to bully someone else into using him as a walking stick though, because I was fully capable of handling the stairs by myself. Slowly, but I could still do it.

I made my way to the living room and sat down on the couch. Cujo was probably parking the car and Red had disappeared somewhere. It was just me and John.

“I need to make some things clear,” I said bluntly.

He didn’t answer, but he did sit down on the far end of the couch.

“I have interfered with the bargain between you and my Godmother. It was a last minute opportunity and mostly unplanned, so don’t start complaining.”
“Mostly?” he asked softly.

“I was hoping to avoid her, but had prepared for the possibility that I might. I hadn’t expected to be bargaining over you when I met her, so I couldn’t do much.”

There was a moment where we each waited for the other to speak up and neither did. It dragged on for what seemed an impressive amount of time before John finally said: “I will still take your place.”

Grimly, I nodded. “Considering the circumstances, I couldn’t try to change that. What I gave you is a possible… way out.”

He shifted closer, eyes narrowing. “Explain.”

“Your time with her is limited to one year as the mortal world passes – no more than one year on this plane – unless one of us dies.”

“I will not be your excuse for suicide.”

“I like life a bit too much for that, thanks,” I snapped back. “It was more for you. If she does too much, if you can’t come back as yourself because of what she wants you to do, if she forces you to face the unthinkable – promise me you’ll take the out.”

“Harry-“

“Do it,” I growled. Too many people were using my name too freely, and this was too important for the scumbag to distract me by irritating me until I gave up. “It’s better if you don’t need the out and have it than to need it and not have it. Being a wizard isn’t just about magic. It’s about being prepared for any possibility.”

I waited.

He didn’t answer long enough I thought he wouldn’t. Finally, after what felt like ages, he said: “If there is no other viable alternative, I will do so. I accept your modifications to the original barter. Though I will remind you the details are still not set in stone; I could have worked such limitations into the negotiation.”

“You would have needed to give something else up,” I reminded him, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. “Now you don’t have to.”

“You won’t try this out on your own, will you?” he asked, looking concerned.

I shrugged. “In a few months I can try to get you out in a controlled situation. Only one or the other of us has to die for a few moments. Enough to break the bond. EMT’s could revive me or you, or someone with an antidote to what’s been taken.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I got the idea from you,” I told him honestly. He seemed puzzled, so I elaborated: “You insisted I had died for a few moments when Bianca’s manor burned down. You gave me CPR, remember?”

He nodded.

“If I was dead for a few moments, then I had died – so any bond which ended with my death should have ended there.”

Marcone raised an eyebrow. “And this bargain?”
I shrugged. “I was young and stupid,” I told him instead.

“Won’t something like this simply anger your Godmother?”

“If we’re lucky, yeah, she’ll just be angry.”

“Harry-“

“I need to sleep. I’ll find my own way to the bed.” I stood and left before he could finish protesting.

When John slipped into bed with me that night, I considered getting up and leaving. I had thought about it for hours, all but decided I couldn’t be in the same room with him, yet I didn’t move when I felt the bed dip in his direction nor when I heard him slip his gun under his pillow.

I was shirtless, uncomfortable with my arm bandaged up to my elbow and with - well, with what happened at Bianca’s. While some people might want to hide under the covers, the constriction of clothing and sheets - ridiculously smooth as they were - had made my breath hitch and my joints lock. I was uncomfortably cool shirtless on top of the sheets, but it was better than the feel of fire and... other things.

His hand ghosted across my back, light and careful. If I hadn’t been awake, I wouldn’t have noticed. How many times had he felt my back while I slept unaware?

After a few moments I realized he was tracing the scars still left from Frank. He avoided the fresh wounds which would have been irritated by his touch, or if he didn’t his touch was too light to feel. It would be a few good years before the scars from Frank were noticeably fading despite how well they had healed. I couldn’t help the shudder that ran through me as a finger crossed my spine.

John’s hand withdrew, and I bit my lip to keep in the shuddering breaths. I was awake the rest of the night.

[1]

Marcone kept his bargaining with Lea out of my sight after that. I’m not sure if I should be grateful or angry about it, so I just avoided him. Life as normal, right? Except I hadn’t told him to delay the wedding and I’d kept visiting with Charity for the final preparations and before long I was standing in the yard in a newly tailored tuxedo and trying not to look nervous.

This was it. This was what we had been heading towards ever since the scumbag had pulled me into his car and called me his consort.

I guess I shouldn’t call him scumbag anymore. He was John now.

I felt like I should be shaking, trembling even, but I wasn't. I was calm. My heart was beating about a mile a minute, but somehow my hands were steady and my breathing even. They were waiting for my answer. John. The priest. The crowd. It took me a moment. Not long enough for the crowd to get restless, but a noticeable pause.

I looked him in the eyes. Eyes the color of old dollar bills looked back at me, unafraid to meet my gaze. But he was nervous. His hands were sweating where they held mine and waited for me to say the words.

"I do."
John visibly relaxed, as if some part of him still thought I might say no or run off. I’d made a deal, though, and I would keep it. His hands squeezed mine tightly. As he said his part and slid the ring onto my finger, he smiled wide enough he might have been able to fold sunlight. Wide enough that the vague suspicion in the back of my mind which told me he was marrying me because he wanted me solidified a bit more into conscious thought. Maybe, just maybe, there was truth in that thought.

I hardly paid attention to the rest of the ceremony. It wasn’t until John leaned in to kiss me that I realized it was almost over. When our lips met, it wasn’t perfect or heavenly or any other of those mortal clichés. It finalized the deal. I felt the magic binding me to him. I felt his own magic, the magic that existed inside every living thing, respond and bind to mine. It was equal. We were joined together. Forever.

Hours later I still couldn’t believe we’d done it. Sure, there were still a few hoops to jump through to be official in certain mortal legal terms (and my godmother and her bargain to live with), but the ritual was complete.

I was married. Bonded. Wed.

I finished off another glass of champagne and told myself I wasn’t going to be the nervous bride who hid in the bathroom on her wedding night. And I certainly wasn’t going to puke.

Finding Marcone – John – was easy enough. I found Cujo’s red head sticking out above the crowd and followed his line of sight. If there was one job Cujo took seriously, it was the safety of his boss. I bit my lip as I remembered his boss wasn’t my fiancé anymore. He was my husband.

“Hey there,” I greeted when I found myself at John’s side. “Interesting conversation?”

“Hardly,” he answered, grabbing my hand and pulling me in for a gentle kiss.

He’d been doing that a lot the past few days. The kisses, I mean. He’d done them before, snuck them in when I wasn’t careful to avoid them and him, but lately he’d had more opportunity. My recovering from a badly burned wrist gave him those opportunities, since it made working difficult.

When he let me go, whomever he’d been talking to had left. “I think you insulted them,” I said, licking my lips before I realized what I was doing. It was just because they were dry, and not because I wanted more kisses. He tasted a bit like the chocolate cake we’d served and a bit like strawberries.

“I’m not concerned,” John said with a shrug. “We’ve fulfilled all our social obligations – and then some, I think. Shall we retire back to the house? If we leave quietly, it’ll be hours before someone realizes.”

“Cujo will.”

“Mr. Hendricks will be part of the reason no one else will.”

I bit my lip and felt the sting of a tooth. I knew it would be coming, I always had, but there was a fluttering in my belly that felt a bit like falling and a bit like I really was going to puke.

“If you’re not ready-“

“I’m ready,” I said immediately, blurted out really. And then, as if he needed an excuse: “Just nervous, I guess.”
John smiled, and I’d almost call the expression fond. “Don’t be,” he said.

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered. “You’ve done this before.”

One eyebrow raised over a money-green look of skepticism. “I assure you I’ve never been married before.”

“Not what I meant.”

It took a moment for him to accept the answer he’d known all along. He was going to be my first guy. Okay, yeah, maybe I’d experimented a few times, mostly as a kid, but always alone and it had always felt strange. And I didn’t really know what happened at Bianca’s, but under the vampire saliva anything would have felt good. Aside from my own experiments there were girls, and they were so much better than alone. And then there was Justin, and fire, and hell’s bells, it had just been a really long time since I’d done this with someone else. Alone was awkward and weird. Together?

It could be really good or really bad. And I wasn’t sure which was worse.

John kissed me again, pulling me out of my thoughts, and he was grinning like a cat on the hunt. “Come on then,” he said with a bit of tooth showing in his smile. “Allow me to show you there’s nothing to fear.”

John had his mouth on mine and was unbuttoning my shirt as we entered the bedroom. He kicked the door shut, locked it, then almost stilled with his hands on my waist. “There is a circle on the floor to keep everyone out, correct?”

“Finished laying it this morning,” I said, gulping. It was a strong circle made of a mixture of my diluted blood, salt, rose powder, and a few other items I was forgetting about with John’s hands on my skin. It wouldn’t just keep everyone out; it would keep my magic in. If something happened, the only ones I’d hurt were myself and Marcone. I wouldn’t be burning down the house. “I just need to close it,” I almost whispered, stumbling a bit on the words.

It may have been a long time since I’d had sex, but my body knew what was coming and some part of me was excited. Almost – almost thrilled. The excitement mixed with nerves was making me shake, making me dizzy, making me – I swallowed again – hard.

“Close it, then,” he suggested against my throat.

“We should – uh – undress first,” I said. There was no way my face wasn’t red. I wasn’t exactly laying on my belly and thinking of England, here.

I wanted this.

“Once I close the circle, nothing can leave it,” I said, because I needed the excuse. I didn’t want to want this. I didn’t want to admit it. But I’d have been lying to say I wasn’t craving it. “If we accidently throw a shirt sleeve over the edge, it’ll break.”

He nodded, stepped back to give me some space, and started undoing his own buttons.

I looked away before I got too nervous to work any magic and started getting out of my tux.

A few seconds later – he was fast – I heard him get into bed with a rustling of sheets, and then I hesitated to take off my boxers.
Stars and stones, it shouldn’t be such a big deal! He was going to see me anyways, going to get very intimate with me, and I couldn’t even take off my boxers? Hell’s bells, it’s not like he didn’t have one himself!

With a sudden rush of courage, I stripped completely and knelt to close the circle. I pricked myself with a knife, slipped it under the bed, and used the small bit of blood to activate the magic.

It was a bit of a rush. Closing a circle is something simple, usually, but my magic flowed over me and circled around us in a heady excitement I felt down to my toes. There was no way anything was getting through that circle. I stood and waited for a moment, not quite ready to face him yet. I was eager for something, and there was no hiding that, but it was still John Marcone.

I heard him shift on the sheets, and turned around.

And almost tripped over myself. John was sitting at the edge of the bed, legs spread, and held his hand out to me.

I’d never really looked at him before. Peeked, yes, because he had no problems being around me in naught but his skin, but not looked.

He had scars. Old ones. So old some of them could barely be seen, and not anywhere I’d dared to look before. The inside of a thigh, the edge of a hip. One almost hidden by a line of muscle on his abs. I’d thought he was almost scar-free, because he hid them well.

He wasn’t.

He was also hard.

When I took his hand he led me between his legs and leaned back, pulling me on top of him.

“What-“

“I know you’re scared,” he said, kissing the inside of my wrist.

“Bull-“

“Harry,” he scolded. “Don’t lie.”

“I’m nervous,” I said. “It’s not the same.”

“Very well. You’re nervous. I want to show you there’s nothing to be nervous about.”

I could hardly believe he really meant what I thought he was saying, but his face said he was honest. And I could feel the evidence that said he believed he would enjoy it pressing against my leg. I was touching him, and the universe hadn’t imploded yet.

“I don’t know how,” I admitted. “I’ll hurt you.”

“I’ll tell you what to do.”

“But-“

“Someday we’ll do it the other way around, after you see how great it feels. We’ll try different things in different places and see how good we can make each other feel. But tonight you need this.” He leaned upwards and kissed me again. “We need this.” He nuzzled my throat like he could be happy just touching my skin.
I felt my breath hitch a bit as his hands trailed down my sides. There was a strength in those hands which had been gentled. It wasn’t protective or possessive. It simply was.


I guess he really does.

Chapter End Notes

First posted: 9/29/2013
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When I had imagined getting married, I hadn’t expected most of what had really happened. I hadn’t expected to accept a proposal while bound, weak, and sucking down the tonsils of a criminal scumbag. I hadn’t expected said criminal scumbag to take up all my debts for me. My wedding night - well, I certainly hadn’t expected that.

I hadn’t expected to wake up alone the next morning, either.

I was torn. He had done so much to me and for me I wasn’t sure which way was up, if he was helping me or hindering me, but what really hurt - actually hurt - was that despite any contingency planning he would probably die for me out there. After only one night of marriage he was gone. And he wouldn’t come back. I’d be a widower.

It was almost enough to make a guy cry.

Wallowing in bed wasn’t going to do anything. I got up and took a shower, washing away the physical evidence John and I had bonded. I forced myself to get dressed and walk downstairs. I skipped breakfast and walked outside, squinting against the morning sun. Cujo and Red were waiting for me next to the Caddy.

“What now?” Red asked.

What indeed. John was gone. He might be back, he might not. He’d given up so much for me. Maybe there was a way to do something for him.

First though - first there was something I had to take care of. “Do you have your guns?”

Cujo nodded while Red answered: “Of course.”

“Unless someone has a better idea, then I suggest we go get those bullets blessed before kicking some vampire ass.”

A smile slid across Cujo’s face. “Sounds good, Boss.”

Chapter End Notes

First posted: 9/29/2013

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