

The Company of Four

Elizabeth Bear

Many are the days and the nights. Many are the things that must be, that have been, that never should be. Much is the time that passes. Much is the time that remains. Few are the memories which are more than a handful of dust, to be let run through the fingers. Such are the dangers: "Am I not powerful? Am I not fair? Do you not love me, Niamh, Daman, Daithi?" Such are the words, of a black spell cast.

This is the Company of Four, as they ride through the shadows between *here* and *there*. This is the Company of Four, and the barred light moves across them as they ride beneath the branches of strange trees.

Here is a dark-magicker, mage of little power, or, perhaps, who is denied his power. Here is a jester decked in bells and black and silver motley, a jester sad as snow. Here is a bard with a curse hung on his shoulders like the mantle of his trade. And here is the fourth...

What Faerie touches cannot be trusted, and yet. And yet, the very air about the tall, fey man whispers "believe me." There is a look of honor in his carriage and on his curl-crowned brow, and below that beautiful brow gleam eyes as blue as shadowed snow. His charger and his mail are as white as any good king's, and the sword at his knee is straight and swift. He is as fair as his companions are dark.

The magicker is slight and sleek as the rapier he bears, and his supple grace reveals a cool, feline charm. His dark hair is simply parted, and falls to his collar, as straight and smooth as a young boy's. With the bard, he shares a fierce love, a brotherhood that might only be ended by steel through both hearts - steel like the steel in his ten bright rings.

That bard's heart beats in a chest massive as a bull's, and his face is lined by weather where the magicker's is strangely smooth. He is almost silent, usually somber, except for when he weaves his tales out of music and firelight and wine. His matted hair is a dark cloak on his shoulders, his full beard hides the lips that rarely smile.

The jester -- she is different. There is something inhuman in her night-colored skin and her star-tinted eyes. Her costume is quartered silver and black, and on the seams of the silver side bright bells are hung, thousands and thousands of infinitesimal, sweetly chiming spheres. They are woven on chains into the moon river of her braid, and each one sings a different note.

She rides close to the magicker and the bard, as if drawn to their bond even as she is not quite included in it. She loves them well, in her secret way, and they know and return this, but she is cautious. Friendship can snap like ice, just as you trust it with your weight.

The jester and the magicker tease and fence with words, and she juggles her steel and copper balls and rings in fanciful bridges and arches. The bard watches, and sometimes a faint smile might curve his moustache, and sometimes he slides a word or a phrase into the dialogue as tight as a carpenter planking

a ship. He is humming softly to himself the while, and the music is sad and deep. The white lord rides ahead and slightly to the side, and seems lost in his own thoughts, his own travel.

The magicker pays little attention to the reins, rather playing with his rings. They are of faceted steel, and there is one on every finger, and each thumb as well. They are lovely things, each one different and cunning and graceful. They have left on his skin, beneath, a rash of long wear like the scar of an ancient blister or burn.

The jester catches her balls and rings and slips them into a pouch that hangs from her saddle. She lifts up her reins, which she had hung about the neck of her grey mare, in her black left glove, and she urges her mount up beside the lord. "Where are we bound now, Master?" she asks him, and he is jerked up from the depths of his thoughts like a startled fish upon a hook.

"To the castle of Fearghall," he replies. He glances over at her, and there is a questioning expression on his face. She hears his voice over the pleasing jangle of her bells. "Lately of Niamh."

But though he watches her eyes closely, he sees no recognition of the name. His gaze is disconcerting, however, and her mare shies a pace away from the pale stallion before the jester can bring her under control. Her eyes, guileless, return to his. "You say that name as if I should know it, Master." She glances down at the path below her horse's feet, then up again, perhaps more bold than wise. "Yet I do not."

"I have heard nothing of this king, Fearghall," the bard interjects, his thoughtful baritone puzzled. "Is he a new King?"

The lord smiles, and white teeth flash between rose-petal lips. For a second, the sun tangles her fingers in his golden hair, like a lover, and he is crowned in light. "A new King." His eyes crinkle in amusement. "Aye." And he turns away, and lifts up the reins of his milk-white steed, and breaks into a canter and away, ahead of the rest. The bard blinks slowly after him, but says no more.

And so they ride, until their eyes strain against the edges of the strangling dusk. And then the four dismount, and the magicker sees to the horses, and the jester builds the fire. The white lord watches, until they bring him his dinner, and the bard paces and grumbles and refuses to eat. It is the night of the full moon, and food, for him, has no savor.

As the white lord rolls himself in his blankets on the other side of the fire, the magicker and the jester build it higher. The bard continues his pacing, restless, irritation and rage in every line of his body, every movement of his flesh. When he tugs ineffectually at his clothing, the magicker stops him, and begins to unfasten his laces, undressing him as one might a child. As he removes each item of clothing, he gives it to the jester, who folds it piece by piece as it is handed her. When the bard at last stands naked except for the impressive pelt that nature gave him, the jester turns away, and places his clothing in his pack, and his boots beside his saddle.

The bard sits down on the ground, and, lost under some tremendous pressure, buries his face in his hands. The magicker pats his shoulders ineffectually. Full night has fallen. The moon parts the branches of the trees with long fingers and smiles down at them, beside their pathetic campfire. It is a cruel and a terrible smile.

The bard begins to scream.

He rises to his feet, his neck corded in agony, his chest seeming to swell with the power of each indrawn breath. The magicker croons affectionate nonsense, but he does not touch the bard. The scream continues forever and then longer, wailing out into the pitiless night as the bard jerks convulsively, his body wracked by brutal seizures. His flesh melts -- he expands -- he wrenches apart and seamlessly

knits together as bones crack and muscles twist and the bottomless scream deepens and deepens into a final, shattering roar, and in his place there stands a giant bear, a bear so black that only its eyes and teeth and its red, red maw are visible in the firelight.

The bear snarls, and soft, heavy paws begin to pad toward the blanket-wrapped figure beyond the fire. The magicker runs to meet him, steps into his path, spreads his beringed fingers on hands held wide. "No," he says, softly, his own eyes finding the small, piggy eyes of the bear.

The bear rears up, menacing, showing fangs and claws that could destroy him with one casual blow. The magicker holds his ground. "No," he whispers again, his voice calm and serene. He is trusting of the bard's love. The jester, standing behind him, hearing the tinkle of her bells, is less so. The jester does not believe in love.

In the bear's dim mind lives hatred, lives passionate fury and rage. It wants to rend the soft pale thing wrapped in the blankets. It wants to smash it to earth until there is nothing left. But the ones who guard it -- they are to be protected. They are adored.

It is too much for such simple understanding. It tries to shoulder them aside, and they will not move, and it will not push hard enough to risk harming them. The bear presses its broad chest against the magicker, and the jester, with her heart between her teeth, runs up and throws her arms about its hairy neck. She clings to it like a burr, lost in the dark fur, hearing the low rumble of its growl over the frantic clamor of her bells. She does not know why it needs to destroy their guardian, but she knows it must be stopped, even should it cost her life.

With a final snarl, the bear tears free of the encircling arms, and shuffles into the night. Magicker and jester sit side by side by the fire, awaiting its return.

The bear pads into the camp before sunrise, and lays its heavy head down on its paws, and when he raises his head he is a naked man once more. "If I had known, if I had known, Tam Lin," the bard murmurs, and then the magicker brings him a steaming cup and the sun glances around the corner to be sure that it's safe to come out and the night, at last, is done.

Midday brings them to a castle under a hill with thorn trees growing at the crown, where they are made welcome and given to eat, and to bathe. It is the seventh anniversary of Fearghall's ascension to the throne, and nothing will do but for there to be a masque. And at that masque will mage and bard and jester all perform.

The jester lingers in a curtained doorway, gazing into the mirrored hall, and she listens to the strains that the bard pulls forth from his harp strung with golden wire. She watches him upon the stage, and thinks, *That is not his harp*, and does not know why, because it is the harp that he has strummed by the fire, every night when he is not a bear. He has no other. She watches the bright skirts of the ladies and the gay coats of the lords, and does not venture forth into the hall. There is an ache across the bridge of her nose, like unshed tears, and she feels, all at once, both forlorn and at home.

"Finnegan," says the King, as his and the white lord's footsteps carry them past the curtained doorway, "Hiding them in this way is clever enough by half. But are you quite sure that it was safe to bring them back here, on this night of all nights?"

"It is seven years since the spell was cast, Fearghall," the white lord replies. "Tonight is the night that is must be renewed, and this is the place where the spell may be cast." He sighs.

The King, tall and fair and golden and costumed as the rising sun, tugs at the lobe of one pointed ear, raises a pointed eyebrow. "Would that we could simply slay them."

But the white lord's answer is lost to the jester's ears as they sweep by, and are gone into the crowd. The implications of the speech, however, are not.

Under a spell, she thinks. We are under a spell. The bard's curse -- is that my Master's doing? She leans back against the arch of the door, feels the cold roughness of the stone snag at her motley, and listens to the rustle of her bells, in time with the rhythm of her heart. If only I could think, she muses, mind already drifting onto something else. Just for a moment, clearly think...

The hand at her elbow all but startles her into a scream. She jumps and stiffens, and her bells clash, and whatever erring thought she chased is gone. She whirls, and the magicker stands behind her. In his hand that does not rest on her sleeve is a cage of doves, with which he will later conjure. "Jester," he says, softly, insistently, raising his hand to her cheek. "Jester. This is important."

"Mage?"

He turns away, sets his doves down by the wall, where they coo and rustle within their cage. He straightens again, and takes her by the shoulders. Behind her, in the mirrored hall, she can hear the patter of dancing feet, the strains of the harp, the bard's sweet baritone voice raised in song. *Iron's hard, and gold is cold. Steel is bright, and silver bold. Emeralds for a lady, and diamonds for a queen, and jeweled masks for thy features, never to be seen...*

"What is your name?"

It is all drowned out in the chiming of the bells. "I..." Her expression shifts to shock and terror. "I do not know. I do not..." She stands, braced as though expecting a blow, and looks up at him with her wild eyes wide in her child's soft face. "I must have a *name*!"

But the bard's song is ending, and the magicker is picking up his doves. It is his turn to perform.

Still he pauses, one hand on the curtain, drawn back to permit him to pass, and he turns back to the jester, who stands, still stunned. The light glitters in the facets of the steel rings on that hand. "Yes," he says, and his voice is level and conversational, as if enquiring after the butter. "I suppose we all must, after all." And then he walks into the mirrored ballroom, and the curtains fall shut behind him, and the jester is alone.

The masque would persist till sunrise, as is the nature of such revels, but the King retires when the clock strikes three, and the white lord some few moments before him. The jester and the magicker have already made their way up the servant's stair to their own small room, and there, warmed by a brazier, they wait for the bard. The jester sits perfectly, awesomely still, willing her breath to stop, willing her heart to beat more softly. At last, at last, there is silence: her bells swing, perhaps, but they do not jangle or rustle or tinkle. She sits with her head cocked slightly, as if listening for something. Earlier, she had told the magicker what she had overheard.

And then the chamber door opens, and the bard comes in, and sets his cloth-wrapped harp against the wall. The jester turns her head, and a dozen bells chime sweetly. "Jester," the bard says, "Is something wrong?"

She shakes her head to an astounding, silvery dissonance. "For a moment," she says, "Just for a moment, I thought I heard someone calling my name." She sighs, and tugs her braid. "I felt that I knew something that I ought to know. But the feeling has passed, now."

"There is a harp," the bard says, "Hanging in the throne room." He settles back, against the wall. "And a sword hanging beside it, among all the trophies and banners."

The magicker looks up for the first time. "And?"

"And I feel I ought to know them, from somewhere."

The jester starts, eyes wide as if shocked. "What does it look like?"

"Which? The harp or the sword?"

"The harp!"

The bard sighs, takes a piece of bread with cheese from off a tray. "It is red wood, strung with silver wire." He shrugs. "It is silver. I cannot touch it, after all."

She leaps to her feet. "I must see it! I must!"

The bard chews and swallows, but is not slow in getting to his feet. The jester reaches her hand out to the magicker, who declines it and stands on his own, brushing crumbs from his lap as he does. He slides his sword in its scabbard into his belt, and the three exit the door in a single, silent file. The mage watches the back of the jester's head as she follows the bard down the stairs, and something nags at him, stirred by the sight of her braid. Beneath his skin he feels the shift of power, of magic being cast, but dimly, muffled and distant. Better born with no talent at all, he thinks, then with such a small one. Like the minor poet who knows the meanness of his gift, I am doomed to a lifetime of frustration: to be able to comprehend beauty, but not create it. His fingers itch at the thought, feeling swollen and engorged.

The throne room is still torch lit, although there are no revelers here. Strains of music still drift across the courtyard from the great hall, though, and the bard's feet shuffle a bit in an ursine dance as he crosses the hall. "There."

He gestures up at the harp, which is hung just at eye level, just across from the throne. It is a lovely thing, the wood red as holly berries, the wire of true silver. The jester looks at it in delight. "Oh, it is yours, it is yours!" she cries, not knowing how she knows this, knowing it is true.

"How can it be?" the magicker asks. "It is silver..."

The jester shakes her head, and the bells clash, and she looks crestfallen. "I do not know. And I do not know my name."

"You have only to name a thing," says the bard, "To comprehend it."

The magicker smiles. "Of course. That is the nature of..." His voice trails off, and he stares away, as if after his beloved. "...the nature of magic..."

His head snaps around, and he grasps the jester hard by the arm. "Sit there, on the steps of the dais," he commands her. "No, better, on the throne."

She steps back from him, tugging against his grip. "I cannot sit on the throne."

"Do it," he orders, and she follows his pull over to perch, reluctantly, on the edge of the giant chair. The magicker reaches into his pocket, and draws forth a knife, small and sharp. It is the one he shaves with.

Carefully, quickly, he cuts the bells from her costume, and breaks them one by one under his heel. And then, from the same pocket, he brings forth a comb of bright silver, and he touches it to the end of her plait.

She starts up. "Do not!"

He shows her the comb. "I have never seen you with your hair unbound, lady," he tells her. "Humor me."

Trembling, she takes the seat again. Something almost soul-deep in her rebels at the thought. Something deeper, however, welcomes it. "Do," she whispers, and clenches her fingers on the gilded wood.

It is a tedious task, freeing the intricate plaits from the strands of chains and bells. Somehow, they have not matted in, but they are tightly and complexly woven. He is surprised by the color, the texture of the unleashed mass of her hair.

It is like water as it rolls down her shoulders and over her thighs to pool on the floor. It is soft and thick, wavy from being bound, of a thousand shades of grey and white and argent and alabaster. It is a river, a thunderstorm, a sea, running, quick and silver, in rivulets and brooks and breakers over everything.

For the jester, it is as if each chain he slides from her tresses is a chain off her heart and her mind. "I feel," she declares, "As if I am just about to remember something terribly important."

As the magicker slips the last chain out of her mooncolored hair, his rings become caught in the strands. He tugs them loose, but not before the jester catches and holds his hands. "Why do you always wear those?"

He frowns. "I must."

She is insistent. "Why? Who told you?"

He steps back, drops the chain to the floor with a rattle of metal. "I do not know," he confesses. He pulls his hands from hers, leaving the silver comb in her grasp. "Someone."

"Some strange taste of magics on this." It is the bard's voice. He has turned, at last, from the harp on the wall.

"Aye," says the magicker. "A compulsion. But to help or to harm?"

She nods, and bites her lip to taste the blood. "If you do not know, can it be for good? All the more reason, I think, to be rid of them."

He wants to explain that magic does not always work that way, that sometimes the recipient of a spell must know nothing of it for the spell to be truly effective. "There is a great sorcery being wrought within these walls tonight," he offers. The bard looks over at him and nods.

"I feel it, aye."

The magicker looks back at the jester, and silently holds out his hands, fingers spread wide. He looks away. "Take them," he tells her.

One by one, she wrestles them free. They are tight, and have worn grooves in the flesh of his fingers. One by one, she drops them to the cold stone floor.

The magicker feels a sudden easing, as though the rings had bound his chest, and not his fingers. He looks into the jester's eyes, and feels something there, some flicker of recognition. "Name?" she asks him, and he shakes his head.

"You?"

"Not yet," she answers. As one, they look to the bard. "If we were bound..."

The magicker presses his lips together. "He must be too. And the white lord?"

She shakes her head, and no bells ring. "Remember what he said to the king?" She looks down at the backs of her hands, the shine of the silver comb in the right one. "Is there a way to tell what binds him?"

"Not without his name," the magicker answers. The jester casts about the throne room, as if looking for a solution. Then she looks up, startled, into the eyes of the mage. "Daithi," she tells him, and the bard turns suddenly toward her.

"What did you say?"

"Daithi," she says again, this time looking at the bard. "Can't you both hear it? *'Am I not powerful? Am I not fair? Do you not love me, Niamh, Daman, Daithi?'* It's perfectly clear. It's the white lord's voice -- Finnegan's voice..."

The magicker shakes his head slowly. "That's the binding. They are repeating it... you first, lady, that's why you hear it now."

Her head is bowed, suddenly. "Aye. I feel it. The pressure..." But the magicker has turned away, murmuring under his voice, "I am Daman..."

A flush of power colors his skin, and he raises his eyes to those of the bard. "And you are Daithi, and I will know how you are bound..."

Daman the magicker holds out his hands, and lets the power run into them, unfettered by intricate steel. And then he lays those hands upon the brow of the bard Daithi, and then, unhesitating, plunges them into his matted hair. "There!" he cries out, as Daithi winces in sudden pain. "This!" And in his hand is a tuft of hair that is coarser and blacker even than that of the bard, and reeking of sharp animal musk.

"Bear fur?"

"It's all matted in with his own." Daman turns back to Daithi, who glances from one to the other. The jester holds out the silver comb, and Daithi blanches.

"Silver..."

"Will work all the better. Come, bard, sit on the throne and let me comb out your hair."

Daithi crosses the room, sits as the jester sat before him, and looks down at the litter of chains and bells upon the floor.

Daman comes up before him, and holds out both hands. "Hold tight to me," he instructs, and Daithi reaches out with his long musician's fingers and wraps those of his friend within them. He closes his eyes, then, and grits his teeth, and groans between them as the silver comb brushes his hair.

Slowly, meticulously, the jester combs out the mats. Bit by bit, the scatter of hair upon the floor grows into a pile, and then a heap. Daithi bites through his lip and weeps silently as the blood flows into his beard, but he does not cry out and he does not flinch away, and at last, the jester is done.

He looks up at her with new eyes, then, and releases Daman's hand to wipe the blood from off his face. "Your Majesty," he calls her, and kneels at her feet, and she gestures him rise, the bard of her court. And Daman fetches his sword and Daithi's harp from off the wall, and the two brothers, so alike and yet so different, smile at one another and then turn to their queen.

"The spell," she whispers, sagging back against the throne. "Daman, attend me..."

And then guardsmen are running into the torchlit room, and behind them two tall, golden-haired figures in white, and Daithi blows the dust from the Red Harp of Coinleach and strikes, once, hard, the lowest string. There is a trembling, and a shattering, and a note that rolls on and on and on as the drawn swords in the guardsmen's hands shiver into splinters, and the guardsmen themselves raise hands to ears and cry out in pain.

Finnegan pushes them aside, and comes forward, reeking of foul herbs and with his hands spread wide. He takes another step toward Niamh, and Daman's drawn blade gathers the light as it flashes toward him. He dives aside, and then Fearghall has a blade in his hand as well, and the battle is joined.

Niamh levers herself to her feet, her hair falling about her like a rich garment and one hand clenched on each arm of her throne, and raises her burning eyes in a black face to Finnegan's blue ones. "Am I not powerful?" he whispers, as her eyes meet his. "Am I not fair? Do you not love me, Niamh....?" He says her name as a caress, and there is no question in his voice -- only acceptance of allegiance duly offered.

"Aye, you are powerful," she whispers. "And aye, you are fair." Her hand extended, she steps toward him, and smiles a sweet, sad smile. And slaps him once across the cheek, hard enough to leave an ivory handprint that flushes slowly scarlet on the fairness of his skin. He rocks backward, and she strikes him again, and he falls before her fury, to lie amid the broken chains and bells.

He tries to stand, and Daithi is on him, one powerful hand pressing down until he kneels, head bowed, before the fury of the queen. "And I do not love thee, Finnegan Fey, for I know thee, and thy soul is black as thy face is fair. Be silent, or we will have thy tongue cut out, slaver, usurper, sorcerer." There is a clatter across the hall, and Niamh looks up to see that Daman has disarmed Fearghall. Daman gestures Fearghall, as well, to his knees.

Niamh leaves the throne, strides across the room to stand before him. "Who," she asks him, "Fearghall, you fooled us once. Tell us, Fearghall, who are we?"

"You are Niamh," he answers, eyes downcast. There is a bleeding cut across his cheek. It is already healing. "You are Faerie." His tongue seems to choke him. "And they are Daman and Daithi, your mage-champion and your bard."

"And what are we, Fearghall?" She touches his head. "Tell us, and we may be merciful."

"You are the queen of the Seelie Fey," he answers, and she smiles and turns away. "Daman," she says, and her mage looks up from his prisoner's form.

"Majesty?"

"They are immortal. We cannot have them executed, any more than they could us. And I have promised this one, at least, some mercy. What shall we do with them, Daman?"

He appears thoughtful, and Daithi's voice speaks from across the chamber's width. "Majesty?"

"Daithi?"

"I have -- an idea..."

In the court of the Queen of the Seelie Fey, there stands a red rowan and an ash tree. The limbs of the one is hung with chains and bells that tinkle and chime in the wind, except for those that are strangely crushed and broken. The branches of the other are decked with ten steel rings of strange and lovely

design, forced onto the twigs as if onto the fingers of a hand.