

Wax by Elizabeth Bear

* * * *

No one slept well that night.

A little after three A.M., as a cold whispering rain fell over steep-gabled slate, husbands silently pulled wives close in the clammy darkness. Nursemaids rose from narrow beds to check bundled babes; massive-headed mastiffs whined by banked hearthfires as household cats insinuated between dream-running paws; and in their warm, summer-smelling loose boxes, arch-necked carriage horses stamped and rolled white-rimmed eyes, leaning against the barred partitions to press flank to flank. The City of New Amsterdam tossed restlessly.

Detective Crown Investigator Abigail Irene Garrett had no one to turn to for comfort on a dismal night in April. When the chill slipped like an unwelcome guest between sheet and featherbed and her faded blue eyes came open, Garrett's hand crept automatically to the pistol under her pillow. Her half-awakened intellect checked her wards and guards. Intact. Despite the muffled impact of her heart against her ribcage, she was as alone as she should have been.

The pearl grip cool and heavy in her hand, Garrett sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of her black wood bedstead. Her left hand resting on the ornate spiral of a bedpost, she ran through her wards again. At her feet, her ragged patchwork terrier whined into the darkness.

“Hush, Mike. I know.”

Nothing. She slipped her revolver back under the pillow and stood, belting a cream lace negligee over her nightgown. Her wand—ebony capped in silver, as long as the span from elbow to fingertip—lay on the nightstand, and this she lifted and touched to the wick of a gnarled beeswax stump. The candle sparked into light and Garrett drew a long, tight breath, trying to ease the clenching in her belly. Thirty years in the service of the Crown, and she had never felt such apprehension.

Setting her wand aside, she crossed rug-scattered tile to the credenza, where she poured herself whisky without water and sipped it slowly. Mike scampered close at her heels. She opened the casement one-handed, rainbeaded glass icy on her fingertips, and leaned out into a gaslamp-jeweled night. Falling water trickled down her neck, washed her face like tears. The woeful exhalation of a late-arriving steamship, packet boat from England or places more distant, hung on the night. The black stone windowledge gouged a cold furrow across her belly. Mike shoved dustmop paws against the wall, too small to reach the windowledge. She reached down and ruffled his ears.

When the first inch of liquor warmed the chill from her shoulders, Abigail

Irene Garrett straightened from the window, unwound white fingers from her tumbler, and began to dress.

* * * *

“Grisly,” Garrett commented—an uncharacteristic sentiment.

And an understatement. The rain had slowed to a mist, but the flagstoned walk lay puddled under her feet. Her eyes narrowed as she gathered the navy-blue skirts of her walking dress in her hands. She lifted them clear of the bloodstained stoop of a wide-fronted three-story brownstone as she minced up the steps. Stringy, clotted runnels dripped down them like paint.

She glanced at uniformed representatives of the Colonial Police and two of the Duke’s city Guard, looking apprehensive and outnumbered. “Who can tell me what happened here?”

A patrolman stepped forward, avoiding the DCI’s gaze—and avoided following the direction of it when she turned her back on him, bending toward the body crumpled against the scored wooden door. She couldn’t keep her boots out of the clotted blood, but uniformed officers had already walked through it. *And a detective or two who should have known better, I warrant*, she thought. *Well, we’re not all cut out to be sorcerers.*

She glanced over her shoulder, pinning the hapless patrolman on a needle-pointed gaze, wondering which of her notorieties occupied his attention. *Perhaps it’s just the scent of blood paling his face.* “Well?” *Perhaps.*

“DCI, I was first on the scene.”

“And?” Garrett drew herself upright, ash-laced blonde hair falling in a wing across her forehead. Don’t smile at him, Abby Irene, or you’ll never get another word of sense out of him, and he might very well piss himself. And you know Division would have something to say about that—disgrace to the uniform and so on. The thought quivered her lips. She fought the smile to a standstill and converted it into an expectant frown.

“He was dead when I arrived, DCI. I heard the screaming...”

“I see.” She let him see her lean forward to note the number on his shield. “Did you identify the bystanders? At what time?”

He took a half-step back. “Sunrise, ma’am. Perhaps an hour ago. There were no witnesses present when I arrived.”

“No-one came to his assistance? You heard screaming—”

The officer trained his gaze on the blood-spattered leaves of a just-budding rose alongside the wrought-iron fence. “It was over quickly. Ma’am. As I arrived, the neighbors began coming out of their houses. I was only around the corner.”

“No-one has touched the body since?” Poor lad. He couldn’t have been more than fifteen. What was he doing out so early in the rain?

“Officers entered. But they climbed through the window.”

She could see that from the footprints. Thankfully they had sense enough not to move the body to open the door. Garrett planned to go inside once she had finished her work with the victim. She was too old to climb through windows in the rain.

I wonder what’s become of his spine? She leaned forward to examine the damage. The skull is cracked, and I would wager the poor lad’s brains have been scooped out. If a human being could do that, I’d say so violent an attack was personal. She crouched to investigate a scatter of pale flecks on the steps, like a splash of milk frozen in place.

The patrolman swallowed loudly. Red hair and freckles, couldn’t have been four years older than the victim. Despite herself, Garrett took pity on him. “What’s your name, officer?”

“Forester,” he replied. His face gleamed white around a fevered flush spotting the center of each cheek.

She sighed, seeing her own imperious face reflected in his eyes. Twenty years ago, she had been thought a great beauty. Boys like Forester had been so far beneath her notice that she had not even realized it was possible for them to *have* feelings. *Times change, Abby Irene.* “I am a sorcerer, lad, not a cannibal. You did as well as could be expected.” She turned away.

“Ma’am?”

“Dismissed,” she confirmed. “Go back to your dispatch for debriefing, Forester. You were right to call me in. This is a matter for the Crown.” She knew perfectly well that the summons had come from the city Guard, and not from the Mayor’s Colonial Police, but it was polite to lie.

Sometimes—but only some times—Garrett could almost admit a sympathy for the Mayor and his push for home rule. Her true loyalties, however, lay with the Crown. And the Duke.

Except, she mused, bootheels clicking as she made her way back to her waiting carriage, the Crown was an ocean away on the other side of her self-imposed

exile, and in these days of threatened hostilities with the French and Iroquois it seemed to prefer to forget the Colonies existed. And the Duke, loyal Patriot that he was, had problems of his own.

Still, it rankled: in London, she could have counted on a specialist sorcerer and at least one additional DCI for so gruesome a murder. In the entire reach of the Colonies, from the Atlantic to the Iroquois territories West of the Appalachians, Garrett's only colleagues were in Boston and Philadelphia. One doddered through the closing years of a white-bearded wizard's career; the other was a puling idiot who never would have achieved his Th.D without judiciously applied nepotism.

Yes, unequivocally—and especially since the Iron Queen's death and her eldest son's succession—Garrett was on her own.

Her driver, huddled miserable on the box, touched his cap. The renewed patter of rain on the cobbles told her to hurry. Uniformed officers held the gathering crowd back while Garrett rooted in her blue velvet carpetbag, kept dry in the enclosed coach. Quickly, she found what she needed and returned.

It was nasty work, sketching a circle around the corpse, and the hem of her dress was black with sucking mud and daubed red as well by the time she closed it. Renewed murmurs ran through the onlookers. Garrett shook her head, not troubling herself to look up. *They can't have only now figured out who I am.*

But deliberate steps clipped along the bloodsoaked walk, and a silken voice close behind her said, "Crown Investigator."

Garrett pinched the bridge of her nose, thinking very hard about the silver flask of brandy in her carpetbag. She knotted the circle off so that it would hold during her distraction and turned to face the intruder.

"I see the officers recognized you, Viscount," she said, briefly distracted by hazel eyes under a fall of brown-black hair. Princely cheekbones, a caballero's noble nose, and the sensual lip of a Rumanian aristocrat. Garrett bit down on a sigh.

"Please," said the notorious amateur detective, extending his grey-gloved hand, voice melodious with the interwoven tones of his native language. "So lovely a lady must by all means call me Sebastien. Besides, your English titles are so confusing."

Garrett transferred her wand to her left hand and allowed him to bend over her right. Much as she despised the man, she had to admit to a certain agreeable shiver when his lips brushed her glove. Don Sebastien de Ulloa straightened and smiled, gesturing to the mangled remains of the boy with the tip of his walking stick. "And so, my dear investigator—what have we here?"

Garrett pursed her lips in frustration, but kept her voice level. "I'm not certain yet," she said. "I've just finished containing the scene. There are a few interesting anomalies...."

"That is candlewax." Don Sebastien leaned forward, laying a hand on Garrett's arm to steady himself away from the circle.

"It appears to be," she answered, shifting from the touch. "Interesting, is it not? Other than the mud and blood, it is obvious that the doorstep and facade were immaculately kept; probably scrubbed daily, if their housekeeper is anything like my Mary. So the wax can be no older than a day."

Don Sebastien was no sorcerer, and she largely ignored him while she dipped mingled salt and lampblack out of a little pouch and spread those around the circle, pretending she did not notice the cold water dripping down her collar. Don Sebastien seemed untroubled. "What intrigues me, Crown Investigator, is the swiftness of the attack. Have you eliminated a human agency?"

She tucked the little pouch into her pocket. "I've ruled out nothing," she answered, feeling as if he tested her. "But I must admit, I can see no way around suspicions of sorcery. Unless it was a beast." She let her voice drop. "In which case, we can expect further attacks."

Don Sebastien pursed sensual lips. Rain spattered from the brim of his hat. "May I call you Lady Abigail? It is so much less unwieldy than 'Crown Investigator.'"

"My name is 'Abigail Irene.' And I would prefer to be addressed by the title appropriate to the situation. 'Garrett' will do if you are pressed for time, Don Sebastien."

"I meant no disrespect. DCI, have you considered some of the more unpleasant possibilities?"

"Such as?"

"Were-thing. Wampyr. Summoned demon, improperly bound."

"What would you consider the more *pleasant* possibilities, Don Sebastien? A deranged lunatic with the strength to peel a man's spine out of his back?"

"Ah. I take your point, Investigator. Although I admit, I am still exceedingly curious about the candlewax."

Garrett chuckled. "So am I, Don Sebastien. So am I. And curious as well, where the other residents have gotten off to. Shall we proceed?"

Once the coroner had moved the body, Don Sebastien wrapped the brass door-pull—which had already been examined—carefully in his handkerchief and tugged it open, stepping aside so that Garrett could precede him. “Crown Investigator, may I join you?”

“Thank you, Don Sebastien. If you must, you may.” She shook her gore-daubed skirts and knocked the worst of the mire from her boots before she crossed the threshold; it didn’t help. Wet cloth still clung to her knees when she crouched. “Well.”

Don Sebastien reached up and pulled a taper from the sconce upon the wall, keeping the drip shield at its base. He set it alight with a silver lighter, drawn from his coat pocket, and dropped to one knee facing Garrett, tilting the candle to give her light. Shadows scrolled about them. “More candle-spatters,” she said. “Beeswax, and a good quantity of it, too.”

“Do you maintain your good opinion of the housekeeper?”

She lifted her chin and glanced around, hair moving against the nape of her neck. Don Sebastien’s eyes were on the scrollworked secretary beside the door. Garrett reached out and ran a kid-gloved fingertip along its edges. She examined the results in the glow of the taper, which was of good enough quality not to drip even when he angled it. “Even the back is clean,” she said. “And a family of some means, if they were spending so on candles. And *that* candle does not drip like this.” She drew out a penknife and flaked a few dribs of wax into a glassine envelope.

“Your reputation does not do you justice,” Don Sebastien said, and stood, offering Garrett his assistance. “The intruder’s light, do you think?”

“If there was an intruder.” His flesh was cool even through her glove. “Don Sebastien, you were too long in the rain.”

“I am always cold,” he answered, and released her lightly once her balance was sure. “The trail appears to lead this way. Shall we have a look upstairs, Crown Investigator?”

“By all means. Lead on, Lucifer.” *Light-bearer.*

He laughed and held the candle high. “I have been called worse. You have noticed the angle of the drippings?”

“Of course,” she answered. “They fell from the candle of someone *leaving* the house.”

“Indeed.” They entered the front room. He stood aside again, to allow her to

precede him up the sweeping stair.

Very pretty. For a hobbyist. Does he think because a Crown Investigator is also a woman, she needs an expatriate Spaniard as her shadow to solve a murder? And then, since he was only looking at the back of her rain-wet head, she allowed herself a little, mocking smile. Perhaps he's just hoping to catch a glimpse of your ankles. "There is more wax up the stair runner."

"And on the banister."

"And across the landing—interesting. The droplets crisscross the hall." She bent again, gesturing for the light. Don Sebastien was beside her as silently as a cat in his patent-leather boots, dabs of mud marring their mirror shine. "The intruder spent a fair amount of time here."

"Do you suppose he came in through an upstairs window? Two were open; strange on a stormy night."

"Do you suppose he was a *he*?" Garrett answered mildly, moving to the closest of the bedrooms, from which a cold draft flowed. The door stood open; mud on the threshold told her the officers had been through it, and she wished she knew if the door had been closed or open when they arrived.

She paused in the frame of the doorway, letting her eyes take in the room. A young man's, by the schoolbooks and fencing gear, and the bed had been slept in—disconsolately, judging by the crumpled and thrown-back covers and the disarray of the pillows. Unlike the downstairs entryway, there was light enough in this room to see the spatters of wax on the floor, although there was no candle in the holder by the bed.

A chill lifted the hair on Garrett's neck. She moved to the window, aware of Don Sebastien behind her, although the wide wooden boards scarcely seemed to flex under his weight. "Are you a swordsman, Don Sebastien?"

"A notorious one, in my youth," he answered, giving it the slight inflection of a double entendre. Her lips twitched. She did not look, instead leaning down beside the windowframe and tilting her head to examine it against the slanted light. The floor beneath was damaged, the wood already swollen from rain falling inside. That rain had washed away any traces that might have been on the windowsill; Garrett stared until her eyes crossed and found nothing. Still her skin crawled.

"He is restless," Garrett said, straightening and stepping away from the casement. She whirled, noticing Don Sebastien's sudden stillness, as if he set himself for an attack. Garrett pulled her eyes from the Spaniard and paced quickly to the bed. "He rises. He—"

“—kindles a light,” Sebastien interrupted. “There is a burnt match in the candle holder, and the box in the nightstand cubbyhole.”

“Very good. Except he’s neglected a candle—”

“—or perhaps he pulls the candle from the holder.”

“To what purpose?”

“I do not know.” Their eyes met, and Garrett released the deep-drawn breath she had been holding. *The thrill of the chase.*

“Were you restless last night, Don Sebastien?”

“I am always restless at night, DCI.”

“Then perhaps—” she advanced with a firm step like a duelist’s “—you would be better served at home, resting in your bed.” She didn’t smile to soften it, and again their gazes crossed. Garrett fancied she could hear the ring of steel. “This is still a Crown investigation, Viscount.”

Don Sebastien reached up to tip his hat, which he had not removed when they stepped inside. “I am very restless,” he answered. “And, too often, very bored. And I do not imagine that this is *anything* but your case, Crown Investigator.”

“As long as you understand me.”

She turned away and went to the window again. She was leaning out to grasp the edge of the casement with the intention of swinging it closed when he spoke again from close beside her. “Oh, never that, Abigail, I—”

His body struck hers a moment before she properly registered that he had stopped speaking mid-sentence, slamming her forward, belly against the windowsill and her arms flung out like a diver’s. Her corset took the brunt of the impact, whalebone bruising her at belly and breast, and she shouted outrage and scabbled at rain-slick wood. She teetered, Don Sebastien’s weight pinning her, and kicked wildly, expecting any moment to feel his hands on her ankles tilting her forward into a sickening, tumbling fall.

She didn’t think the rose-bushes would break her fall enough to save her. Especially if she hit the fence. *Why would the Great Detective murder a wealthy East Side boy?* Amazed by the calm precision of her own thoughts even as she twisted, bringing her gloved hands up to fend him off.

His strength was irresistible. He simply wrapped hands as hard as barrel-hoops around her wrists and—hailed her spluttering back into the room and

down onto the floor. “Are you hit?” he asked, patting her cheek anxiously. His hat had tumbled off and fetched up in the far corner, and his glossy, hard-looking hair stood up in disheveled spikes.

“Hit?”

“The carriage—” He shook his head. “You didn’t see.” And rolled on his back, away from her, and raised his right hand to point across his face to the ceiling directly overhead. “There was a rifleman down on the street.”

Detective Crown Investigator Garrett certainly knew the look of a fresh bullet-hole in plaster, when she saw one. “Ah,” she said quietly. “Someone must be taking an interest in the case.”

* * * *

A little before noon, Garrett marked time in the antechamber outside the Mayor’s office, grateful at least for the chance to shed her soaked oilcloth. Although the rain had stopped falling and the clouds had thinned shortly before Don Sebastien took his leave, the afternoon promised a continuing overcast.

Blood and mud still smirched the hem of her walking dress, and it might have been politic to return to her rooms and change. However, his Lordship, Peter Eliot, Mayor of New Amsterdam, had made it known that he expected to see her with all deliberate speed, and far be it from her to think of preserving the man’s prized Persian carpets under such circumstances. Garrett swallowed a pleased smile.

By the watch pinned to her bodice, she’d been waiting at least twenty minutes before the door opened and the Mayor’s confidential secretary—a well-made young man with dark blue eyes, whom she noted appreciatively—gestured her in. Garrett smiled; she’d taken the opportunity to rifle his desk while he was away, and had one of his visiting cards slipped inside the cuff of her glove. *Simon LeMarque, M.Th.S. Another sorcerer. And French. How interesting. The Mayor must be more worried about the Duke and me than he admits. Although, given the number of times he’s tried to—embarrass—us both, I shouldn’t be surprised.*

She swept past Simon LeMarque, holding her soiled dress well aside, and glided to a halt before Peter Eliot’s enormous mahogany desk. The Mayor didn’t trouble himself to look up from the papers that occupied his attention, and Garrett gave her sodden skirts an extra shake to settle them. “Your Lordship.”

Eliot glanced up. “I understand there was some trouble in the city this morning, Detective.”

“Crown Investigator, sir,” she answered. “And yes.”

He nodded judiciously, setting his papers aside. “Have you identified a

suspect yet? I'm under pressure from the press, you understand. The gruesome aspect of the murder...."

You blithering idiot, I've been at the crime scene for six hours. I've barely begun my investigation, and you know it. But he isn't a blithering idiot, and I'd better remember that. "Respectfully, sir, because of the possibly—probably—arcane nature of the crime, it's a Crown matter now. You shall have to address the press's inquiries to the Duke's office."

"I'd hate to have them jump to the conclusion that the Duke's officers are impeding a murder investigation."

Ah. The threat made manifest. "The Duke is quite capable of handling his own public affairs, your Lordship."

Eliot smiled, uncoiling from his desk. He was a long, narrow man, grey hair thinning at the top, waistcoat tight across the small bulge of his paunch. Probably not much older or taller than the intensely annoying Don Sebastien. Despite her professional dislike for the so-called Great Detective, Garrett found herself comparing the Mayor unfavorably to the Spanish aristocrat. "Ah, yes, the Duke. Has he taken an interest, then?" Garrett didn't miss the jeweled-serpent glitter in the man's eyes.

She knew she was one of Richard's—the Duke's—biggest political weaknesses. And she suspected the Mayor knew as well, or at least suspected. *But he cannot prove a thing, and that is the important part. And my service record is impeccable, for all I am a woman.*

"I have yet to speak to him regarding the case, sir. Usually he prefers not to be involved until the evidence is more complete, and in any eventuality, I have not yet even had time to write up my notes. But you appreciate that I can discuss nothing relating to a Crown investigation with anyone who is not in my chain of command." *And here in the god-forsaken West, my chain of command begins and ends with the Duke. You have no power over me.*

Well, other than the power to endlessly complicate my life. With the exception of Garrett and the city Guard, New Amsterdam's law enforcement reported to the office of the Mayor. And Garrett desperately needed to keep her access to the resources of the Colonial Police.

"And I know you like to keep a very personal hand on your investigations, Detective ... Crown Investigator."

Familiar ice stiffened Garrett's spine, and she let it freeze her professional smile on her face. "Surely, sir, I have no idea what you might be insinuating."

“Ah, of course not. You will keep me apprised?”

And that’s what this is about. An offer to betray Richard for a place at Peter Eliot’s right hand? Oh, how will I ever resist the temptation. Years of practice kept the ironic tinge from her voice. “Of course, your Lordship.”

Eliot came around his desk and laid a hand on her upper arm, turning her gently toward the door. “I would be indebted to you, Lady Abigail. I hope you know how impressed we all are with your work. So many women consider themselves fit to fill any man’s shoes—it is always refreshing to meet one who can actually do a job. There are always opportunities for people like you.”

Ah, yes, the carrot and the stick. The touch, warm through damp cotton, made her skin crawl, and she was again moved to contrast the Mayor with Don Sebastien. She frowned, pushing disloyal images aside. *You despise the man, Abigail Irene.* The reminder amused her; she let that amusement color her tone. “You will be the third to know, your Lordship. Possibly the fourth.”

That brought him up short, or perhaps he merely stumbled, spit-shined shoes catching on the nap of the richly knotted carpets. “The fourth?”

“Ah, yes,” Garrett said, taking advantage of his momentary distraction to disengage her arm and break for the door with all the dignified haste she could muster. *Two years of finishing school not entirely wasted. At least I can manage an imperious exit.* “Don Sebastien de Ulloa appears to have interested himself in the case.” *And he has no loyalty to the Duke, but neither bears he any love for you.*

* * * *

It was too much to hope that the Mayor would not have her followed, so Garrett did exactly as he would expect. Resuming her carriage, the Crown Investigator gave instructions to her driver to wake her when they arrived at the Duke’s residence, in Queens.

But she could not sleep. Somewhere along the way, the clouds broke and a slanted line of sunlight glanced off rain-frosted stones, gilding the city. Garrett took a breath of cold air, rich with the promise of spring, and let it out again on a sigh. *That’s what you do it for, Abby Irene,* she thought. *Seven million souls, thirty percent of the population of the Colonies, and the capitol of the British Protectorate of North America. So what if it’s not London?*

She chuckled at the comparison. Well, it’s just not London. That’s all. But you live with your decisions, Abigail Irene. And if living in the would-be-Plutocratic chaos of the Colonies is what it takes to fulfill your duty, so mote it be.

After crossing the Elizabeth Bridge, her driver turned the rattling coach down Brewster Street, and Garrett smoothed her dress. The mud had somewhat dried; she

slipped her gloves off, cracking the powder off her hem. Then she dug in her reticule for lotion to smooth her face and disguise her exhaustion. Not that she had anything to hide from Richard, Duke of New Amsterdam, but old habits died hard.

She was tugging the fingers of her gloves back into place when the carriage jolted to a halt on the gracious circular drive of the Duke's massive white Colonial. Garrett nodded coolly to the groom who rushed to hand her down, and made her way up the broad, shallow steps to the portico.

The Duke's servants opened the door before she reached the landing. They ushered her into Richard's study, where she shooed a two-hundred pound Mastiff out of the loveseat and settled herself before the fire with a brandy from the sideboard. Candles blazed on the marble mantle; the gaslights were not lit. The fair-haired, fiftyish Duke himself joined her before she had halfway finished the glass.

She set it on an end table and would have stood, but he raised one hand and shook his head. "Keep your seat, Abby Irene. And finish your brandy. I can see that you need it." He poured a glass for himself before coming to sit beside her, curling his long legs to the side. His hair was wavy, silver at the temples and the nape, the rich ashen color of tree bark. She wanted to run her fingers through it, and instead she sipped her brandy.

"You can't be ready to make me a report on that murder yet," he said, leaning toward her.

She gave him a troubled smile and put her other hand on his knee, first glancing past him to make sure the door was latched.

"I locked it," he said.

"People will talk."

"People do," he said. "Someday you'll tell me what brought you to America, Abby Irene. My curiosity keeps me up nights."

She sipped her brandy. "I don't think it was curiosity, Richard. Not last night, anyway."

He offered her an expression of frank surprise. "Really? You didn't sleep well either?"

"No one did, it seems. And one boy's night-time wandering may have led to his death."

"Ah, yes. Tell me about the murder."

“There’s little enough to tell.” She let her hand slide across the tailored dark fabric of his trousers before leaning back, curling against the arm of the loveseat in a manner that would have horrified her tutors. “Don Sebastien has involved himself, but he is—as is his wont—playing his cards close to his chest. And whoever it was that arranged the vanishments and the murder isn’t above a little rough play with a hunting rifle.” Sebastien had dug the flattened bullet out of molded plaster. Now Garrett slipped it from the cuff of her glove and dropped it with a clink into Richard’s brandy glass.

His lips thinned. “You were not harmed.” Flatly, as if he would accept it no other way.

“Thanks to de Ulloa, I was not harmed.” She swirled brandy on her tongue, watching Richard fish the bullet out between thick fingers and hold it up to the light. Her voice was more petulant than she had intended when she spoke again. “If I could find the rifle that came from, I might be able to prove who fired it. And I *wish* you would let me have that Peter Eliot assassinated.”

“Abby Irene....”

“I know, my love. I’m not—*quite*—serious. Yet. But you know he’d rather have your nephew in your place.”

“David is too young.” The Duke raked a hand through his hair and bit his lip. “Which is why Peter would want him in my place. Of course, I’d have to be dead.”

“Dead or abdicated.” She did not permit longing to enter her voice.

“There is that. And there are days when the temptation to divorce is overwhelming. But then I think of Mayor Peter Eliot. And the French and Iroquois on our Western border. And,” he continued bitterly, “King Phillip, and his Eastward-looking eye.”

“I wouldn’t have you anyway, Richard.” Trying for levity.

He toasted her, one eyebrow raised, his voice rich with irony. “What sensible woman would marry a man she knows to be unfaithful?” Into her silence, he continued, “The murder.”

She finished her brandy. “Grisly,” she said, standing to pour herself another. “Inhuman, I think. Nasty.”

“Ah.” He frowned as she turned back.

She saw him taking in the disarray of her dress, and drew herself up a little prouder. You were a famous beauty once, Abigail Irene. If you’re stupid enough to

sleep with your superior, you'd best be smart enough to use whatever you have left. "Also, the murdered boy was slain on his own doorstep. Mud to your ankle, and not a footstep. No marks and no signs anywhere, except two windows open and his whole family missing."

The Duke leaned forward, all but ready to jump to his feet. "*Missing?* How many?"

"Mother, father, adolescent sister, housekeeper. Strange."

"Indeed. Continue."

Garrett shrugged. "Most odd was the wax."

"Wax? Candlewax?"

"Droplets of it. Scattered throughout the house. Splashed. Near the boy's body as well."

"I see. And yet no leads?"

Garrett shook her head. "If I locate the candle—presuming it is a candle—I'll be able to use the principles of contagion, similarity and sympathy to prove that the wax originated with that particular one, and we'd have a case. But..."

"But?"

"Well.... Richard, I have nothing. I haven't even a trail to follow, and four people are missing who may very well be alive and in danger somewhere."

Across the room, he nodded. "I see."

"Do you?"

No smile creased Richard's face now. "You say that Don Sebastien has taken an interest?"

Garrett nodded curtly.

"Use him," Richard said, coldly. "Use whatever it takes. I'm relying on you, Abby Irene."

"Richard," she answered softly. And: "My Lord."

* * * *

Garrett seldom entertained at home, and when she did, they were usually the

sort of guests one received in the den, or the library. Her laboratory was on the first floor of her townhouse, immediately behind the parlor, where one might have anticipated a dining room. The room itself was half study and half chemistry, with books and chairs lining the walls and long stone-topped benches running parallel.

Cleanly clothed, now, and gowned in a white canvas smock to protect her dress, Garrett moved crisply between her granite-topped workbench and the thaumaturgic circle inlaid in red and white stone tiles amid the slate-blue field of the floor. She laid out the samples she'd isolated from the body of the murdered boy: earth, fingernail clippings, scraps of his clothing and scrapings from the steps on which he had died. She piled each sample in a shallow watch glass placed in one of the isolation circles. Those smaller peripheral circles also held beakers of clotted blood and an Erlen flask of rainwater, along with samples of hair that she had retrieved from the toiletries of the missing individuals—a bit of everything she meant to eliminate from the parameters of her spell. At the very center of the circle, over the gas flame, a crucible warmed. A low table set beside it held a small heap of candles brought from the victims' house and several more watch glasses.

Three of these shallow dishes each contained a bit of the waxlike substance. The last one cradled splinters from the gouges in the blue wooden door.

By seven o'clock, Garrett was on her second pot of tea. Mike had come in to find her after his supper and was dozing in his basket. Straightening from her bench, she had just thought of pausing for her own meal before the evening's real work when a familiar tap on the door brought her head around. Mike pricked up his ears and hopped to his feet as she opened the door.

"Supper already, Mary?" Garrett asked the dark, narrow-shouldered housekeeper standing in the hallway.

Mary's eyes twinkled. "If it please you, m'Lady, there's a right handsome gentleman caller to see you. I've invited him in." Mary extended an ornate silver tray so that Garrett could pick up the visiting card lying on it.

"Ah. Indeed?" She didn't think she needed to glance at the name—the slightly oily feel of parchment between her fingertips told her everything. "Engraved. Very nice. Send Don Sebastien in, please. I will receive him in the laboratory." Mike wagged his coiled plume happily after Mary; she ducked her head and left.

Mary must have taken the gentleman detective's overcoat and hat, but Garrett noticed that the shoulders of his coat were damp through. "Is it raining again, Don Sebastien?" Absently, her hand came up to press the place between her breasts where a sigil tattooed in crimson marked her training. She felt as if his gaze burrowed through cloth to notice it.

"Indeed," he said, bowing over her hand, making no comment on her stained

smock. Again, his lips brushed the back of her fingers—ungloved, this time—and sent a shiver down her spine.

Her terrier withdrew to his basket and watched the tall stranger warily. She snapped her fingers for Mike's attention, and his tail flipped twice, but he merely lay there, watching with disturbing, alert eyes.

“Have you had any success, my dear Crown Investigator?”

She sighed and turned away, gesturing toward the circle. “As you can see, I am just about to commence. What have you discovered, Don Sebastien? As I recall, when we parted company, you were on your way to research the boy's family.”

“And so I was. May I sit?”

“As it pleases you,” she answered. He selected a wingbacked chair against the wall, pushed away from Garrett's equipment and opposite Mike's basket, not far from the hearth.

When he was settled on the olive brocade and had refused tea, he began to speak. “The lad's name was Bruce Carlson, home on Easter break from a school in Westchester. His family, as you no doubt noticed from the house, were not without resources, which proved fortunate for them, because the lad seems to have been something of a troublemaker.”

“Really?” Garrett turned up the flame under her crucible and began breaking the candles into it. “What sort of trouble?”

“Well.” The handsome Spaniard rubbed his hands together, leaning toward the fire. “There were whisperings—nothing proven, you understand, or even openly charged—that he was less than honorable to a maidservant who left their employment last year.”

“English girl?” Even a servant should have been able to go to the Colonial Police if her master's son laid hands on her.

“Irish,” Don Sebastien answered, his frown raising him an inch or two in Garrett's estimation. Her own history gave her a certain sympathy to pariahs of any stripe—Irish, Negro, even the Romany and Indian halfbloods who were welcome nowhere—but few aristocrats harbored fellow-feeling for their ‘inferiors.’ “No family I've been able to locate. Not even a last name.”

“What became of her?” What is your agenda, Don Sebastien? What is it you want of me? Of New Amsterdam?

He shrugged expressively, smoothing his damp hair behind his ear. “I do not

know. I understand she may have been—*embarazada*, although such things are not openly spoken of.”

“So we have a motive for the killing. A potential motive, at least. Sorcerous blood runs strong in those old Irish families.”

Don Sebastien nodded. “There may be other motives as well. The father is a member of Colonial Parliament. House of Commons.”

Garrett stirred wax with a glass rod, the hot scent filling her head. “They must be better off even than the house shows.”

“Not necessarily. The father—Robert Carlson—has familial links to Mayor Eliot. And the Mayor’s patronage.”

“Ah.” The wax was clearing. Garrett fished the wicks out of the bottom of the crucible and trapped them against the rim, scorching her fingers slightly as she pinched them out. She blew on the scalds. “Would he not have been the target, then?”

“Perhaps. We cannot be certain he was not—he is, after all, gone. And we also cannot rule out other, unknown, enemies.”

Garrett lifted the first of the watch glasses and held it over the seething pot. “What troubles me is the consents,” she said. “The boy was killed outside the door of his house. Outside its protection. But the family—although that upstairs window was open, there is no trace of forced entry.”

“Continue, Crown Investigator.” She thought she saw respect in his eyes. Perhaps his open-mindedness about the worth of things extends to Irish and women both. Will wonders never cease?

“Human agencies can come and go as they please. Magical ones—the forms must be observed. One of the forms is consent, expressed or implied.”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “I am familiar with the theory. And of the difference between implied and informed consent, and that one will serve as well as the other.” He smiled as if something amused him. “So, in adherence to the principal tenets of magic, if no human agency entered the house—excepting the officers of the Colonial Police—”

She stirred the contents of the watch glass into the wax. “—then a consent must have been issued to whatever did. Did you note the damage to the door?”

“S̃.” He watched her intently now, eyebrows rising as she frowned at the contents of her crucible.

“That’s odd.”

“Crown Investigator?” He stood from the wing chair and would have come to her, but she raised one hand to forestall him before he crossed into the circle.

“A moment,” Garrett said, selecting another glass. “As I was saying, whatever killed the boy—and I too become more convinced it was a whatever and not a whomever—made an attempt at the door and was barred from entrance. However, it—or something else—apparently managed to enter the house almost immediately and remove the residents tracelessly.”

“Except.... “His long fingers indicated the shallow dish in her right hand.

“Candlewax. Yes.” She nodded and upended it.

Don Sebastien leaned forward, curiously, his boots firmly on the outside of the tiled circle. “What are you looking for?”

“Antipathy,” she answered, and looked up long enough to shoot him a brief, real smile.

“What every woman wants.”

Garrett laughed and set the dish aside, rather more casually also capsizing the third one into the vessel. She did not lift the one containing the splintered bits of door. “I’ve learned something interesting, Don Sebastien. You may enter the circle now, I’m finished. Come and see.”

* * * *

Mary served them dinner on a card table in the book-paneled library, where Garrett normally took her solitary meals. Silver candelabra decorated the table, and when Garrett commented on the extravagance, Mary remarked that she’d gotten a bargain on candles. Don Sebastien lifted his Windsor-backed chair and placed it adjoining Garrett’s, rather than across. Amused or contemplative, she permitted the familiarity. He tasted his wine and picked up the heavy, long-tined silver fork gingerly, investigating the salmon on his plate.

As he teased the flaking fish apart, he glanced up and met her eyes, smiling. “You did not find what you expected,” he said.

Garrett ate carefully but with good appetite. “One tries not have expectations, precisely,” she answered. “But yes, I would have to say that I did not expect the splashed wax to exhibit similarity with the candles remaining in the house. You saw how the wax in the crucible accepted what I introduced to it?”

Don Sebastien nodded. "I could see no difference."

"The principle of antipathy states that two substances which do not share an identity will not normally commingle. This tells me that the splashes of wax which we retrieved from the Carlsons' house are magically identified with the candles they were using."

"Those candles were from several sources, however. Beeswax and paraffin, you had." Don Sebastien laid his fork down by his plate. Rain drummed on the windows.

"But what is important in this case is that they were bought by the same person, with the same sense of purpose—that of lighting her home. The will of the individual who uses a thing is very important. A bullet and a gun, for example, are manufactured separately—but a bullet may be traced back to the gun from which it was fired, using the principle of sympathy—which is the converse of that of antipathy. Do you understand?" She peeled buttered bread apart with her fingers and offered a tidbit to the terrier, her expression challenging Don Sebastien to say anything as the little dog nipped her fingers with sharp white teeth.

He smiled, amused, swirling wine in his glass. "Very well, I think. So the splashed wax came from candles inside the home."

"Precisely. Which means...."

Sebastien effortlessly picked up her thread. Annoying or not, it was a pleasure to talk to a man with a wit. "...our lad must have gone out to the stoop to investigate something—some noise, some cry—and been carrying a candle in his hand."

"Then we are left with another question, Don Sebastien."

"SÃ¬, DCI. What became of the candle?"

"At dinner, Don Sebastien, you may call me Abigail Irene if you so desire." She lifted her glass and drank deeply. "From the evidence of the wax, there was nothing special about it. I wonder if it was picked up by a bystander, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Don Sebastien, you've barely touched your dinner."

He shook his head slightly, smiling. "This is not what I am hungry for." And then he sighed and glanced toward the windows. Mike, curled watchful near the door, whined. "I wonder what this night will bring."

"Rain," Garrett said, and—wary to the bone—kissed him on the mouth.

* * * *

Later, in the darkness of her bedroom, he paused with his cool face pillowed on her belly. “This is what I hunger for, Abigail Irene.”

“A request for consent, Sebastien?”

He nodded against her skin.

“What harm will come to me of it?”

“A day’s weakness. Or two. No more, I promise; I would not take from you the sun.”

With some slight idea of what she offered, she smiled into the darkness and whispered, “Yes.”

And screamed against her muffling fists as he turned his head and sank fangs like spikes of ice and flame into the inside of her thigh.

* * * *

Sometime in the night, the rain stopped, and Sebastien slipped from beneath the covers to dress. Garrett stirred sleepily, the stiffness in a blackening bruise tightening her leg. “Stay until morning?”

“I cannot, my lady. The clouds are breaking.... and I cannot risk the sunrise.” Shirtsleeved, a pale ghost in the darkness, he bent over the bed to kiss her. She tasted the harsh metal of her own blood on his tongue. “I will return, if you will have me.” He ducked his head and kissed the tattoo of a sorcerer, nestled just between her breasts.

“Ah,” she said, one hand still on his arm. “I ... cannot promise fidelity, Sebastien. Or any acknowledgment of this.”

“Secrets,” he answered, “are a stock in trade.” He straightened away from her. Outside the door, Mike—silent for hours—scratched and yipped.

Garrett’s hand rose to her throat. “I feel it.” She fumbled for her wand and kindled a light. The stub of candle flared.

Don Sebastien moved toward the door, listening with an ear pressed to the wood. “Nothing,” he said, and cracked the door open so that Mike could scramble in. The dog lunged across the floor, scattering throw rugs, and hurled himself into his mistress’ arms to bathe her face with his little clean tongue.

Gathering him close, Garrett rose to her feet, her pistol ready in her other

hand. Her dressing gown lay forgotten on the foot of the bed. “This is just like last night,” she whispered.

Sebastien came to stand beside her. “Our quarry,” he said. “I’d warrant it.”

For a long moment, they stood side by side, listening to the nightfall. Nothing disturbed the spring chill of the bedroom. Garrett shivered and set her dog down. He whined, cuddling close.

“Don Sebastien,” she said, suddenly formal in her nakedness. “Have you a way to track the source of that unnatural chill? A poltergeist, would you say?”

He shook his head. “Yes, and I do not.”

She frowned. “Learn what you can of Robert Carlson. I will call on you before lunchtime. Unless you will be sleeping.”

He smiled, and bent to kiss her on the cheek. “A woman both brave and fair,” he said. “I never sleep.” He raised an eyebrow at her, bowed, and was gone through the door and down the stairs.

* * * *

Morning did indeed dawn bright and clear: Sebastien’s instincts proved correct. Garrett, exhausted by a second sleepless night, did not trouble herself with the Mayor’s office hours. Instead she presented herself at his home on Manhattan, fronting the park, before breakfast. Her groom offered her a conspiratorial wink as she disembarked. He knew very well how long Don Sebastien’s carriage had waited.

And what would you say if you knew the Spaniard was an immortal drinker of human blood? It explained many things.

There were always a contingent of Colonial Police by the Mayor’s door, and Garrett nodded to one of them as she passed, recognizing the redhaired youth. He blanched when she met his eye, and she fought a grin. *Wait until the rumors of your wampyr lover get around. Ah, to be a stranger to scandal ... but what fun would there be in that?*

The mayor greeted her in the echoing marble-pillared entryway, flanked by servants and the dark-haired young Master of Thaumaturgical Sciences. Now she saw him clad in a dressing gown, and clearly made out the sigil inked black under the notch of his collarbone. *Private sorcerer, not personal secretary. And the Mayor keeps him at his side at all times. Interesting. Can he truly be so frightened of Richard?*

“Sir, you did not tell me,” Garrett said, ignoring the pleasantries, “that one of the missing was your political ally.”

“It did not seem significant,” Peter Eliot answered. “And I would never use my office to the advantage of my friends, of course. Detective, will you join us for coffee?”

Garrett bit her tongue, contenting herself with a shake of the head. A moment later, when she’d brought herself back under control, she continued: “Are you taking precautions, sir, to prevent an attack upon your person?”

“I am,” he answered, and she noticed the significant glance that passed between sorcerer and Mayor. “I will send messengers to the Duke, as well. Perhaps it is some plot of the French or Iroquois. I would not put raising demons past them.”

“Raising demons?” Garrett snorted, smoothing her hair back. “Would that were all, your Lordship. Would that were all.”

* * * *

Halfway along the long route from the Mayor’s house to the Duke’s, the clamor of hooves racing too fast for a city street drew alongside her carriage. “DCI!” A city Guard, one of the Duke’s men, resplendent in red on a lathered dark bay. “There’s been another murder, Ma’am. The Duke is there.”

“Tell my coachman to bring the horse around then,” she said, leaning through the curtains. “Lead on, good man. Lead on!”

Thirty minutes later, the carriage clattered into an exclusive neighborhood not far from the Mayor’s house. Her heart sank as she recognized the address—the townhome of William, Earl of New Haven, another Member of the Colonial Parliament. House of Lords, and one of Richard’s closest allies.

Richard handed her down from the carriage, to all appearances formal and distant—but she felt the squeeze of his hand and caught the comforting smile in his eyes, even if his lips showed nothing. She felt obscurely guilty, and forced herself to return the smile. *You owe him nothing*: remembering the hard, slick texture of Sebastien’s hair.

“The same as last time?”

Richard shook his head. Garrett wanted to smooth the tight creases from the corners of his eyes. Frustration curled her fingers. She forced herself to listen. “They’re just—gone. The entire family. Seven staff. The groom and stableboy are present and unharmed, but everyone who slept in the house has vanished.”

“More wax?”

“Spattered on the floor. Otherwise clean as a whip.”

Garrett, dizzy with exhaustion, followed the Duke inside, thoughtful as he led her from room to room. “The groom called the Guard, which is why we are here and not the Colonial Police.”

“Politics,” Garrett said, too much a lady to spit. “But whoever is behind this doesn’t seem to be choosing sides.”

“What do you mean?”

“One of yours, one of the Mayor’s. Were the windows open when you arrived?”

“Two in the bedrooms only. And what you just said—not precisely true.” Alone in the servants’ stair, he laid a hand upon her shoulder. She turned to him, and they kissed furtively, a moment’s embrace.

“Oh?” she asked, breathless. Her heart pressed, enormous, in her throat.

The Duke’s eyes crinkled at the corners, but it wasn’t exactly a smile. “Robert Carlson, the house of Commons fellow—he passed information to us, Abby Irene.”

“Us?”

He nodded. “The Patriots. He was opposed to home rule. Not that Peter Eliot ever knew it.”

“Ah.” Garrett leaned against the wall for a moment, considering. “Or maybe he did.”

Richard laid the palm of his hand against her cheek, breaking her train of thought. “Abby Irene....”

His tone rang alarms. She stiffened, did not answer. He continued. “A man was seen leaving your house late last night.”

Garrett stepped back. “Don Sebastien de Ulloa,” she replied. “What of it? I am not a married woman, and I am old enough to make my own decisions, Richard.”

His lips twitched, his eyes dark with concealed pain. “You are beholden to no man,” he said, very quietly.

Garrett laughed low in her throat, tired and giddy. “That’s right, Richard. Not you. And not him either. Do you understand?”

He took a breath, let his hand fall to his side, and leaned forward slowly, touching his lips to the center of her forehead. “Perfectly,” he said, and turned away.

* * * *

“I have the maidservant’s name,” Sebastien said from the darkness of the parlor doorway. “Where were you this afternoon?”

Garrett dropped her velvet carpetbag inside the front door and leaned against the frame. Mary would not thank her for the clutter, but she was too exhausted to care. “I was with the Duke, and then at University. There have been more disappearances. Why are you here?” She was too exhausted for politeness, either. She stripped off gloves and cast them on a side table.

“You did not keep our date. I was concerned.”

Mary bustled down the hallway to take Garrett’s coat, clucking over the mess.

The bruise on Garrett’s thigh ached, and more than anything she wanted to be left alone. She wove unsteadily on her feet. “So you came to check on me when darkness fell. Thoughtful.”

Sebastien ignored the dig. “We need to talk in private.”

Garrett bit her lip and nodded acquiescence, leading him up the stairs. “I’d bet a guinea the Mayor’s somehow behind this,” she said. “He’s got a sorcerer dancing attendance—black mark, not red, so he could have graduated from any little backwater college of magics and I have no way of knowing what his ethics are. Furthermore, I’ve learned that the man who vanished yesterday was working for the Duke on the sly.”

“Interesting. Was there another dismemberment, or merely the disappearance?”

Mike ran at their heels, determined not to be left behind. Abruptly, Garrett stopped and crouched, offering her hand to the patchwork dog. “I’m sorry, boy. I should have said hello when I came in.” He wriggled adoringly, and she tousled his head before she straightened. Don Sebastien caught her arm to keep her afoot. “Disappearances. A whole household again, which sent me to the library for the balance of the day. I can think of only one reason for attacking entire households.”

“And what is that?” They attained the landing; Sebastien opened her chamber door. Mike gamboled past him, having decided that wampyr made acceptable houseguests after all.

“Fear,” she said. “To engender fear.”

“I keep asking myself,” Sebastien commented, “what was different about the boy? Why did he need to die so terribly, when the others just ... softly and silently, vanished away.”

Garrett staggered again. “I need to lie down.”

“Of course you do. A sleepless night, and the blood you gave to me ... on top of the work of the past two days. Forgive me.” He scooped her into his arms like a child—like a doll—and carried her to bed. Mary had made it, tidied the counterpane, placed a new candle on the bedside table to replace the one burned out the night before.

Blackness like an undertow, Garrett tried to remember the last thing. She yawned jawcrackingly. “Sebastien. You said....”

“Ah, yes,” he answered. “The missing maidservant. I haven’t found her yet, but I have her name. Forester. Maeve Forester.”

Sleep sucking her under, Garrett knew to a certainty that there was something enormously important about that name, but she was damned if she could remember what it was.

* * * *

A chill awakened her in the small hours of the morning. Sebastien lay curled beside her, but his body offered no warmth, and her heart hammered in her chest as if she awakened from nightmare. Mike whined by her feet, huddling into the covers.

“Sebastien?”

“I feel it,” he said. “Like last night.”

But it wasn’t. Similar. But colder and stronger, and it froze her to the bone. The curtains on the casement windows fluttered—*odd*, she thought, *those should be tight shut*. And she could see that they were, see the glass reflecting the gaslights from the city below. *Where is the draft coming from?* Teeth chattering, Garrett reached for her wand and struck a light.

The temperature dropped sharply. Garrett clutched her wand to her chest. Mike growled his terrier’s growl, voice of a much larger dog in a little dog’s throat. Meanwhile, Sebastien swung his long legs out of the four poster and stood. When he spoke, even his cool breath frosted in the icy air. “Ghost?” he asked.

“Sebastien!”

Garrett threw herself across the bed, away from the nightstand, jumping up with her back against the far wall, the coverlet dimpling under her feet. Mike

scrabbled toward her, crowded her ankles growling, all sharp teeth and powderpuff defiance. Slowly, Sebastien turned....

The candle on the nightstand ascended into the air and was joined and circled by others that materialized out of the darkness. A vast, lumpy darkness, clawing with enormous hands like annealed black clots of wax, a ring of candles blazing on the gnarled stump that might have been its head.

Garrett screamed as the thing reached for her. She leveled her wand at it and spoke a word. A spark flashed between them, did nothing. Mike snarled and would have lunged after the threat, and Garrett swept her leg aside, knocking her indomitable companion from the bed. He yelped, and she flinched, but for a second he was safe from the squelching abomination that examined her face with familiar pale eyes.

It grabbed for her and she twisted away, falling half into the crevice between bed and wall. In a moment, those slick, sucking hands would touch her flesh. "Sebastien! The candles!"

Sebastien hesitated, hands half outreached as if to grab the monstrosity and haul it away. Candlewax dripped from its crown, splattering the tile floor; droplets that touched its black hide vanished without a trace.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't touch it! The candles! Put them out!"

Mike growled low in his throat as he found his feet again, eyes gleaming in the flickering brilliance. Something moved through the blackness, flaring light. Candlewax dripped, splattered, ran.

The thing lurched closer, stepping onto the bed. Sebastien glanced about wildly, caught up a rug from the floor, and swung just as Garrett, half-pinned, shouted a word of magic and hurled her wand like a throwing knife.

The rug came down on the dark thing's crown, dashing candles out. Garrett's wand vanished into its breast, silver tip first. The thing wailed, spinning wildly, reaching for Sebastien with groping, malformed paws. He skittered aside like a toreador, swinging the rug again, smashing the thing in the face. A final candle fluttered out as it fell forward, keening, clutching Sebastien's shirtfront, and Garrett saw the horror in his eyes as it started to enfold him in devouring blackness.

And then it sagged to its knees, slid downward, cloth tearing in the grasp of its suddenly human hands. It fell, curled inwards, and buried its face in its knees, dappled moonlight shaking in short red curls.

* * * *

Duke Richard waited for her in her parlor, flanked by city Guards. The early afternoon light crept in through white eyelet lace, gilding his hair. He had his hat in his hand, as if he did not intend to linger, but Mike sat on his shoes, tongue lolling.

When she entered, he dismissed the Guards.

“Richard,” she said, when the door was closed.

“Investigator Garrett.”

She came a few steps closer, and did not let her hurt show in her face. “I’m glad to see you, your Highness.”

His jaw worked, and the hat tumbled from his hands as he came to her, pulling her close, all but crushing her in his arms. “Abby Irene.” His voice broke.

She leaned into the embrace for a long, quiet moment, listening to the pounding of his heart. When he finally let her step back, she did. “I’m safe.”

“But barely. And I wasn’t there to protect you.”

“Sebastien was,” she said, and regretted it immediately. “What’s to become of Officer Forester?” He’d been taken away in chains before sunup.

“He’s cooperated. Named his accomplice. Or his handler, more like—the Lord Mayor’s pet sorcerer.”

“Neither one implicated the Mayor?”

“Stayed silent as the grave. To hear Forester tell it, LaMarque—the sorcerer—offered him revenge against the lad who ruined Forester’s sister. Forester took him up on it, not knowing the price. And then LaMarque—and Peter Eliot, of course, but neither one of them has or will admit that—used that consent, once granted, to enslave him. From what he said, he killed the Carlson family first, consumed them ... and then chased the lad out into the street to deal with him more messily.”

Garrett shuddered. “What about the splintered door?”

“Misdirection. A smart lad. He’ll hang, of course.”

“Of course.” The door was shut; the curtains were drawn. She laid a hand on his shoulder, leaned her face against his sleeve. “They must have thought I was close.”

“You were.” He put his arm around her shoulder. “I would have been next, no doubt.”

She nodded. *This is wrong. And yet ... what else can we do?* “It is a pity that we cannot arrange a search of the Lord Mayor’s domicile. I feel certain that we would find a rifle which I could match to the bullet fired at me.”

He let the silence hang for a moment before he continued. “What I don’t understand is how Forester got admittance to the houses. I know there are rules of consent and so forth, for these dark things to do their will.” *He looked away. And he’s not mentioning Sebastien, although it’s costing him something not to.*

“Each of the houses invaded had apparently received a surprising bargain on candles recently. And an action can provide consent as easily as a word.”

“I am afraid I’m not following you, Abby Irene.”

Garrett counted breaths before she answered, pressing her face to his arm. “Consent must be offered,” she said. “Express or implied. But think. You awaken, cold and alone. In darkness with a banked fire. You feel a presence looming over you. What is the first thing you do?”

“Reach for my pistol.”

“After that.”

“Strike a light. Oh!”

“Strike a light, yes. And reach for the candle by your bed.”