

Something Borrowed

JIM BUTCHER

Steel pierced my leg and my body went rigid with pain, but I could not allow myself to move. "Billy," I growled through my teeth. "Kill him."

Billy the Werewolf squinted up at me from his seat and said, "That might be a little extreme."

"This is torture," I said.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Dresden," Billy said, his tone amused. "He's just fitting the tux."

Yanof the tailor, a squat, sturdy little guy who had recently immigrated to Chicago from Outer Sloboviakastan or somewhere, glared up at me, with another dozen pins clutched between his lips and resentment in his eyes. I'm better than six and a half feet tall. It can't be fun to be told that you've got to fit a tux to someone my height only a few hours before the wedding.

"It ought to be Kirby standing here," I said.

"Yeah. But it would be harder to fit the tux around the body cast and all those traction cables."

"I keep telling you guys," I said. "Werewolves or not, you've got to be more careful."

Ordinarily, I would not have mentioned Billy's talent for shapeshifting into a wolf in front of a stranger, but Yanof didn't speak a word of English. Evidently, his skills with needle and thread were such that he had no pressing need to learn. As Chicago's resident wizard, I'd worked with Billy on several occasions, and we were friends.

His bachelor party the night before had gotten interesting on the walk back to Billy's place, when we happened across a ghoul terrorizing an old woman in a parking lot.

It hadn't been a pretty fight. Mostly because we'd all had too many stripper-induced Jell-O shots.

Billy's injuries had all been bruises and all to the body. They wouldn't spoil the wedding. Alex had a nasty set of gashes on his throat from the ghoul's clawlike nails but could probably pass them off as particularly enthusiastic hickeys. Mitchell had broken two teeth when he'd charged the ghoul but hit a wall instead. He was going to be a dedicated disciple of Anbesol until he got to the dentist.

All I had to remember the evening by was a splitting headache, and not from the fight. Jell-O shots are far more dangerous, if you ask me.

Billy's best man, Kirby, had gotten unlucky. The ghoul slammed him into a brick wall so hard that it broke both his legs and cracked a vertebra.

"We handled him, didn't we?" Billy asked.

"Let's ask Kirby," I said. "Look, there isn't always going to be a broken metal fence post sticking up out of the ground like that, Billy. We got lucky."

Billy's eyes went flat and he abruptly stood up. "All right," he said, voice hard. "I've had just about enough of you telling me what I should and should not do, Harry. You aren't my father."

"No," I said. "But—"

"In fact," he continued, "if I remember correctly, the other Alphas and I have saved your life twice now."

"Yes," I said. "But—"

His face turned red with anger. Billy wasn't tall, but he was built like an armored truck. "But *what?* You don't want to share the spotlight with any of us mere one-trick wonders? Don't you *dare* belittle what Kirby did, what the others have done and sacrificed."

I am a trained investigator. Instincts honed by years of observation warned me that Billy might be angry. "Great hostility I sense in you," I said in a Muppety voice.

Billy's glower continued for a few more steady seconds, and then it broke. He shook his head and looked away. "I'm sorry. For my tone."

Yanof jabbed me again, but I ignored it. "You didn't sleep last night."

He shook his head again. "No excuse. But between the fight and Kirby and . . ." He waved a vague hand. "Today. I mean, *today*."

"Ah," I said. "Cold feet?"

Billy took a deep breath. "Well. It's a big step, isn't it." He shook his head. "And after next year, most of the Alphas are going to be done with school. Getting jobs." He paused. "Splitting up."

"And that's where you met Georgia," I said.

"Yeah." He shook his head. "What if we don't have anything else in common? I mean, good grief. Have you seen her family's place? And I'm going to be in debt for seven or eight years just paying off the student loans. How do you know if you're ready to get married?"

Yanof stood up, gestured at my pants, and said something that sounded like, "Hahklha ah lafala krepatu khem."

"I'm not seeing people right now," I told him, as I took off the pants and passed them over. "Or else you'd have a shot, you charmer."

Yanof sniffed, muttered something else, and toddled back into the shop.

"Billy," I said. "You think Georgia would have Fought that thing last night?"

"Yes," he said, without a second's hesitation.

"She going to be upset that you did it?"

"No."

"Even though some folks got hurt?"

He blinked at me. "No."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because . . ." He shook his head. "Because she won't. I know her. Upset by the injuries, yes, but not by the fight." He shifted to a tone that he probably didn't realize was an imitation of Georgia's voice. "People get hurt in fights. That's why they're called fights."

"You know her well enough to answer serious questions for her when she isn't even in the room, man," I said quietly. "You're ready. Keep the big picture in mind. You and her."

He looked at me for a second and then said, "I thought you'd say something about love."

I sighed. "Billy. You knob. If you didn't love her, you wouldn't be stressed about losing what you have with her, would you."

"Good point," he said.

"Remember the important thing. You and her."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Yeah," he said. "Georgia and me. The rest doesn't matter."

I was going to mumble something vaguely supportive when the door to the Fitting room opened and an absolutely ravishing raven-haired woman in an expensive lavender silk skirt-suit came into the Fitting room. She might have been my age, and had a lot of gold and diamonds, a lot of perfect white teeth, and the kind of curves that only come from surgery. Her shoes and purse together probably cost more than my car.

"Well," she snapped, and put a fist on her hip, glaring first at Billy and then at me. "I see you are already doing your best to disrupt the ceremony."

"Eve," Billy said in a kind of stilted, formally polite voice. "Um. What are you talking about?"

"For one thing, this," she said, and flicked a hand at me. Then gave me a second, more evaluative look.

I tried to look casual and confident, there in my Spider-Man T-shirt and black briefs. I managed to keep myself from diving toward my jeans. I turned aside to put them on, maintaining my dignity.

"Your underwear has a hole," Eve said sweetly.

I jerked my jeans on, blushing. Stupid dignity.

"Bad enough that you insist on this. . . petty criminal taking part in a ceremony before polite society. Yanof is beside himself," Eve continued, speaking to Billy. "He threatened to quit."

"Wow," I said. "You speak Sloboviakstanese?"

She blinked at me. "What?"

"Because Yanof doesn't speak any English. So how did you know he threatened to quit?" I smiled sweetly at her.

Eve gave me a glare of haughty anger and defended herself by pretending I hadn't said anything. "And now we're going to have to leave out one of the bridesmaids. To say nothing of the fact that with *him* standing up there on one side of you and Georgia on the other, you're going to look like a midget. The photographer will have to be notified and I have no idea how we'll manage to rearrange everything at the last moment."

I swore I could hear Billy's teeth grind. "Harry," he said, in that same polite, strained voice. "This is Eve McAlister. My stepmother-in-law."

"I do not care for that term, as I have told you often. I am your mother-in-law," she said. "Or will be, whenever this ongoing disaster you've created from a respectable wedding breathes its last."

"I'm sure we can work something out," Billy assured her, his tone hopeless.

"Georgia is late and is letting the voice mail answer her phone— as though I needed something else to occupy my thoughts." She shook her head. "I assume the lowlifes you introduced her to kept her out too late last night. Just like this one did to you."

"Hey, come on," I said, careful to keep my tone as reasonable and friendly as I could. "Billy's had a rough night. I'm sure he can help you out if you just give him a chance to—"

She made a disgusted sound and interrupted me. "Did I say or do something to imply that I cared to hear your opinion, charlatan? Lowlifes. I warned her about folk like you."

"You don't even know me, lady," I said.

"Yes, I do," she informed me. "I know all about you. I saw you on *Larry Fowler*."

I narrowed my eyes at Eve.

Billy's expression came close to panic, and he held up both hands palm out, giving me a pleading look. But my hangover ached, and life is too short to waste it taking verbal abuse from petty tyrants who watch bad talk shows.

"Okay, Billy's Stepmom," I began.

Her eyes flashed. "Do *not* call me that."

"You don't care to be called a stepmother?" I asked.

"Not at all."

"Though you obviously aren't Georgia's mother. Howsabout I call you trophy wife?" I suggested.

She blinked at me once, her eyes widening.

Billy put his face in his hands.

"Bed warmer?" I mused. "Mistress made good? Midlife-crisis byproduct?" I shook my head. "When in doubt, go with the classics." I leaned a little closer and gave her a crocodilian smile. "*Gold digger*."

The blood drained out of Eve's face, leaving ugly pinkish blotches high on her cheeks. "Why, you . . . You . . ."

I waved my hand. "No, it's all right; I don't mind finding alternate terms. I understand that you're under pressure. Must be hard trying to look good in front of the old money when they all know that you were really just a receptionist or an actress or a model or something."

Her mouth dropped completely open.

"We're all having a tough day, dear." I flipped my hand at her. "Shoo."

She stared at me for a second, then let out a snarled curse you'd hardly expect from a lady of her station, spun on the heel of one Italian-leather pump, and stalked from the room. I heard a couple of beeps as she crossed to the shop's door, and then she started screeching into a cell phone. I could hear her for about ten seconds after she went outside.

Mission accomplished. Spleen vented. Dragon lady routed. I felt pleased with myself.

Billy heaved a sigh. "You had to talk to her like that?"

"Yeah." I glowered out after the departed Eve. "Once my mouth was open and my lips started moving, it was pretty much inevitable."

"Dammit, Harry," Billy sighed.

"Oh, come on, man. Sticks and stones may break her bones, but one wiseass will never hurt her. It's not a big deal."

"Not for you: You don't have to live with it. I do. So does Georgia."

I chewed on my lower lip for a second. I hadn't thought about it in those terms. I suddenly felt less than mature. "Ah," I said. "Oh. Um. Maybe I should apologize?"

He bent his head and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "Oh God, no. Things are bad enough already."

I frowned at him. "Is it really that important to you? The ceremony?"

"It's important to Georgia."

I winced. "Oh," I said. "Ah."

"Look, we've got a few hours. I'll stay here and try to sort things out with Eve," Billy said. "Do me a favor?"

"Hey, what's a best man for? Other than tackling a panicked groom if he tries to run."

He gave me a quick grin. "See if you can contact Georgia first? Maybe she's had car trouble or overslept or something. Or maybe she just left her phone on all night and it went dead."

"Sure," I said. "I'll take care of it."

I called Billy and Georgia's apartment and got no answer. Knowing Georgia, I expected her to be at the hospital, visiting Kirby. Billy might have been the combat leader of the merry band of college kids who had learned shape-shifting from an actual wolf, but Georgia was the manager, surrogate mom, and brains when there wasn't any violence on.

Kirby was on painkillers and groggy, but he told me Georgia hadn't been to see him. I talked to the duty nurse and confirmed that though his family was flying in from Texas to see him, he'd had no visitors since Billy and I left.

Odd.

I thought about mentioning it to Billy, but I didn't really know anything yet, and it wasn't like he needed *more* pressure.

"Don't get paranoid, Harry," I told myself. "Maybe she's got a hangover, too. Maybe she ran off with a male stripper." I waited to see if I was buying it, then shook my head. "And maybe Elvis and JFK are shackled up in a retirement home somewhere."

I went to Billy and Georgia's apartment.

They live in a place near the University of Chicago's campus, in a neighborhood that missed being an ugly one by maybe a hundred yards. It still wasn't the kind of place you'd want to hang around outside after dark. I didn't have a key to get in the building, so I pressed buttons one at a time until someone buzzed me in, and took the stairs up.

As I neared the apartment door, I knew that something was wrong. It wasn't like I saw or heard anything, magical or otherwise, but when I stopped before the door I had a nebulous but strong conviction that something bad had gone down.

I knocked. The door rattled and fell off the lower hinge. It swung open a few inches, drunkenly, upper hinges squealing. Splits and cracks that had been invisible until the door moved appeared in the wood, and the dead bolt rattled dully against the inside of the door, loose in its setting.

I stopped there for a long second, waiting and listening. Other than the whirring of a window fan at the end of the hall and someone playing an easy-listening station on the floor above me, there was nothing. I closed my eyes for a moment and extended my wizard's senses, testing the air nearby for any touch of magic upon it.

I felt nothing but the subtle energy that surrounded any home, a form of naturally occurring protective magic called the threshold. Billy and Georgia's apartment was the nominal headquarters of the Werewolves, and members came and went at all hours. It was never intended to be a permanent home—but there had been a lot of living in the little apartment, and its threshold was stronger than most. I slowly pushed the door open with my right hand.

The apartment had been torn to pieces.

A futon lay on its side, its metal frame twisted like a pretzel. The entertainment center had been pulled down from the wall, shattering equipment, scattering CDs and DVDs and vintage *Star Wars* action figures everywhere. The wooden table had been broken in two precisely in its center. One of the half-dozen chairs survived. The others were kindling. The microwave protruded from the drywall of an interior wall. The door of the fridge had taken out the bookcase across the room. Everything in the kitchen had been pulled down and scattered.

I moved in as quietly as I could—which is pretty damned quiet. I've done a lot of sneaking around. The bathroom looked like someone had taken a chain saw to it and followed up with explosives. The bedroom used to house computers and electronic stuff looked like the site of an airplane crash.

Billy and Georgia's bedroom was the worst of all of them.

Because there was blood on the floor and one wall.

Whatever had happened, I had missed it. Dammit. I wanted to kill something and I wanted to scream in Frustration and I wanted to throw up in Fear For Georgia.

But in my business, that kind of thing doesn't help much.

I went back into the living room. The phone near the door had survived. I dialed.

"Lieutenant Murphy, Special Investigations," answered a professional, bland voice.

"It's me, Murph," I told her.

Murphy knows me. Her tone changed at once. "My God, Harry, what's wrong?"

"I'm at Billy and Georgia's apartment," I said. "The place has been torn apart. There's blood."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Georgia's missing." I paused and said, "It's her wedding day, Murph."

"Five minutes," she said at once.

"I need you to pick something up for me on the way."

Murphy came through the door eight minutes later. She was the head of Chicago P.D.'s Special Investigations Department. They were the cops who got to handle all the crimes that didn't fall into anyone else's purview—stuff like vampire attacks and mystical assaults, as well as more mundane crimes like grave robbing. Plus all the really messy cases the other cops didn't want to bother with. SI is supposed to make everything fit neatly into the official reports, explaining away anything weird with logical, rational investigation.

SI spends a lot of time struggling with that last one. Murphy writes more Fiction than most novelists.

Murphy doesn't look like a cop, much less a monster cop. She's five nothing. She's got blond hair, blue eyes, and a cute nose. She's also got about a zillion gunnery awards and a shelf full of open-tournament martial arts trophies, and I once saw her kill a giant plant monster with a chain saw. She wore jeans, a white tee, sneakers, a baseball cap, and her hair was pulled back into a tail. She wore her gun in a shoulder rig, her badge around her neck, and had a backpack slung over one shoulder.

She came through the door and stopped in her tracks. She surveyed the room For a minute and then said, "What did this?"

I nodded at the twisted Futon Frame. "Something strong."

"I wish I was a big-time private investigator like you. Then I could figure these things out for myself."

"You bring it?" I asked.

She tossed me the backpack. "The rest is in the car. What's it for?"

I opened the pack, took out a bleached-white human skull, and put it down on the kitchen counter. "Bob, wake up."

Orange lights appeared in the skull's shadowed eye sockets, and then slowly grew brighter. The skull's jaws twitched and then opened into a pantomime of a wide yawn. A voice issued out, acoustics odd, like when you talk in a racquetball court. "What's up, boss?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Murphy swore. She took a step back and almost fell over the remains of the entertainment center.

Bob the Skull's eyelights brightened. "Hey, the cute blonde! Did you do her, Harry?" The skull spun in place on the counter and surveyed the damage. "Wow. You *did*! Way to go, stud!"

My face felt hot. "No, Bob," I growled.

"Oh," the skull said, crestfallen.

Murphy closed her mouth, blinking at the skull. "Uh. Harry?"

"This is Bob the Skull," I told her.

"It's a skull," she said. "That talks."

"Bob is actually the spirit inside. The skull is just the container it's in.

She looked blankly at me and then said, "It's a *skull*. That *talks*."

"Hey!" Bob protested. "I am not an it! I am definitely a he!"

"Bob is my lab assistant," I explained.

Murphy looked back at Bob and shook her head. "Just when I start thinking this magic stuff couldn't get weirder."

"Bob," I said. "Take a look around. Tell me what did this."

The skull spun obediently and promptly said, "Something strong."

Murphy gave me an oblique look.

"Oh, bite me," I told her. "Bob, I need to know if you can sense any residual magic."

"Ungawa, bwana," Bob said. He did another turnaround, slower, and the orange eyelights narrowed.

"Residual magic?" Murphy asked.

"Any time you use magic, it can leave a kind of mark on the area around you. Mostly it's so faint that sunrise wipes it away every morning. I can't always sense it."

"But he can?" Murphy asked.

"But he *can!*" Bob agreed. "Though not with all this chatter. I'm working over here."

I shook my head and picked up the phone again.

"Yes," said Billy. He sounded harried, and there was an enormous amount of background noise.

"I'm at your apartment," I said. "I came here looking for Georgia."

"What?" he said.

"Your apartment," I said louder.

"Oh, Harry," Billy said. "Sorry, this phone is giving me fits. Eve just talked to Georgia. She's here at the resort."

I frowned. "What? Is she all right?"

"Why wouldn't she be?" Billy said. Someone started shrieking in the background. "Crap, this battery's dying. Problem solved, come on up. I brought your tux."

"Billy, wait."

He hung up.

I called him back, and got nothing but voice mail.

"Aha!" Bob said. "Someone used that wolf spell the naked chick taught to Billy and the Werewolves, back over there by the bedroom," he reported. "And there were faeries here."

I frowned. "Faeries. You sure?"

"One hundred percent, boss. They tried to cover their tracks, but the threshold must have taken the zing out of their illusion."

I nodded and exhaled. "Dammit." Then I strode into the bathroom and hunkered down, pawing through the rubble.

"What are you doing?" Murphy asked.

"Looking for Georgia," I said. I found a plastic brush full of long strands the color of Georgia's hair and took several of them in hand.

I've gotten a lot of mileage out of my tracking spell, refining it over the years. I stepped out into the hall and drew a circle on the floor around me with a piece of chalk. Then I took Georgia's hairs and pressed them against my forehead, summoning up my focus and will. I shaped the magic I wanted to create, focused on the hairs, and released my will with a murmur of, "Interessari, interressarium."

Magic surged out of me, into the hairs and back. I broke the circle with my foot, and the spell flowed into action, creating a faint sense of pressure against the back of my head. I turned, and the sensation flowed over my skull in response, over my ear, then my cheekbone, and finally coming to rest directly between my eyes.

"She's this way," I said. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh?"

"I'm facing south," I said.

"Which is a problem?"

"Billy says she's at the wedding. Twenty miles north of here."

Murphy's eyes widened in comprehension. "A faerie has taken her place."

"Yeah."

"Why? Are they trying to place a spy?"

"No," I said quietly. "This is malicious. Probably because Billy and company backed me up during the battle when the last Summer Knight was murdered."

"That was years ago."

"Faeries are patient," I said. "And they don't forget. Billy's in danger."

"I'd say Georgia was the one in danger," Murphy said.

"I mean that Billy's in danger, too," I said.

"How so?"

"This isn't happening on their wedding day by chance. The faeries want to use it against them."

Murphy frowned. "What?"

"A wedding isn't just a ceremony," I said. "There's power in it. A pledging of one to another, a blending of energies. There's magic all through it."

"If you say so," she said, her tone wry. "What happens to him if he marries a faerie?"

"Conservatives get real upset," I said absently. "But I'm not sure, magically speaking. Bob?"

"Oh," Bob said. "Um. Well, if we assume this is one of the Winter Sidhe, then he's going to be lucky to survive the honeymoon. If he does, well. She'll be able to influence him, long-term. He'll be bound to her, the way the Winter Knights are bound to the Winter Queens. She'll be able to impose her will over his. Change the way he thinks and feels about things."

I ground my teeth. "And if she changes him enough, it will drive him insane."

"Usually, yup," Bob said. His voice brightened. "But don't worry, boss. Odds are he'll be dead before sunrise tomorrow. He might even die happy."

"That isn't going to happen," I said. I checked my watch. "The wedding is in three hours. Georgia might need help now." I looked back at Murphy. "You carrying?"

"Two on me. More in the car."

"Now there's a girl who knows how to party!" Bob said.

I popped the skull back into my backpack harder than I strictly had to, and zipped it shut. "Feel like saving the day?"

Her eyes sparkled, but she kept her tone bored. "On the weekend? Sounds too much like work."

We started from the apartment together. "I'll pay you in donuts."

"Dresden, you pig. That cop-donut thing is a vicious stereotype."

"Donuts with little pink sprinkles," I said.

"Professional profiling is just as bad as racial profiling."

I nodded. "Yeah. But I know you want the little pink sprinkles."

"That isn't the point," she said loftily, and we got into her car.

We buckled in, and I said, more quietly, "You don't have to come with me, Karrin."

"Yes," she said. "I do."

I nodded and focused on the tracking spell, turning my head south. "Thataway."

The worst thing about being a wizard is all the presumption, people's expectations. Pretty much everyone expects me to be some kind of con artist, since it is a well-known fact that there is no such thing as magic. Of those who know better, most of them think that I can just snap my fingers, poof, and have whatever I want. Dirty dishes? Snap my fingers and they wash themselves, like in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Need to talk to a friend? Poof, teleport them in from wherever they are, because the magic knows where to find them, all by itself.

Magic ain't like that. Or I sure as hell wouldn't drive a beat-up old Volkswagen.

It's powerful, true, and useful, and enormously advantageous, but ultimately it is an art, a science, a craft, a tool. It doesn't go out and do things by itself. It doesn't create something from nothing. Using it takes talent and discipline and practice and a lot of work, and none of it comes free.

Which is why my spell led us to downtown Chicago and suddenly became less useful.

"We've circled this block three times," Murphy told me. "Can't you get a more precise fix on it?"

"Do I look like one of those GPS thingies?" I sighed.

"Define 'thingie,'" Murphy said.

"It's my spell," I said. "It's oriented to the points of the compass. I didn't really have the z-axis in mind when I designed it and it only works for that when I'm right on top of the target. I keep meaning to go back and fix that, but there's never time."

"I had a marriage like that," Murphy said. She stopped at a light and stared up. The block held six buildings—three apartments, two office buildings, and an old church. "In there. Somewhere. It could take a lot of time to search that."

"So call in all the king's horses and all the king's men," I said.

She shook her head. "I might be able to get a couple, but since Rudolph moved to Internal Affairs, I've been flagged. If I start calling in people left and right without a damned good logical, rational, wholly normal reason . . ."

I grunted. "I get it. We need to get closer. The closer I get to Georgia, the more precise the tracking spell will be."

Murphy nodded once and pulled over in front of a fire hydrant, parking the car. "Let's be smart about this. Six buildings. Where would a faerie take her?"

"Not the church. Holy ground is uncomfortable for them." I shook my head. "Not the apartments. Too many people there. Too easy for someone to hear or see something."

"Office buildings on a weekend," Murphy said. "Empty as you can find in Chicago. Which one?"

"Let's take a look. Maybe the spell can give me an idea."

It took ten minutes to walk around the outside of both buildings. The spell remained wonderfully nonspecific, though I knew Georgia was within a hundred yards or so. I sat down at the curb in disgust. "Dammit," I said, pushing at my hair. "There has to be something."

"Would a faerie be able to magick herself in and out of there?"

"Yes and no," I said. "She couldn't just wander in through the wall, or poof herself inside. But she could walk in under a veil, so that no one saw her—or else saw an illusion of what she wanted them to see."

"Can't you look for residual whasis again?"

It was a good idea. I got Bob and tried it, while Murphy found a phone and tried to reach Billy or anyone who could reach Billy. After an hour's effort, we had accomplished enormous amounts of nothing.

"In case I haven't mentioned it before," I said, "dealing with Faeries is an enormous pain in the ass." Someone in a passing car flicked a still-smoldering cigarette butt onto the concrete near me. I kicked it through a sewer grate in disgust.

"She covered her tracks again?"

"Yeah." "How?"

I shrugged. "Lot of ways. Scatter little glamours around to misdirect us. Only used her magic very lightly, to keep from leaving a big footprint. If she did her thing in a crowded area, enough people's life force passing by would cover it. Or she could have used running water to—"

I stopped talking and my gaze snapped back to the sewer grate.

I could hear water running through it in a low, steady stream.

"Down there," I said. "She's taken Georgia to Undertown."

Murphy stared at the stairs leading down to a tunnel with brick walls and shook her head. "I wouldn't have believed this was here."

We stood at the end of an uncompleted wing of Chicago's underground commuter tunnels, at a broken section of wall hidden behind a few old tarps that led down into the darkness of Undertown.

Murphy had thrown on an old Cubs jacket over her shirt. She switched guns, putting her favorite Sig away in exchange for the Glock she wore holstered on one hip. The gun had a little flashlight built onto the underside of its barrel, and she flicked it on. "I mean, I knew there were some old tunnels," Murphy said. "But not this."

I grunted and took off the silver pentacle amulet I wore around my neck. I held it in my right hand, my fingers clutching the chain against the solid, round length of oak in my right hand, about two feet long and covered with carved runes and sigils—my blasting rod. I sent an effort of will into the amulet, and the silver pentacle began to glow with a gentle, blue-white light. "Yeah. The Manhattan Project was run out of the tunnels here until they moved it to the Southwest. Plus the town kept sinking into the swamp for a hundred and fifty years. There are whole buildings sunk right into the ground. The Mob dug places during Prohibition. People built bomb shelters during the fifties and sixties. And other things have added more, plus gateways back and forth to the spirit world."

"Other things?" Murphy asked, gun steady on the darkness below. "Like what?"

"Things," I said, staring down at the patient, lightless murk of Undertown. "Anything that doesn't like sunlight or company. Vampires, ghouls, some of the nastier faeries, obviously. Once I fought this wacko who kept summoning up fungus demons."

"Are you stalling?" Murphy asked.

"Maybe I am," I sighed. "I've been down there a few times. Never been good."

"How you wanna do this?"

"Like we did the vampire lair. Let me go first with the shield. Something jumps out at us, I'll drop and hold it off until you kill it."

Murphy nodded soberly. I swallowed a lump of fear out of my throat. It settled into my stomach like a nugget of ice. I prepared my shield, and the same color light as emanated from my pentacle surrounded it, drizzling heatless blue-white sparks in an irregular stream. I prepared myself to use my blasting rod if I had to, and started down the stairs, following the tracking spell toward Georgia.

The old brick stairs ended at a rough stone slope into the earth. Water ran down the walls and in rivulets down the sides of the tunnel. We went forward, through an old building that might have been a schoolhouse, judging by the rotted piles of wood and a single old slate chalkboard fallen from one wall. The floor was tilted to one side. The next section of tunnel was full of freezing, dirty, knee-deep water until it sloped up out of the water, went round a corner where the walls had been cut by rough tools, then opened into a wider chamber.

It was a low-ceilinged cave—low for me, anyway. Most folks wouldn't have been troubled. Three feet from the doorway, the floor dropped away into silent, black water that stretched out beyond the reach of my blue wizard light. Murphy stepped up next to me, and the light on her gun sent a silver spear of white light out over the water.

There, on a slab of stone that rose up no more than an inch or two from the water's surface, lay Georgia.

Murphy's light played over her. Georgia was a tall woman—in high-enough heels, she could have looked me in the eye. She'd been stork-skinny and frizzy-haired when I met her. The years in between had softened the lines of her and brought out a natural confidence and intelligence that made her an extraordinarily attractive, if not precisely beautiful, woman. She was naked, laid on her back with her arms crossed over her chest in repose, funeral-style. She took slow breaths. Her skin was discolored from the cold, her lips tinged blue.

"Georgia?" I called, feeling like a dummy. But I didn't know of any other way to see if she was awake. She didn't stir.

"What now?" Murphy asked. "You go get her while I cover you?"

I shook my head. "Can't be as easy as it looks."

"Why not?"

"Because it never is." I bowed my head for a moment, pressed my fingertips lightly to my forehead, between my eyebrows, and concentrated on bringing up my Sight.

One of the things common to all wizards is the Sight. Call it a sixth sense, a third eye, whatever you please, around the world everyone with enough magic has the Sight. It lets you actually see the forces of energy at work in the world around you—life, death, magic, what have you. It isn't always easy to understand what I see, and sometimes it isn't pretty—and anything a wizard views with his Sight is there, in Technicolor, never fading. Forever.

That's why you have to be careful what you choose to Look at. I don't like doing it, ever. You never know what it is you'll See.

But when it came to finding out what kinds of magic might be between me and Georgia, I didn't have many options. I opened my Sight and Looked out over the water to Georgia.

The water was shot through with slithery tendrils of greenish light—a spell of some kind, just under its placid surface. If the water moved, the spell would react. I couldn't tell how. The stone Georgia lay upon held a dull, pulsing energy, a sullen violet radiance that wound in slow, hypnotic spirals through the rock. A binding, I was sure, something to keep her from moving. Another spell played over and through Georgia herself—a cloud of deep blue sparkles that lay against her skin, especially around her head. A sleeping spell? I couldn't make out any details from here.

"Well?" Murphy said.

I closed my eyes and released my Sight, always a mildly disorienting experience. The remnants of my hangover made it worse than usual. I reported my findings to Murphy.

"Well," she said. "I sure am glad we have a wizard on the case. Otherwise we might be standing here without any idea what to do next."

I grimaced and stepped to the water's edge. "This is water magic. It's tricky stuff. I'll try to take down the alarm spell on the surface of the pool, then swim out and get Geo—"

Without warning, the water erupted into a boiling Froth at my Feet, and a claw, a Freaking pincer as big as a couple of basketballs, shot out of the water and clamped down on my ankle.

I let out a battle cry. Sure, a lot of people might have mistaken it For a sudden yelp of unmanly Fear, but trust me. It was a battle cry.

The thing, whatever it was, pulled my leg out From under me, trying to drag me in. I could see slick, wet black shell. I whipped my blasting rod around to point at the thing and snarled, "Fuego!"

A lance of fire as thick as my thumb lashed from the tip of my blasting rod, which was pointed at the thing's main body. It hit the water and it boiled into steam. It smashed into the shell of the creature with such force that it simply ripped the thing's body from its clawed limb. I brought my shield up, a pale, fragile-looking quarter dome of blue light that coalesced into place before the steam boiled back into my eyes.

I squirmed away from the water on my butt, shaking wildly at the severed limb that still clutched me.

The waters surged again, and another slick-shelled thing grabbed at me. And another. And another. Dozens of the creatures were rushing toward our side of the pool, and the pressure wave rushing before them rose a foot off the pool's surface.

"Shellycobbs!" I shouted, and flicked another burst of flame at the nearest, driving it back. "They're shellycobbs!"

"Whatever," Murphy said, stepped up beside me, and started shooting. The third shellycobb took three hits in the same center area of its shell and cracked like a restaurant lobster.

It bought me a second to act, and I raised the blasting rod and tried something new on the fly, a blending of a blast of fire with my shield magic. I pointed the rod at one side of the shore, gathered my will, and thundered, "Ignus defendarius!"

A bar of flame, bright enough to hurt my eyes, shot out to one side of the room. I drew a line across the stone with the tip of the blasting rod, and as the flame touched the stone it adhered, spooling out from my blasting rod until it had formed a solid line between us and the water, and an opaque curtain of

flame three feet high separated us from the shellycobbs. Angry rattles and splashes came from the far side of the curtain.

If the fire dropped, the faerie water monsters would swarm us.

The fire took a lot of energy to keep up, and if I tried to hold it too long I'd probably black out. Worse, it was still fire—it needed oxygen to keep burning, and in those cramped tunnels there wasn't going to be much of it around for breathing if the fire stayed lit too long. All of which meant that we only had seconds and had to do something. Fast.

"Murph!" I snapped. "Could you carry her?"

She turned wide blue eyes to me, her gun still held ready and pointing at the shellycobbs. "What?"

"Can you carry her?"

She gritted her teeth and nodded once.

I met her eyes for a dangerous second and asked, "Do you trust me?"

Fire crackled. Water boiled. Steam hissed.

"Yes, Harry," she whispered.

I flashed her a grin. "Jump the fire. Run to her."

"Run to her?"

"And hurry," I said, lifting my left arm, focusing as my shield bracelet began to glow, blue-white energy swiftly becoming incandescent. "Now!"

Murphy broke into a run and hurtled over the wall of fire.

"Forzare!" I shouted, and extended my left arm and my will.

I reshaped the shield, this time forming it in a straight, flat plane about three feet wide. It shot through the wall of flame, over the water, to the stone upon which Georgia lay. Murphy landed on the bridge of pure force, kept her balance, and poured on the speed, sprinting over the water to the unconscious young woman.

Murphy slapped her gun back into its holster, grabbed Georgia, and with a shout and a grunt of effort managed to get the tall girl into a fireman's carry. She started back, much more slowly than she'd gone forward.

The shellycobbs thrashed even more furiously, and the strain of holding both spells started to become a physical sensation, a spidery, trembling weakness in my arms and legs. I clenched my teeth and my will, focusing on

holding the wall and the bridge until Murphy could return. My vision distorted, shrinking down to a tunnel.

And then Murphy shouted again and plunged through the fire, this time more slowly. She let out a gasp of pain as she got singed, then stumbled past me.

I released the bridge with a gasp of relief. "Go!" I said. "Come on, let's go!"

Together, we were barely able to get Georgia lifted. I was only able to hold the wall of flame against the shellycobbs for about fifty feet when I had to release the spell or risk passing out. I guess the shellycobbs weren't sprinters, because Murphy and I outran them, dragging the naked girl out of her Undertown prison and back to Murphy's car.

In all that time, Georgia never stirred. Murphy had a blanket in her trunk. I wrapped Georgia in it and got in the backseat with her. Murphy gunned the car and headed for the Lincolnshire Marriott Resort Hotel, twenty miles north of town and one of the most ostentatious places in the area to hold a wedding. Traffic wasn't good, and according to the clock in Murphy's car, we had less than ten minutes before the wedding was supposed to begin.

I struggled in the backseat, fumbling to keep Georgia from bouncing off the ceiling, to get my backpack open, and to ignore the cuts the shellycobbs pincer left on my leg.

"Is that blood on her face?" Murphy asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Dried. But I figure it wasn't hers. Bob said she wolfed out in the apartment. I think Georgia got her fangs into Jenny Greenteeth before she got grabbed."

"Jenny who?"

"Jenny Greenteeth," I said. "She's one of the sidhe. Faerie nobility, sidekick to the Winter Lady."

"Are her teeth green?"

"Like steamed spinach. I saw her leading a big old bunch of shellycobbs just like those guys, back at the Faerie war. If Maeve wanted to lay out some payback for Billy and company, Jenny's the one she'd send."

"She's dangerous?"

"You know the stories about things that tempt you down to the water's edge and then drown you? Sirens that lure sailors to their deaths? Mermaids who carry men off to their homes under the sea?"

"Yeah?"

"That's Jenny. Only she's not so cuddly."

I dug Bob out of my backpack. The skull took one look at the sleeping, naked Georgia and leered. "First you get demolition-level sex with the cop chick, and now a threesome, all in the same day!" he cried. "Harry, you have to write *Penthouse* about this!"

"Not now, Bob. I need you to identify the spell that's been laid on Georgia."

The skull made a disgusted sound but focused on the girl. "Oh," he said after a second. "Wow. That's a good one. Definitely sidhe work."

"I figure it's Jenny Greenteeth. Give me details."

"Jenny got game. It's a sleep spell," he said. "A seriously good one, too. Malicious as hell."

"How do I lift it?"

"You can't," Bob said.

"Fine. How do I break it?"

"You don't understand. It's been tied into the victim. It's being fueled by the victim's life force. If you shatter the spell . . ."

I nodded, getting it. "I'll do the same to her. Is it impossible to get rid of it?"

"No, not at all. I'm saying that *you* couldn't lift it. Whoever threw it could do that, of course. But there's another key."

I grew wroth and scowled. "What key, Bob?"

"Uh," he said, somehow giving the impression that he'd shrugged. "A kiss ought to do it. You know. True love, Prince Charming, that kind of thing."

"That won't be hard," I said, relaxing a little. "We'll definitely get to the wedding before he goes off alone with Jenny and gets drowned."

"Oh, good," Bob said. "Of course, the girl still kicks off, but you can't save all the people, all the time."

"What?" I demanded. "Why does Georgia die?"

"Oh, if the Werewolf kid goes through the ceremony with Jenny and plights his troth and so on, it's going to contaminate him. I mean, if he's married to another, it can't really be pure love. Jenny's claim on him would prevent the kiss from lifting the spell."

"Which means Georgia won't wake up," I said, chewing on my lip. "At what point in the wedding does it happen, exactly?"

"You mean, when will it be too late?" Bob asked.

"Yeah. I mean, when they say, 'I do,' when they swap rings, or what?"

"Rings and vows," Bob said, mild scorn in his voice. "Way overrated."

Murphy glanced up at me in the rearview mirror and said, "It's the kiss, Harry. It's the kiss."

"Buffy's right!" Bob agreed cheerily.

I met Murphy's eyes in the mirror for just a second and then said, "Yeah. I guess I should have figured."

Murphy smiled a little.

"The kiss seals the deal," Bob prattled. "If Billy kisses Jenny Greenteeth, the girl with the long legs ain't waking up, and he ain't long for the world, either."

"Murph," I said, tense.

She rolled down the car's window, slapped a magnetic cop light on the roof, and started up the siren. Then she stomped on the gas and all but gave me whiplash.

Under normal circumstances, the trip to the resort would have taken half an hour. I'm not saying that Murphy's driving was suicidal. Not quite. But after the third near collision, I closed my eyes and fought off the urge to chant "there's no place like home."

Murphy got us there in twenty minutes.

Tires screeched as she swung into the resort's parking lot. "Drop me there," I said, pointing. "Park behind the reception tent so folks won't see Georgia. I'll go get Billy."

I bailed out of the car, which never actually came to a full stop, clutching my blasting rod, and ran into the hotel. The concierge blinked at me from behind her desk.

"Wedding!" I barked at her. "Where?"

She blinked and pointed a finger down the hall. "Um. The ballroom."

"Right!" I said, and sprinted that way. I could see the open double doors and heard a man's voice over a loudspeaker: "... until death do you part?"

Eve McAlister stood at the doorway in her lavender silk outfit, and when she saw me her eyes narrowed into sharp little chips of ice. "There, that's him. That's the man."

Two big, beefy guys in matching badly fitted maroon dress coats appeared—hotel security goons. They stepped directly into my path, and the

larger one said, "Sir, I'm sorry, but this is a private function. I'll have to ask you to leave."

I ground my teeth. "You have got to be kidding me! Private? I'm the best fucking man!"

The loudspeaker voice in the ballroom said, "Then by the power vested in me . . ."

"I will not allow you to further disrupt this wedding, or tarnish my good name," Eve said in a triumphant tone. "Gentlemen, please escort him from the premises before he causes a scene."

"Yes, ma'am," the bigger goon said. He stepped toward me, glancing down at the blasting rod. "Sir, let's walk to the doors now."

Instead, I darted forward, toward the doors, taking the goons by surprise with the abrupt action. "Billy!" I shouted.

The goons recovered in an eyeblink and tackled me. They were professional goons. I went down under them, and it drove the breath out of me.

The loudspeaker voice said, "... man and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

I lay there on my back under maybe five hundred pounds of security goon, struggling to breathe, staring at nothing but ceiling.

A ceiling lined with a whole bunch of automated fire extinguishers.

I slammed my head into the Boss Goon's nose and bit Backup Goon on the arm until he screamed and jerked it away, freeing my right arm.

I pointed the blasting rod up, reached for my power, and wheezed, ". . . fuego . . ."

Flame billowed up to the ceiling.

A fire alarm howled. The sprinklers flicked on and turned the inside of the hotel into a miniature monsoon.

Chaos erupted. The ballroom was filled with screams. The floor shook a little as hundreds of guests leaped to their feet and started looking for an exit. The security goons were smart enough to realize that they suddenly had an enormous problem on their hands, and then scrambled away from the doorway before they could be trampled.

I got to my feet in time to see a minister fleeing a raised platform, where a figure in Georgia's wedding dress had hunched over, while Billy, spiffy in his tux, stared at her in pure shock. That much running water grounded out whatever glamour the bride might have been using, and her features melted back into those I'd seen before— she lost an inch or two of height and her proportions changed. Georgia's rather sharp features flowed into a visage of

haunting, unearthly beauty. Georgia's brown hair became the same green as emeralds and seaweed.

Jenny Greenteeth turned toward Billy, her trademark choppers bared in a viridian snarl, and her hand swept at his throat, inhuman nails gleaming.

Billy may have been shocked, but not so much that he didn't recognize the threat. His arm intercepted Jenny's and he drove into her, pushing both hands forward with the power of his arms, shoulders, and legs. Billy's got a low center of gravity, and he's no skinny weakling. The push sent Jenny back several steps and off the edge of the platform. She fell in a tangle of white fabric and lace.

"Billy!" I shouted again, almost managing to make it loud. My voice was lost in the sounds of panic and the wailing fire alarms, so I gritted my teeth, brought my shield bracelet up to its flashiest, spark-liest, shiniest charge, and thrust into the press of the crowd. To them, it must have looked like someone waving a road flare around, and there was a steady stream of interjections that averaged out to, "Eek!" I forged ahead through them.

By the time I was past the crowd, Jenny Greenteeth had risen to her feet, tearing the bridal gown off like it was made of tissue paper. She stretched one hand into a grasping claw and clenched at the air. Ripples of angry power fluttered between her fingers, and an ugly green sphere of light appeared in her hand.

She leaped nimbly back up to the platform, unencumbered by the dress, and flung the green sphere at Billy. He ducked. It flew over his head, leaving a hole with blackened, crumbling edges in the wall behind him.

Jenny howled and summoned another sphere, but by that time I was within reach. Standing on the floor by the platform gave me a perfect shot at her knees, and I swing my blasting rod with both hands. The blow elicited a shriek of pain from the sidhe woman, and she flung the second sphere at me. I caught it on my shield bracelet and it rebounded upon her, searing a black line across the outside of one thigh.

The sidhe screamed and threw herself back, her weight mostly on one leg, and snarled to me, "Thou wouldst have saved this one, wizard. But I will yet exact my Lady's vengeance twofold."

And with a graceful leap, she flew over our heads, forty feet to the door, and vanished from sight as swiftly and nimbly as a deer.

"Harry!" Billy said, staring in shock at the soaking-wet room. "What the hell is happening here? What the hell was that thing?"

I grabbed his tux. "No time. Come with me."

He did but asked, "Why?"

"I need you to kiss Georgia."

"Uh," he said. "What?"

"I found Georgia. She's outside. The watery tart knows it. She's going to kill her. You gotta kiss her, *now*."

"Oh," he said.

We both ran, and suddenly the bottom fell out of my stomach.

Vengeance twofold.

Oh God.

Jenny Greenteeth would kill Murphy, too.

Outside the hotel was a mess. People were wandering around in herds. Emergency sirens were already on the way. A couple of cars had smashed into one another in the parking lot, probably as they both gunned it for the road. Everyone out there seemed to be determined to get in our way, slowing our pursuit.

We ran to where Murphy had parked her car.

It was lying on its side. Windows were broken. One of the doors had been torn off. I didn't see anyone around. But Billy suddenly cocked his head to one side and then pointed at the reception tent. We ran for it as quietly as we could, and Billy threw himself inside. I heard him let out a short cry.

I followed.

Georgia lay on the ground, hardly covered by the blanket at all, limbs sprawled bonelessly. Billy rushed over to her.

Just past them I saw Murphy.

Jenny Greenteeth stood over her at the refreshments table, hands locked in Murphy's hair, pushing her face down into a full punch bowl. The wicked faerie's eyes were alight with rage and madness and an almost sexual arousal. Murphy's arms twitched a little, and Jenny gasped, lips parting, and pushed down harder.

Murphy's hand fluttered one more time and went still.

The next thing I knew, I was smashing my blasting rod down onto Jenny Greenteeth, screaming incoherently, pounding as hard as I possibly could. I drove the faerie back from Murphy, who slid limply to the ground. Then Jenny recovered her balance, struck out at me with one arm, and I found out a fact I hadn't known before.

Jenny Greenteeth was something strong.

I landed several feet away, not far from Billy and Georgia, watching birdies and little lights fly around. On another table, next to me, was another punch bowl.

Jenny Greenteeth flew at me, lust in her inhumanly lovely features, her feline eyes smoldering.

"Billy!" I slurred. "Dammit, kiss her! Now!"

Billy blinked at me.

Then he turned to Georgia, lifting the upper half of her body in his arms, and kissed her with a desperation and passion that no one can fake.

I didn't get to see what happened, because faster than you could say "oxygen deprivation," Jenny Greenteeth had ahold of my hair and my face smashed against the bottom of the punch bowl.

I fought her, but she was stronger than anything human and she had all kinds of leverage. I could feel her pressed against me, body tensing and shifting, rubbing against me. Getting off as she murdered me. The lights started to go out. This was what she did. She knew what she was doing.

Lucky for me, she wasn't the only one.

I suddenly fell, getting the whole huge punch bowl to turn over on me as I did, drenching me in bright red punch. I gasped and wiped stinging liquid from my eyes and looked up in time to see a pair of wolves, one tall and lean, one smaller and heavier, leap at Jenny Greenteeth and bring her to the ground. Screams and snarls blended, and none of them sounded human.

Jenny tried to run, but the lean wolf ripped across the back of her unwounded leg with its fangs, severing the hamstring. The faerie went down. The wolves were on her before she could scream again. The wheel turns, and Jenny Greenteeth never had a chance. The wolves knew what they were doing.

This was what *they* did.

I crawled over to Murphy. Her eyes were open and staring, her body and features slack. Some part of my brain remembered the steps for CPR. I started doing it. I adjusted her position, sealed my lips to Murphy's, and breathed for her. Then compressions. Breathe. Compressions.

"Come on, Murph," I whispered. "Come on."

I covered her mouth with mine and breathed again.

For one second, for one teeny, tiny instant, I felt her mouth move. I felt her head tilt, her lips soften, and my oh-so-professional CPR— just for a second, mind you—felt almost, *almost* like a kiss.

Then she started coughing and sputtering, and I sank back from her in relief. She turned on her side, breathing hard for a moment, and then looked up at me with dazed blue eyes. "Harry?"

I leaned down, causing runnels of punch to slide into one of my eyes, and asked quietly, "Yeah?"

"You have fruit punch mouth," she whispered.

Her hand found mine, weak but warm. I held it. We sat together.

Billy and Georgia got married that night in Father Forthill's study, at Saint Mary of the Angels, an enormous old church. No one was there but them, the padre, Murphy, and me. After all, as far as most anyone else knew, they'd been married at that disastrous travesty of a farce in Lincolnshire.

The ceremony was simple and heartfelt. I stood with Billy. Murphy stood with Georgia. They both looked radiantly happy. They held hands the whole time, except when they were exchanging rings.

Murphy and I stepped back when they got to the vows.

"Not exactly a fairy-tale wedding," she whispered.

"Sure it was," I said. "Had a kiss and an evil stepmother and everything."

Murphy smiled at me.

"Then by the power vested in me," the padre said, beaming at the pair of them from behind his spectacles, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss th—"

They beat him to it.