



# Saved by the Rat (Necromancer)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Robin

I've been managing my uncle's secondhand building-supply center long enough to know that I need to make an impression on new employees first. I'm five-foot-two and skinny and look younger than twenty-five. I start with the power suit and the power attitude, until I get the upper hand. Problem is, with Alaric, I've been bossing him around wearing the stupid tie and shiny shoes for a week, and I don't think he's impressed yet.

Alaric

The kid running this store doesn't know that dangerous artifacts were dumped here in the clearance of a local sorcerer's house. Robin's human. To him, magic's just a trick and a joke. My familiar Harry and I know better. If I don't find the missing grimoire bound in human skin before someone less scrupulous does, we're all in trouble. I need to ignore Robin's cute ass and keep searching, although that ass gives me an idea for a distraction if I need one.

Saved by the Rat is a standalone 17,000-word story set in the Necromancer universe in modern times. (content warning for violence)

**Total Pages (Source):** 4

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Robin

“What’s that?”

I jumped at the deep voice behind me. My knuckle snagged on the sharp corner of a cabinet hinge, and a drop of blood dripped onto the scuffed wood. Well, I’d be refinishing the cabinet anyway. I swiped up the drop, sucked my knuckle, and waited to turn until I had my unruffled-boss face on. Then I stood and pivoted. “It’s an antique four-door armoire from that estate leftovers package we got. In bad shape but salvageable. Did you finish sorting the light fixtures I assigned you?” I raised an eyebrow as if Alaric wasn’t a foot taller than me, ten years older, and far more imposing.

“I’m almost done.”

I kept my eyebrow high, because it was one of the useful weapons in my boss arsenal, and because finishing the lights would be the unending work of months, not hours.

“I’m taking a break,” Alaric admitted. “I didn’t know this room was in use.”

“This is my private workshop.”

When I’d agreed to manage the dying Three Rs business for my uncle, I’d quickly decided I needed something for myself. I’d always loved fixing old furniture, and there was no better place than the “reuse, restore, reimagine” outlet to get my hands

on lots of beat-up candidates. I did the work in my free time plus some slow winter work hours, gaining skills as I went along. The business got half the sale price of the finished product. Win, win.

My long-term employees knew all about that of course. Alaric had only been working for me for a week. I was still in my business-suit-and-call-me-Mr.-Forrest stage of easing a new employee into the workplace. Sadly, I wasn't yet confident I'd impressed Alaric with our relative status, so I hadn't relaxed down to jeans and Call-me-Robin yet. With most employees, that took a couple of days. This guy was a challenge.

He peered down his nose at me, although his gaze kept darting to the tall cabinet behind me. "I didn't know you— we— got furniture from the sorcerer's house."

"Are you superstitious?" I rapped a knuckle on the front panel, hiding a wince at having used the skinned one. Ouch. I pressed my thumb casually over the new drop of blood. I'd get a Band-Aid when I was out of Alaric's sight. "Sorcerers are mostly smoke and mirrors. A few minor tricks, but it's not like their household goods will attack you. I promise, it's just a cabinet."

"If you say so." His eyes seemed unfocused as he turned his attention to the other items in the room. "Are any of the rest from that shipment?"

"A couple." I shrugged and gestured him toward the door. "I'm not dressed to work in here today." Eager as I was to get to refinishing that fascinating dented and jammed armoire, I did have a job to do. Which included supervising Alaric. "Show me what you've accomplished."

Alaric backed toward the door, giving way as I advanced.

When we were clear of the room, I— for no reason I could articulate, and out of my

norm for the middle of the day— locked the door and pocketed the key. “Go on. I’m going to swing by the office for a Band-Aid and then I’ll be right with you.”

“Okay.” Alaric threw a last glance at the locked room, then turned and strolled off across the warehouse floor.

He was wearing jeans, and his ass looked fantastic in them. Sadly, even if he was gay, he was also my employee. Not to mention seeming like he’d fit better in his own three-piece suit in a corner office. His air of authority didn’t go with being a low-wage worker amid the jumble of the Three Rs, and his unimpressed attitude made me want to push back. Despite a week of lunches in the breakroom and idle chatter on the warehouse floor, I knew almost nothing about him.

Except that he was hot, he was a challenge, and clearly, blurring any lines with Alaric would be a huge mistake.

I took a moment in the office to wipe the blood off my skin, disinfect the cut, and wrap my torn knuckle with a Band-Aid from the well-stocked first aid kit. Then I settled my glasses straighter on my nose, ran a hand over my hair, and headed to the north corner of the giant warehouse where we kept the lights. Alaric was bent over a big cardboard carton, digging through the contents. I didn’t let myself appreciate his ass. In fact, I deliberately scraped my shoes on the concrete floor so he straightened and turned.

Alaric said, “Mr. Forrest, have you seen the crap that’s in this load?”

I shrugged. “Not specifically, but I assure you, that’s par for the course. What did we get?”

He hauled out a cheap chandelier-style fixture, two of the arms bent. “Five of these and not one usable. And a bunch of sconces with the cheap brass finishes chipped

up.”

Our store was a non-profit, taking in used and leftover building materials and fixtures that would otherwise fill the dump, and turning them into an inexpensive source for reuse. Sadly, sometimes reusable was in the eye of the beholder. “Mark them for disposal, then.” I gave him a nod. “I trust your judgement.”

His expression did something complicated, as if he wasn’t sure he liked my tone and words.

“There’s a reason we have daily dumpster pickup,” I reminded him.

He sneered at the boxes on the floor. “You ought to charge a disposal fee to the remodelers who drop off this level of crap.”

“Nah, we just keep a do-not-fly list. If someone seems like they’re using us to get rid of garbage, they get two warnings and then they go on the list. There are only a few names there. Most of the local crews understand the value of reusing what we can, and they send us workable stuff. It’s the homeowners who try to get donation value from crap, and they’re low volume.”

Alaric nudged the box with his foot, drawing a thin clank from the contents, and then focused on me. “What about estate sales? The leftovers. Does that happen often?”

“Sometimes. Depends on what the heirs want to do with what’s left once the good stuff has sold.”

“Like that sorcerer?” I wondered if I was imagining the intent look in his eyes. He glanced around. “How much of the stuff in here was his?”

“Magnus Fairborn?” I chuckled. “Although I doubt that’s the name he was born with.

We got a truckload. His sister wanted to get rid of everything. I don't think she liked her brother much. There are boxes I haven't even opened."

"I could look through them," Alaric volunteered.

"Sure, but you could also get these cartons of light fixtures sorted and the good stuff priced and on the shelves. Which is higher priority."

Alaric waved at the tall industrial shelving around us, stuffed full of lights with orange price tags attached. "How can that be high priority? You have more lights already than anyone needs. I could be doing something more useful."

"Lights sell." I let my tone go frosty. "And new ones are constantly coming in, as you've found out, which means we need to try to stay on top of the inventory." Lights were fragile, dusty, with a lower usable ratio than a lot of the categories, and unending. When I had doubts whether a new employee would stick with the job, I started them here. Not usually for a week straight, I grant you. He'd actually made inroads on the backlog. The area had never been this organized.

Alaric was a puzzle. His jeans and shirts were pricey enough that if he needed a near-minimum-wage job, the change was recent. His hands had no calluses, his dark hair had been cut by a stylist three grades above the local Fast Clips, and his sneakers didn't show much wear. If we were a front for stolen goods or smuggling, I'd have guessed he was undercover. But the closest we got to a crime was when a drug dealer who was being chased by the cops tossed his stash into our dumpster.

So I'd had him doing light fixtures for a week now. I wasn't sure which of us would break first. I added, "Or did you mean you want to do something more fun?"

His sudden grin shocked me. Wide, almost boyish, it took a decade off his lean, tanned face. "You caught me. Yes, please, Mr. Forrest, can I please move on from

cheap brass and plated nickel to something more interesting?”

Fuck. I liked him saying “please.” Way, way too much. Still, he’d taken a step down off his high horse, so maybe it was time for me to compromise. Not to the extent of giving him my first name, but since he was still coming in to work every day, it was time to lay off the pressure. “Sure. I’ll start showing you how to work the register and check out customers. Heck, with your face, you can probably persuade tentative buyers to give secondhand a shot.”

He blinked at me. “My face?”

Oops, don't cater to his ego. “You look knowledgeable,” I backpedaled. “Even if that’s an illusion at the moment. Come on. Wash your hands and I’ll introduce you to Gertrude.”

“Gertrude?”

“Our main computer. When she reached the venerable age of ten, we threw her a party.”

He chuckled, and that was a good look for him too, his full lips turned up, the corners of his dark eyes crinkled with amusement. “Out of warranty, huh?”

“Way out.”

We had handwash stations around the store and he cleaned up at the nearest. I didn’t watch— okay, I did— as the water ran over his long fingers and veiny forearms. He toweled his hands dry and followed me to the front of the store.

Ten minutes at the terminal showed me Alaric was a fast learner. A customer came to the desk with two cans of donated excess paint and I let him check her out. He

handled the transaction just fine, but then turned to me. “What’s the usual reward for learning the register?”

I cocked my head. “I thought learning the register was the reward for working hard on the lights.”

“Nah, you have to stack rewards. Like, doing lights gets you register. Register gets you, I don’t know, lumber? And lumber gets me a chance to dig through mystery boxes. Something like that.”

“You want to do lumber?”

“Well, not specifically.”

“Good, because that’s Miranda’s baby and she’ll let us know when she needs extra hands. Otherwise, we won’t mess up her system.” Miranda was fifteen years older than me and had worked at the Three Rs for a decade more. By rights, she should’ve been the one offered the manager job, but she hadn’t wanted the responsibility. She wasn’t a people person and said her worst nightmare was spending her days telling other folks what to do.

Which was my jam, actually. Like now. “I’ll show you Venetian blinds. You’ll wish you were back in lights.”

“That doesn’t sound like a reward.” Alaric frowned, his thick brows almost meeting. That was hotter than it should’ve been, too.

I was saved from responding by a familiar truck driver coming into the store. “Hey, Robin, got a load from a teardown. Where do you want me to put stuff?”

“Hey, Jack. Let me roll up the loading bay and we’ll see what you have.” I gathered



up Alaric with a tilt of my head. “Come on, time for some real work.”

I called over Sheldon and pinged Miranda on my way to the back. The bay door trundled upward with only a minor screech. Seemed like lubricating the rollers last time helped. Jack backed his truck up close, opened it, and I headed inside to check the contents. Maybe I’m weird, but I took a deep breath of the scent of old lumber and new wood dust, and the odd musty smell of antiques. This was the other fun part of my job, finding the goodies.

“Solid oak doors,” I called to Miranda. “Windows, some cabinets, hardware, a nice banister.” I ran a careful hand up the gleaming but dusty newel post and along the thick rail. Someone had kept that thing polished and there were almost no nicks in the mahogany surface.

“Let me at it.” Miranda came up behind me, looking over my shoulder from her eight-inch height advantage. “Yeah, we’ll find a taker for that. Hey, Sheldon, get your butt in here and help me with this.”

“Work gloves,” I told the teenager, grabbing his sleeve before he passed me. “You know that.”

“Forgot.” He excavated a pair from the pocket of his hoodie and put them on.

I backed up, regretting that my power games with Alaric had made me wear the suit again. I looked like a douche type of manager, standing back and letting other people do the hard work, but I didn’t have the money to replace my good clothes. “Miranda knows where everything goes,” I said. “Alaric, wait a second.” There were work gloves stashed all around the store, and it took me fifteen seconds to find a pair that would fit him. “Here, put these on. The old wood almost always has splinters that’ll jab you. Come find me up front when you guys are done. Jack, c’mon with me, let’s get your donation slip printed up.”

Jack had a list of what he'd brought, because this wasn't his first rodeo. I checked the descriptions for any outliers, but truthfully, for a regular supplier, I wasn't going to wait to count old solid-wood doors to make sure there were ten and not nine. That was between him and the tax man. The list seemed reasonable with what I'd scanned in the truck, nothing so valuable I needed to go and confirm the details, so I printed a copy and signed off on the donation.

He folded the receipt into his pocket and waved to the back. "I'll go help get everything off-loaded."

"Thanks, man." I wanted to help too, but if I did, I'd end up carrying bulky and dusty stuff and guaranteed, something would kill this jacket. Jeans tomorrow.

In the meantime, I headed back to my workshop and unlocked the door. The tall armoire from the so-called sorcerer's house stood near the front, somehow catching my eye in a way a dozen projects behind it didn't. Standing in front of the closed doors, I noted that the decorative upper rail reached almost to the top of my head, putting the cabinet around five feet tall. While I was familiar with most types of wood, I didn't recognize this one, a dark brown with a coarse, almost black grain. Near the top, exposure to sunlight had lightened the edges of the doors and rail to a redder shade.

The front was composed of two pairs of rectangular doors, upper and lower, supported on brass hinges. Each door sported a large brass knob shaped like a lion's head for a handle, and was secured with an ornate inset lock for which all the keys, annoyingly, were missing. Unless they're in the boxes of stuff donated along with this. Maybe I could make Alaric hunt for them.

I wanted those doors open with an urgency that surprised me.

What does it matter? Most likely the cabinet was empty. Or the compartments might

hold faded and yellowing towels or linens, something soft and bulky. I hadn't heard anything solid shift inside when we'd brought the armoire in on a hand truck and tipped it upright.

But my logic couldn't make a dent in my sudden intense curiosity.

I need to know!

Urgency flooded me. I jiggled the upper doors, gripping each brass handle in turn, yanking and twisting, then tried the lower two. Despite the numerous scratches and dents, that cabinet had been well crafted. The doors barely shivered.

I had tools of all kinds on my workbench for prying and cutting, but as eager as I was to see the interior, I hesitated before reaching for them. I didn't want to damage the wood further or break the fancy locks. Maybe I could unscrew the hinges, although I didn't see obvious screwheads. I squatted to take a closer look. The decorative brass hinge plates seemed bonded to the wood with a technique I couldn't make out. No antique glue would do that job between wood and metal— "Shit." I'd jabbed my finger on that same obnoxiously sharp hinge corner. Another blood smear on the wood. I sucked my fingertip. Luckily, the dark-colored grain meant any marks would probably be hidden once sanded—

The lower cabinet door with the damaged hinge swung open.

Must've shaken something loose. I peered inside. The interior of the cabinet seemed strangely shadowed, given the bright workshop lights overhead, but I could make out a shelf dividing the lower space. On that shelf sat a massive, leatherbound book. A hint of gold lettering glowed at the top of the spine, but I couldn't make out a title.

My fingertip had stopped bleeding, but I moved the Band-Aid from my knuckle and covered any chance of causing more stains, before kneeling and reaching in to ease

out the book. The dusty tome slid into my hands. I'd expected the back cover to be stuck down with dust or old varnish, with how nothing had shifted when we tipped the cabinet around, but no. If anything, the book was lighter than its thickness suggested, and the leather seemed pristine beneath the dust.

I straightened and eased the cover open to a random page. A puff of dust emerged, sparkling a little in the fluorescent light. My nose itched. I held my breath so I wouldn't sneeze on the glorious layout, full of odd calligraphic script and little sketches, some painted in bright colors. The words floated before my eyes, dancing on the paper. I squinted, unsure if the problem was an unfamiliar language, an overly ornate style, or my eyes watering from the dust.

A bang and rumbling crash from out in the store yanked my attention away from the book. Instinctively, I slammed the cover shut, stuffed the volume back into place, and closed the cabinet door before realizing my mistake. What if it won't open again? That felt like a huge disaster, but another distant crash got my feet moving. I sprinted out of the room, yanked the door shut behind me, and ran for the loading bay.

I was met by the sight of a dropped oak door leaning on a toppled pile of lumber that in turn had knocked down a shelving unit. The truck was gone, the rolling door closed. "What happened?" Alaric stood rubbing his wrist and, despite trying to keep my distance from the tempting man, I was responsible for my employees' safety. I hurried over, reaching for him. "Alaric, are you hurt? Let me see."

"Just a scrape." He held out his arm to show me.

I dug a clean tissue from my pocket, pressing it to his skin where blood slowly welled from a gouge in his forearm. "Keep that covered." Our fingers brushed as he took over applying pressure and a static shock leaped between us. Alaric jumped and stared at me. "Sorry," I told him, then turned to Minerva. "What do you need?"

“Rat-proofing?” She sighed. “There was a sound overhead. Sheldon looked up, saw a rat in the rafters, and jumped a bit. Lost his grip.”

“I hate rats,” Sheldon muttered. “Had one run over my bed once. When I was in it.”

I shuddered in empathy. “I’ll call an exterminator.” Although we occasionally had small birds get in and spend days flitting about the high trusses before they found their way out. Mouse droppings in hidden corners were a fact of life. Vermin-proofing this warehouse was an exercise in futility. “And we should all be careful about leaving food out. If the rat has nothing to eat, hopefully it’ll move on.” I sighed. “So you dropped the door? Understandable.”

“I guess.” Sheldon stared at the destruction. “Sorry. You’re not going to take the damages out of my paycheck, are you?”

Not if you don’t sue me for unhygienic working conditions. I decided not to make the joke. Sheldon wasn’t the slacker or opportunist some of the teens I’d employed had been, but better not to put ideas in anyone’s head. “No, of course not. It was an accident. They happen.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.” He squatted and touched the door. “I don’t think this was damaged.”

Minerva said briskly, “Help me get it put away, then.”

I told Alaric, “Go get your arm cleaned up. Do you remember where I showed you the first aid kit in the office?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

“And we have to write up an injury report. I’ll come find you for that.”

He frowned. “For a scratch?”

“If it bleeds, it goes down on paper. In case your arm gets infected or something, detailed records make workman’s comp happy.”

He dropped his gaze to my banded finger and scuffed knuckle, then gave me an intent look. “Did you report your hand?”

“Paper cuts are exempt.” I waved him off. “Go fix your arm and then you can come back and help.”

His lips parted as if he was going to say something. He rubbed his arm where I’d accidentally shocked him and stared into my eyes. I found it hard to break his gaze. I felt as if he saw a part of me I needed to keep private, but that was nonsense, of course. Even if he’d picked me up on gaydar, well, I’d picked him up too, and anyhow I was out. My uncle pretended he didn’t know, and everyone else was cool with queerness. Alaric’s perceptiveness was no threat.

After a moment, he gave me a nod, whirled, and strode off into the store.

“He’s an odd one,” Minerva muttered. “Not afraid of work, though. Unlike some we’ve had in the past.” She waved Sheldon to take the bottom end of the door and they lifted the slab of oak together.

As they hauled the door back to the racks where we’d take off the hardware and measure it for a price tag, I squatted by the fallen lumber. The main damage was a broken rail on a rack holding trim pieces, spilling molding strips across the floor. Even in a suit, I could pick up the lighter ones and squeezed them into the next bin. I’d mess up Minerva’s sorting, but we’d have to fix that rail first. Luckily, we had plenty of free lumber. I smiled, eyeing the handmade racks I’d made years back. We cannibalized a certain amount of what came in to keep the store in good repair. Waste

not, want not. I picked up a few strips with carved-leaf motifs and stood them upright.

Minerva and Sheldon returned and got to work shifting the rest of the doors and lumber stacked by the exit. I continued picking up the trim. It took me ten minutes to notice that Alaric hadn't come back. Maybe he can't find the kit, or maybe he's more hurt than he admitted.

I straightened. "I'm going to go check on Alaric. You two okay here?"

"I think we can lift a few two by twos." Minerva waved me off.

The office was deserted when I peered inside, the first aid kit in its place. I couldn't tell if Alaric had used the supplies or not. There was no employee passed out on the floor. The office bathroom stood open and empty. Did he quit, from a little scrape? That didn't fit with anything I'd imagined about him.

As I left the office, I spotted the door of my workshop standing ajar. I closed that, didn't I? I strode over and as I got near, Alaric appeared in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder. I asked, "Can I help you with something?"

He jumped and turned. "The door was open."

"And you got curious? You've seen the place before."

Alaric licked his lips and came out with, "It's your hideaway. I, um, wanted to know more about you. Who you are. What kind of man you are."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Short. Gay. Your boss." Something hot and electric crossed the space between us, a potent mix of his wet lips and dark eyes and my words, echoing...

Alaric suddenly stepped in front of me, so close I had to tip my head back to look him in the eyes. “Do you care about that? Being my boss? You’re not the one who signs my paychecks.”

My uncle took care of payroll. Didn’t change the fact that I could fire Alaric. Which in turn didn’t change the fact that, this close, I could see the gold flecks in his brown eyes and the haze of stubble already regrowing on his chin. A quick breath didn’t help, bringing me the spicy, musky scent of his cologne and the earthier smell of his skin. For a man with the cheekbones and proud nose of Geef’s Lucifer statue, Alaric had an unfairly lush mouth.

A mouth that landed on mine a moment later.

My gasp of surprise was the wrong tactic, since it parted my lips for him. His tongue against mine sent blood racing to my dick. In a moment of shock, I didn’t fight when he swung us farther into the workshop and kicked the door shut. My arms went around him instinctively as he bent and kissed me again. His strong grip and hot mouth and male scent filled my senses.

Sanity came a moment too late. I pushed away from him, breathing hard, and he let me go.

“What the fuck was that?” I demanded, ignoring the way my heart was racing.

Alaric tilted his head. “Tell me you haven’t been flirting for the last week.”

“I haven’t!” Have I? Yeah, I’d spent time with Alaric, but I did with every new employee. I’d noticed him, no denying that, but flirting?

He stepped toward me and I backed up until my spine hit the workbench. I jerked my chin up to hold his gaze. He might be a foot taller, but I wasn’t afraid of him. This



was my domain.

Alaric reached out and fingered my pinstriped lapel. “Tell me you haven’t been wearing a suit to a warehouse of all places, for a week, for my benefit.”

So you’d know your place. I wasn’t about to put it like that. “I’m the boss.”

“Minerva and Sheldon call you Robin. They don’t act like you boss them around and avoid the hard work.” He tugged lightly on my tie. “This suit was for me today, wasn’t it? Because you wanted to imagine me taking you out of this jacket, those slacks.”

“No.” Maybe? His closeness felt overwhelming, the air in the workshop heavy with possibilities. My dick strained against my zipper. That little knowing smile on Alaric’s face needed to be wiped clean, to be replaced by my cock in his mouth.

This is a terrible idea. But as Alaric grabbed the edge of the worktop on either side of me, caging me with his arms and looming over me, all I knew was a deep desire to put this man in his place. Which was under me, or on his knees. No time for the first one, but the other...

I boosted myself to sit on the bench top, set my hands on Alaric’s shoulders and pushed downward. “Suck me, then.”

He jolted and his gaze leaped up to mine.

Yes, I have the height now, and the power. Not from rank or size, but from my will. You’re going to recognize that. I let my voice go sharp. “You’re in my private space, uninvited.” Something about that nagged at me, but with the heat of Alaric’s hips clamped between my knees, it wasn’t important. “I’m your boss, but if you obey me now, it has nothing to do with the store or your job.” I gestured. “The door is there.

You can leave. Or put your money where your mouth is, take down my suit pants, and suck me. Your mouth on my dick.”

For almost a minute, we stared at each other. He had to tip his chin up so he could meet my eyes, a position no doubt unfamiliar to someone with his height and his ego. He frowned, his heavy brows drawn together.

No doubt he’d imagined putting me on my knees like some random twink he picked up. You’re going to learn just how wrong you were.

I held his gaze, watching his breath quicken and his pulse flutter in his neck, there below his perfect angle of jaw. Slowly, the black of his pupils eclipsed the russet of his irises. He threw one glance over his shoulder at the closed door, then reached for the top button of my jacket.

“Good.” I didn’t lift my hands from his shoulders, didn’t shift my arms to make undressing me easier.

He fumbled the lowest button, his hands inches from my straining dick. I glanced down his body to make sure he was really into this, and was reassured by the tight stretch of his jeans across his obvious erection. When he spread my jacket open, I deigned to scoot my ass forward a little for access. “Now the belt. Slowly.”

The sound of the leather slipping through the loops filled the still air. I hadn’t told him to pull it all the way off, but I didn’t hate seeing my belt sliding through his hands. Before he could set the thing aside, I grabbed the loose end with one hand and wrapped the strap around his wrists. Just for an instant, an intake of breath, one more jolt of his body under my touch. Before he could speak, I reversed the wrap and pulled the belt from his grasp, setting it aside. His cock still tented his jeans. I told him, “My button. Zip.”

His fingers trembled as he followed orders. That surprised me. Excited me. Watching his strong hands lower my zipper and spread my fly had me leaking against the blue cotton of my briefs.

“Pull everything down. Slowly.” I braced my hands on the thick wooden slab under me and lifted the bare minimum. His knuckles brushed my stomach as he tugged on my waistband. I let him get the fabric of my underwear and slacks bunched at my thighs, then said, “Enough. Now your mouth. Hands behind your back.”

Alaric shot me a glare, shock and disapproval, but behind those, unmistakable heat kept his pupils wide and his neck flushed. I sat still, breathing through my nose in a slow, controlled rhythm, waiting for his next move. After a moment on the brink, Alaric put his hands behind him and bent forward, opening his mouth.

He didn’t mess around licking or nibbling, just lowered his head, slow and steady, and sucked me to the back of his throat. Then sucked back up off me the same way, letting my dick slide from his lips with a pop. He looked and felt as good as I’d imagined. I leaned back on my hands, my shoulders against the rack of hammers and screwdrivers, for a better view. A niggling worry for what that was doing to my jacket couldn’t penetrate the haze of lust rising in me. “Again. Faster.”

Those full lips slid up and down my length. Alaric’s hair fell into his eyes as he bobbed. Then he coughed and pulled off. “Sorry. It’s an awkward position.”

I sat up. “I don’t mind getting down from the bench, if you’re ready to go to your knees.”

He straightened, rubbing his spine, then reached toward my dick.

I snapped, “Hands behind your back. Or can’t you manage that? On your knees.”

Alaric jerked his chin up and stared at me. I froze, not moving a muscle, pinning his gaze with mine.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

### Chapter 2

Alaric

Robin— damned if I was going to think of him as Mr. Forrest in my own head— sat on the workbench, his pants around his thighs, his surprisingly thick cock erect and glistening with my spit. His eyes were a pure blue that should've seemed innocent in his youthful face, but somehow... didn't.

He'd told me to kneel. Now he waited in carven stillness to see if I'd obey orders. With my hands behind me, no less.

Part of me rebelled at that idea. Most of me. I usually topped and I never knelt. But some unfamiliar element deep in my gut, or maybe my groin, vibrated like a tuning fork hit with exactly the right note.

I can. This time. Just once. To protect my secrets.

After all, the whole reason I'd seduced Robin was to keep him from seeing the runes I'd chalked on the front of that damned cabinet. There was something very unwholesome about that piece of furniture. Unfortunately, I hadn't had time for any specific tests before I'd heard his footsteps coming my way. I'd barely managed to jump back from the cabinet and meet him in the doorway, to head him off before he saw white chalk on black wood.

Robin had laughed about the sorcerer who'd owned that piece, called magic "smoke and mirrors." Which was fine, ideal even— the Great Spell was designed to make

ordinary humans believe that we sorcerers were a joke, feeble and useless, party entertainment, good for maybe laying Aunt Lucy's ghost if she started throwing potholders around the kitchen. We were safer when humans didn't see the huge underwater part of the sorcery iceberg. The Upheavals of the nineties had shown how dangerous life became if humans grew afraid of us.

Odds were, Robin would laugh off my magical attempt to get that cabinet to open, too. But the symbols would attract his attention to the piece and mark me as other, weird, not quite human. I preferred to keep that secret.

So I had a good reason for going to my knees.

A real reason, not just that hum in my body that made my cock hard as steel and my knees want to bend. Bend to this juvenile, short, annoying, superior, pipsqueak of a boss who sat there, bare-ass naked on a workbench, and stared at me until I locked my hands behind me and sank to the floor.

"Well done." His voice was as light as you'd expect from a guy who couldn't top a hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet, but he achieved a note of confidence that made me want to hear those words again.

To keep him busy. Nothing else.

Robin slid off the bench, landing lightly on his feet, his slim thighs still trapped in pinstripe chambray and navy cotton. His cock bobbed in front of my face. I leaned forward and took him into my mouth.

Here at least I could take command, suck him as fast or as slow as I chose. I'd control his pleasure, his climax.

Except he set his hands on my head, dug his fingers into my hair, and said, "Let me?"

I froze, my head pinned in his grip. He eased his cockhead out from my lips and said, “I want to fuck your face. Yes or no?”

No! But also, yes.

I liked sucking cock. I didn’t mind the guy in my mouth getting enthusiastic, as long as I was on top and in control. This was different. I’d barely known Robin a week, had no certainty to trust him. There was no reason his hands tugging at my hair should make the blood rush to my groin. His blue eyes on mine should’ve been easy to refuse. I opened my mouth to say no, but what came out was, “Yes.”

“So good.” The warmth of his words caressed me as he set his fat cock against my lips. “Open up for me.”

Last chance to say no. My lips parted.

Robin pushed into my mouth, pausing halfway. “If you need me to stop, unlock your hands and tap my thigh. Now. How much can you take?”

More than you’ve got. I sucked hungrily.

He chuckled under his breath. “Like that, huh? All right.”

With building intensity, Robin drove his cock deeper, then eased back. His hands fisted tighter and tighter on my hair, pinning me in place as he rocked his hips. The first taste of slick precum welled across my tongue. The smell of his groin, of man and musk and clean sweat, filled my nose, and I hollowed my cheeks around him.

“Ah, fuck, yeah. Good job.” Robin thrust faster.

He was close to choking me now, and yet I relished the challenge. My body sang with

the fullness of my mouth around him, and the sharp tug of pain in my scalp when I resisted. I felt alive, powerful, eager even as he held me and controlled me. I ignored the trickle of spit down my chin and the growing dampness in my shorts to focus on giving the best damned blow job Robin had ever known.

Our breaths echoed, his fast and shallow through full, parted lips; mine stuttered, gasping around the gagging length of Robin's dick. He began grunting in rhythm as he fucked my mouth, his cock driving along my tongue and against my palate, bumping the back of my throat and making my eyes water. The taste of him grew stronger and more bitter. I tried to use my tongue and lips, but Robin was driving and I had to relax into letting him use my mouth whatever way he chose.

He pulled my hair sharply, changing the angle, and sank deep enough I couldn't breathe at all. "Jesus, so good. The mouth on you." For an instant he stayed there as my throat spasmed around him, then he eased back till just the fat, precum-slicked head sat between my lips.

I inhaled a shaky breath around him and put my tongue to good use.

"I'm so damned close." He rocked in an inch, then retreated, rocked forward again. "Fuck. So close. If you don't want my load, tap out now."

Fuck that. I sucked eagerly.

"Ah. God, yeah." Robin took up his rhythm again. "Ngh. Hell, all right. Fuck. Fuck. So good. So good!" He drove in and froze as his cock bucked against my palate. "Ah!" He clamped his hands on my head, pinning me, and bitter spunk filled my mouth, the taste reminding me why I never swallowed. Except for Robin. Except for now. I sucked him down, swallowed over and over, let him feel my throat ripple around him. I took his taste eagerly, giving what I so rarely offered, and the moment felt incredibly right. Robin groaned and shuddered as he came for me.



When he was done shaking, he let go of my hair and eased out. I raised my head and was caught in his intent gaze.

Robin stroked the hair back off my forehead. “That was awesome. Are you okay?”

I blinked at him, words escaping me.

“Do you want to come?”

His words brought me back to the aching now, yes, please that throbbed in my groin. That awareness let me rasp, “Hell, yeah.” I licked my dry lips.

“Jerk yourself, then,” Robin told me. “Let me see.”

Whatever else I’d hoped for was lost in the urgent need to come, right the hell now, in any way possible. I fumbled my jeans open, got my cock out of my shorts, and closed my dry hand around my shaft. My vision tunneled, dark around the edges, as I drove my dick through my fist once, twice— relief flashed through me in a firestorm of release. At the last moment, I managed to turn and avoid shooting all over Robin’s slacks. Instead, pulse after pulse of jizz hit the tile floor as I shook and gasped and pumped myself dry.

“Oh fuck.” I shivered. My cock squeezed out one last drip. Unclamping my hand, I sat back on my heels and stared at the mess on the floor. My brain reeled and floated, untethered from my body. I jumped as Robin stroked my hair again, tucking a strand into place.

He chuckled. “You’re so fucking hot.”

I coughed. “You’re not bad yourself.”

Robin took a step to the side and pulled his clothes up, zipping, buttoning. He reached behind him, snagged the leather belt, and slid its length between his fingers with his eyes on me. I remembered that instant when he'd wrapped the leather around my wrists. I didn't like bondage, never had, but my traitor dick gave a last helpless twitch at that memory.

From the wicked grin that grew on Robin's face, he noticed and was remembering that same moment, but he threaded his belt back through the loops without commenting. I clenched my sticky hands together because I had an instant's desire to offer to do that for him. Stand close, wrap the leather around his waist— No.

A quick scan of the room showed me a sink in the back corner. I pushed to my feet, got myself tucked away, my jeans zipped, then went over to wash the spunk off my hands.

"Can I get you anything?" Robin asked.

I was going to say no and rinse my mouth under the tap when I remembered the reason I'd gone through with this seduction in the first place. Not for this buzz along my nerves like nothing I'd felt before, not for the heady pleasure of seeing that light in Robin's eyes, but for business. Sorcerer's business. "Would you bring me a water? Or soda?"

"We have both. What would you like?"

My head still spun and I wasn't capable of any decisions. "Surprise me. I like it all."

"Right. Give me a minute." Robin opened the door a crack, checked through it, then let himself out and shut the door behind him.

As soon as he was gone, I grabbed a couple of damp paper towels from the sink and

hurried over to the cabinet.

Its aura hadn't been sweetened by watching our hot sex. Something nasty simmered in there. But if I hadn't been able to get the doors open with straightforward magic, then at least no one else would find it easy either. I pondered my options as I swiped away my chalk runes with a damp towel.

I'd offer to buy the cabinet, I decided, and if that failed and I couldn't get the doors open with one more fast spell tonight, I'd have to steal it. Leaving that malevolence smoldering in Robin's private workshop wasn't safe.

Magnus Fairborn had been far from a joke, and the only mirrors or smoke around him were sulfur fumes from the demons he'd summoned when his quest for power turned dark. One of which had killed him, to no one's disappointment, although banishing the demons had wiped out our two local necromancers for a week.

As always, when a sorcerer died, two members of our local council had gone straight to his house before the corpse was cold to remove any books and artifacts that we didn't want humans to see. We always tried to clear away the evidence of magic before the heirs arrived. Corbin and Naismith had left with a truckload of books and tools and devices that desperately needed burning. And yet, somehow, they'd missed the cabinet.

I'd have called that mistake sloppiness, except I'd worked in the Three Rs for a week now, searching magically in my private moments for traces of Fairborn's goods, and my seeking spells had noticed nothing in this room till I saw the cabinet with my own eyes.

The dark, hand-carved wenge wood was ideal for holding power, but still... Usually, when a sorcerer died, his magic faded with him. This time, the hiding and lock spells on the cabinet were still going strong. Either they were someone else's work, or

Fairborn had infused a shit-ton of power into them before his death.

Or they were powered by something else. Something that didn't want to be found. Like the book. The reason I was here.

Because once she'd recovered from exhaustion, Necromancer Sylvanwood had returned to Fairborn's house to make sure all the demons were truly gone, and she'd found a ghost. Some unfortunate apprentice, dead by supposed accident two decades back, whose tattered, insubstantial, almost-lost form warned about "The book. Kimber's Death Rites. He hid it. Destroy the book." Sylvanwood hadn't been able to get more than those words, over and over, out of the poor specter, and eventually she'd given it mercy and laid the ghost.

But in the week between Fairborn's death and Sylvanwood's recheck, while Fairborn's home had stood untenanted, his sister had showed up, co-ownership papers in hand, and brought in a company to sell, discard, and donate all the house's contents. Fairborn's goods were scattered to the four winds, and the book with them.

Our council meeting had been... in generous terms, vigorous. Loud. Acrimonious. Kimber's Death Rites was a notorious black magic tome, of which perhaps a dozen copies were supposed to still exist around the world. The knowledge that one had been in our community and then slipped through our fingers was nauseating. The discovery of how far down the dark path Magnus Fairborn had gone also made us all look at each other with distrust. Fairborn hadn't come to our meetings in a decade, no doubt to hide the growing demon taint in his magic, but he'd once sat around that same mahogany table, talking about how to keep the local community safe and well.

Which of us should be trusted to hunt down a dangerous book of great evil? Who among us might be hiding the same lust for power that had driven Fairborn?

In the end, we'd done the only thing we could do, which was to share the search for

the book in logical ways. Since I worked for myself, I could take a week off from my PI business to check out the perennially short-staffed Three Rs store where the dregs of his estate had been donated. Using seeking runes, I'd scoured the stock for magical items. A few bits and pieces in boxes had held a sour residue and I'd stolen a couple for destruction before retaping the cartons, but nothing had glowed dark like the book would. I could've quit after four days, reassured, but something had made me stay longer.

Something? Premonition? Or your cock hoping for a chance with "Mr. Forrest?"

I didn't answer my inner voice, which seemed to be channeling my familiar, Harry.

As if thinking about the rat had conjured him, I heard Harry's sharp voice from the corner of the workshop. "Smells like you got a bit of fucking done, anyhow. Any actual work accomplished?"

I straightened from wiping off the chalk and gestured at the cabinet with my thumb. "The longer I hang about that thing, the more certain I am the book's in it. The aura stinks."

Harry scrunched his pointed nose at the cabinet, whiskers twitching. Then he blinked his beady eyes twice. "Fuck me sideways with a spoon." He nodded to me. "I looked in this room three times this week. Didn't once notice that great hulking mess of dark magic. How—" He cut himself short and scurried under the workbench.

Robin came back in with a can of pop in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. He held out the water as he kicked the door shut again behind him. "Here. Are you all right?"

I gave him my best superior stare and a cool tone. "Of course. Why?"

Most men backed down when I treated them to Alaric-the-cold-bastard. Robin got a glitter in his eyes. “Because I fucked your pretty mouth hard, and I hope you’re not regretting it.”

No one had ever called me pretty, in any way. I didn’t like it. Much. I twisted the cap off the bottle and poured cool water down my throat. Which Robin had fucked. Big mistake. I’m distracted as hell. I couldn’t manage to regret seducing him, though. Because it worked, of course. “You weren’t that rough.”

Robin’s eyes darkened and he ran the tip of his tongue around the rim of his pop can.

I ignored the effect on my apparently not-fully-spent dick. “By the way, I’m a fan of old furniture. What will you sell this armoire for?” I waved at the cabinet. “It would fit well in my study.”

“It needs a lot of refinishing.” Robin eyed the piece, his head tilted. “Once that’s complete, maybe eight hundred? Although I’m thinking of keeping that one. It’s unique.”

Damn. “I’d love to learn refinishing,” I lied. “Maybe I could buy that cabinet as is and bring it home, and you could come over to give me lessons .” I gave his crotch a suggestive leer.

Robin shook his head. “Without all the right power tools, you’d spend months working on it. I tried a little sandpaper and whatever that wood is, it’s hard as hell. I have all the equipment here.” Then he broke into a wicked grin, making my stupid dick twitch again. “If you want to learn refinishing, I work here in the evenings after we’re closed. You could come on back, and I could teach you a few things.”

I managed a matching smile. I couldn’t make headway with opening the cabinet if I was working under his supervision, but maybe I could finagle some alone time with

that hulk of malevolent furniture. “I’ll take you up on that offer.” I licked my lips to suggest it wasn’t the cabinet I meant. “Are you working tonight?”

“Tonight?” Robin chuckled. “Eager, are we? Sadly, I have to do some shopping and there’s an online chat group I should check in with. Friday?”

“Friday, then.” I didn’t show my relief at having a clear field tonight. I’d break in and take a real shot at the cabinet, unhampered by time and noise limits. I had plenty of tricks I hadn’t tried. If I still failed, I could persuade someone to help me steal it on Thursday.

“We need to get back to work.” Robin tugged his shirt straighter and buttoned his jacket. “I guess tomorrow I can skip the managerial costume and come in jeans. And you might as well call me Robin. Unless you prefer Mr. Forrest? It does have a ring to it.”

I lowered my eyes demurely. “Yes, Mr. Forrest.”

Robin threw his head back and laughed. Watching out of the corner of my eye, I was caught by a powerful desire to grab him and bend him over his workbench. Or perhaps vice versa. The lines had become a bit blurred.

Since this was neither the time nor the place, I followed him out onto the warehouse floor and headed back to help take the hardware off the newly delivered doors. I noted that Robin paused, five paces outside his workshop, then went back and locked the door.

Harry would be fine— there were very few spaces a rat couldn’t get out of, or into— but I wondered what made Robin decide on that lock. I’d opened the door without a problem last time.

There was no way Robin knew what that cabinet was. I'd checked all the employees with my Othersight the first day, and none of them held more than a wisp of magical talent. So what had changed to make him wary? If he doubted my honesty that much, he surely wouldn't have fucked me.

Or maybe he would. How much of a risk-taker is Robin?

It bothered me that I couldn't decide. It also bothered me that the idea of him fucking me while restraining me and imagining I was some kind of thief struck me as hot. I'd been mostly vanilla in my sexual tastes until now. After a week of staring at Robin striding around in his suits, and now finding myself on my knees, I was discovering desires I didn't recognize.

By the time the Three Rs closed its doors at six p.m., I was hot and sweaty and plastered with dust. There was some satisfaction in seeing the stripped oak doors sized, stacked, and labeled, and all the hardware sorted, lubed, and put into bins. We'd already had a remodeler come by and buy ten of the antique hinges right out of my hands, so reuse was already happening. I hadn't realized this place existed until the Council meeting, but I could imagine volunteering now and then, for a good cause.

Harry was waiting for me under my car in the employee lot. I paused, holding the door open while blocking the view with my legs so he could jump in, then got in after him. He sat on the passenger seat cleaning his whiskers, as I headed for home.

"Any luck checking out the cabinet?" I asked as I pulled up to the first stop sign.

"Nope. It's an odd one. Got a spell on it, sure enough, that makes me half-forget about it when I turn away. No markings on the outside that I can see, but that nasty, greasy magic taste if I pay attention. I didn't want to touch the wood."



“Agreed.” I’d made sure chalk, or paper towel, stayed between my fingers and the surface of the cabinet. “Whatever’s inside, book or not, Fairborn was protecting the contents with a lot of magic. Which means we need to get it open and look.”

“Need to put the whole thing on the flames, if you ask me.” Harry chattered his teeth. “Solve the problem quick and easy.”

“Except then we’ll never know if the Kimber was in there or we still need to look for the book elsewhere. I have to open the compartments before any burning.”

“Fair enough. You got a plan?”

“Depends on what you have for me.”

Harry grinned, baring yellow incisors. “I have the spare back door key, hidden behind a rock. And I have the alarm code. No one looks overhead when they punch those things in. Unless I want ’em to look up, of course.”

“About that.” I rubbed my scraped arm. “You couldn’t find a less dramatic way to get Robin out of that workshop?”

“Not as quick and easy.” Harry would never admit he liked startling people, but he sure did. “And it’s ‘Robin’ now? What happened to ‘Mr. Forrest?’”

“I fucked him.” Or he fucked me, which was none of Harry’s business. “Anyway, he said he wouldn’t be there tonight. We’ll give him a couple of hours to finish closing and leave, and then we’ll head back.”

“You might have a shower first,” Harry suggested. “Look respectable in case the cops stop by.”

“Let’s hope they don’t.” I doubted there was more than one security system. If I had the alarm code, we should be safe. But a shower sounded like heaven anyway.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

### Chapter 3

Robin

I had no idea what'd brought me back to the Three Rs at eight o'clock at night. Something kept niggling at me, tugging me toward work, and then as I was sitting down to chat about wood stains with my online friends, that tug became an alarm call.

Except the actual alarm notice on my smart watch said everything was quiet.

Which didn't keep me from ducking out of the chat, jumping in my car, and breaking the speed limit to get back to work.

The warehouse sat there, looking ordinary. Nothing out of place as I pulled into the front lot and parked. Before opening the front door, I decided to walk around the perimeter. And there— "Shit!"

The loading bay door stood open, a gaping mouth inviting me to the dark interior gullet of the slumbering beast. I shook off the creepy fancy. "Why the fuck didn't the alarm go off?" I was about to call 9-1-1 when a car pulled into the employee lot. The sedan stopped in a back corner under the trees and its lights went out.

I moved deeper into the shadows against the wall, watching, holding my breath.

To my shock, Alaric scrambled out with a small furry dog at his heels. In the still night air, I heard Alaric mutter, "Shit. Someone got here first."

A high voice from somewhere asked, “One of ours, you think?”

Alaric snapped, “Not a good one, if so.” He sprinted toward the back door, stooped to fumble on the ground for a moment, then slid a key into the lock. The door opened at his touch, but the alarm didn’t sound, never even chimed on my smartwatch. He pulled the door shut behind him and vanished out of sight.

What the hell? I should call the cops!

Common sense said report Alaric and whoever had broken in ahead of him. But the whole thing was weird as hell, and curiosity had always been my biggest sin. I couldn’t manage to be afraid of the man who’d knelt and let me face-fuck him. So I followed, opening the unlocked door and closing it silently behind me. The alarm panel on the wall sat dark and dead. The smell of fried electronics filled the air. Apparently, whoever had come through the loading door had somehow shorted out the whole system without setting it off.

I couldn’t hear Alaric’s footsteps, but I could make out the bobbing gleam of a small greenish flashlight ahead. My knowledge of the store’s layout served me well as I followed him in near darkness.

He and his dog headed straight for my workshop. An instinctive part of me wasn’t surprised, had been drawn that way myself. Although the pull to come here had eased, and now something wanted me to leave. Leave. Immediately and go... somewhere. I ignored that impulse.

What the fuck is Alaric doing?

The glow of his odd flashlight moved through the workshop doorway. I hurried as quietly as I could to catch up.

As I reached the doorway, that high voice said, “Look out! Incoming.”

Alaric extinguished his light.

But I was supposed to be there, it was my space, and I had no fear of the cops. I hit the light switch by the door.

In the harsh glare of the fluorescent fixtures, Alaric stood frozen, five feet away. At his feet, a small— not dog, but rat!— sat on its haunches, peering at me.

I yelped, “Fuck!” instead of the questions crowding my brain.

Alaric said, “Hardly the time. What are you doing here?”

“This is my store. Why are you here?” Before he could answer, I saw that the antique cabinet was missing. In the open space where it had stood was a small paper bag. “And what’s that?”

I hurried over to grab the bag, but before I could close my hand on the paper, Alaric tackled me to the floor. We landed hard, his shoulder in my ribs, ejecting the breath from my chest. I gasped like a dying fish, suddenly aware that he was fifty pounds heavier and much stronger. “Get off,” I choked, struggling to get away. “Let go!”

“Just don’t touch the bag. Okay?”

“Get your hands off me.” I scrambled away on my butt and he let me.

Alaric pushed to his knees, remaining between me and the paper bag.

I pointed at it, annoyed that my hand was shaking. “What is that?”

“I don’t know yet. But it’s— I think it’s magic.”

““Think?”” I stared at him. The rat was nowhere to be seen, and I didn’t want to know what Alaric had been doing with a giant rodent. This whole scene felt surreal. “What do you know about magic? Where’s the cabinet?”

“I have no idea. I only got here a few minutes ago.”

That was true enough. Unless he could make things disappear into thin air, he’d have had no chance to spirit the cabinet away. But someone had. I could feel the armoire moving into the distance now, a tug under my breastbone, pulling me off... that way . I turned slowly, feeling like the needle of a compass. “Someone stole it. They went over there.” I pointed. “Who? Why?”

“Over where?” Alaric peered at me from under lowered brows. “What do you mean?”

“I can feel it.” I pivoted a few more degrees, facing the way I needed to go.

Come. Help me.

“It needs me. That way.” I pushed to my feet, eager to follow.

Alaric caught my arm in a firm grip. “Where are you going? What needs you?”

“The cabinet.” Something seemed to be speaking through my lips. “No, the book.”

“Book!” Alaric’s fingers turned to iron on my forearm. “What do you know about a book?”

“The one in the cabinet. The big, dusty one.” Another yank at my core deep inside made me stagger and struggle to get free of his hold. “I have to go!”

Alaric released me but moved between me and the door. “You opened the cabinet and found a book? How?”

“It opened for me. I don’t know.” I tried to think back. The loss of the cabinet, of the book, was like a bee buzzing in my ear, distracting as hell. “The door with the sharp hinge. I cut my finger on it and it opened. Probably the hinge was damaged.”

The high voice said from over by the paper bag, “Blood price. Must’ve been part of the locking spell. Did you cut yourself once, young man, or three times?”

“Three times— fuck! You’re a talking rat.” I stared at the big rodent who sat with its beady eyes fixed on me.

“Harry!” Alaric’s tone sounded shocked.

“He’s deep in this already,” the rat replied. “Got the smell of the blood magic on him, and the cabinet opened for him. Did you touch the book, Forrest? Read it?”

“I couldn’t read it. It wasn’t written in English. I looked at the pictures.” Alaric’s muffled curse at my words couldn’t distract me from the pull of that cabinet. “We need to go get it. Now!” I tried to dodge around Alaric, but he cut me off.

“Go where?”

“There!” I stamped my foot and pointed at the north wall. “The cabinet’s that way. Hurry.”

“Easy, Robin, we will.” He peered over my shoulder at the rat. “What’s the spell in the paper bag, Harry? It feels like a booby trap. We don’t want it to go off and burn down the store.”

That made me pull up short. “Damned fucking right we don’t. It could do that?”

The rat— Harry, I guess— gave the bag a good sniff without touching the brown paper, as Alaric watched intently. “Sleep spell, I think,” Harry said. “Touch the bag, move it, and poof, flat on the floor.”

“But not dead?” Alaric asked.

“Don’t think so. No smell of fire runes, anyhow, so we can come back and deal with it later. If Forrest really can sense the damned cabinet and we’ve any hope of catching up, we need to move.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “This way.” Relief that my store wasn’t going to burn made me lightheaded, or maybe that was the cabinet buzzing in my brain. “Come on! Quickly!” I ducked past Alaric and took off running, dodging around the half-seen shelves and racks as I sprinted for the back.

A brilliant green light flooded the space, startling me. I tripped, went to one knee, and looked back. Alaric, two steps behind me, held a glowing ball of something in his palm. He reached my side and extended a hand down. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” I let him haul me to my feet. My knee smarted. “What’s that green?”

“Witchlight. Easy way not to run into stuff in the dark.”

“You’re a sorcerer!” I blinked at him as that fact finally percolated into my brain.

“Well, duh,” the rat said. “Come on. The slower we go, the farther the bastards are ahead of us.”

That reminder got me running again with Alaric at my heels. We burst out the back



door. It was Alaric who remembered to close it, and I left the loading bay open. There was nothing important in the store anyway, just the book, needing me, calling...

I tripped and Alaric caught me with a hand under my elbow.

"This way." He steered me toward his car, dimming the witchlight as we reached the passenger door. "You're distracted. I'll drive, you tell me where to go. Here, get in."

I didn't argue. Whatever would get me to the book fastest. Although I yelped when Harry leaped in at my feet, bounced with small hard paws to my lap, and then rebounded up to the dashboard.

Alaric laughed, shut my door, and hurried to get behind the wheel. The engine came to life with a much smoother purr than my old Mazda. "Right." Alaric backed out and turned the car toward the road. "Which way?"

I pointed and he turned left, the closest he could get to my direction. There wasn't much traffic and he floored the gas. The engine's purr became a throaty roar. The car leaped forward.

"Who's going to bail you out if you get pulled over?" the rat asked from the dashboard.

"I'm trusting my luck." Alaric pulled out around a slower car and powered up a hill. At the next crossroad, he turned right, then left again, following my pointing as my sense of the book wavered between the two.

"Hurry." I bounced in my seat, fumbling with my seatbelt. I knew jumping out and running cross-country wouldn't get me there faster, but the bees in my head had begun flitting up and down my nerves. Urgency built behind my breastbone like floodwaters behind a dam. Somewhere in the background, I was freaked out that

some weird book had done something to me, and freaked out that Alaric was a sorcerer and I'd fucked a sorcerer... but the front of my brain had no room for anything except finding that book. "Turn again. There."

Alaric asked Harry, "Anyone we know out this way?"

The rat plastered his paws to the windshield, staring at the darkened landscape, his nose twitching. "Half a dozen, depending how far we go. No one who makes my tail itch."

"Pity." Alaric pushed our speed up past eighty.

I leaned forward, the weirdness of a talking rat on the dashboard eclipsed by... by... "There! There, stop, turn around!" I twisted in my seat to keep the long country driveway we'd passed in view. "Alaric, dammit!"

"I hear you." He pulled off to the side, waited for a truck to pass, then did a three-point turn, cut his headlights, and rolled forward slowly down the shoulder.

"Come on." I bounced harder in my seat. "They could be doing anything. Destroying it. Burning it."

Alaric gave me an odd frown, but asked Harry, "Address ring any bells?"

"Not offhand, but I don't know them all. Be careful and keep your shields up."

We reached the mailbox, a banal, rusting metal oblong with a street number on the side. Beyond it, a gravel drive led to a sprawling house and a couple of outbuildings. A pickup with an attached U-Haul trailer sat outside the smaller of the outbuildings. Faint light spilled from under the building's door.

There! The relief I felt was almost as good as sex. The moment Alaric slowed to a stop, I released my belt, shoved the door open, and took off running.

Either Alaric or Harry whispered, “Wait!” behind me but I couldn’t stop my headlong plunge.

I heard a deep-voiced, “Damn,” that had to be Alaric and then he came after me, catching up with ease on his much-longer legs. “Stop,” he hissed under his breath as he drew level with me. “We need a plan.”

“We need the book!”

Alaric wrapped his arms around me and dragged me to a halt. I struggled, the call of the book loud in my head. He muttered in my ear. “Slow down. Be smart about this.”

I’d always prided myself on being clever and that reminder slowed my flight. I stopped resisting as Alaric pulled me to the ground behind a bush.

Ahead of us, Harry whipped around the corner of the shed, barely a disturbance in the shadows. “He’s scouting,” Alaric breathed, fingers digging into my arms. “Give him a moment. I’m a decent sorcerer but it would’ve taken at least two people to carry that cabinet. We need to know what we’re up against.”

I made myself nod, made myself take a few long, deep breaths. I had no clue what I could do against a sorcerer. More information was a good idea.

Harry reappeared out of the weeds inches from my knee. I held back a yelp and pressed my knuckles to my lips. Don’t be ridiculous.

“Found a gap to look inside. Two men in there,” Harry said. “Marcus Barnes and his nephew.”

“Barnes?” Alaric sounded shocked. “He barely has the power to light a candle.”

“That was before a demon got hold of him.”

“Ah. Shit.” Alaric hissed through his teeth. “Powerful demon?”

“Can’t tell. They don’t have the cabinet open yet, for what that’s worth.”

“We need reinforcements, and a necromancer for the demon.” Alaric turned to me.

“If I let go of you, will you stay put while I call for help?”

“Of course.” I wasn’t confused enough to ignore the wisdom of that. “How long will it take them?”

“We’ll find out.” Alaric released his grip on my arms and dug out his phone. He hit a contact, waited... “Miriam. It’s Alaric. I located the damned book but a demon-ridden sorcerer grabbed it first. Marcus Barnes. He has his nephew with him. Does that guy have any power?” He paused. “Okay, good. But we still need a necromancer for the demon and I won’t say no to some backup. How fast can you send someone...? We’re off Shreveport road— Yeah. Is that Barnes’s address? Sounds right... Okay, we’ll wait for you here.”

Alaric pocketed the phone and turned to me and Harry. “She says fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty. Sylvanwood may be even later, but if Miriam, Corbin, and I can restrain the demon, then we can hold him till Sylvanwood can get here and send him back to hell.”

“Real actual Hell? A real demon?” I stared at him.

“More like another dimension of smoke and fire which we call a hell, and dimensional travelers. No deities involved. I’ll explain later. I’m going to put a circle

around the shed. Worst comes to worst, I might be able to hold them in there.” Without any better explanation, Alaric scuttled toward the building, staying low to the ground.

When I would’ve followed, Harry grabbed my hand between sharp teeth and growled.

“Okay, okay.” I raised my other hand in surrender and the rat let go.

“He’s busy, doesn’t need you juggling his elbow and giving him away.”

“Busy with...” As I watched, Alaric reached the shed wall and sketched a symbol that glimmered green in the darkness. That one floated to the wall and faded away. The next one he made drifted over to the door and sparked around the edges in deep red before extinguishing.

“Crap,” Harry muttered. “They have the door warded.”

“Warded?”

“A magical spell to keep other sorcerers from opening or crossing it. That red is the demon’s power.”

“So what do we do?” I crept a little closer to the shed, staying under the bushes, and Harry didn’t stop me.

He padded silently beside me and breathed, “We wait for reinforcements and then see if Alaric and Miriam can break the wards. Neither one of ’em is a slouch when it comes to power.”

“Do you do magic?” I’m talking to a rat. The surreal nature of the evening hit me

again.

“I help Alaric with his.”

Alaric vanished around the side of the shed, duck-walking, trailing a hand along the siding.

“What’s he doing?”

“Chalking a circle. He’ll have to find a way to complete it around the door, but circles are powerful for containing magic.”

Noises rose from inside the shed, a deep male voice thundering in anger. “What do you mean, no? You don’t say no to me. If you can’t get it open with the axe, then you’ll bleed for me.”

A clang and thud resounded, the impact of metal on hardwood.

That sound vibrated in my chest. Help! Help!

I scrambled to my feet. “They’re breaking it!” Panic gave my sprint wings. Harry leaped at my arm but I batted him away, leaving a shred of sleeve in his jaws. I hit the shed door and yanked it open. Whatever the magic ward was, I felt nothing as I burst through. “Stop! Don’t hurt it!”

Two bearded men wearing flannel and jeans whirled to face me. The younger held an axe in both hands. The older raised his palms and shouted something. A shimmering red wave splashed over me, eye-wateringly bright, somehow smelling of sulfur, and yet it left me untouched. Anger tunneled my vision. Get him!

I grabbed up a length of two-by-two leaning beside the door and swung it like a

baseball bat. I was a great shortstop in high school. The end of the wood hit the older guy upside the head with a jarring impact that almost made me drop my weapon. A flash of crimson at the point of impact gave me a moment of terror that I'd killed him, before I realized the red wasn't blood but his magic somehow blocking the blow an inch from his temple. He staggered, though.

No time to recover! I swung again, following through like I was aiming for the bleachers, and he slipped to one knee. I hit him forehand, backhand. Again. Again. My blows landed on each side of him, hitting that flaring red defense he put up between my weapon and his head. The impacts shivered hard through my palms. He raised his hands at me but that was fatal to his balance. My next stroke landed him on his ass.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the younger man jolt out of his paralysis, raising the axe, coming at me. Then he screamed as Harry leaped in the air and fastened his teeth into flesh, blood spraying. He dropped the axe. I couldn't spare the time to watch.

Hit the sorcerer. Again. This time, my blow shattered through the older man's protection and found his temple. His head snapped sideways and he fell.

Again! I landed a hit askew, more on his shoulder than anywhere vulnerable, but I swung back upward and caught the bastard under his chin.

The sorcerer collapsed, sprawled flat, gasping on the floor.

I'd have hit him again, the mist of fury still bright in my eyes, but Alaric shouted, "Enough," in my ear and grabbed my arm. "Let me get him."

He leaped past me and knelt, drawing a white chalk line around the flailing man, scrambling on his knees to encircle where the sorcerer lay. Then Alaric completed his

circle with a flourish and called out a breakneck string of unfamiliar words. Bright green flared high like a translucent curtain where the white line had been drawn.

I flinched at a thud close behind me. The younger man had managed to shake off Harry and flung him to the floor. Harry landed hard, and staggered, shaking his head. The man turned wild eyes on the glowing green circle, then sprinted out the door clutching his bleeding arm. Harry dashed after him and I heard the man yelp but his thudding footsteps didn't stop. I made out another yelp, a scream, a thump, and then the sound of a car door and a motor starting. The car receded in a hail of pinging gravel and a more distant squeal of tires.

Harry reappeared in the doorway. "He has a high pain threshold, I'll give him that. I didn't taste any magic in him, so I didn't want to mutilate him to stop him." He came over and sat at Alaric's side.

"If he's just human, we can deal with him later." Alaric turned to the trapped sorcerer who'd begun moaning and clutching his head. "Barnes, on the other hand, definitely has a demon."

"Indeed." Harry and Alaric peered at the green circle with matching intensity.

Despite my curiosity, I was pulled away from the flaring green magic toward the cabinet. A shallow gouge marked one of the front doors. I hope they didn't harm the book. I knelt in front of it, running my hand over the raw gash, and the door swung open. There inside sat the magical book, its pages seeming to glow in the dusty shed. I reached forward—

Alaric yanked me onto my ass, his fingers digging into my shoulder. I batted at his hand and he grabbed my other arm too, hauling me backward across the floor.

"Let go. Let go!" I swung a punch toward him, a blow that glanced off his arm.



“Stop!”

The word echoed through my chest. For a moment, I stopped— no movement, not even a breath. Then I whirled to stare at him. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t touch that book. Bad enough you touched it once. A book’s not as bad as a demon, but it’s full of dark magic, bound in human skin flayed off a slave. It’s not safe.”

“Human skin? Ew!” I glanced at the leather covering the thick pages, sitting there... shining... full of magic... desirable— “Crap, I think it’s doing something to me. I want to touch it, help it.”

Alaric wrapped his arms around me and pulled me farther away. “Can you resist? Wait till reinforcements get here?”

“I don’t know.” I thought about that and realized I’d scooted forward a foot while pondering. “Can you make it stop?”

“Not just yet. We have to deal with the demon first.”

“Can you...” I peered around the room, noting how my eyes kept being dragged back to the cabinet, how I’d shifted my weight forward again without meaning to. “Can you do, like, a spell to block it?”

Alaric shook his head. “Not without knowing how the book created its hold on you.”

“Then... could you tie me up, maybe? I don’t like the way it calls me.” A shiver racked my body, but when my shaking was done, I was three feet closer to the book. I scrambled back on my ass, putting my shoulders to the wall.

“I can do that, I suppose.” Alaric scanned the shed, then fetched a coil of extension cord. “Not the best rope, but it should serve. Give me your hands.”

I held them in front of me and watched as his long, competent fingers wound the cord around my wrists and knotted it. The book called to me in a siren song that dulled my eyesight and pushed me to my feet.

Alaric looped the cord through a gap in the wall studs and tied it off out of reach. “That okay?”

Already I regretted my request. I jerked on the cord. “Can you undo it?”

The sound of a vehicle racing up the gravel drive outside made us both turn. Harry scampered out the door, ducking back in a moment later to say, “Miriam.”

“Praise the pigs.” Alaric moved toward the imprisoned sorcerer, who’d made it to his hands and knees.

The sorcerer stared at him, eyes blazing red, and let out a snarl. He lunged at the wall of the circle, slamming his palms on the green, flashes of crimson flaring to black under his hands.

Alaric staggered but the green wall didn’t change. “Give it a rest.” His voice was impressively steady but I saw his hunched shoulders relax when a tall woman strode into the shed, white light glowing at her fingertips.

“What’s going on? Oh. Shit.” She strode up close to where the demon sorcerer had his hands planted and looked him over. “Barnes. I’m so sorry.”

“Fuck you, bitch. So superior. Always telling me how little power I had.” Barnes’s lip curled, the expression progressing until his face warped in a way that seemed

inhuman. His voice deepened. “Well, I have power now.”

“Not for long.” The woman turned to Alaric. “Good job finding him and breaking his wards on that door—”

“I didn’t,” Alaric interrupted. “That was Robin.” He gestured my way. “He’s human, so the wards set against sorcerers didn’t stop him. He powered through and broke them. And he brained Barnes with a two-by-four.”

“Two-by-two,” I said, as if that somehow mattered. I’d moved to the limit the cord would allow, yearning toward the cabinet and the book. If I turned around, I could get one step closer yet...

“Why’s he tied up, then?” The woman glared at me.

“The book’s calling him.” Alaric gestured at the open cabinet.

“You opened it?”

“He did—”

A sudden flare of power flashed from the captive sorcerer, red running all around the inside of the green walls. Alaric grunted, swayed, and reached toward the woman.

She captured his flailing hand in hers. “Got you. Here.”

I didn’t see what she did, but the green circle steadied and Alaric muttered, “Thanks.”

“Can you hold him till Sylvanwood gets here?” She didn’t drop her grip.

“If you keep feeding me power, sure. The demon’s strong, but not that far out of my

league.”

I jerked on my tether again. “We should make sure the book is safe.”

Alaric and the woman traded frowns. The woman half-turned to me. “My name’s Miriam. You’re Robin?”

I jerked my chin up and almost said, “Mr. Forrest.” But that was foolish, a reaction to her height and power I needed to not give in to. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Well done, Robin. Very well done.” She waved at the demon-guy. “Sounds like he’d have been a lot harder to capture without you. Now I just need one thing.” She sketched something in my direction, a pretty confection of glowing white lace that floated my way. “I need you to listen to me. Can you do that?”

I nodded, my head swimming. “You. And the book.”

“Me. Just me. The book will wait.”

That sounded wrong in some back part of my brain that wasn’t full of cottony lace. “It doesn’t want to.”

She sketched again and the white lace spread bigger, a translucent veil draping over my head. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes.” The book had gone blessedly silent.

“Harry.” Miriam eyed the rat. “Can you chew through his rope and lead him safely outside? Easy now?”

“Sure.” Harry rose on his hind legs until he could reach the cord where Alaric had

threaded it. Three swift scissors of his teeth left the ends dangling. Harry took the end attached to me in his jaws and ground out, “Follow ’ee.” He headed to the door, his teeth clamped on the cord, and I tagged along obediently.

“Stay with Harry till we come for you, Robin,” Miriam said as I passed through the doorway. Then she turned back to Alaric.

The cool outdoor air felt refreshing on my face. I trudged behind Harry over to a big tree. Part of me wanted to be amused, or maybe outraged, at being led on a leash by a rat. The part in control right now didn’t care, though.

Harry let go of his end and waved a paw at the grass under the tree. “You might as well have a seat.”

“Thanks.” The word floated from my mouth. I sank to the cool grass. “Can you chew through the rest of this?” I held out my hands, not much caring if he released me or not.

Harry tilted his head. “I’d better not, yet. I’ll keep you company, though.” He settled on the grass beside me.

“What comes next?” My tongue had no constraints, so I added, “You’re Alaric’s friend, huh? You think he could ever fall for a short twink with no magic? He has a lot of magic. He shines. And his ass is awesome, and he’s smart, and I like his dick—Ouch!” I frowned down. “You bit me.”

“Nipped. You’re power drunk. Hush up now. You’ll thank me later.”

“Oh.” I did feel like I was drunk on the best champagne. I tilted my head back and watched the stars overhead appear and disappear as the wind ruffled the canopy of leaves. A car drove up and a man and woman got out, rushing toward the shed. I

knew I should be curious, but I couldn't work up the energy.

Noises came from the shed, a shout once, a growl like a captured bear, an inhuman scream that faded and was gone. Harry muttered, "And good riddance," under his breath.

After a few more minutes, Alaric, the new man, and both women emerged from the shed. Miriam said, "You take care of the rest. I'll get the hunt underway for Barnes's nephew." She crossed the lawn, heading my way, as the man I hadn't met splashed something from a can onto the sides of the shed. An acrid scent wafted across the grass toward me.

Miriam stopped at my side and asked Harry, "Any problems?"

"Nope. Happy as a clam, docile as a lamb." He twitched his whiskers.

"We're almost done. As soon as they light the match, I'll set him free. You can get the cord off his wrists."

Harry rose to his haunches in front of me. "Give your hands here then, Robin."

I held my arms out and he made quick work of freeing me. The smothering cloud of white receded a fraction. A worry nagged at the back of my mind.

Alaric hurried to the other outbuilding next to the shed, found a hose, and turned it on. Water arced out in a glittering spray. He said, "Ready."

The second woman struck a match and tossed it toward the shed. With a whoomph, flames burst free and rolled up the wood siding and in through the open doorway. The roof tiles caught, crackling and spitting sparks.

“Save me!” blasted through my fuzzy brain, ripping holes in the white lace.

The book! I shook off my stupor and plunged forward, charging toward the shed, arms outstretched.

Miriam shouted, “Stop!” but the screams of appeal and command from the book were louder.

Alaric grabbed me. I fought as he wrapped me tightly in his arms. He squeezed me harder, plastering me against him until I couldn’t breathe. I tried to hit, tried to head-butt, kicked his shin. He clutched me and turned his head away as my skull thudded on his neck.

And then, from one breath to the next, the screaming in my head was gone. I dropped like an anvil had landed on me. Only Alaric’s hold on my buckling body kept me from hitting the dirt hard.

“Oh! No!” I took a deep breath of smoke-scented air and burst into tears.

Alaric cupped the back of my head and pressed my face to his shoulder, rocking me through three racking sobs. Then, as fast as the fit had come on, my despair faded. I pushed at him and when he clung tight, said, “I’m fine. It’s gone. You can let go.”

“Are you sure?” He eased his grip bit by bit until he could look me in the eyes. Firelight danced in the shine of his gaze. “Really all right?”

“I’m good.” I wiped my face with the back of my wrist.

“Yeah, you sure are.” Alaric winked and smirked, and of all things, that steadied me. Behind him, the shed burned in a pyre of flaming walls. The other man walked around, soaking any spot where embers landed. Sparks rose to the heavens like a

giant bonfire.

I shuddered. “You burned the book?”

“Yes. Safest. Trust me.”

“And... the man?” I didn’t understand demons, but Barnes had been a human being. Fire was a horrible death.

“He was already gone. The necromancer sent Barnes back with the demon to the hell it came from.”

“Will he live there?”

Alaric’s lips twisted. “He was dead from the moment he invited a demon in. Only one man ever separated a demon from his victim and saved the host. That was decades ago, and the Weaver lives a long way from here. Once a sorcerer accepts the demon, they’re a dead person walking.”

“Oh.” It was a lot to take in. Everything was. Exhaustion hit me like my own two-by-two to the head. “Can I go home now?”

Behind me, Miriam said, “Let me just clear this.” The last wisps of white cotton cleared from my mind. She peered at me, sketched another symbol in white, then nodded as it faded and was gone. “There, all clear, no lingering traces. Alaric, we’ll clean up here. You take Robin home.”

“Right.” He kept his warm arm across my shoulders and turned me toward his car. “Come on, let’s get you back.”

“And Harry?” I twisted to look around.



“Right under your feet.” The rat gave a high chuckle. “Better get used to that.”

“What do you mean?” Alaric asked before I could.

“I mean, I’m not blind and I’m not a fool. I may not be a seer, but this future’s easy to make out.” Harry hopped onto the hood of the car as we reached it. “Come along, my sorcerer. Let’s get your boyfriend home.”

Alaric snorted. But oddly, neither he nor I corrected Harry as Alaric opened the door, held my elbow until I slumped into the seat, then walked around to start the car and drive me back to my familiar world.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am*

Alaric

Robin stared at me out of the back door of the Three Rs next morning. I'd chosen to ring the bell, not walk in, although I still had the spare key. He frowned and didn't step aside, looking self-assured despite the casual clothes that replaced his suit. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm scheduled to start at eight, aren't I?"

"It's ten past seven."

"I'm an eager beaver." When his frown didn't ease, I added, "I figured you'd be here." I held out the key, as evidence of my goodwill.

Robin took it, hesitated, then swung the door wider to let me past. "I didn't expect you to show up at all." He closed the door behind me, reached as if to reset the alarm, and then sighed. A scorch mark surrounded the panel Barnes had fried with his magic and the box hung dead. "Crap. I'll have to replace that."

Robin wore loose jeans and a tidy dark-blue Henley with the Three R's logo on the breast pocket. Deep shadows surrounded his eyes, and I wondered how he'd slept. His hair was its usual perfection, though, and his chin was clean-shaven as ever. "How are your wrists?" I asked.

He shrugged and tugged his sleeves lower. "Fine. Already forgotten."

"And how are you?" Harry queried him from the floor six feet behind us.

Robin jumped and whirled. “How did you get in?”

Harry preened his whiskers. “You can’t keep a rat out. Whatever do they teach you humans in school?” He glanced my way. “No intruders. No spells. No trouble. See you later.” One leap took him to the second shelf of a nearby unit, the next to the top level opposite, and he vanished from view.

Robin sighed. “You know, I’d almost convinced myself last night was all a dream.”

“Do you want it to be?” If I backed away from Robin permanently, and nothing jolted his memories, the Great Spell would make sure his recall faded. Slowly, and probably never completely, given the intensity of his exposure. But the Great Spell would convince him that magic was a lot less powerful than he’d imagined.

“No.” Robin met my eyes and jerked his chin up. “I have questions, though.”

He’d been silent the whole drive home from Barnes’s place, so unlike himself I’d worried. I’d tried to persuade him to let me come in, let me take care of his cord-bruised wrists or at least explain, be a sounding board, let him yell, if nothing else. He’d told me to go home, though, in a tone that had no wiggle room. He’d looked distant, but not shaken to where I could ride over his wishes. So I’d gone.

I was glad to see him bouncing back. “I’ll try to have answers, but some of this is confidential. For my safety and for Harry’s.” I’d pressed that point home before I left him, but it bore repeating. “Remember the Upheavals?”

He frowned and nodded. Schools only taught a tiny fraction of what had happened in the 1990s when sorcerers and humans clashed out in the open, but there were enough deaths, especially among the sorcerers, to make my point. Enough prisons and torture and hunting folks down too. The Great Spell had softened human memories but the aura of disaster lingered.

I told him, “I’ll answer what I can, as long as you promise to accept when I can’t tell you more. As long as you keep Harry safe.”

“Of course!”

“Don’t tell people about the talking rat. Seriously.”

His lips twisted. “They wouldn’t believe me.”

I caught his gaze. “The wrong people would.”

“Ah.” That gave him pause. “Okay, I understand. But how do you know I’m not one of the wrong people?”

Putting my hand on his chest over his heart was a liberty, but he didn’t shake me off. Warmth seeped from his skin to mine through the thin cotton. “I worked for you for a week. You’re a great boss, fair but not soft, kind but not weak. You showed me who you are, day after day.”

“A guy too unsure to drop the suit and tie after a week?” He said it like a joke, but his eyes held a shadow of doubt.

“Hah. Unsure?” I let my hand trail lower. “I seem to remember being on my knees to someone who was very sure.”

That chased some of the shadows and he smiled. “I do remember that.”

“Vividly.” I plucked at the waistband of his jeans. “Now you’re out of the suit, and no less attractive. Do you think you can be just as bossy in a Henley?”

Robin gripped my wrist, trapping my hand against his hip. “Is that a challenge?”

“Well,” I said. “It occurred to me that the rest of the staff will be arriving in half an hour. We can talk while they’re out here working, but I prefer dropping to my knees without any risk of an audience.”

The pleased sparkle in Robin’s eyes was reassurance I’d urgently needed. I haven’t lost him. He glanced around, and I wondered if he liked the idea of being sucked off right here in the midst of his retail domain. But when I made a move to kneel, he tugged on my arm. “Not here, tempting as it may be. Let’s head to my workshop.”

We walked side-by-side through the half-lit store. The six inches of air between his shoulder and my arm felt overheated. I was regretting wearing my tightest jeans for him.

“So is this a one off?” he asked as we passed the lighting fixture section. “How long will you stay?”

“I promised you two weeks’ notice, and I’ll keep that promise. I work for myself, so I have flexibility.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m a PI. I find people, check out things, do background investigations, stuff like that.”

“With magic?”

I’d made the decision not to keep him in ignorance, back this morning when I’d shaved twice and pulled on these jeans, instead of heading to my own office. “Sometimes. But I’m good with computers. Most of the background stuff is online.”

We paused outside the workshop door. He set his hand on the knob but didn’t turn it. I wondered if he was thinking about the cabinet and Kimber’s Death Rites .

I said, “I promise, the cabinet’s gone and the book as well, burned to a crisp. A couple of our people sifted through the ashes once the fire was out and there was nothing left. You’re safe.”

“Thank you.” He swung the door open. “I’m still not quite sure what happened.”

“Apparently Magnus Fairborn found a copy of an evil book.” Robin didn’t need to know the title. “He stored it in the cabinet with powerful protection spells. But he put a backdoor shortcut into the lock spell. Three drops of blood from the same person, placed on one of the doors. It’s a known technique. If he was incapacitated, he could give someone else the book that way. You triggered the backdoor accidentally.” Or the book induced you to trigger it. I’d mention that option later, when his exposure wasn’t so raw.

“Oh! When I cut my knuckle, then knocked on the cabinet with the bleeding spot, and then sliced my damned finger.” He eyed the scab on his fingertip. “Did the book make me do that so it could escape? I’m not usually clumsy.”

He wasn’t slow, my Robin. At least he also didn’t sound too creeped out. “Maybe. We’ll never know. Anyway, from then on, the door opened for you. Unfortunately, the cabinet also lost its camouflage spell when you opened it. That’s why Barnes and his demon’s scrying spell could finally locate the book.”

“Scrying?”

“A magical way of finding things, a spell that shows you where something or someone is hiding.” Usually, the sorcerer needed a physical connection to scry with, a scrap of the original or something that had touched it. I wondered what link to the Death Rites the demon had used. Hopefully, whatever it had been was burned now. “I gather they’d been looking hard since Fairborn died, but the cabinet’s spell hid the book until you triggered the lock.”

“Were you looking for the book too? Is that why you took the job here?”

I couldn't deny that. Honesty was best, anyway. “Yes. We knew some of Fairborn's stuff was sent here, but the cabinet hid from me, too, until yesterday.”

“And Barnes came for it last night.” He gave me a sharp look. “Beating you to the treasure by minutes. Were you going to steal the armoire yourself?”

A wry smile seemed like the way to go, although Robin didn't smile back. “Not last night. I was going to try some opening spells. If they didn't work, then theft was on the table later, yes.”

Robin nodded, his jaw clenched. “I guess I understand why. Was Barnes a black sorcerer?”

I frowned, remembering our interrogation of the hissing, struggling demon-ridden sorcerer. “Barnes had done landscaping work for Fairborn, and spied on him. He was always low-powered, little more than a hedgewitch, and hungry for more magic. Not black magic, necessarily, but he wasn't picky. When Fairborn died, one of the demons he'd summoned escaped and seduced Barnes with offers of power. The demon wanted the book but didn't know where it was, and they couldn't find it till you broke the lock yesterday. Once they were able to scry for the location, they recruited his nephew and came here to get the cabinet and its contents.”

“What would they have done with the book?”

I shuddered. “We probably don't want to know. Luckily, the lock shortcut was tuned to you by then, and they couldn't open the cabinet. The demon had a spell prepared to sacrifice Barnes's poor nephew next, if that axe didn't break through.” The runes had been written on the shed floor, waiting for a human's heart-blood. They might've worked.

“Did you ever find him? The nephew, I mean.”

“Yes.” Miriam had Barnes's nephew at her house right now. While I rarely condoned erasing memories, that young man would be both happier and safer without some of his. Not even Miriam had the strength to wipe them all clean, but a little tweaking from “possessed, magical uncle who was trapped by a demon” to “weird, deluded uncle who died when his shed burned down” would do the job. “He’s going to be all right,” I told Robin. “Will need some recovery time, though.”

“I bet.” Robin gazed around the workshop, his eyes distant. “I have other questions. Things I want to know, later...” But before I could become too worried about what he was thinking, he reached behind him, locked the door, and fixed a much keener stare on me. He drew himself up to his full height and crossed his arms. At a skinny five-foot-two, that should’ve been humorous, but somehow he managed to fill an imposing amount of space. “Right now, Alaric, I believe you said something about me still needing to seem the boss in jeans and a Henley?”

My dick gave a denim-strangled twitch at the tone in his voice. “Yeah, I did.”

“Any doubts I need to lay to rest?”

It should’ve been ridiculous— that short young man in glasses peering up at me, arms folded across his chest, chin up, ready to give me orders. Instead, it was the hottest thing I’d seen since... well, since the last time. “No doubts. Maybe plans.”

Robin’s wicked grin lit his face. “I make the plans, Alaric. And I think it would be a good plan for you to show me just how talented your mouth is. In case I’ve forgotten.”

Just my mouth? I wanted to turn and lean on the workbench and drag down my jeans. But the other staff were arriving soon, I had no condoms, and a sore ass wasn’t the best way to start an eight-hour workday. Plus, I truly wanted another taste of Robin



with his dick down my throat and his hands in my hair.

So I went to my knees, there in front of my boss, and raised my head to meet his eyes. For a moment, the heat leaping from his gaze to mine faded to something else, something softer and more tender. I realized I wanted to explore that too, to figure out how we fit together when sex wasn't the only thing on the table. I had two weeks to convince Robin to date me for real.

He reached down and ran a finger along my jaw. I turned my head and kissed his fingertip, and the sound he made was soft and pleased.

But courting Robin was something I wanted to give time and thought. Right now, here on my knees, I had no problem with a bit of fun, starting with the best blow job I could deliver. I locked my hands behind my back, licked my lips, and looked Robin in the eyes. "Tell me what to do, Mr. Forrest."

Let the boss-employee games begin.

##### the end #####