

The Rest of Your Life in a Day

Elizabeth Bear

(First published in *Baen's Universe*, 2007)

The tattoo artist was Yukako Kobayashi, and she was in her sixties or seventies--or possibly older. Her hair was skinned back in a bun; her cheekbones lifted like unfurling wings under button-bright eyes. She was tiny in her batwing sweater and leggings, scrunchy elf boots pooled at her ankles, and Matt was just barely thankful that she hadn't opted for the Laura Holt hair to complete the outfit.

He was all for cognitive dissonance. Sometimes.

She didn't turn her back while he undressed, except incidentally as she readied her machine and needles and the dishes of black iron ink. Matt had handled the depilation himself. She did glance across as he slid off his briefs, and said "Your glasses too, please."

He pushed them up his nose with his thumb, reflexively, and caught himself with a short self-conscious laugh. He had come alone; his only family, his brother Kelly, was practicing with his band--which meant smoking some joints and drinking some beers more than actually playing any music, if Kelly's bitching about his bandmates was anything to go on.

That was fine with Matt: he hadn't been there when Kelly got his ink, and he would be damned if Kelly was going to gloat over the pained faces Matt was sure he'd make. And if he told him no, thanks, I'll do it alone, he wouldn't get his hopes dashed when Kelly said he'd come and didn't show.

Naked, denuded, Matt sat on the edge of the bench, paper crumpling under his ass, stiff plastic denting beneath that. He could barely hear the street noise; easy to forget that New York was going about its business just the other side of the locked, shaded glass doors. Miss Kobayashi pulled on latex gloves--he hadn't known they made them in such small sizes--and wheeled her work surface over. He watched her, deft and precise, a study in gray and black and white, and tried to breathe normally. The ink had an odor to it, chemical, not unpleasant. He wondered how it would smell mixed with blood.

"Lie down," she said, in the same even tone she'd said everything to him since he and his archmage, Jane, came in to make the appointment. He did, staring at the ceiling. It was clean and interesting, hung with colored silks. The light was good, spotless and white.

Miss Kobayashi was a Mage, like Jane, like Kelly. Like Matt was training to become. He felt her iron

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Miss Kobayashi was a Mage, like Jane, like Kelly. Like Matt was training to become. He felt her iron rings through her glove when she patted his hip. As her hands moved over the tray, he'd seen them, lined with pale gold and set with black and gray coral. "Jane says you're sworn chaste." Her English was as

American as her outfit, her voice younger than her age and light in tone. "That's an unusually powerful offering for a young Mage these days."

"I'm not a Mage yet."

She showed him teeth like stained pearls. "You will be when I'm done with you." The way she said it lifted the hairs on his neck. He bit his lip, shut his eyelids. Anything Kelly could do, Matt could do... nearly as well. He needed the power. He had reasons.

"We start at the center," she explained. Another quick pat, which might have been meant to soothe but left him twitching like a nervous bird. "The

organs of generation, and then next time, the heart. You are--right handed? Then we finish with that. It will take a year and a day." He smelled soap, studied the ceiling as she washed him with impersonal competence. And then there was texture--coolness, a sharp pinch, the sensation of weight and stretching as she handled his genitals. He looked down; she'd locked a chromed steel, leather, and rubber cage around the base of his penis and scrotum. "Keeps the blood in," she said. "Otherwise, at the first needle prick--like a turtle!" *Show a little faith*, he almost said, but instead laid his head back on the table and tried not to feel the blood rising in his face. Or his penis. "If you need a break," she said, "you tell

me." First, she made him hard. With quick, sharp strokes of her hand, the glove catching on his razor-sensitized skin. He turned aside, embarrassed at how easily he responded to the casual touch of a woman three times his age.

"Do I have your consent, Matthew Patrick Szczegielniak?"

Point of no return. This was strength. This was armor. This was a weapon against the creatures who had left him alone in the world, except for Kelly--at first--and then later, when she had unofficially adopted them, Jane. Not that he remembered his parents. Not well, anyway.

"Yes," Matt said, and made himself open his eyes. At first he thought with relief *that only kind of tickles*

, but then he realized she was drawing careful curlicues over his groin with a magic marker. The first stab was bad, sharp. The machine buzzed; he tightened his hands on the edge of the table and held on, breathing deep and slow, and the pain tangled and became complex. He'd been told to expect a floating sensation, but it was more than that. Oh, it hurt all right, but not as badly as he'd feared. In fact-"Give me a second," he said, and the needle came off his skin, blessed relief that nevertheless left him abruptly lonely. He realized how much

he'd been feeling the vibration, down both legs and up to his solar plexus. His thighs trembled, his ass and abdominal muscles flexed. He curled up, on his elbows, and let himself gasp like an overheated cat. A thin slick of shining fluid covered his genitals, and he almost thought he saw something shimmer behind it. *I can do this. I can do anything, if I want the reward bad enough.*

And he wanted it. Jane would make him a warrior monk, she said. Like Galahad. All he had to do was get through this, commit himself to the order, keep putting his heart and body into the training and she'd make him what he wanted to be.

"All right," he said. "I can do this." And made himself lie back down. After that, it went fine for a while. Once he called a rest and once she did, when he had lost track of what was happening and was just lying on his back, eyes closed, feeling the needles perforate skin. The sensations became warmer, rounder. Until she stretched the skin of his scrotum over a wooden spoon to make a smooth surface for the buzzing needles. *That* seared like a brand. By then, it only made him harder.

The cock ring was, quite frankly, humiliating. Still, Miss Kobayashi was clinical, impersonal, and mostly did not try to engage him in conversation. So no,

it wasn't nearly as bad as Kelly had insinuated--but then, he thought Kelly had been trying to psych him out.

Big brothers. That bully streak was part of their charm.

He heard himself breathing, deep-chested gasps. Not just the pain of the needles, now; a rooted ache was building behind his testicles. And fire along his nerves, drawn as if with a pen--things flickered and moved in the corners of his vision. He felt himself observed, and cringed from it. There was no one here but the two of them.

He had the sudden crazy urge to thrust, to push himself into her hand, and lifted his

feet a fraction of an inch. A spiked band of fear, of what the needles could do to him if he wasn't still, tightened around his heart, and he mastered himself. The chatter of the machine stopped; she stepped back. "Matthew?" And then the giggles hit, making his diaphragm shake while he stuffed his fist against his mouth and tried to keep still.

When he had himself under control, he peeked to see if Miss Kobayashi was glowering. She huffed approvingly and patted his hip, and he clinked to clear the smear of light haloing her small hands from his vision. A sigh of relief trickled out. "Sorry."

"Perfectly normal reaction," she said,

and bent his penis to the left to get a better angle. The lines had to be gone over several times to make them dark. It was delicate work; too shallow and the ink would fade, too deep and it would scar.

Miss Kobayashi played no music while she worked, but bent close enough to his sensitive, fresh-shaven skin that he could sometimes feel her breath. He told himself stories to pass the time, and honestly, to distract himself from that aching edge of orgasm that was becoming an unrelenting pressure, and the way the world swam in front of his vision, the muttering voices he *almost* thought he heard. The stories he used

were fairy tales, the ones Jane insisted Matt memorize and Kelly scoffed at. It was okay for Kelly to scoff; he could play an instrument. Matt had to make do with Bluebeard. Iron John. The Firebird.

That one was particularly good, especially the part where Tsarevich Ivan was chopped up by his wicked brothers.

And then Matt thought of the best one, and had a good fifteen minutes with the Beautiful Vassilisa and Baba Yaga, though he never managed to forget the scratch, scratch of the needles, or the way the electricity--the magic, it had to be--scoured him inside and out. Passion was power, and power was passion. *If this is like this, I wonder how sex feels.*

He remembered another fairy tale with the Baba Yaga in it, and the doll that Vassilisa's dead mother had left her, that guided her through her captivity by her wicked step-family, and by the witch Baba Yaga too. *Eat a little, and drink a little, and listen to my grief.*

His mother had left him something too. Magic, and the Prometheus Club. And Kelly. He almost didn't notice when the needle stopped, when cool latex-gloved fingers encircled the base of his penis. He was somewhere else, focused entirely, watching the old witch fly with her iron mortar and pestle for a cart, sweeping away the dust behind. There

was a pop, an appalling sudden easing--and Matt startled himself with a breathtaking, uncomfortable ejaculation that left him panting like an animal, hands clenched on the bench. "Shit," he said, when he could speak for breathing.

"It's okay," she said. And she'd been ready for him, too; there was a wad of paper towels in her hand, which she left stowed inside the right glove as she snapped them inside out. God, was he that obvious?

"That's not a violation of your oath, I don't think." She dabbed delicately at the bloody skin with a pad of gauze, patting rather than rubbing. He winced. It *hurt* now--his testicles ached; his penis felt

sandpapered--and there was nothing transcendent about this pain.

But there had been.

Miss Kobayashi clucked her tongue and stepped back, returning a moment later with a sheaf of mimeos and a tube. "Here are the care instructions. Here's the cream--use it before you dress, and then again after you wash--and wash it as soon as you get home. And if it itches, either apply lotion, or slap at it. Don't *rub*."

"Yes, Miss Kobayashi." Easier said than done, he imagined.

She gave him a sort of a smile. "Don't

forget your spectacles. I'll see you next week, Matthew."

*

When Matty staggered out of the tattoo parlor--there was a closed sign hung on the door, but it wasn't like Kelly had forgotten how to find the place in two years--he looked just about as white and exhausted as Kelly had expected. And he walked right past Kelly, inward-turned, focused on his pain, on trying to move normally.

Kelly had been listening to Yngvie Malmsteen on his Walkman, half-tranced by the soar and the grind of the hard-driving sound. That was real magic.

Matt's fairy-tale crap, the Prometheus Club's manipulations--those could not compete. Bards had always been the real mages. Reluctantly, Kelly flipped the music off with his thumb.

"Hey, Matty," he said, and Matt spun around, as light on the balls his feet as he was on the basketball court. Matt had gotten all the athleticism. Well, most of it. Some.

And then he saw Kelly and let the exhaustion show, and also his pleasure. "Oh, you came."

"Sure," Kelly said. "The guys were pissing me off anyway. They don't really give a shit about playing, they just want

to coast and pick up chicks. You want to get something to eat?"

"I could kill," Matt said, after a delay as if he checked systems and was surprised to find himself hungry.

"You got a place in mind?"

"Jane said we should come over." Kelly indicated his wristwatch. Matt nodded. "I don't know that I'm up for a long visit, though." They walked side by side, Kelly limiting his stride out of consideration. "It went okay?" He didn't need to turn to see Matt blush. Scarlet, from the dimple of his collarbones all the way up.

"Yeah," he said. "Not too bad."

"Well, all right then." Kelly said. And stepped into the street to hail a cab. "Screw this. It's your birthday. Let's go in style."

Matt paid for the cab, but it didn't actually matter. It was all Jane's money anyway. When he dug in his pockets, he unearthed the clutter that collected there--a matchbook, some steel washers and ball bearings, a packet of sesame seeds. Kelly more or less pretended not to know him until he sorted it out, which was a good trick when Matt kept handing him things.

She had said to come to her private

apartment on the Upper East Side rather than the Prometheus Club ritual space on the Upper West. They walked in past the doorman--he gave them a little wink; they were regulars--but Matt hesitated and didn't quite push the elevator button. "What's that?" Kelly squinted. He didn't see anything unusual. But there was the usual susurrus of soft voices, the stones of the building awakened by a Mage's residence and presence. They liked having someone to talk to.

"You hear that? Already? It's the apartment building. Talking to itself." He cocked an ear. "Somebody on the third floor just brought home a new baby."

"Is this normal?"

Of course Matt knew it was. But it was weird, Kelly remembered, suddenly hearing the city grumbling to itself when it turned over in its sleep.

"It's just a little... early," Kelly said, hoping Matt wouldn't notice the hesitation. *Damn*, he thought. *He's going to be better at this than me, too.*

Not that it really mattered. All Kelly cared about was the music, and Matt didn't want anything to do with that.

"You know," Matt said, as if he knew what Kelly was thinking, "there's a version of Red Riding Hood where the wolf asks her if she'll be travelling via

the road of pins, or the road of needles."

"So what's that got to do with anything?"

"That's us. Pins and needles. Music and stories. Two different ways to get there. Both of them involve things that can stab you through the heart."

Kelly stared at Matt for a minute, and then leaned on the button again. "It ain't magic if you don't bleed," he said, so softly he didn't think his brother heard him.

*

Jane Andraste was slender, fiftyish, and lucent. Her iron rings were plated with

gold and set with diamonds. She held herself like her spine was a string of pearls dangled in a casual hand. She opened the door for Matt and Kelly, releasing the smell of good cooking into the hall. "Boys!" she said, and tugged them down so she could kiss them both in turn, Kelly and then Matt.

Matt set her at arm's length and grinned at her. "Could have been worse," he said before she could ask, and blew her a kiss.

She blushed and waved him off. "Come in and eat."

Jane was powerful in more ways than one, and as wounded as Kelly and Matt.

Matt came into her apartment past framed photos of her husband and daughter, as lost to her as Matt and Kelly's parents were lost to them.

Her husband was just dead--a heart attack, or some other peril of middle age. She didn't talk about him much. Matt's mom and dad were also dead, beyond recall, beyond reparation, casualties of the endless centuries of conflict between the Prometheus Club and the Fae.

But the Fae craved those with talent, and what they wanted, they took. And Elaine had been *taken*. Elaine was alive, a changeling in Faerie. And there was always the hope that they could win her

back. Her, and all the others.

"Come in," Jane said belatedly. "Sit, be well. How was your day, Kelly?" He startled. He'd been focused on the middle distance, fingers moving idly on imagined chords. "Fine. We practiced. Wicked good."

Her mouth thinned as she turned away. Matt heard clinking; she fussed in the kitchen and brought them cokes in crystal tumblers. Matt toyed with his, amused; his-and-Kelly's kitchenware ran more to McDonald's Miss Piggy glasses. "You should come to Tuesday night circle," she said. "We're going to be starting a seminar on bardic traditions. It'll be

more use to you than rock songs." Matt ducked into the living room, looking for a little distance, but Kelly followed, and perched one ass-cheek on the arm of the sofa. Matt, hands folded around the glass to hide how they were shaking, chose a more sedate position.

"Shakespeare was an actor," Kelly said, mouthing the words of the argument more to demonstrate his obduracy than because he had any illusions that he could convert Jane. "The bardic tradition is popular song, Jane. I can be useful to Prometheus on stage."

Jane looked across Kelly, appealing to Matt for help. Matt ducked the gaze. He knew how much Kelly wanted that

success, how badly he craved it.

The rotten thing was, Kelly didn't have the gifts to be more than a mediocre musician.

"I'm starving," Matt said, unsubtle. "What's to eat?" Jane hadn't ever formally adopted Matt and Kelly, but she'd found out about them somehow. Through the Promethean grapevine, no doubt. Matt's mother had been a Maga. And Jane had made sure they never wanted, and that there was always a foster home in some Promethean's family. It had meant a lot of moving, but Matt didn't mind--and when Kelly was old enough to live on his own, she'd

found the two of them in an apartment, which she paid for. Jane had always been there, constant. Matt couldn't stand to watch them fight.

His question broke them up, thank God. And she'd made roast beef and asparagus. And a birthday cake. And if Matt spent the entire meal shifting uncomfortably in his chair, she could think that it was because he was sore, and not because he couldn't stop thinking, with squirrely obsession, of the thunder of the needles against taut flesh.

*

A year and a day after Matty's eighteenth

birthday, Kelly sprawled on Matt's bed, smoking an unfiltered Camel, watching his little brother dress. They were nearly twins--well, Kelly was taller and better looking, though Matty spent every minute when he wasn't cramming for his classes or in circle at the gym, taking out his sex drive at the weight pile--but the light slid up and down the thumb-thick black bands on Kelly's arm as he smoked, and one of Matt's still showed bare, prickled from the elbow to the wrist only with fine sunlit hairs.

As promised, it was the only unmarked skin remaining between Matt's collarbones and ankles, excluding his hands. Everything else was covered with

dully glossy lines of black iron ink that reflected moving highlights as he pulled shirts out of the closet and piled them on the bedroom chair.

"You don't have to be such a goddamned cram," Kelly said, staring at the ceiling. A spider spun in the corner. He blew a smoke ring at her, but it faded before it went that high. "Semester's over, man. Time to party a little. Even if you don't screw around, you can still, you know, drink."

"Not when I also have to learn magic," Matt said. He gestured to a pile of books teetering perilously close to the keyboard of the TRS-80 on his desktop. "I just finished my finals, and Jane wants

three pages on magia versus goeteia by Sunday. Besides, you're sliding through on technicalities. One of us ought to use school to *learn* something. Since Jane is being nice enough to pay for it."

"Magic," Kelly said, "is all about the technicalities. Oh, god, Matty, don't wear that. It doesn't go."

"This shirt?"

"It's green," Kelly said. "The pants are olive. Don't do that."

"Fine." Matt threw the shirt on the closet floor. "It's all gray to me." Matty was colorblind.

"That's why you have me," Kelly said, amused, turning his head in the cradle of his arm. He drew a knee up, daring Matt to bitch at him for the Doc Marten on the chenille bedspread. But Matty just gave him that sidelong eyeroll and pulled a purple paisley long-sleeved shirt from the hanger. "How's that?"

"Just wear the jeans, not those fucking painter's pants."

"I wish you wouldn't smoke in my room," Matt said, unzipping his fly and letting the trousers pool around his ankles. Kelly sat up, and didn't manage to get his palm under the drooping ash before it pattered to the bedspread.

"Sorry." But apparently it wasn't even worth a dirty look. Matt was jerking his jeans over his tattooed calves with a series of short, concentrated tugs. "I've gotta get dressed, man. I'll see you at the gig?" He held his breath, expecting the kid to blow him off. Although it wasn't like he had, you know, a date.

"Yes," Matt told him. "I'll see you at the gig. Are you coming to my ordination?" To cover that he'd forgotten, Kelly brushed it aside with the back of his hand. "No shit, I'd skip out on my baby brother becoming a Mage. But you'll be too busy to notice *me*." Kelly didn't let Matt see him smile as he went to spike his hair and change into his gig clothes.

And he pretended he didn't hear Matt muttering one of his ridiculous fairy tale chants under his breath as Kelly was leaving. Bluebeard, this time. *Anne, sister Anne, who do you see coming?*

*

Matt rested more or less at ease on Yukako's work table, his right arm comfortably supported, as she etched a broad elaborate cuff over her black guidelines. When he shifted uncomfortably it was not from the needles but because he was hard. After the first couple of sessions, he'd figured out that that was just what his body had gotten tricked into thinking it was supposed to do when somebody started

sticking needles into it. More embarrassing, he had the same reaction to the smell of Yukako's shampoo and her skin, which haunted him at odd hours. He didn't care if she knew about the erection. He just hoped she didn't know that he thought of her meticulous needlework when he jacked off in the shower. Thick scrolls hurt when the needles passed over his wristbones. He made a little huff of protest; she bumped his knee with her hip. They were old friends, now that her needles had knocked the pride out of him.

It was one way to study humility. It hadn't worked on Kelly, though; if anything, he was more arrogant than

ever.

"Matthew?" She was the only one who called him that. He loved it.

"Thinking about my brother." He was well-trained now; he didn't fidget and he didn't shrug. "He's got his first gig tonight. I'm going after the ceremony."

"Is he any good?"

"God, no," Matt said, and laughed. "He's terrible." She steadied his arm with her hand and kept working while he leaned down to smell the soap she said was green, to smell her hair, the ink, and the blood. "It'll be weird not seeing you."

"A year and a day. I'll be at the ordination," she said. She set the machine aside, tendons striping her narrow wrist. "Congratulations. You are done."

The words hit him funny; he had to think them over for a minute before he understood what she saying. He felt strangely bereft.

"You'll come back if you need touch-ups?"

"I'll come back even if I don't," he said, and--greatly daring--touched her hair. He would have kissed her if he'd had the courage.

She chuckled, reaching for gauze and the vitamin cream. He didn't look up, just took them and began doctoring her work.

"You're a brave young man." And then *she* ducked down, so her v-neck sweater hung away from her white turtleneck, and pecked his cheek with birdy indifference. "Take an old woman's blessing, Matthew. Happy Birthday."

"Thank you," he said. He draped the gauze loosely over his lotion-slick arm. "I will." He buttoned his sleeve over the bandage and went directly to the ordination. The city hummed around him, the buzz of human traffic and the quieter conversations of steel and brick and cloth and glass and stones. They were

comforting now, the conversation of old friends; he listened while he walked. You could never quite make out the words, but sometimes you could get a sense of personalities, or opinions. Gargoyles, in particular, had opinions.

Like most of the rituals of the Prometheus Club, the ordination would be short and uncomplicated. Matt took the subway to the Upper West Side, rode a lift to the penthouse of a stately apartment building, and let himself in by tapping the code on the access pad beside the door. He wasn't the first. A couple dozen East Coast Magi stood around the lobby, chatting amongst themselves and snacking on crudités and

canapés, because everything tastes better in French.

There were polite and quiet greetings as he made his way around the room. A couple wished him happy birthday; one other poured him a drink. No one tried to take his hand, but Matt mostly kept it tucked in his pocket or wrapped around his wine glass anyway. They must have been warned in advance, because he and Kelly were the only ones with the ink. Which was fine with him. He liked being chosen. Special. Eventually, Jane's second, Felix Luray, emerged from the ballroom to throw open the doors. The crowd filtered from the antechamber with its stretched stark modern

canvasses and ice-pale wood, and were received into a white tall chamber with an inlaid floor. The ballroom ran almost the length of building, uninterrupted except for a few structural pillars that had been made to look elegant. Matt moved with the Magi, not quite anonymous in their midst. Yukako was already waiting; Felix appeared at Matt's shoulder, his black, wavy hair slicked, his shoulders squared in a pinstriped suit that Matt suspected was navy, though to him it seemed charcoal gray. "It'll be over in two ticks," Felix said cheerfully, in habitually plummy tones.

"Said the bishop to the actress," Matt

answered, and smiled a little at Felix's amused snort. "Felix, take my glass?"

Felix lifted it from his fingers and sipped what was left of the wine, while Matt made a face.

"You're on, lad." With a duck of his head, Felix effaced himself. Matt barely noticed him going. Goeteia--illusion--rather than real magic. But kind of charming anyway. Matt walked forward, sidestepping between waiting Magi, and caught sight of the archmage, Jane Andraste. She wore an off-white tailored dress. She stood alone in the center of the room, her black hair piled up high, her skin powdered until it could not shine.

He wouldn't glance over his shoulder to see if Kelly had come. He wouldn't. Kelly would not let him down this time. *Nibble, nibble, like a mouse.* "Matt," Jane said. She held up her right hand; a black iron band, slightly concave in the center and flared at the edges, was pinched between her fingers.

Who's that gnawing at my house?

He tried to say her name, and stammered. She grinned. "Matthew Patrick Szczegielniak, do you solemnly swear, avow, aver, and affirm that you will uphold justice in the service of humankind, that the Promethean flame of art and science may be evermore

preserved in the furtherance of that service, and the sacrifice of the fire-bringer remembered?"

"I do," Matthew said, and held out his left hand so she could slip the ring on his finger.

*

Kelly edged inside the door just in time to see Jane thread a black iron ring on Matty's left hand, and heaved a sigh of relief. There. As good as his word, wasn't he? He even heard Jane's crisp, carrying voice pronounce his little brother Matthew Magus, and welcome him into the Prometheus Club. Matt just kind of stood there, shoulders hunched,

his head ducked so his bangs fell down over his glasses. Somebody really needed to talk to him about that mullet. And then other Magi surrounded him, patting his shoulders, offering congratulations, and Kelly glanced at his watch. He slipped between the others and waited until Matt looked up.

The smile the kid gave him was--oh, hell. Kelly could have made some flip comparison-- *saccharine enough to give him bladder cancer*--but it was a pure sweet smile, sharp as glass, confident and adult and absolutely piercing. It was their mom's smile. He bet Matt didn't even remember enough to know that if he saw it in a mirror.

Kelly almost stepped back. Instead he reached out, squeezed Matt's left biceps, and thumped him on the other shoulder so hard his glasses slipped. Matt leaned into it, though, beaming. "Man," Kelly said, and meant it, "man, I'm proud of you."

Matt just grinned wider. "Thank God that's over, huh?"

Kelly winked. "Come on," he said. "Let's ditch this crowd and go buy you your first legal drink."

*

The bouncer examined Matt's license suspiciously--the only reason he *had* a

license, as a New Yorker by birth and inclination, was because Jane had insisted he learn to drive--and ran a thumb across the birthdate before he handed it back. Nothing easier to fake than a New York driver's license. They weren't even laminated.

It was looking touch and go until Matt--suddenly remembering that he was ordained now, and allowed to use his magic once in a while, *leaned* on the man.

Not enough to be unethical. Just enough to help him make up his mind. He felt the click as the guy decided not to be a pain in the ass and smiled; all it had taken was a little pressure.

"Happy birthday, kid," the bouncer said.
"First drink's on the house."

"Thanks," Matt said brightly, and followed Kelly inside.

The place hovered somewhere between hole-in-the-wall and dive, and was leaning crookedly toward the latter. Matt fiddled the buttons on his right cuff to make sure it was closed over the fresh tattoo. An infection at this stage of the game would be *just* the thing.

"Right," Kelly said. "Can I get you a beer?"

Matt considered. He wasn't about to get

lit in this crowd. Not when he had to walk home with Kelly while Kelly was dressed up like a cross between a bargain basement Billy Idol impersonator and a West Village gay cruise. "Yeah," he said. "Anything but Budweiser." Kelly made a face, but came back with two bottles of Coors and handed Matt one. They clinked; Matt drank from the neck and said, "I'll get the next round."

"We're playing for beer," Kelly said. "Drink up. Oh, there are the guys. I'll see you after the set, all right?" He was gone before Matt could clear the second swig of beer from his mouth to answer. It's not like he could have said no anyway. He

glanced around; the room was small and smoky, with a floor of broad splintery boards, but it was less than half-full and there were stools by the bar with a good view of what passed for a stage--a niche with a couple of klieg lights trained on it. Kelly's two band mates were shuffling equipment around. Matt thought about going over to help them, but his arm hurt and was sticky with lotion, and there were already three empty beer bottles by Deke's foot. Matt shook his head, claimed that seat by the bar, and set about finishing his beer. He wanted at least part of a second one inside him before Irn Bru started to play.

He was going to need it.

Two girls tried to pick him up while he was sitting with his back to the bar. He waved them off, semi-politely. Legs crossed in a figure four, bottle resting in the crook of his knee, he recited Vassilisa the Beautiful to himself while he waited.

"Well," said the old witch, "only remember that every question does not lead to good. If thou knowest overmuch, thou wilt grow old too soon. What wilt thou ask?" He suspected that he was not the first Slav to have reason to be glad he'd never met the Baba Yaga in an elevator. On the other hand, he thought, fiddling with his concave iron band, he had a better chance of running

up against her than your average Polack. And a better chance of getting eaten, too, unless the one he tripped over was the Polish one-chicken-leg version.

The two-chicken-leg version was prone to ethnic cleansing when annoyed by anything other than Russians.

That was enough to finish a beer on. And reach for the pretzels, too.

*

It was a pretty good gig. The crowd could have been better--there was Matty, sitting out there on that bar stool with a beer cradled in the bend of his knee like a parody Pieta--and you'd think he could

look halfway enthusiastic. But the guys managed to get into the swing of the music, and two or three girls got up and danced, and that meant a couple of guys did too. They swung through a bunch of covers--a Ramones tune, a Billy Idol tune, some amped-up Zeppelin--and even kept people on the floor for the two original songs. Kelly drank another beer while Paul sang, and shook sweat from his hair as he grooved over the bridge.

Yeah, they kind of sucked. But they would get better. And there were enough people dancing and drinking that they might even get invited back.

One of the women was stunning, tall and black-skinned, a real Grace Jones type.

She shot him a look over her shoulder, caught his eye, turned, swaying to the music, pressing her breasts together with her upper arms. That long look through her eyelashes.

Christ, too good to be true. He turned his head to check on Matt, to see if he'd seen the best-looking girl in the place coming on to Kelly, but his vision was blurry and all he saw was a bright blond head ducked down, turned away, as if Matt was dismissing one of the young women standing beside him. Ah, Matty, it's not worth it, Kelly almost said, and just in time remembered the microphone right beside his mouth. He bent over his guitar, easy chord progression, E-D-G-

A, and pretended he didn't see the woman running her hands along her hips, rubbing her dress up, as if she was imagining his fingers lifting the ruffled skirt, tracing the line of her thighs.

After the set was over, he went to her.

To his complete shock, she handed him a business card.

"Black Cat Talent? You're an agent?"

"I'm your agent," she said. "If you want me to be." He studied her face. Not kidding. "I'll have to talk to the guys--" She shook her head, put one finger to his lips. "No guys. Just you."

"Oh, shit." His own exclamation startled him. It wasn't supposed to work that way. He slipped the card into his pocket furtively. "I don't think--I mean, can I call you tomorrow? I need to sleep on it." Her brow furrowed in displeasure, but she nodded, a picture of a woman showing patience to a naïve child. She handed him a second card, and with this one a pen. "Write down your name and phone number?"

He did--scratch scratch--and handed it back. His nerves buzzed. *This isn't me. This isn't real.* But when he glanced back at the guys, there they were, packing up and swilling beer. He'd only had five or six himself; he knew he

wasn't drunk enough for the room to be spinning, or to be losing time. But he found himself with no idea of how he'd wound up pressed against the dirty wall beside the door to the men's room, the tall woman in his arms. She smelled of something peppery, and her lips were resilient and plump, soft as pillows. Her small breasts lifted under the silk of her top. He slid his hand down her thigh, slid it up again.

The ruffled skirt slid with it.

"Come away with me," she whispered.
"Come stay the night."

"Where?" Oh, he couldn't bring her home. Gloating over a little attention

was one thing, but strange women at the breakfast table were entirely too much to throw in Matt's face. "I have to tell my brother I'm not--"

"He knows," she said. "We told him on the way out. Remember? He's taking your stuff back to your place."

He did, as she said it. A blurry recollection--how much beer had he drunk?--but definite. Down to the disappointed tilt of Matt's head. "Sure," he said. "Where to?"

"Sweetheart," she said, "come home with me."

*

Matt saw Kelly vanish. Not literally, but he saw him slip down the hallway with the woman in the light-colored dress, and he didn't see them coming back again. And then something happened--a soft hiss, a groan, as if the old yellow brick of the storefront building called to him. He had a momentary flash of a nervous cow, its head thrust over a stall door, lowing for attention, and put his hand reassuringly on the wall.

Kelly. He'd resigned himself to going home alone, and was going to collect Kelly's gear from Deke and head out if Kelly hadn't reappeared by the time he'd finished his beer. Instead he left the bottle on the bar and stood, not moving

with any particular silence--but silent enough, in a noisy room. As he ducked into the corridor, he was just in time to see the woman's long brown leg vanish through the fire door. Damn.

Strangely, there was no alarm. His skin itched. The ring on his left hand burned with cold sudden fire. After a moment's hesitation, he scrambled back to the bar and demanded the phone. Local calls only. He must have looked freaked out enough that the bartender handed the black plastic touch-tone over without protest.

Jane answered on the second ring, and didn't sound sleepy. "Jane--" a false start. He tried again. "Kelly's been taken.

By a Fae."

She listened silently for thirty seconds while he cupped his hand over the retriever and explained at speed. And then she interrupted. "Matt. What do you want me to do?" She couldn't have brought him up shorter if she'd jerked his leash. "Help me. Help him."

"Come over," she said. "We'll get a team on it. We'll talk about it." Her voice sounded distant, and he realized it was because he was staring at the phone in his hand. Yes, talk. While he lost Kelly the same way she had lost Elaine.

Maybe there was still time.

He hung up on her.

God damn it. He'd been sitting there thinking about witches.

He hit the door so hard it rebounded off brick and would have caught his heel if he hadn't been moving as fast as he was. This time, the alarm detonated. He was at a run by the end of the alley, but Kelly and the girl were a block and a half away and moving fast, even though they seemed to be only walking.

*

She led him up a thorny hill. They must be in Central Park, though Kelly wasn't sure how they'd gotten here, and he

could hear the soft--and not-so-soft--noises of furtive lovemaking nearby. The sweat dried on his neck, though the night was humid. "You said you were taking me home." She kissed him again. "Where do you think we are?"

And then she grabbed his shirt collar in both hands while he was thinking about that and kissed his eyes, once each. "Welcome to Annwn, Kelly Szczegielniak."

He stepped back, for he saw her.

The face was not too changed, but now she was naked except for a loincloth, and her breasts and cheeks and belly were covered with neat rows of nubby

scars. The teeth behind her plush violet lips were filed to points. She was not smiling.

His hands were on fire where he touched her. Rings, he realized, rings on his fingers. He dropped the grip--unwilling to release her--and saw where his touch had raised welts on her skin. "Lady," he said. She stroked his face with the back of her hand. "Take off your rings, Kelly. And I will show you things you never dreamed."

"It's a trick," he said. "You lied to me."

"Of course it's a trick." Her hand cupped him through his tattered jeans. He hissed and meant to shift away, but somehow

what happened was that he moved against her. "That's what we deal in. The queen of Faerie would treat with thee, young warrior. Come with me."

"Fae." He would have stepped away, he told himself, if the thorn trees weren't jabbing his back. She let her lips brush his face; he felt the rasp of her conical teeth.

"The thing you crave, my queen can give you. Prometheus has no power to create greatness in a mortal man."

He'd been set to deny her. Three times, ritually. The words filled his throat. They choked him.

She kissed him again. "What say you, mortal man? Would become--of a sort--immortal?"

"You cannot." But he said it against her lips.

"The Queen of Faerie is a Leannan Sidhe."

Vampire muse. Oh yes. She could teach him greatness. As she devoured his art, it would flare like lightning. All his heat spent in a blaze.

All it would cost was the rest of his life.

He opened his shirt, showed her the iron in his skin. "I am warded."

"You are marked," she corrected. She touched him with a bridged hand, hissed, pressed her palm sliding flat to his chest. "Piquant," she said, and ducked her head to flick her tongue against his nipple. "It will be like embracing a man of fire." Her touch seared him. He cringed--but toward her, not away. He paused. There were ways to handle this, ways to make it safe. How could he say no? But his head was spinning, and he could barely remember his name, never mind the strictures he should set.

"She'll make you legend," she said.

But he hesitated still, though his fingers curved to touch it. He ached, his mouth full of saliva. Even Matt made fun of his

playing, damn them all--"There's a price for that."

"Oh yes," she said. "Your life. If you take the gift, you know how it ends. John Lennon. Jim Morrison. Jimi Hendrix. Janis Joplin. If you blaze, my love, you burn. But think, love, of your name said on a breath with theirs." And then she grinned, filed teeth and red tongue. "If anyone can pronounce it." Ten years of brilliance, or fifty of failure? In a hundred years, what would it matter?

Who remembers the also-rans?

"I'll need safe-passage. A promise I can go home."

"So long as you eat nor drink anything in Faerie," the woman said, "you have my word you may go home at dawn. With your music. One night's revel is all she asks. One night's revel, and your death." He tugged the rings from his fingers, and let them fall to the ground. And took the Faerie's hand. From dark night, the whole world went brilliant. The air shone with the fire of ten thousand candles refracted in infinite crystal, and Kelly swayed on his feet. The court that towered over him was white and massive, the windows fluted Gothic arches in stone that moved like wind. He caught a breath at the loft and the beauty of it--all white, so white, and shining--and then another breath at the creatures

that peopled the space. "Oh," he said. "Oh--"

The woman's fingers stopped his lips. "Say not the name of the divine. For it is painful to us." *That might be useful later*, Kelly thought, but for now he nodded and fell silent, staring about him. What he saw was... one hell of a revel. Music pealed about the court, though he could not see the musicians, and a slow pavanne went its way across the center of the floor, lords and ladies dancing with stags and centaurs--or, he thought, as his vision blurred and shifted again--perhaps the lords and ladies and the stags and centaurs were the same. Something heavy-horned and green

winged passed across the great hall, its talons dripping blood.

No one paid it notice.

The hall beside the dancers might have teemed with creatures, except the spaces were broad and there were a good many niches for conversation or simply sitting on a window-ledge, watching the pageant pass. Kelly saw creatures great and small, gross and gracile, sublime and shocking--winged things, and things that flew, and a brazen bull that clattered on eight silver hooves, tossing its head in seeming agreement with the gold winged, cruel-faced piskie who rode its horns and whispered in its ears. Tables groaned with food, and the mere scent of

the wine was dizzying. Men and women who might have been human or Fae were lined against the walls like caryatid pillars. Their hands were tucked--no, he saw, *bound*--into the smalls of their backs and their faces were hooded with white silk, which had the effect of making them seem headless--and armless--from a distance. So they were like long rows of ruined classical statues, except for the rainbow colors of their skins. And of no few of these, the Faerie host made sport. With their tongues or hands or genitals--or organs Kelly had no names for, or with whips and crops, or with wands of thorns--they plied the bound victims, and laughed coldly at the response. Some of the

humans writhed in pleasure or agony; some sobbed out loud. Some begged through their masks for surcease, and some to be taken harder, offered more.

"They are here by consent," the woman said, when Kelly flinched from a particularly heartfelt moan of pain. "They are not poets or singers; in return for our sufferance, they offer what entertainment they can." She looked aside. "The Daoine queen will not house such. She chooses her pets... elsewhere. But my mistress finds the intensity of their sensation... cheering, and so she has them set about the court."

"And is that the price of my... admission?"

"You are a musician," she said. "And a Mage. My queen will keep you to herself." *I'm not a very good musician,* Kelly thought, but bit his lip, and walked along. At the end of the hall rose a dais, and upon its mirror-white marble surface rested a throne of peeled bone-white thorn branches bound with rainbow silk. The branches curved into a spike-tipped heart over the head of the woman who sat at her ease within them, her long arms emerging bare as ice from the translucent layers of her gown. She did not rise, but leaned forward among her thorns. "Child," she said, extending a white hand, "I will give you music such as you have never known." Kelly

stopped, the stones cold through the soles of his shoes. And then he went to her. Across the white pavement, in front of the Unseelie court, he went to the Winter Queen. And there she stripped him, and there she had him, on her throne of white, white thorns.

*

Matt found the iron rings upon the ground. He dropped one knee and pinched them up, sliding them onto his right hand. Another Faerie gate to seal. But first, to exploit.

He patted his pockets until he found a pen and a card among his clutter, and on the card he wrote out the Lord's Prayer.

He wasn't Christian. But the fey folk were. In a crooked fashion. There was also a steel ball chain in his pocket, along with some packets of salt stolen from a McDonald's and other useful things--a horse-shoe nail, steel pins, a stone with a hole, a paper pouch of apple spice oatmeal, and so on--and he punched holes in the card with the point of his pocket-knife and threaded the chain through them. It would go around his neck.

But first he took his shirt off and turned it inside out, buttoning it before he pulled it on over his head. He should do the jeans too, but he didn't have time to unlace his boots, so he made sure his

buttons were buttoned and his shoelaces tied, though he loosened the laces on the left one. He thought he was more likely to have to throw it than to run from anything.

And then he stood again and took a cleansing breath or two. He knew the technique. He hadn't actually *done* it. But he closed his eyes and turned widdershins three times and stamped his foot on the ground, and visualized extending his hands until his iron ring caught on something, and then easing the world open like a door.

He fumbled the pierced stone from his pocket and held it before his face, so he should see through it first when he

opened his eyes. He didn't need an incantation, not exactly, and incantations were mostly a matter of focus anyway, so he cleared his mind and let the words of the Russian fairy tale hang before him like embers. *"There is the fire for thy stepmother's daughters! And may they joy in it!"* And when he opened his eyelids, he wasn't where he had been before. The first thing he saw was a beautiful dark-haired fat woman, her thighs like stalactites, leaned back in a flurry of cellophane wings, shaking her avoirdupois with ecstasy. Something coiled and gnawed between her thighs, under the overhanging curve of her belly. Small winged creatures, like dragonflies and like naked women with barbed

silver arms, lifted her soft shuddering breasts by the nipples, tugging until she moaned and arched her back, swaying from foot to foot in a slow, erotic dance.

Matt swallowed, hard, and looked away, shifting against the seam of his jeans. Somewhere in here, he would find his brother.

The door was still open, still clenched in his hand. He replaced the stone in his pocket with the other one. One of the pins stuck quite easily in a corner of the world when he pinched the door open. He did not care to be sealed in a Faerie mound, and this would help keep the time-slip from running away with him. He also didn't care to return home in two

hundred years--or tomorrow, two hundred years older. He stepped forward into light, into a vast white room full of people. Everything he saw was an education. He fisted his hands, his own ring on the left hand, his brother's on the right. They bit flesh painfully. It was like seeking one candle in a cathedral. But it was simple to track someone by magery, if you had something they habitually wore.

*

The music filled him, the curve and weight of the notes, the glow of the horns. The thorns in his flesh were nothing, less than nothing, because all he

could feel was the caress of the music, perfect and sharp, like the weight of the beautiful woman who drove him--white as snow, black as ebony, red as blood--who ripped his flesh with her fangs and her claws and straddled him and impaled him back on her throne. He heard it now, the music, the way he'd never heard it before. He understood it. He could make that too.

He lost himself, in a crescendo, in a dream, in the sweet sharp clash of notes rising in a whorl like the sparking vortex over a fire. And then there was a different woman in his arms--the dark one, with her wild eyes and her teeth that left circles of pain in his skin--and after

her there might be another, or a man, unless they tired of him and bid him dance until they wanted him again. The music rang in his ears, and he understood it.

In the morning he would lose this. Like a perfect book read in a dream, whose pages fade when turned. In the morning, they would send him home. In the morning.

But he would remember it. Clearly, presently, not like the fading sparkles of a dream. And he could make it anew.

It was all his.

*

Matt paused in the long hall, feeling the tug of direction from his right hand. He closed his eyes, he closed his ears, as he walked among the feasting and frolicking, the flogging and fucking. He made no attempt to move in secrecy, and some of the Fae turned from their diversions to watch him pass. Some of those were intrigued enough to follow, fanning out behind him like a trailing cloak, though they all stayed far enough away that he could not have reached them with a lunge.

By the time the crowd had cleared enough that he could glimpse the head of the hall, he knew what he would see. There were darker shapes on all that

whiteness, and as he pushed his glasses up his nose with his thumb, the steel frames chill on his skin, he saw Kelly, naked and banded like a tiger, on his knees amid the Fae.

A woman crouched before him, her buttocks pressed to his hips, her breasts pressed to the stone, her head lowered on her arms and her hair all variegated spread out around her. A faun, its little tail flagging like a deer's, bucked against Kelly's ass, horned forehead resting on Kelly's shoulder, arms linked loosely around his waist, hands resting on the hips of the rocking woman. And over them, straddling the woman who crouched on her shoulders and knees,

white as snow, black as ebony, gray as pearl, stood a narrow woman who held Kelly's face pressed into her groin with one slender hand and in the other cupped an ornate goblet with a broad, shallow bowl. *Lot of use those tattoos amounted to*, Matt thought. *All that time and pain for nothing*. He would have rolled his eyes if he dared take them off the queen. She regarded Matt with the perfect impassivity of a pantheress, staring down at him with dark slanted eyes. Kelly's shoulders and back were scratched and raked. Dark blood oozed from a shallow wound along his throat. He rocked between his lovers, and Matt heard him humming.

"Jesus," Matt said, and the nearest Fae fainted. The Queen herself winced sharply.

"Matthew Magus," she said, and brought the goblet to her breast. He saw what she intended; the wine would spill down her sternum, run across her belly, and fill Kelly's eagerly working mouth. Wine, drunk in Faerie. Wine to bind him there.

Which meant, if she was not bluffing, that he'd not yet taken food nor drink from her hand. There was a chance to win him home.

Her voice was reeds and fiddles. "You should not be here, child. You could

lose your whole life in one night."

"The morning is wiser than the evening," Matt answered, and didn't realize until it was out of his mouth that he'd quoted Vassilisa's magic doll. "I've come for my brother."

"What have you to bargain with, you who are not a musician?" She ran her fingers luxuriously through Kelly's hair. "Have you come to take his place?"

As if she could read Matt's stricken fascination, hear the shallow roaring of his heart. Of course. He'd have to pay to bring his brother home. And he could almost taste the temptation.

"A story," he said. "I'll tell you a story."

She ran that knife-edged cat-gaze up and down his frame. "Not your body?"

"I doubt I'd stand up to your tastes," he said, trying for dry and arriving in the vicinity, albeit via shaky. "I will tell you a story."

Her eyes lidded. Her fingers threaded Kelly's hair. The faun made a little bleating noise and slumped against his back. Matt heard his brother's moan from where he stood, and it didn't sound like pleasure, exactly, but then it also didn't sound like pain.

His heart thumped harder; he wouldn't

stare, dry-mouthed, at the lacerations on Kelly's back and thighs, wouldn't think of how they must sting as Kelly stretched to please the queen and his beaded sweat ran through them. Wouldn't allow himself to wonder how she tasted, as the air thickened with sex and ambergris. But the time on Yukako's table had changed him in more ways than that, and he knew how to pretend disdain. The Queen might tempt him, but she had nothing at all to shock him with. He already knew where that particular twist in his psyche led. And he found he *did* mind the Queen staring at his crotch.

He swallowed, and began. "There was a girl named Vassilisa, whose mother died

when she was but a child, and left her no legacy but a doll carved out of wood--"

It was a complicated story, and Matt kept his eyes on the white Queen's face as he told it. Which is how he knew she climaxed as he narrated the scene where the Baba Yaga's fire-skull burns the wicked sisters' flesh from bone; it was only revealed in the flick of her lashes, the pinch of her teeth, the flex of long muscles unslackening in her narrow thighs. She let spill not so much as a drop of wine. She pushed Kelly away; he fell to the dais, and the woman the Queen had been straddling slid down in exhaustion.

"Well told," she said. She reclined on

her throne, robed in white as if she had always been, scatheless among the thorns. "For that tale, I will sell you a piece of your brother. Will you win him back from me bit by bit, Matthew Magus, if you cannot have him whole?"

"That was not the bargain," he said.

She tilted her head and smiled. "In my house, I make the bargains. I think the first thing I will give you is his... sight."

"Your majesty, no!--" Respect. Always speak to immortal things with respect. They have a great deal of time for remembering slights.

He spoke too late, as if speaking early

would have had any effect. His sight blurred and cleared as if he'd blinked away a tear, and abruptly everything he saw changed. For a moment, he didn't understand, and then he realized what dazzled him.

Those were *colors*.

And he did not know their names.

On the dais, Kelly stirred and moaned.

"I promised him music, not vision. Strip Matthew Magus," the Queen said, with a negligent wave of her hand. "Enchant him. I've always loved brothers."

"Your majesty!" Matt cried, stumbling a

half-step forward.

She turned her face. Someone plucked his trouser leg, and he jerked back sharply with a gasp. He jammed his hands into his pockets, barely daring to glance away from the Queen. The Fae surrounded him, tall and squat, broad and slight. Limbs like lobster claws and tree branches reached, stroking, catching-The first one to grab at his sleeve drew back with a thin little cry. "Inside-out!" it whined, clutching its clawed hand to pendulous breasts. "Its clothes are inside-out, your majesty." Salt. Oatmeal. A packet of pins. Matt yanked them from his pockets, bulled through the ring of Faerie--forward,

where the line was thinnest, shocking them that he would willingly approach the Queen. She rose from her throne like a handkerchief drawn on a string, and he paused a step away. The pins were in his right hand. As she stepped forward, he scattered them on the floor all about his feet and between himself and the throne.

They rang like silver, but they were steel.

The Unseelie Queen froze with one foot uplifted, and Matt showed her his other hand. "Salt," he said.

"Oatmeal. And I've never lain with a woman. I stand in your hall in my power

and my purity, and in the name of the Christ and the Holy Ghost and the Father, in the names of all God's angels, you will abide by our bargain."

The Queen flinched cruelly, but did not step back. Behind him, Matt heard cries of pain, and weeping. Matt paused, trembling, and made his voice strong and deep. "Give me my brother, and I'll go."

"Seize him," she said, blind to any irony. But the tall black-skinned Faerie who had brought Kelly here came up to the dais, and ran a hand along his outline without touching cloth or skin. "He's blessed," she said, her words as much a caress as her gesture. "He wears a fresh blessing, your majesty. And we were

offered one, not both."

The Queen seemed to swell, no more awkward one-legged than any hunting heron. "I'll have no blessings in this house!"

"Give me my brother," he repeated, "and I'll go." He tore open the green-printed paper of the Quaker oatmeal, the sound echoing through a silent hall.

"Kelly, my love," the Queen said, slowly. "Dance for me." Matt couldn't look. He did not look away from the Queen, burning in all her nameless colors, even as Kelly rose up, panting, trembling, drawn with exhaustion, and lifted his arms to the sides. His feet,

Matt saw, left smears upon the stone.

Red. That must be what red was.

The musicians were well-trained, or heavily cowed. They had already resumed playing. "Why don't we play a game?" the Queen asked. She had not glanced away from Matt, either. "Why don't we both call him. Neither of us moves, and we see to whom he comes?"

"Fine with me," Matt said, and with an abrupt jerk of his arm, threw the powdered oatmeal over Kelly. Kelly twitched, stumbled, went to his knees. Coughed, gasped--and seized, long jerking convulsions, smearing saliva and blood on the stones. "Oh, such a clever

mortal," the Unseelie Queen purred--and the floor around Matt buckled and heaved, shivered into pieces, and each of the pieces became an ember glowing red.

Red, Matt's first color.

"Clever clever mortal. Kelly," she said, softly. "Kelly. Stop that. Sweet child. Come to me. I will make you happy."

And Kelly stood. Matt saw his feet clearly now, and could not hide his cringe. And as for Matt--he stood on an eighteen-inch island, a puddle of white marble in the midst of an eight-foot ring of fire. If he called Kelly to him-- *if* Kelly would come--he would be

staggering over coals. And the alternative was leaving him here.

"Kelly," the Unseelie Queen said. "Come here to me." Matt crouched in his narrow island of safety, dropped the salt packets on the ground, and began untying his left boot. He could not let haste make him fumble. Kelly was turning, blindly seeking the Faerie Queen's dulcet voice. There was no time for second attempts.

"Kelly," he said. "Don't do that. Come to me."

And Kelly hesitated. He didn't turn; but his groping footsteps lagged. "Matty?"

"Come to me." Matt stood, his left shoe

in his hand. All his command in his voice, a Mage's conviction. The simplest form of magia-- *command*. Not quite Faerie glamourie, but people would obey it because it was easier than saying no. "Come to me *right now!* "

Kelly turned, suddenly decisive, and stepped onto the coals. He seemed to feel nothing; his face remained slack, wondering, as he advanced. But Matt heard the sweat and the blood, and then the meat, sizzle.

The Queen jerked forward, reaching out. And Matt hit her hard, over the breasts, with his hurled steel-toed boot. "This is yours!" he shouted. " *That* is mine!" She grunted, caught it reflexively, and

dropped it as if he'd thrown her a handful of her own smoking coals.

And Kelly came one more step toward him.

"Come on, man," Matt said. He held out his hand, leaned forward as far as he could without moving his feet. *Is it dawn yet? It is sunrise? Is she lying?* "Reach for me, big brother. Dammit, man, *reach*."

"I curse you, Matthew Magus," the Faerie Queen said, her voice like silver and ice, as Kelly grunted with each step, the coals powdering his feet with ash and char. "I curse you to a cold life and an ill death. I curse you to kinslaughter

and betrayal."

Kelly reached. Matt grasped his fingers, reached more, got his wrist, pressed his hand adorned with Kelly's own iron rings to Kelly's flesh. He reached out with his left hand and pulled out the pin he'd left holding a flap of the world aside.

The Queen drew herself up, and spoke her final words like the tolling of a bell. "As I have taught you to see as other men, so I curse you to the death of your illusions."

"My lady," Matt said, "I wish you the death of your own." And stepped through, onto the cold hillside in the

pewter light, his brother in his right hand and a bit of bent steel in the left.

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