

The Other Magic

By

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Meriadme stared at the tiny gears, her brow creased in bemused irritation. Why wouldn't the silly spell run its course? Granted, its works were ancient. But she'd spent the better part of the last week disassembling it, cleaning every delicate tooth, repairing every worn piece and oiling every moving part.

The spell had worked yesterday, when she'd finally finished putting it back together. But it had frozen up overnight, quite inexplicably, and that wouldn't do. Lios wanted it ready today, and he had all the patience typical of youth. None, that was to say.

It should have been vexing, but Meriadme smiled ever so slightly as she slowly, carefully began tracing the power train with an expert touch.

Ah! The chain on the counterweight had slipped slightly, probably when the mouse tried climbing it. She ought to have thought of that. She straightened the chain with the slightest touch of her forefinger and the spell spun back into life.

"Wonderful! You've got it working again!"

Meriadme glanced up as Lios rushed across the room, grinning at the tiny flakes starting to fall from somewhere just below the ceiling. "You said it was impossible, but I knew you could fix it. You can fix anything."

Meriadme bowed, brushing the creases out of her long, embroidered robe. "It was impossible, my lord; that's my specialty," she said, smiling at her own bravado. "Actually, it was more a matter of cleaning than of repairing, though," she admitted. "These old works can be rather exacting."

The flakes were bigger now, and falling more rapidly.

"How long will it take to fill the room?" Lios demanded. "Will it be ready tonight, for the dinner?"

"With the proper adjustments," Meriadme said, carefully closing the silver door that hid the spell's inner workings. "Someone will have to monitor the humidity levels so it doesn't end up dehydrating your guests. One of your mages should be able to manage it."

"Can't you?" Lios entreated. He brushed snow from his smooth brown hair. "Won't you stay?"

"My time is costly, Lios," she told him.

"I mean... as my special guest?" he tried, smiling shyly.

Inwardly, Meriadme sighed. Lios Erduin wasn't the first to try this line with her. But for all his charms, the handsome young lord was little more than a child. "I have

several commissions awaiting my attention," she said. "I put them aside for a few days as a personal favor to your brother Tiam, but I must return to my workshop now that it's is done."

"But there's something else," Lios said softly.

"There's always something else."

"Beg pardon?"

"Please, Lios," Meriadme said. "Do you think you're the first one to implore me to repair some frippery and then suddenly decide it's time to invest the walls with a few extra defenses?"

"It's not that at all," the young man said.

"You fear you've been ensorcelled? You think I can make you king?"

"No, Meriadme. It's Tiam."

"What about Tiam?"

"I think he wants to marry Althilde."

The spellmaker flinched. "Althilde Gornam? Why? Surely he's not fooled by her?"

"I thought maybe she'd used a love philter on him or something, but you would have sensed that as soon as you saw him, wouldn't you?"

"Those things don't work anyhow, Lios; they're just a fraud. What put it in his head to marry *her*?"

"Please," Lios said, touching the sleeve of her robe, "at least stay for lunch and let me tell you what's been going on."

"Very well," Meriadme acquiesced, pulling her arm away. "I'll listen, at least."

Lord Lios Erduin served a simple lunch on a simple table — one that stood still on its own four legs and was set with plain china, not enchanted serving pieces. Chicken roasted with rosemary and sage waited quietly on its platter, not whistling so much as a note. That sort of thing was all the rage in Parsidon, but it was widely known Meriadme scorned such silliness.

Meriadme scorned many things, for that matter; her attitude was part of the reason her clients were willing to pay so much for her services. That, and the simple fact there were very few who could match her skills. Unlike most occult practitioners, she refused to limit herself to a single discipline. It was widely known she had studied witchcraft, sorcery, enchantments, magery and transformations. She'd even gone to the unheard-of length of familiarizing herself with the physical sciences. There were whispers she had dabbled in darker matters as well.

"Tell me why you think Tiam is interested in Althilde," Meriadme said as a servant removed the salad plates. "But first, explain why you waited until today to mention this."

"The dinner tonight was his idea, but he wouldn't tell me why," Lios explained. "I was so surprised that he'd suggested such a thing - that he actually wanted to see people socially - I wanted to do something special."

"Thus the snow-speller," Meriadme reasoned.

Lios nodded. "It wasn't until yesterday that he told me that he and Althilde had an announcement to make. They plan to tell everyone tonight."

"And he didn't say why?"

"He says it's what he wants, but I'm afraid he's doing it for me. A union of our two families would give me considerably more clout on the council."

"It had occurred to me."

"The price is too high," Lios said. "And Althilde wouldn't agree to it unless she thought it was to her greater advantage."

"Of course it's to her advantage. She has that rare ability to fool people into thinking she's interested in the common good," Meriadme agreed. "Very dangerous."

"And more dangerous if she has the Erduin name behind her."

"You could forbid it," Meriadme suggested.

"What if he really is in love with her, though? What if he sees something in her we don't?"

"People who count on a dragon's better nature seldom live to count beyond ten."

"This is Tiam we're talking about," Lios reminded her. "I owe him so much."

"You consider it a debt; he doesn't. He never wanted to be Lord Erduin."

"But if he's found something he *does* want, he will have it," Lios insisted. "Please, won't you speak with him?"

Meriadme shook her head. "What would Tiam tell me what he wouldn't tell you?"

"I'm still just his little brother. You're his friend."

"Is Althilde here yet? Perhaps I could speak with her."

Lios grinned. "She's in the guest suite right now. I'll have you announced."

"Well, Mistress Meriadme; I'd heard you were here," Althilde said, adjusting the waistline of the pale green gown she was wearing as greeted her guest. "I assumed you'd be busy this afternoon."

"I am."

"Oh?" Althilde said. She walked over to the long mirror. "Is this the right gown, do you think?"

"The color doesn't suit your fair hair, but it does signify fertility. Are you that anxious to get started on an Erduin heir?"

Althilde giggled. "Whatever are you talking about, Meri? This one makes my hips look big," she said. "Although you might think that signifies fertility, too, I guess." She giggled again. "Oh, Meri! You think the silliest things."

"Do I?"

"What would you say if I wanted to wear red, I wonder? Or black?"

"I notice you're not considering white."

Althilde laughed. "In the snow, dear? I'd blend right in."

"Of course," Meriadme said drily.

"Whyever are you so concerned about all of this?"

"I think Tiam's fooling himself."

The other woman smiled. "I don't concern myself with other peoples' motives, so long as I feel it's all for the best. This was his idea; I'd be foolish not to agree."

Meriadme gazed at her a long moment, long enough to make the other woman wonder if some spell was awork. "Wear gold then, Althilde; let them see what it is you really want."

When she left Althilde, Meriadme had every intention of going straight to Tiam, but she found herself going back upstairs to the ballroom instead, to check on the snow-speller. It was doing well; there was almost an inch of dry powder on the floor, and Lios' servants were carefully arranging candelabras and torchieres so as to ensure they'd be artfully draped in snowy white by the time guests arrived.

Meriadme opened the workings' silver door and stood staring at the tiny gears inside, watching for any fault or slipping.

As one gear turned, it pushed another. The second moved a third; each in minute, controlled increments. The movement of each gear affected every other gear; one tiny slip and the whole mechanism failed. But nothing moved at random. If a gear did slip, it did so for a reason, some failing in the spell.

"Meriadme?"

The low voice broke her reverie, but she did not look away from the gears. "I cannot find the pattern, Tiam," she said softly.

"Some patterns can only be seen from the proper perspective," the dark-bearded man said, grinning wryly.

"So tell me, then: Why Althilde Gornam?"

"Because no one else would do."

"It makes no sense," Meriadme said with unaccustomed vehemence as she spun to face Tiam.

"It makes no sense to *you*," Tiam corrected her. "There's a difference."

"I'm not even sure Althilde knows why you're doing this, Tiam; don't try to tell me it's for love."

"You asked Althilde about this?" Tiam asked, chuckling. "That must have been interesting."

"You're evading the question."

"But I am doing this for love, Meriadme," he said, smiling. "You just don't see it, do you?"

"Quit taunting me, Tiam!" Meriadme noted the snow around her was beginning to melt. She drew a deep breath; checked her temper. "This isn't a joke, Tiam; I thought you realized how dangerous a woman like Althilde can be."

"You are, of course, merely concerned for the dynastic stability of the Erduin line? Stability being good for business, of course."

She glared at him, oblivious as all the snow within several yards of her feet evaporated. "Tiam, I already apologized for what I said that day we...."

"And I accepted that apology," he said, cutting her off. "I'm sorry I brought it up. But I assure you, I know what I'm doing."

"You don't," she said. "You can't possibly."

He smiled again, that annoying, all-knowing smile of his that made her want to both slap his face and smile, too. "Do *you* know what you're doing?" he asked. "Or did you intend to melt all of the snow two hours before the guests arrive?"

Flustered, Meriadme glanced about. He was right; only the farthest corners of the room remained covered in white. Red-faced, she turned back to the spellworks; when she looked up again, he was gone.

Meriadme stood in a well-lit corner her guest chamber, beset by unfamiliar doubts. Other than on business, she did not attend social events; she had a strict policy against such things. She certainly hadn't thought to bring a gown suitable for such a gathering when Lios summoned her; not that she owned one, anyway. She could have worn her ordinary robes, perhaps; they were simple but finely made. But such somber clothing would have drawn attention, and that was the last thing she wanted.

So Lios had offered his staff's help in assembling a suitable ensemble, and skilled hands had quickly altered an old blue dress. Now properly dressed, she whispered a quick spell and her straight brown hair coiled itself into elaborate braids. With her right ring finger, she sketched a circle in the air around her face. A shimmering mask of her features appeared in the air before her. Working quickly, she added color: pink to the cheeks, a little kohl around the eyes and on the lashes, a glistening, soft red to the lips. Once satisfied, she carefully placed the mask over her pale, slender face. The mask vanished, leaving the cosmetics behind.

Meriadme crossed the room to check her work in the small mirror above the dry sink: quite acceptable, if barely recognizable.

She felt foolish, though, laden with all the trappings of feminine artifice. It might be wiser, she told herself, to leave Tiam to his sorry fate and go on back to her workshop. Might be? *Would* be. But the man was convinced he was making the right choice. Maybe if she stayed he'd see things differently.

Cursing her curiosity, Meriadme made her way back up to the ballroom, uncertain how to carry herself in the unfamiliar full skirt. The snow was still falling when she arrived. They'd had to run the spell at near-blizzard conditions for a while to make up for all that had melted. The results were not quite as graceful as one would have hoped, but the guests who already filled the hall seemed suitably impressed. Snow spellworks were notoriously cantankerous.

Tiam laughed when he saw Meriadme's futile attempts to keep her hem dry.

"Count yourself lucky I gave up curses," she growled at him, "or you'd have three heads and flipper feet right now. Where's Althilde?"

Tiam shrugged, unconcerned. "Late. Planning to make an entrance, I imagine."

Meriadme stared at him. "You don't care?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's typical of her, though she didn't know she'd miss seeing you arrive in full frippery."

"Damn you."

"You look lovely, by the way."

"I feel like a fool," she scowled, blinking away a snowflake that had landed in her thickened eyelashes.

"You shouldn't. What's wrong with being a woman instead of a wizard for a change?"

"I don't have to wear silk and facepaint to be a woman, Tiam."

"I'd noticed; I was just wondering if you had," he said, nodding a greeting to a passing guest.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her. "I thought I'd made that clear once before."

She glared at him, exasperated. "We agreed to put that day behind us."

"We agreed to put that particular argument behind us. The underlying issue remains unresolved," he said calmly. "Please don't melt the snow again."

"Quit with the mysteries, Tiam: What are you up to?" Meriadme said, glancing at the bare floor near her feet. At least her hem might dry now. "What is it I'm missing?"

"Listen, Meri, you've been a good friend. You're concerned; you spoke your piece. I listened. Why does it still matter what I do?"

"Because you don't love her. You can't. And I don't know why else you'd do this to me."

"To you?"

"Damn it, Tiam. You know what I mean." Thanks to the damp fabric around her ankles, she was quite literally steaming, she realized with chagrin.

Ignoring that, Tiam smiled and glanced toward the door, where there was a flurry of movement. A flourish of trumpets greeted Althilde's arrival, and Meriadme's heart froze. The woman had selected a blue gown in the end, just a shade darker than Meriadme's. But Althilde's was draped in jewels and gold, and the falling snow sparkled on her delicate shoulders as Lios formally greeted her near the door.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Tiam whispered; a smattering of voices throughout the room echoed him. The crowd watched as Althilde crossed the room.

"Stop it, Tiam," Meriadme whispered, and the snow fell more heavily. "Please."

He glanced at her and hesitated before stepping forward to greet Althilde, cautiously, for the floor nearest Meriadme was suddenly coated with ice.

"Welcome, Miss Gornam," he said. "I am so glad you could join us this evening."

"The pleasure is mine, Sir Tiam," Althilde purred, bowing slightly.

"You honor us," Tiam replied, lowering his voice. "But I'm afraid I must beg your pardon for a moment."

"Oh?" Althilde asked merrily, glancing at Meriadme. "But I've just arrived."

"My sincerest apologies, m'lady."

"Of course, then, sir; our matters will keep."

With a nod, Tiam headed toward the door. After a moment, Meriadme followed uncertainly, treading carefully across the ice.

A few people greeted her as she passed; all would-be clients. To those with no current need of her services, she was as good as invisible. For once, she was thankful for that.

She found Tiam seated on a bench in the quiet hallway, hands covering his face, and stood before him silently, waiting.

"I'm sorry," he said at length. "I should have known it was a bad idea when Althilde agreed to it so readily."

"That surprised you?" she asked, amazed.

"It's not what you think," he said, bending low enough to hide his face. "I'm sorry. I told Lios we had an announcement to make, that's all; I thought that would be enough to make you curious. The rest... just happened. We're not betrothed. We're founding a charity, she and I."

"And you let me think —"

He looked up. "I wanted you to think that. I wanted you —"

"Wanted what?" Meriadme demanded, blue sparks cracking the air around her.

"I wanted you," he whispered. "I love you. I thought maybe I could make you listen for once."

"By all that Is, Tiam, I already told you that's just not possible," Meriadme swore. "I'm too busy to marry, and you need a fine lady at your side."

"Don't you tell people the impossible is your specialty?"

Meriadme scowled; she hesitated; she closed her eyes and sighed. Then she smiled slightly.

"I stand corrected, Tiam. Apparently it's yours."