

Black Magic Glitterbomb

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eISBN 9781682523438

Editor: Raven McKnight

Cover Artist: Natasha Snow

Published in the United States of America

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 170549

San Francisco CA 94117-0549

www.loose-id.com

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I liked to relax over a cup of coffee and the bodies of my enemies. It was my favorite way to celebrate a victory. The young man I'd just incidentally rescued, however, was cramping my style.

"Stop staring," I said.

There was silence. Then a quiet "I...can't really help it."

"Stop staring, or I'll hex you."

A gulp. "You really mean that, don't you? I've never seen anything like what you do. What are you, a...an actual wizard?"

"A wizard?" I repeated, aghast. "A *wizard*?"

"I've offended you. Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"I'm not a fucking wizard. I'm an atrumancer. I'll thank you to remember that."

"What's an atrumancer?"

I sighed. "Someone who deals with dark magic, little boy."

"Little boy? I'm twenty."

"You look little to me."

He flushed, which hadn't been my intention. I'd just wanted him to shut up. But then I took another look and saw how seriously thin he was, *too* thin, and I realized I'd hit a nerve.

"I can't always buy enough food," he muttered.

I sighed and slurped my coffee as I stepped over a corpse on my way to the fridge. It was well stocked. I found a store-bought sandwich still in its original packaging and

tossed it over to Little Boy. The way he tore into it, it must have been the best damn sandwich in the universe.

"Why don't you go home," I suggested, "so I can incinerate this place."

Little Boy's eyes widened. "Incinerate?"

"What, you think I'm just going to leave all this evidence lying around for people to find?"

"Um...well, I guess not."

"Exactly. So go home."

"I don't have a home," he said, lowering his eyes.

"You must live somewhere."

"I was staying with a friend. But she kicked me out. I was sleeping in a park when they got me." His eyes flicked to the two dead men on the kitchen floor. "And I don't know what they were planning with me, but at least they fed me and I had a bed, so it wasn't so bad."

"They probably penciled you in as a human sacrifice." *You absolute idiot*, I added in my head. I didn't say it out loud, because I felt bad for him. Poor kid obviously had no idea what he'd been in for.

"So, do you do this a lot?" he asked. "Fight and kill people because they... Um, what did they do to you, anyway?"

"They were my enemies," I said, like it explained everything. I really didn't want to get into things like atrumancer territories and power-leeching right now, not when I was enjoying my coffee.

"How many enemies do you have?"

"Plenty, kid."

He drew himself up. "My name," he said, "isn't *kid*."

"What is it, then?"

"Um...well, it's Kit. With a *t*."

I sighed. "Okay then, Kit-with-a-t, you want a cup of coffee?"

"Would love one," he said. So I poured him one, and then we sat at the table like civilized people, after I'd levitated the two corpses into one of the bedrooms because Kit-with-a-t insisted they were bothering him. I thought it was cute how innocent he was. Then again, jaded old me needed a reminder of basic humanity every once in a while. It was too easy to lose sight of, given what I did, and as I stared across the table at the twenty-year-old blond homeless boy, I suspected that the nagging, uncomfortable feeling in my gut was one I should have been able to name.

Pity, maybe?

I wasn't sure. It had really been too long, too many days spent dealing with magic, studying it and fighting it and throwing it around and drowning in it. If I wasn't careful, it would warp me beyond recognition, and I would become the very thing I fought against. Theoretically, I knew that, but I hadn't realized just how far I'd fallen. Not until Kit-with-a-t had a cup of coffee with me and looked at me with large, dark brown eyes and made me want to remember what it was like to be a good person.

"Well," I said with a sigh, "I do have a guest room. So, until we can find you something else..."

His eyes became huge. "You mean that?"

"If you trust me enough to come home with me." Which he absolutely shouldn't.

He looked around. "You just saved me from being bled out in a pentagram or something. I think I trust you by default."

I didn't usually do *making sure people are okay*. Maybe I was trying to prove to myself that I wasn't quite dead on the inside just yet.

"But, um," he said, nervously pushing his coffee cup away from him, "what's your name, anyway? Seems like something I should know."

"I'm Benji."

"That doesn't sound like a very magical kind of name."

"Federico the Magnificent was taken," I informed him and drained the rest of my coffee. Then I unplugged the coffee maker and wrapped up the cord, because that thing was better than the one I had at home, and I wasn't about to let it go up in flames with the rest of the place.

* * * *

Telling Kit I had a guest room had been a half truth. I had an extra room, sure, but it was small and filled with books and equipment that didn't fit in my equally small lab. As I led him through the hallway, pointing as I went, I wondered what I'd been thinking.

"Kitchen. Bathroom. Spare room. Lab. Don't go in that last one."

"Because there's magic stuff in there?" Kit sounded way too excited about it. "What would happen to me if I did go in?"

Worst case, he'd be utterly destroyed. Best case, he would only be corrupted, and Kit was so pure, it would kill me...well, maybe not kill me, but make me seriously upset to see him sullied with the kind of muck I was stuck in hip-deep. It really hadn't been a good idea to bring him here.

"Just don't go in," I said to dampen his enthusiasm and opened the door to the spare room. Maybe he'd take one look at it and decide he'd rather sleep in the park again.

Getting the door all the way open took some doing because there were books and boxes of ingredients stacked behind it. I grunted and shoved, putting a little of my magical power into the action, and something gave way.

"This is great," Kit said, sounding—to my surprise and annoyance—not in the slightest sarcastic. He waded through the boxes and book stacks to the unmade bed and threw himself onto it. "I like it."

"I've got blankets." I gestured haphazardly around the room. Cleanliness and order had never been my strong suits. "Somewhere. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do."

Kit nodded. "I'll keep myself occupied."

"Just don't—"

"Don't go in the lab. Got it."

"Yeah. Have a nap or something." I didn't even know anymore what normal people did in their spare time. Feeling uneasy, I left him to it and went into my lab.

Two steps in the door, I froze. Something was...off. Things had been subtly moved since I'd left this morning; I was certain of that. A book I'd left open was now closed. My coffee mug sat an inch away from the ringed stain it had made.

"What the hell?" I snarled, spinning around my own axis like that would help reveal the intruder. "Who the fuck—"

I reached out with my magic, looking for traces of whoever had been here. They were faint and fleeting, bits as thin as spider silk floating in the air, and they fell apart as soon as I touched them. I couldn't figure it out. I'd never seen anyone leave traces like this. When I reached farther, pushed more magic into the search, suddenly there was a yanking sensation, and somewhere, a trap snapped shut.

As my magic was severed like a limb and sucked away, I screamed into the sudden darkness engulfing me.

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