

BONE WALKER

by

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"A HA ME BOYS A RIDDLE AYE DAY!"

Three thousand voices roared out the chorus, a thunder of harmony that surged forward to crash against the stage--and in instant reaction, the four musicians we were all watching ripped into the bridge. Guitar and bouzouki chords bounced all over a driving bass line and the machine-gun rhythm from the bodhran. All around me faces were shining, hands were clapping, and heads were bobbing up and down as the music engulfed us all.

Christopher's favorite band had come to town, and the audience was having the time of its life.

And I had to admit, so was I. The good humor and boisterous energy of the performers were infectious, and the music, irrepressible. I didn't know the words to most of the songs, but on the strength of rhythm and melody alone, I was thrilled to

clap and bounce along with everyone else. I didn't mind that mine was the only brown face in sight, or even that half of the white girls in range were paying more attention to the man at my side than they were to the stage. Not that I could blame them. At six-two, clad in a black T-shirt emblazoned with the blue, red, gold, and white of the Newfoundland flag and cheerfully bellowing lyrics he knew far better than I did, Christopher MacSimidh was difficult to miss. He'd spruced up for the concert, with a new shorter haircut that'd traded off his ponytail for front locks that dangled along his brow. For once he'd even shaved properly, baring an intriguing little dent in the line of his chin that I was certain was drawing the gaze of every straight woman and gay man at the show. It certainly kept drawing mine.

All of this was incidental, though, to the energy my beau was pouring forth. Have you ever stood next to a Warder at the height of his elation, surrounded by equally delighted denizens of his bonded city? You'd know it if you did. Warder magic is life magic, and when it runs high, hearts and spirits lift, and limbs and voices find new vigor. That night at this concert, out in the open air of the Seattle Center with the living earth under our feet, it meant that every last person in earshot of Christopher's baritone was finding the breath to sing and bounce at the same time. More than a few were singing not only on key, but also in harmony. There was a designated area for dancers

right by the stage, but it had overflowed three bars in on the second song of the night, and no one was left on the blankets and lawn chairs spread across the gently sloping hill behind us.

Me, I drank up that energy of Christopher's like champagne, and it went to my head just as quickly. I wasn't a Warder, but I was half-Sidhe, with fey blood and magic that had awakened a scant two months ago. Christopher's magic had come online along with mine, when he'd been injured defending me and his blood had touched my skin along with Seattle earth. I could sense other fey, other sources of magic--but nothing filled my senses with sunlight quite like Christopher. Now we were a mixed-race couple in more ways than one: black girl and white boy, Sidhe and Warder, fey and human. Tonight, though, we were doing our best to be nothing more what we seemed, two people out to enjoy some damn fine music.

For the most part, we pulled it off. Millicent, the senior Warder of Seattle and Christopher's teacher--and by extension, mine--had flat refused to let us loose at a public event until she was convinced we'd be able to keep enough of a lid on our magic that nothing much would spill out onto those around us. We'd practiced for three straight weeks to satisfy her, me even more than Christopher. The first time he'd kissed me, he'd promised to introduce me to the music of his home province of Newfoundland, and come hell or high water, I wasn't going to ruin his chance to make good on his pledge. If the rest of the

audience got a little more exuberant than they would have done without us around, I considered that a fair tradeoff for the pleasure of dancing with Christopher along with the music from the place of his birth.

Which is why, when a pulse of ragged, unsteady power shot through my nerves, I almost tripped over his feet in shock.

Christopher caught me before I could bump into the knot of teenage girls in front of us, and I could tell from the sudden rigidity of his hands that he'd felt that pulse too. Up on the stage the band closed out the current song on a perfect four-part chord; the audience roared its approval. I paid none of them any attention. Instead I pulled Christopher close, stood on my toes, and whispered up into his ear, "What was that?"

"Wasn't me," he murmured back.

"Not me either." Just to make sure, just as Millicent had drilled into both of us, I made a point of looking for any traces of stray energy threatening to escape me, just so I could lock them down. It didn't help. I could still feel something prickling in the air, pushing at it, as if trying to break through from the other side of a wall. "Should we go find it?"

I hated to ask; Christopher's face fell the moment the words left my mouth. He threw a glance at the stage, where one of the singers was launching into the first verse of an unaccompanied sea shanty, and then he looked in all directions around us. Nobody in the audience looked out of the ordinary--

I'd already checked. In addition to the teenage girls, I could see any number of software geek types, several parents with young children cavorting around them, and a pair of enthusiastic dykes in matching brimmed caps, waving a sizable Cascadian flag between them. When it came down to it, I was the strangest-looking thing in the vicinity, and not only because of my brown skin. Fortunately, nobody nearby was likely to notice the pointed ears hiding under my hair, or my topaz-yellow eyes. People had a way of failing to notice those, and I hadn't even had to practice that.

So nobody around us could possibly be the source of the power surge. For that matter, nobody looked... distressed enough, I decided, after flailing a moment for a word. Whatever this magic was, it felt strained, rising and then ebbing again, but with each pulse gathering an almost wild kind of strength.

"We'd better," Christopher said. Despite his hangdog expression his voice went firm, and his hand tugged at mine without hesitation. "C'mon, Kenna-lass."

He guided us out through the crowd, begging the pardon of those we passed as politely as only a Canadian can. I followed, more than willing to let him lead. If something nearby was summoning power, that made it Warder business. Since Millicent wasn't with us, that meant Christopher was on tap. Daughter of a powerful Seelie mage I might have been, but when it came to Warder doings, I was more or less along for the ride. As the

immediate noise of the crowd and the harmony from the band members faded a little behind us, the magic spiked up again, sharper than before, and clear as a beacon for us to follow.

Seattle Center is full of distinctive buildings and landmarks, the most famous of which is of course the Space Needle. We had to wind our way past a few of them to follow where the magic led, away from the Mural Amphitheater and the Space Needle's shadow, and north past the massive International Fountain. Even at this hour the fountain was running, and the rush of its spray almost drowned out the echo of music from the concert we'd abandoned. It could not, however, drown out the magic. Christopher picked up the pace as we went by, his face growing more tense and nervous with every step. As I broke into a trot to keep up with his longer stride, I began to worry. The last time we'd felt magic this strong, my mad uncle Malandor had almost sacrificed us both to a fertility demon. And here I was, trying to be a normal girl out with her normal boyfriend seeing a perfectly normal show. Magic and demons? Not part of the plan.

There were others out and about on the Center grounds, but no one got close enough to us that we had to care. No one at all was nearby as we skidded to a halt at one end of a narrow service alley, which was a relief. Less of one was the sheen of brightness hanging in the air, an illumination that had nothing to do with the lighting from the manmade sources all over the grounds. If light could be said to writhe, than this light did.

The formless shape of it twisted five feet up from the asphalt, coruscating through eldritch shades of blue, from pale to dark and back again.

"Somethin's comin' through," Christopher breathed.

Only then did I realize what I was looking at: a portal.

I'd seen portals before, opening and closing between our world and Faerie--and in the case of the aforementioned demon, between our world and some other place I did my best not to think about. But each of those had been magic wielded by adepts, cleanly defined, solidly controlled. This was something else entirely, a fraying of the walls between the worlds, growing wider and clearer with each moment.

"Whatever it is, it's not very good at it," I said. Easy for me to say, I knew, when I barely had down how not to look conspicuous in front of strangers, much less opening doors out of nothing. Still I let the point stand, to cover my agitation.

"Or it doesn't know what it's doin'," Christopher replied. "It could be hurt, or out of its head. Either way I'm after dealin' with it." He took a step forward and then looked down at me. All traces of the boyish glee he'd shown among the concertgoers had vanished from his face, replaced by stern and earnest business. "Are you up for it, then?"

In the glow before us his hazel eyes had gone golden-green, sparking with a light of their own. No matter how normal we'd been trying to be that night, the fact remained that my boy was

a Warder, the Warder Second of Seattle. With that set to his jaw and his magic drawing upon the ground beneath us, adding to the rising crackle of power, he looked the part.

I wasn't about to go anywhere.

"Bring it," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get your phone out and call Millicent. But stay ready. I may need your help."

He didn't have to ask twice. I whipped my new smartphone out of the patchwork tote bag slung off my shoulder, unlocked it, and tapped my speed dial for Millicent's number while Christopher eased closer to the twisting light. His stance didn't change, but I saw him lift a hand towards the electric radiance. The power thrumming through the earth coursed up to his fingers, a wellspring born out of the wealth of life patterns in a thriving city, ready to let him steady the portal or close it if that was what he needed to do. No passerby would have seen anything remarkable, just a tall young man reaching out for nothing. To my eyes, though, he shone.

"I am Christopher MacSimidh," he announced all at once, not loudly, but with a resonance that made each syllable ring out above the distant pounding rhythm from the concert. "By the Pact between Warder and Sidhe, I bid you, show yourself in peace."

Just beside my ear I heard Millicent's number kick over to her voice mail. "Millie, this is Kendis," I said into the phone, never taking my eyes off Christopher as I spoke. "We're at the

concert and there's a portal opening up, call us as soon as you get this!"

On my very word, as if provoked by Christopher's cautious tendril of power, the portal abruptly expanded. Blue fire stretched across the entire width of the alley, still uneven in shape, but now a broad rent torn open out of the dark. A man-shaped form dropped through it and landed hard on its hands and knees, swift enough that I yelped in surprise. Christopher's reaction time was better than mine; he let loose some of the magic he'd called out of the earth, stabilizing the hole in the air and easing it closed. It was impressive, really--he'd been doing plenty of practicing of his own under old Millie's guidance--but truth be told, I barely noticed. I was too busy being thunderstruck by what had just fallen out of the portal.

Or rather, who.

"Oh God, no way," I burst out. "No fucking way!"

The figure on the ground had no shirt or shoes, and the form-fitting pants that were his only clothing had seen far better days. Even from several steps away I could see a long tear down one leg, showing bruises and streaks of blood beneath. What flesh the trousers didn't cover seemed little better, for half-healed scars crisscrossed his back, and skin that should have gleamed with the translucence of moonlight looked bone-pale with fatigue and cold. Black hair that I'd last seen styled into quite the retro pompadour was reduced to an unkempt mop. For an

instant I hesitated, stunned by this piteous appearance; was I really seeing who I thought I was?

When he looked up at me, though, I was sure. So was Christopher, who swore as he whirled to join me, and only then did I find I'd charged forward in a rush of reaction. But the newcomer's large, wavering smile stopped me in my tracks, a smile that clued me in that nobody was home behind his eyes. He tried to rise, to push up to his knees in a ghost of his normal grace. Maybe he was trying to bow? I couldn't tell and didn't care, and yet, I couldn't help wincing as he promptly pitched forward onto his face.

"Mah dear Miss Thompson," he said on the way down, in a Tennessee drawl I knew to be as false as a six-dollar bill, "we've jes' gotta stop meetin' this way."

Oh yeah, I knew him. He was a bard of the Unseelie Court, a singer who shamelessly exploited his coincidental resemblance to a young Elvis Presley, modulo tapered ears and eyes that gleamed like sapphires--or would have, at least, in proper health. Like me, he was a mage, though he was many centuries my senior and had had much more time to master his power.

His name was Elessir a'Natharion.

And he'd tried to kill me.