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A CONSPIRACY OF CHARMING MONSTERS

ILLUSTRATED TALES FROM ELFHAME



HOLLY BLACK

Art by Solenne Songer (Frostbite Studios)

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

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THE FALL
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APARTMENTS
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MADOC KNOWS BETTER than to dwell on losses. In war, loss is inevitable. No matter how strong or clever you are, there's a chance you will encounter someone stronger, cleverer, or just luckier. Loss is a setback. If you plan well, it lands you on what is only a longer and thornier path to victory.

But right then, in exile from Faerie, trapped in the baffling mortal world, in a depressing apartment that stinks of iron, away from everyone he loves and everyone he commanded, he can't seem to stop dwelling.

He schemed to take over Elfhome for years, only to have victory snatched from his grasp by his own ruthless child. A child he raised and trained, and who, had he taken her into his confidence sooner and manipulated

her better, might have *handed* him the goddamn crown instead of taking it for herself.

Part of him can't help being proud of his little Jude. There's even some satisfaction in knowing his family commanded both sides of the battle for the throne.

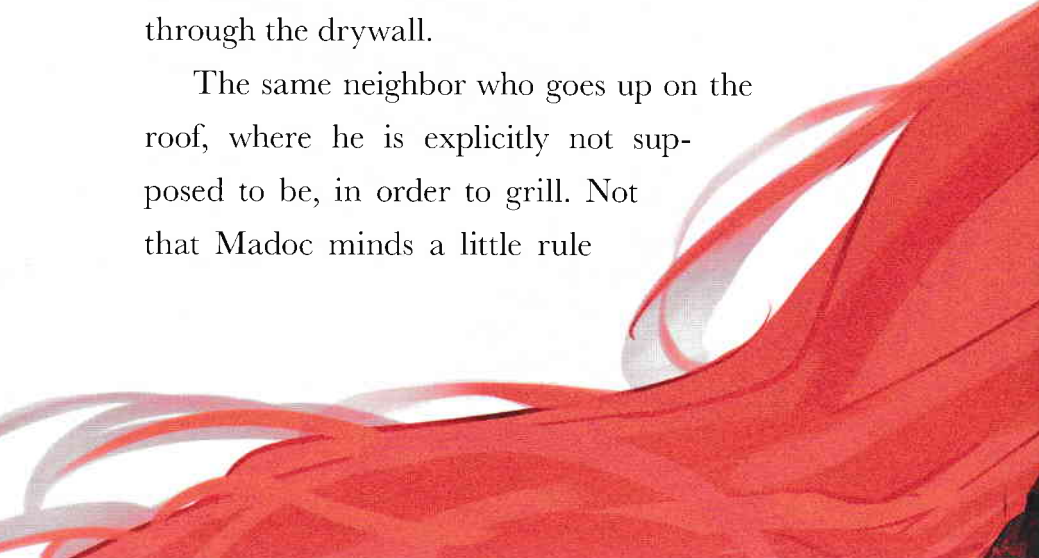
But Madoc still lost.

So now he paces the fake-wood floor, feeling old and tired. Maybe he has no more schemes in him.

Redcaps like him are supposed to die in battle, yet along with his banishment came an admonishment to never so much as lift a weapon again. He is doubly disgraced, denied even the dignity of a worthy death, his failure complete.

Grinding his teeth, he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. There are already three holes in the wall from where he put his fists through it, and he doesn't need to make another. A gossip-seeking neighbor who introduced himself as "Kevin, from across the hall" came nosing around complaining about the noise after the second punch broke through the drywall.

The same neighbor who goes up on the roof, where he is explicitly not supposed to be, in order to grill. Not that Madoc minds a little rule



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breaking, but if he's held to the ridiculous "no noise after ten PM," then surely the rest of the tenants ought to be held to the other equally ridiculous strictures. Not to mention that the woman in 5E has a tiny, yappy dog that barks all hours of the day and night, and yet no one seems to be complaining to *her*.

Madoc told Kevin he would keep it down and did not snap the man's neck. He isn't sure if he's proud of resisting committing murder or if it's evidence of how far he's fallen.

A tapping on the window startles Madoc from his musings. A bird, not one of his falcons looking for strips of meat they aren't allowed to hunt. A white raven. As he walks to open the window, he notes that a piece of parchment has been tied to one of the bird's feet with blue thread.

The raven, as pale as moonlight, flies into his small kitchen area as soon as the sash is up.

"What have you for me?" Madoc mutters, following it.

The bird pecks at a few crumbs on the counter. Alas, Madoc's cupboards are largely bare. Since leaving Elf-hame, he's taken his meals in shops. He does, however, have a cardboard container of chicken eggs, one of which he breaks directly onto the metal of his sink.

The raven picks at the yolk delightedly, making it easy for Madoc to free the message from its foot.

I will come to your dwelling tomorrow around dusk. We have much to discuss.

Oriana

He stares at the note before crumpling it in his fist.

Oriana, second wife. Their marriage was a practical one; she wed him for Oak's protection, and he wed her because he wanted a wife who would take care of the children he already had. Now he wonders if she considers him a burden to be shed or whether she's found a new use for him.

He knew she was clever—she had to have been to survive the internecine politics of the High Court when she was a consort to the former High King—but he's impressed that she's managed to stay in Jude's good graces while never quite leaving his.

And now she's coming here.

While he's been wallowing in self-pity, the idea that his wife might pity him is too terrible to contemplate. And yet, looking around at the broken walls and empty rooms, he fears that if she sees him here, she won't be able to help it.

He has treated his exile like a military campaign. Everything temporary. Sleeping on blankets on the floor, as though he were camping for the night after a march.

No furniture. Nothing in his refrigerator but eggs. Using glamours instead of buying mortal clothing. He has been unwilling to acknowledge the truth: He is stuck in the mortal world. And he may be stuck here a long time.

But if he wants to avoid pity, he must seem to have settled in by tomorrow night.

He writes a brief note acknowledging that she is coming:

I AWAIT YOUR VISIT.

Madoc knows what he has to do; he just dreads doing it.

He chose this apartment because it isn't far from where his eldest daughter, Vivi, lives. He hasn't visited her, though. He doubts he will be welcome. She'd found him only barely tolerable even before he nearly gutted one of her sisters.

Well, now he will have to find out. His daughter knows the local Folk, after all.

And the sobering truth is that there is no one else to whom he can turn.

He goes down the stairs, his doublet and leather pants obscured by a heavy glamour. His keys rest lightly in one clawed hand.

The elderly woman from 5E—Ruth Kaplan—has a small Pomeranian dancing around her feet, barking, tongue lolling out of his mouth, dripping with foamy drool. As Madoc

watches, he darts to the mat in front of 5F, then pisses on it.

“No, Puffball!” Ruth calls. “Get away from there.”

Puffball doesn’t listen, though. He stops to eat what looks like a scattering of dog treats, perhaps an offering from the equally ancient Lydia Holloway in 5F to keep him from further depredations.

“He hasn’t been well,” Ruth tells Madoc apologetically when she sees him noticing.

“Poor creature,” he says, leaving the object of his comment vague. He isn’t sure what the residents think of him. He has attempted to remain civil in his conversations, but has shut down any invitations to get to know them further. He hopes they do not think of him at all.

Four more floors down, he passes 1F, which has a wooden ladder leaned up against a dresser sitting outside the door, along with a rusty-looking bike. Across the way, someone has jammed open the trash chute with a bag that’s leaking something foul.

He continues to the ground floor. On his way out of the building he passes the mailboxes. Over them are several notices—a flyer offering a couch for sale, another with a photo of a missing sphynx cat named Slinky McEgg, and a notice that the tenants’ association is holding a potluck barbecue on the lawn two days hence. But larger than those

is taped an obviously handmade sign: STEALING MAIL IS A FEDERAL CRIME!!!

A woman with a walker is making her way inside. She has a bag of groceries balanced in the basket in front of her. Lydia's sister, Vanessa, also a resident of 5F. Maybe she's the one buying dog treats.

Madoc opens the door for her. "What's that about?" he asks as she passes, nodding toward the sign.

She squints at it, then turns to him with rheumy eyes. "You better not order anything important; especially don't get those discount drugs from Canada. They disappear! Everyone suspects one of the teenagers, but I know it's Leon in 1F."

Leon Watkins. The one with all the stuff in the hall around his door. "Why do you think it's him?"

"Because he's a wanker!" she says with surprising volume, then wheels off toward the elevator.

Madoc stares after the woman, realizing that despite her gray hair, stooped back, and delightful spark of hostility, she is younger than him. Elderly mortals horrify some of the Folk, while others find them fascinating. Madoc can't help thinking of Jude and Taryn and wondering if someday he will hold one of their withered hands in his.

As he crosses in the direction of Vivi's apartment, he

recalls seeing Jude lying in the snow, bleeding out from the wound he gave her. Too grievously hurt to survive, even if he carried her back to camp, and camp too far anyway. In that moment, he would have given much for her to have grown old.

She lived. He reminds himself of that. He does not like to think of the moments after, trudging back to his army, when he knew in his bones that the game hadn't been worth the candle.

And that's why you lost.

Had he still been standing in his apartment, he would have smashed the place to pieces.



"Oh, you've got to be kidding," Vivi says when she sees him standing outside her door.

Madoc opens his arms and gives her his toothiest smile. "I intend to make the most of my exile, child mine. And that means visiting my favorite daughter."

"Jude's your favorite daughter," Vivi says.

"Not at the moment," he reminds her, letting the weight in his voice carry his sincerity.

Vivi snorts at that. She has his eyes. Sometimes he's thought that's all they have in common, those eyes.