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NIGHT SEASON bonus short story

# *Cyncerely Yours*

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by [Eileen Wilks](#)

*This bonus story takes place after NIGHT SEASON, so if you're not fond of spoilers read the book first and come back to this after.*



It was a warm, sunny morning in Washington, DC. Scraps of white fluff trailed across the bare dome of the sky, a lacy lingerie more tease than cover. The air was damp and fragrant; the grass was just damp.

It had rained yesterday. Rain was forecast for tomorrow. But it was not raining this morning. Cullen regarded it all—wet grass, sweet-smelling air, blue sky—with exhilarated wonder. “No rain,” he pointed out to his best man. “They were predicting rain, you know.”

“True,” Rule said. “It has remained true every time you’ve mentioned it.”

So he was repeating himself. So what? He was getting married. A man could be foolish on his wedding day—was intended to be foolish, perhaps, on this one day, when past and future hinged on a moment that was nearly here. Nearly now.

Nearly, dammit. Cullen was not good at waiting. “I should have gone. When she called--”

“You think Cynna and Lily can’t handle a flat tire?”

“They shouldn’t have to, dammit! Not today.”

“Which is why they took a taxi the rest of the way. A taxi that is pulling into the parking lot now.”

Cullen sighed in relief. At last. Cynna was with Lily, and of course Rule knew where Lily was. The two women would head straight for the ladies’ room where Cynna would put on her gown.

“I’ve seen you jumpy before,” Rule said, “but you remind me of a Mexican jumping bean this morning. Scared?”

“Of course.” Cullen waved that away as irrelevant.. “I’m not stupid.”

Everyone was here but the bride and maid of honor. The priest waited at the fallen log they’d chosen as their alter. The guests stood talking quietly, not sequestered into his and her sides of the aisle as they would be in a more traditional wedding. Cullen didn’t mind the omission of formal seating, though he resented the reason for it. The park authorities had been overruled about holding a wedding here, so they’d asserted themselves in typical bureaucratic fashion: no chairs allowed. No tables, either, so the food and drink for after the ceremony was parked in coolers over by the trees.

Cullen wanted badly to move. “How long can it take to put on a dress?”

Rule smiled. “You can ask?”

Okay, dumb question. But Cynna wasn’t doing makeup. She seldom wore it anyway, and she’d liked the Wiccan practice Cullen mentioned of coming naked to their marriage. She’d decided to leave off all the chemical additions—hair gel, makeup, and such—in a symbolic baring, since the literal sort would have made most of their guests uncomfortable, not to mention Father Michaels. The priest was less hidebound than most, but nude ministers would exceed his tolerance.

Ministers. That’s how the Church saw Cullen and Cynna—as the ministers of the ceremony, with the priest being the chief witness or celebrant. Cullen was anything but Catholic, but he had a solid appreciation for the Church’s grasp of ritual. He liked the idea that he and Cynna would minister the ceremony.

He liked the idea that they would be life-bound in the eyes of Cynna’s Church even more. “I don’t see what’s taking her so long.”

“She just arrived, Cullen.”

What is the significance of the wedding dress? A cool mental voice inquired. Does it have a ceremonial function?

The voice belonged to the only guest who wasn’t standing. Mika sprawled forty feet away from the cluster of human guests, a startlement of ruby scales in the green grass. His head rose well above the grass on the muscular stem of his neck, with the great eyes focused on Cullen.

Mika was the reason they were here rather than a more conventional setting. The dragon was curious about human mating rituals, so he’d graciously granted Cullen and Cynna permission

to hold their wedding at the park, since he insisted on attending. Not that this section of Rock Creek Park was his in the eyes of its human keepers, but the authorities were disinclined to argue with the dragon.

Cullen looked at Mika—not in the eyes, of course, because he'd left down one of his shields so he could use mindspeech, and it might be possible for the dragon to ensorcell him. Probably not, but why take chances?

It took a moment to gather his thoughts sufficiently for coherent mindspeech. Some wedding dresses have a ceremonial aspect—a veil that is moved aside to symbolize the baring of the bride to her groom, for example. Or the color white, which in western tradition symbolizes purity or virginity. The chief function of Cynna's wedding dress, however, is to celebrate her beauty and sexuality.

You are wearing white, the dragon observed. You are neither pure nor virginal. Does the color have another meaning?

Figuring out what he should wear had been tricky. Cynna hadn't cared, but he did. A tux would look ridiculous in this setting and a suit would feel fake, pretending to a respectability he had no interest in claiming. Yet jeans were out, too. Jeans would say this day was nothing out of the ordinary.

In the end, he'd decided to wear simple drawstring trousers in white linen. No shirt. "White is also the color of endings and beginnings. I'm doing both today."

"That you are," Rule murmured, "yet I feel I'm coming in at the end of the conversation."

He'd spoken aloud, dammit. How embarrassing. Embarrassment annoyed Cullen. "I was talking to Mika."

"Ah. Is he impatient, also?"

"Dragons are too damned Zen for impatience. It's . . ." His attention drifted to the path that led to the parking lot. A few guests had been late to arrive, it seemed—three men, all in suits though the invitation specified casual wear. Must be people Cynna worked with.

Hey, wait. Cullen frowned. Wasn't that Asshole Number Two? "Cynna didn't invite him," he said definitely.

"Who?"

"The one in the bad suit and green tie. He . . ." Cullen's voice trailed off as he noticed what the man—what was his name? Baxter?—was saying about Cynna.

“Cullen.” Rule made his name a warning. Obviously he’d heard the asshole, too.

“I’ll be right back,” Cullen said, delighted to have something to do.



The ladies room at Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC might not be the glam setting some women lusted after for the final primp session on their wedding day, but Cynna had no complaints. It was clean, wasn’t it? Mostly clean, anyway. The lighting sucked, but she wasn’t planning to wear makeup, so that didn’t matter.

Quickly Cynna tugged off her t-shirt, then stepped out of her shoes. “How’s our time?”

“You’re fine,” Lily said, bending to pick up clothes as fast as Cynna discarded them. Naturally she folded them. Lily did stuff like that. “They aren’t going to start without you.”

A grin slapped itself across Cynna’s face. “Guess they won’t.”

She’d been grinning all morning. And rushing. Crazy at it seemed, she was in a hurry to get herself married to Cullen Seabourne. Most of her haste was due to sheer, bubbling happiness. Not all.

“Uh . . .”

“What?” Cynna took a bath mat out of her tote and spread it on the floor. She dug into her tote again, this time for the vial of sea water.

“I hadn’t realized the spell turned you blond elsewhere. It didn’t affect your eyelashes and eyebrows.”

Cynna glanced down. “Weird, isn’t it? I haven’t gotten used to being blond down there. Looks like dandelion fluff, huh? But the contrast with the tattoos is kind of cool.”

Before leaving Edge, she and Cullen had been visited by the Rohen liege. There were complicated political reasons that Theil couldn’t reward them for their part in saving her world—at least, that’s what Cullen said. Cynna didn’t get human politics, much less the sidhe version, so she took his word for it. Still, Theil had found a way to express her appreciation. It was sidhe custom to gift expectant mothers, and tradition called for two presents—one magical and one physical.

As a result of the magical gift, Cynna would never have to bleach her hair again. “Cullen’s jazzed about it,” she said, unstopping the little vial. “Both the above part and the below. He hated the way the bleach made my the hair on my head smell, and he says the spell puts a sexy little glow

on my—”

“TMI, Cynna.”

She grinned. “Nether regions? Private parts? Hey, you’ve got sisters. You can’t tell me you never talked about stuff with them.”

“With Beth, sometimes. But Susan? She calls it a pudendum. You can’t talk about stuff with a big sister who calls it a pudendum.”

“Jesus. Really? I know she’s a doctor and all, but . . .” Cynna shook her head. “Takes all kinds, I guess.” She closed her eyes, took a cleansing breath, and dabbed sea water on the dandelion fluff, a.k.a. her base chakra. Then she anointed the sacral chakra just below her belly button, and continued on up.

The ceremony itself would be Catholic, but they’d decided to include some other rituals, too. This cleansing mixed Wiccan with Eastern rites. Cullen had taught it to her.

At first Cynna hadn’t wanted any ceremony. Why couldn’t they could just go to the courthouse and do the deed? Cullen wouldn’t hear of it. “You know the importance of ritual,” he’d said.

She’d pointed out that they were getting married, not casting a spell.

He’d raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think marriage requires a touch of magic? Besides, you want to be married in the Catholic Church.”

She did, though she hadn’t expected him to like the idea. Probably she needed to get over expecting things because she was usually wrong. Hadn’t she expected to have trouble getting married in the Church? Not that Catholics didn’t marry outside the faith sometimes, but she didn’t know of any who’d married outside their species.

Turned out that wasn’t a major hurdle. Father Michaels even speeded things up for them since they weren’t planning to remain in DC much longer, asking for only three counseling sessions—one with her, one with Cullen, and one with the two of them together. Getting married here at the park was a bigger problem. The Church wanted people to marry at the church, in the building itself, and Father Michaels couldn’t agree to waive that on his own. He needed dispensation from his bishop. Now, Bishop Kearns might be a fine fellow in some ways—Cynna was trying to reserve judgment—but he wasn’t exactly flexible. He didn’t think allowing a dragon to attend the ceremony was a good reason to buck tradition.

Fortunately, she and Cullen knew someone with ecclesiastical clout. Archbishop Brown was on the Presidential Task Force as well as being on their guest list, and he’d agreed to speak to his brother bishop. They’d received their dispensation.

Then the assholes at the courthouse proved to be more hidebound than the Catholic Church. Them and their damned form DHS 366.

The law required blood tests. That was fine unless one of the people being tested was a lupus—an issue that, admittedly, hadn't arisen before. Everyone knew lupi didn't get venereal diseases, but common knowledge cut no ice with bureaucracy. Cullen had to be tested for syphilis and that test had to be certified as negative before the license bureau would issue a marriage license.

It still shouldn't have been a big deal. The test checked for antibodies produced by a body infected by syphilis, and the lab agreed that they hadn't found any such antibodies in Cullen's blood. They still refused to certify their results because the blood came from a lupus. Separated from its organizing principle, the magic in a lupus's blood turned random, which made a mess of lab tests. Everyone knew that, too, but this time common knowledge trumped common sense.

In the end, it took a call from a certain presidential assistant to persuade the lab to fill out form DHS 366 appropriately. Marilyn Wright had pointed out that the lab was not being asked whether the test could reasonably be expected to find the antibodies in question—only if such antibodies had been found.

Cynna touched the sea water to her crown chakra and stood quietly. It was hard to concentrate on cleansing when her insides were fizzing like a bottle of shaken soda pop. "Okay," she said, her eyes snapping open. She reached for the thong undies that were all she could wear beneath her wedding dress. "I need the dress now."

Lily had it ready. "I can't wait to see it on you."

And this was second gift the Rohen liege had given Cynna, the material one: a length of fabric. Lily had found a tailor to make the fabric into a gown, a simple design called a slip dress that looked more like lingerie than a wedding dress to Cynna. On the hanger the dress was plain, a long length of what looked like blue-gray silk. But it was not the kind of silk spun by little worms. This had been spun by fairies. Real ones, with wings and everything. Fairies from Faerie.

Normally, only the fairies themselves and their larger sidhe kin, the elves, were allowed to wear enesi, or fairy silk. Cynna tried not to think about how much the material was worth as she slid the gown over her head. It was like slipping into liquid sin. She sleeked it down her hips, giving a little wiggle to help it fall in place.

Lily gasped. "Oh, my . . . ."

"Is that a good oh my or a bad one?" Cynna demanded. "Dammit, there's no full-length mirror here. What was I thinking? I need a mirror."

“It’s good,” Lily assured her. “It’s incredible. I knew the fabric was supposed to respond to the wearer’s body, but I had no idea . . . look.” Gently she turned Cynna towards the small mirror over the sink.

Cynna’s breath caught. A sunrise sky flowed over her breasts in a thousand shades of blue, from twilight to shimmering ice. Blue that rippled here and there into white, pink, yellow tinged with orange . . . colors so clear and soft they looked like air itself smiling at the approach of day.

Colors, she saw as she took a step back, that moved when she did. “Wow.”

“I’ve never—what the hell?”

The glass vial that had held the seawater floated straight up from the ledge where Cynna had set it—then dropped, smashing on the concrete floor.

“Shit!” She’d been hoping—but no, she couldn’t be that lucky, could she? Cynna put her hands on her hips. “That is not the way to go about getting yourself forgiven, woman!”

“Uh . . . Cynna? You talking to me?”

“Of course not. Mrs. Ryerson.” Cynna glowered at the broken bottle. “I don’t have anything to sweep up that mess with.” She bent so she could pick up the biggest pieces of glass.

Lily knelt and pushed her hand away. “Move. The bride can’t be bleeding when she walks down the aisle. Ah . . . about this Mrs. Ryerson. She levitates things?”

“She’s haunting me. Started about two weeks ago.” Cynna shook her head. “Never mind her. Come on, you can’t get all that up by hand. Let’s go.”

“Shoes,” Lily said, dropping the shards she’d collected in the trash. “You’re forgetting your shoes. I take it Mrs. Ryerson is dead?”

Cynna pulled her new ballet flats out of the tote. “Long dead.”

“Who is she?”

“She was a neighbor about a zillion years ago.” She stepped into the shoes and wiggled her toes. Pity she couldn’t wear boots with the dress, but these didn’t feel bad. “Nosy type, always thought us kids were up to something. For some reason she picked me as her favorite target, but that was so long ago . . . I don’t know why she suddenly showed up. Doesn’t make sense, does it?” She glanced at the mirror and smiled in spite of everything. This was one killer dress. “Come on. I’m getting married today no matter how many temper fits that stupid ghost throws.”



Lily stuffed the tote into one of the stalls, where maybe it wouldn't get stolen. "How do you know about this ghost?"

"Oh, when stuff started happening I went to see a medium. Friend of a friend, you know? She's pretty good."

"Why is—"

"I don't want to talk about it now. I want to get married." Before the fizz in her stomach turned into a sick funk—or Mrs. Ryerson came up with a new way to bedevil her.

"Okay, sure." Lily slung her smart little leather purse onto her shoulder. "But why do you think the ghost is this Mrs. Ryerson?"

Cynna sighed. Of course Lily wouldn't leave it alone. If Lily was breathing, she was asking questions. "Because she told me so when the medium brought her through. She claims she wants forgiveness, but . . ." Cynna sent a glare around the small bathroom. "I told her I forgave her, but she's still here, isn't she? Breaking stuff. Puncturing tires."

Lily's eyebrows shot up. "She did that?"

"I'm betting on it." Cynna yanked open the door.

"I thought ghosts couldn't affect material objects."

"It's really rare. I don't know how I got so lucky." Cynna stepped out and took a deep breath. Oh, God. She was so scared. "Forget about her. I want to see the look on Cullen's face when he gets a look at this dress."

Muggy air filled Cynna's lungs as if she'd just stepped out of the shower, but so far the rain was holding off. She thanked God and Mary and anyone else who might be listening as she hurried down the path.

The open area where her guests and her groom waited was just down a short, woodsy trail. Cynna could hear a low buzz of conversation and a few birds calling. The blue of the sky was ten times brighter than her gown, but not a whit more lovely. She kept glancing down at the fairy silk.

"Slow down!" Lily called. "I'd rather not make our entrance at a run."

"What? Oh, right." Cynna forced her feet to pause and let Lily catch up. "You look great. Did I tell you that you look great?"



Cynna hadn't gone for bridesmaid gear, which seemed designed for maximum ugly. An annoying little voice had argued against that decision, pointing out that her maid of honor would look prettier than her. Well, Lily always did, so the voice wasn't exactly lying. But however lovely Lily looked in her trim little sundress, she was not wearing fairy silk.

"Thanks. Not that anyone will be looking at me, but it's nice to know. You aren't hyperventilating, are you?"

"Just fizzing." Lily had caught up, so Cynna started moving again, paying attention this time so her walk didn't turn into a gallop. "You've got the ring?"

Lily patted the pocket of her dress. "Safe and sound."

She was going to wear a wedding ring. Cullen was, too. Cullen would probably be the only lupus in the world who wore a wedding ring. Wasn't life weird?

They rounded the last tree and Cynna saw her wedding guests and the priest; Rule, who stood only few feet away, next to a couple of the guests and Cullen . . . who stood over another of the guests. Who lay on the ground, moaning.

"What the—" Lily broke off and hurried forward. "What's going on?"

"Wedding nerves," Rule said dryly.

The man slowly pushed up until he was sitting, rubbing his jaw, his expression dazed. One of the other men bent to help him up just as Cynna reached the small knot of people. "Hey, wait," she said. "Those aren't our guests. I don't know the other two, but that's Baxter. I didn't invite Baxter. Did you, Cullen?"

"Told you she didn't invite him," Cullen said smugly to Rule, then turned to Cynna. "He was being his usual self—stupid and insulting. So I . . . wow." Cullen's gaze took a slow cruise up Cynna's body, having already taken the trip down. "Nice. Really, really nice." His kindled eyes reached Cynna's face, hot blue embers in a face suddenly taut. "And mine.

"You get a lifetime lease," Cynna said, "but I'm still owner and operator."

Rule made a muffled sound that might have been a cough.

Baxter was on his feet now. He shook off the other guy's hand. "I'll tell you what happened. He hit me. That damned werewolf walked up and—"

"Uh, uh, uh!" Cullen said cheerfully, wagging his finger. "Remember what I told you about being rude at my wedding?"

Baxter turned a nice, waxy shade of pale.

Rule said, “Perhaps you gentlemen would like to enjoy another section of the park on this lovely summer morning. One a nice, long ways from here.” His voice was as mild as his words. His face wasn’t. After one glance at him, Baxter’s two friends decided it was time to leave. They didn’t have much trouble persuading Baxter of this change of plans.

Not surprisingly, all of their guests had turned to watch. Cynna scanned the faces she could see, hoping.

The other lupi weren’t happy with Cullen’s decision. Rule was the only Nokolai lupus present, and that wasn’t just because they were so far from Nokolai clanhome. But two lupi from another clan, Mendoza, had accepted the invitation, and after a moment Cynna spotted them.

Good. Her breath eased out. Maybe Cullen wouldn’t be completely ostracized. She hadn’t found another face she was looking for, though. “Gan isn’t here?”

“I haven’t seen her,” Rule said, “and she’s hard to miss.”

The former demon had been all excited about attending the wedding, insisting that Edge would be okay without her—and the medallion she wore--if she wasn’t gone long. Someone might have persuaded her otherwise, though. Or she might have gone swimming and lost track of time in the pursuit of fishies.

“We’ll take our places now,” Lily told them firmly.

The plan was for Rule and Lily to precede them down the aisle—which, of course, wasn’t an aisle, but a very skilled Wiccan witch had cast a subtle “keep back” spell that discouraged people from lingering in the path the wedding party would take to the front, where Father Michaels waited.

Cullen gave someone a thumbs up—probably Sherri, the witch who would remove the “keep back” spell. Cynna couldn’t spot her in the crowd. “Good grief. Did we really invite that many people?”

“Looks like,” Cullen said. He held out his arm.

Cynna linked hers through it. Lily and Rule started for their spot at the back of the crowd, and Cynna and Cullen followed. “So what did you tell Baxter?” Cynna asked.

“To be polite.”

“That’s not all you said.”

“I might have added that—”

Cullen didn't stop speaking. He just became hard to hear over the roar.

Like a towel snapped by a playful boy, Mika's great, ruby-scaled body shot up, wings spreading, tail stretched for ballast as the dragon stretched forty feet of body into the air. He flung his head back, jaws gaping in a second roar.

There were only a couple screams from the crowd, maybe because a number of the guests were trained law officers. Maybe because some were frozen and others were too busy running like hell to yell about it.

“Goddammit.” Cullen stepped forward. “No guns! Put your guns away, you idiots!”

Shit, yes. Cynna saw that several of those trained law officers were packing, which was kind of rude at a wedding, and had automatically drawn their weapons. Which was not too bright. Bullets would annoy Mika, and he was already pissed.

Ruben's voice rose from the front of the crowd, calm as always. “Holster your weapons.”

“Mika.” Cullen faced the angry dragon, head tipped back to scowl up at him. Way, way up. “What the hell are you screaming about? I'm trying to get married here.”

Mika's head swung towards Cullen, jaws gaping, eyes slitted. He looked ready to rip, rend and tear, not chat.

“Remove yourself,” ordered a clear, disapproving female voice. “You are in my way.” A tiny, erect figure emerged from what was left of the crowd. She wore crimson silk, lavishly embroidered and very Chinese. And she headed straight for Mika.

“Shit!” Cynna took a step towards her. “Madame Yu—”

Lily stopped her with a hand on her arm. “It's okay. She knows what she's doing.” But Cynna caught what she added under her breath. “I hope.”

Lily's grandmother crossed the empty grass between the guests and the dragon, stopping well within gobbling distance. “You will behave yourself,” she said sternly, then, after a pause: “Oh, no, you will not. Not me.” She added something in Chinese before returning to English. “Settle yourself. Are you just hatched? Your dam would be shamed by your lack of control.”

The mental voice was shockingly strong, roiled by fury, nothing like the cold crystal Cynna had “heard” from dragons before: She has my dust!

Madame Yu's head turned as if Mika had pointed at something. Cynna looked that way, too . . . .  
"Holy Mother of God," she whispered.

A small Styrofoam container hovered in the air over the trees that separated this area from the dragon's lair.

Madame Yu stared up at Mika a few moments more. Slowly he descended, but his tail lashed once, knocking a small tree into a serious tilt. Lily's grandmother turned to face them. "Mika is overwrought. He is not making sense. Someone has his gold dust, and I see it floating, but he does not say who takes it. He says that Cynna must make 'her' give it back, but does not say who."

Cynna groaned. "The ghost. That damned ghost is playing games with dragon gold." She raised her voice to scream at the air. "I forgive you, all right? I forgive you, you twice-damned bitch! Now put down that gold and go away!"

In the silence that followed Cullen murmured, "The ghost-bitch may have found that less than sincere."

From somewhere behind them a woman said, "Perhaps I can help."

Cynna turned. A pleasant-faced woman in a wrinkled green dress was approaching them on the path to the parking lot. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, maybe a little older. Her dishwater blond hair was cut very short. "I'm afraid I'm late," she said apologetically. "Traffic was difficult, and my taxi driver didn't speak English, and we went all the way to . . . but never mind all that. You say there's a ghost causing trouble?"

Cynna nodded, puzzled. The face was familiar, but she couldn't place the woman. "Yeah, Mrs. Ryerson. She used to be my next-door neighbor, but that was over twenty years ago. I have no idea when she died, or why she suddenly turned up to make my life hell, except that she wants me to forgive her. Ah . . . I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

It was Cullen who answered, so quietly she barely heard him. "You've met her, but you weren't given her name. We don't use their names."

Cynna looked at him, her mouth suddenly dry. She knew of only two types of women whom the lupi didn't refer to by name. One was a goddess and unlikely to show up at their wedding. The other . . . well, she would have thought that almost as unlikely. "She's a Rhej?"

Cullen stared at the quiet, brown-haired woman as if she were the ghost. "Yes. The Etorri Rhej."



Cullen couldn't make himself move or speak. This woman hadn't been Rhej when he was kicked out of Etorri. That Rhej had withered her way into death over twenty years ago; she'd been followed by the woman who had trained the one in front of him now.

Cynna took his hand. That helped, somehow, but when he finally found his tongue he might as well have stayed silent, considering how little he had to say. "You've cut your hair."

"I got tired of messing with it." She smiled at both of them. "I was happy to receive your invitation."

Cynna started to speak. Cullen squeezed her hand before she could blurt out that they hadn't sent her one. Of course they hadn't. It never occurred to him that any of the Rhejes, keepers of the memories and traditions, would be willing to attend the tradition-busting occasion of his wedding.

Yet here she was. And she wasn't just any Rhej. She was Etorri. What she did mattered—not just to him, but to all the clans. Her presence wouldn't bring universal acceptance of his marriage, but it would make a difference.

Cullen had to swallow first, but this time he knew what to say. "We are happy to have you."

"Thank you. Now, about that ghost--?"

"Rhejes deal with ghosts?" Cynna asked, dubious. "I didn't know that."

"No, but—" He almost forgot and used her name. "She's a medium."

Interesting. She is very young, yet she knows her true name. So few humans do. Mika advanced with the sinuous sway common to dragons. Several of the guests scattered to give him room. He stopped and stared at the Rhej. What is a medium? Ah, I see. You will make the dead woman give back my dust.

The Etorri Rhej's eyes widened slightly, but her nod was polite, her voice matter-of-fact. "I'll do my best. Where . . ." She glanced around, her gaze fixing on the floating container. "Oh, there she is. What did you say her name is?"

Cynna supplied it. "Mrs. Ryerson. Don't you need candles and stuff?"

"No. Mrs. Ryerson, you are causing a great deal of trouble. You must have a strong reason."

“But—” Cynna began.

Cullen squeezed her hand, urging silence. The Etorri Rhej was a very strong medium . . . and, it seemed, Mrs. Ryerson was a very strong ghost. The usual trappings for communication with the dead weren't needed.

“I see,” the Rhej said solemnly. “That isn't all of it, though, is it? I think you'd better tell me the rest.” A long silence followed, with the Rhej apparently listening closely. Twice she nodded; once she made an understanding sound. At last she looked at Cynna. “I see why you were confused, but Ada isn't trying to obtain forgiveness for herself. She wants you to forgive your mother.”

“My . . . she what?” Cynna stiffened. “What business is it of hers? Besides, I have forgiven her. Mostly.”

“Ada owes your mother a debt of guilt,” the Rhej said gently. “I believe we'll skip the details about what that debt involves, but it is real and serious. She can't release until she feels she's atoned. Since your mother has already moved on, she can't atone directly, so she's trying to do something that will benefit you.”

Cynna stared in disbelief. “Inciting a dragon to riot? Ruining my wedding? Yeah, she's been tons of help.”

“Her methods are muddled, but those trapped between are often muddled. Her goal is for you to forgive, however, and that will certainly help you.”

“Okay. I forgive my mother.”

Nothing happened.

“You can't lie to a ghost, dear,” the Rhej said. “I'm not sure how, but they always know.”

“I'm not lying, I just—she--I can't forgive on command!” Cynna's voice rose. “It doesn't work like that!”

“Perhaps I can help.” Father Michaels—who hadn't run away, or screamed, or pulled a gun when Mika roared—made his way towards them. He was a short, husky man just into middle age with dark hair and eyes. “Forgiveness does rather fall into my province. Cynna?” He held out his hands. “Will you step aside a moment and speak with me?”

She looked at Cullen first. He gave her hand another squeeze, feeling helpless and disliking that. But forgiveness was definitely not his best thing. He let go of her hand.

The priest took her aside and spoke quietly. The others probably couldn't hear him. Cullen could.

First Father Michaels asked if she knew whether Mrs. Ryerson had belonged to the Church, then he made a suggestion. Cynna said yes to the first, and nodded reluctantly to the second.

“All right.” Cynna faced the Rhej. “Tell her—“

“She can hear you, dear.”

“I feel funny talking to the air,” Cynna muttered, but turned to face that small, floating ice chest. “Here’s the first part of the deal, Mrs. Ryerson. I’ve promised Father Michaels that I’ll pray for my mother every day for a month.” She glanced briefly at the priest. “He says it’s almost impossible to stay bitter at someone you keep praying for. You were Catholic. You know about promising a priest something.”

The Rhej smiled. “She chuckled over that.”

“Right.” Cynna nodded, resolute. “The rest of the deal is that you agree to let Father Michaels give you the Last Rites—well, he can’t do the whole deal because you can’t take the Eucharist, but he says it won’t matter. You let him do that, then you’ll be prepared for forgiveness yourself and can, uh, go on.”

The Rhej tilted her head, then smiled slowly. “She agrees. And she’s very happy about your offer, Father.”

Father Michaels withdrew with the Rhej, who would respond aloud for Mrs. Ryerson. While they were busy, Rule and Lily went in search of the missing wedding guests, hoping to bring a few, at least, back to the ceremony now that Mika was calm again. Cynna waited in the circle of Cullen’s arm. “This has to be the weirdest wedding on record.”

“We wouldn’t want to be accused of the ordinary.” He tucked a hand below her chin, tilting her face towards him. “Are you all right with what you agreed to?”

She nodded slowly. “Praying can’t hurt. And, well, I like to believe I never think of my mom, but I do. I just push it aside, you know? So now I’ll have to think about her, but maybe that’s good.” Her hand crept to the hard lump of her stomach that used to be flat. “Maybe this is a good time to let go of some stuff.”

“Good, then. That’s good. And our wedding isn’t ruined,” he informed her. “Altered a bit, that’s all. Not ruined.”

She saw the trace of anxiety hiding in those brilliant blue eyes and smiled. “No. Not ruined at all.”

My dust! Mika “shouted” and leaped into the air, his wings unfurling quick as a thought. He



threw himself aloft—and dived, catching the Styrofoam chest in his jaws as it fell.



With Mrs. Ryerson gone, the rest of the wedding may have seemed anticlimactic to their guests, most of whom did return for the ceremony. Not to Cynna. Ghosts and angry dragons were nowhere near as scary as the point when Father Michaels finished his homily, turned to Cullen, and asked him the “till death do you part” question.

They were holding hands, facing each other. Cullen smiled slowly and said simply, vehemently, “Yes.”

Not “I do.” Just “yes.” That nearly sent her into giggles, but then it was her turn.

“Do you, Cynna Weaver—ack!” Father Michaels jumped back.

A short, bald orange female in a fuchsia robe, turquoise tights, and a yellow belt studded with emeralds had popped into existence beside the priest. “Am I late?” Gan asked anxiously. “Did I miss anything?”

Cynna couldn’t hold back her laughter. “Nothing important,” she managed. “We’re just getting to the good part.”

True in so many ways.



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