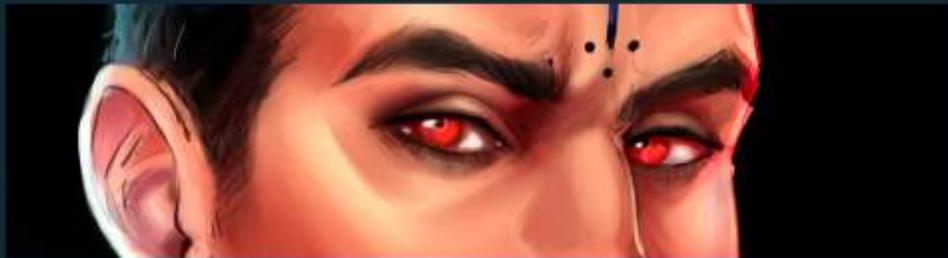


# A SPELL FOR MASTER VERVAIN



A FANTASY M/M ROMANCE  
SHORT STORY

BY

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## A Spell for Master Vervain

The moment the sun went down behind the mountains west of town, Kit Palgarin tore off his red apprentice's robe and tossed it to a corner of his room. He made the salt circle with trembling hands, lit the five black candles, and pulled off undershirt, trousers, and drawers. He had to be naked to summon an incubus.

In fact, he had to be aroused.

In fact, he had to be *aching* with lust.

Since Kit spent half his life in such a state, that part was going to be easy.

He knelt within the circle and poured a bit of oil into the palm of his hand. His stomach was churning with nerves, but he'd been trying *not* to think of Master Vervain all day. He sighed with relief as he wrapped his fingers around his cock and let his mind run free.

Free to think of Master Vervain's dark eyes, the irises stained by magic to the colour of old burgundy. Free to imagine touching the guild marks tattooed onto Vervain's chin and forehead; the patterns of crosses and dots that signified his status and power. Free to think of Vervain's short-cropped dark hair, which would probably feel like velvet, and of Vervain's mouth and what it might feel like, pressed warm against Kit's skin.

Vervain taught the history of world magic, with attention to how these magics were applied today, including how they might kill you. It was serious stuff and Vervain seldom smiled during lessons, although Kit was certain that Vervain smiled at him more than at any of the others.

In his late twenties, Vervain was the youngest of Kit's teachers by several decades. Vervain had taught at the school for only a year, having come from what he referred to as "fieldwork." He was lean and sun-tanned, and his black master's robe, while conforming to the usual style—long and unadorned—was made of a strange silky material that seemed to suck in light and that billowed behind him like a storm cloud when he walked. His black boots were also of a unique design, being shinier and narrower than the heavy boots worn by the older masters.

Kit altered his grip on his cock and shortened his strokes, thighs beginning to tremble. He thought of what it would be like to kneel naked at Vervain's feet, unlace

those boots, and have Vervain watch him do it. Kit threw his head back and fondled his balls with his other hand.

Of course, what he was doing was wrong. For an apprentice of nineteen who was still a month away from earning his journeyman's robe, summoning any kind of sex demon was against the rules. To summon an incubus, which was male, when Kit himself was male, was against common decency. To summon one in the likeness of a real person—and a teacher at that—well, Kit shuddered to think what would happen if he was found out. He would be expelled, of course. He would never get his master's robes. He would never be able to go home; the shame would probably kill his parents. His life would be ruined.

His cock softened a little.

But Kit had sat through nearly a year of lessons with Master Vervain. Three lessons a week. An hour every time. And each time, he'd wanted his master a little bit more. At first, he'd tried to ignore it. If he didn't dwell on it, perhaps his nascent longing would dissipate like a demon in the sun. Only, it hadn't. It had become worse. Vervain began to haunt his dreams, and Kit got used to waking with sticky sheets and feverish half memories of Vervain's weight on top of him.

And then, because Kit was in his final year, the one-to-one tutorials began. True, they only happened once a fortnight. True, they were only for half an hour. True, Master Vervain kept the door to his chaotic book-filled study open the whole time, but for Kit, every tutorial was an ecstasy and an agony. He lived from fortnight to fortnight and dreaded tutorials as passionately as he anticipated them, because at tutorials, he would sit opposite Vervain by the hearth. Vervain was close enough to touch, had Kit dared. Vervain was close enough to *smell*—he had a warm, pleasant scent, like baking bread or dried bracken, only more heady. And they would talk. Not just about magic but about all kinds of things: geography and astronomy, poetry and art, and how to live a good life. Vervain would smile quite a lot, then, and sometimes, Kit could make him laugh, and Kit spent the time half-giddy with excitement, sweaty with need, aching with desire—and desperate to conceal it all.

He knew Vervain didn't treat his other students like this. The others grumbled about tutorials, said Vervain was as much of a slave driver in his study as he was in the classroom, said he quizzed them and tested them and generally made their lives a

misery. Vervain didn't do that with Kit. Rather the opposite; Vervain seemed to enjoy Kit's company. That meant something, didn't it? Or did it just mean that Kit had done his reading? Because of course he had. Always.

During lessons, Vervain ruled with absolute authority. He could excoriate you with a look. You soon learned, if you hadn't done the reading, it was better to pretend to be ill. If Master Vervain asked you a question and you didn't know the answer when he considered that you should...oh gods! Vervain's ruby eyes often held a half smile, even if his mouth did not. But that gleam of humour vanished, as soon as he transfixed his victim with his gaze.

In the second week of classes, Kit had not known an answer.

"I *beg* your pardon?" Master Vervain had said, stopping in front of Kit's desk.

"I...er...don't know, sir," Kit had repeated.

"You don't *know*, Mr. Palgarin?"

"No, sir." And because that clearly wasn't enough, Kit added, "Sorry."

"Did you do the reading, Mr. Palgarin?"

"Er, yes, I did, sir."

Actually, what Kit had done was to scan the chapter on his way to school that morning, glancing at what seemed the salient points as he dodged carts and whisked his robe clear of stinking gutters. Kit's lodgings were in the lower town, which was where all the tanneries, butcheries, and laundries were, and where all the dead dogs seemed to end up. The gutters were wide and needed avoiding. But he had done the reading. Sort of.

Master Vervain stood directly in front of him, glaring down. Kit studied the blacker-than-black hem of Vervain's robe. It was nearly touching one of Kit's scuffed secondhand red boots.

"So, you read the chapter but somehow did not absorb the information pertaining to soul trees and what to do should you find yourself threatened by one?"

"Er...yes." Kit wished he could vanish in a puff of smoke the way everyone thought magicians could. He was eighteen and being treated like a naughty boy in front of his classmates. "I suppose I didn't read it closely enough, sir."

"And would you at least recognise a soul tree, Mr. Palgarin? Or is that too much to hope for?"

“I think I would.”

“Oh? And?”

“Well...” Kit thought back. There’d been an illustration, which he’d looked at twice. “I thought ‘soul tree’ something of a misnomer, sir. They look more like a large complicated key. They’re made of iron. The mages of Kembardy use them to capture a person’s life essence.”

“Very good, Mr. Palgarin. So, you can identify one. So, you will know exactly what’s about to kill you when a mage of Kembardy comes at you with one in her hand. And you’ll tell her you think it a misnomer that she’s about to murder you with something she calls a soul tree, when really it should be called a large life-taking key of iron—is that what you’ll say?”

The classroom had gone completely silent. Kit could hear the blood thumping in his ears. He dared not look up.

He muttered, “No, sir.”

“No. Because you’ll be screaming, Mr. Palgarin, the kind of scream that no one should ever have to hear. Least of all you.”

Kit felt that even his eyeballs were blushing. But then the hem of Master Vervain’s robe swirled, and he was gone towards the back of the class where he asked someone else what they should do if threatened by a soul tree. Kit’s hands were still shaking when he left school three hours later. But he’d never neglected his reading for Master Vervain again. Not ever.

For now, as Kit knelt in the salt circle with his cock in his hand, he tried to transform the humiliation of that day into something else. Imagine if at the end of that class, Master Vervain had asked him to stay behind, and all Kit’s classmates had filed out, leaving him alone. Alone with the master, behind a closed door and with no one else expected. And Master Vervain might say, “If you’re neglecting to read about soul trees, Mr. Palgarin, I expect you’ve been neglecting your dueling practice. So, we’ll have a bout, you and I, and if I win, then you’re mine, and I shall do whatever I like with you.”

Of course, Vervain would win, without even trying. He would pin Kit to the gritty classroom floorboards, one strong hand around both Kit’s wrists. He would bite Kit’s neck, and Kit would arch up to meet him, and Vervain would know Kit was desperate for him, and he would be glad. But not surprised, because he would have known from the

moment they met that Kit was his. And he would smile his one-sided smile, wine-red eyes intent as he felt Kit's arousal through his robes, and then he would tug the robes aside and—

But the secret to calling an incubus was to say the incantation *before* you got to the point of no return. You had to be horny as a goat and clear-minded as a priest, both at the same time. You had to do it after sundown, and you couldn't make a mistake. Or so Kit's classmate, Vinne, had said.

Kit had never summoned an incubus before. He was, usually, a good boy, a keen student. He had to be. His parents weren't rich like the parents of most of the other students. Kit's father was a carter, and if the family had never been hungry, it was because turnips were so cheap and because Kit was a good shot with a sling and could usually get a rabbit or a partridge. Kit wasn't at school because magic was the highest-status profession his parents could think of. He was here because he was clever and talented and worked hard and because his family had scrimped and saved and called in favours to get him here.

But Kit knew Vinne broke the rules where succubi were concerned, because Vinne seldom shut up about it. So that morning, when Kit's feverish imaginings about Master Vervain had finally reached the point where he could bear it no longer, he'd gone searching for Vinne. It had been especially awful that morning because he'd had a tutorial. He and Vervain had been talking about an Oratian cultural practice called "theatre," which was stories acted out by real people who dressed up. Kit had been enchanted by the idea, and Vervain was smiling at his delight and answering his questions. But Kit had become aware of the next student, hovering at a discreet distance in the covered walkway outside Master Vervain's study. Kit broke off from what he'd been saying, but couldn't suppress a sigh of frustration.

"Never long enough, is it?" Vervain said, and Kit thought he saw an echo of his own longing in Vervain's eyes.

"No," Kit said, heart in his mouth. "It never is."

Vervain gave him a long look, then smiled. "Oh well, it's nearly the end of the year. I'll see you in class. Oh, and Kit? Next tutorial, shall we talk about what you'll be doing next year?"

"Yes," Kit breathed. Vervain had never called him by his given name before. Kit

hadn't realised Vervain knew it.

But the look in Vervain's eyes, even though Kit had surely imagined it, had done its work. Kit went and found Vinne lounging with some other students in the pie shop nearest the school.

Vinne had laughed, loudly but not unkindly, when Kit had told him what spell he wanted to know. If anything, Kit felt Vinne liked him better for asking. Kit's classmates often teased him for being so studious.

"It's that fair-haired barmaid at the Taproom you want, isn't it?" Vinne asked, brushing pastry crumbs from his robe. "Don't blame you. She smiled at you last time we went, didn't she? That's what you get for being good-looking, Palgarin, you lucky bastard. Women always like you. That barmaid never bloody smiles at me."

"I think it's mainly because I say thank you and don't make remarks about her arse," Kit said.

"Really?" Vinne shook his head, still mystified. "Gods, women are a mystery, aren't they? She's impossible. Says no to everyone. Even to you, I guess? It's her you want, isn't it?"

Kit shrugged. He wondered for a wild, ridiculous moment what Vinne would say if Kit told him the truth.

*I want Master Vervain. I want him to fuck me. I want his mouth on mine and his cock in my arse. I want him so much I might die of it.*

"Not her?" Vinne narrowed his eyes, thinking. His eyes were lavender-coloured. Kit's were already poppy-red, because Kit practiced more than Vinne. "Oh, gods! It's that new Countess of Solgan, isn't it? With jet-black hair down to her knees? The one we saw in the procession?"

"Will you tell me how to do it or not?" Kit demanded.

Vinne had told him: the spell, the circle and candles, the state Kit had to be in.

"But how do you get it to look how you want?" Kit had asked.

"Easy. You picture her. Hair colour, eyes, skin colour, the size of her tits. You know. Imagine fucking her. And she'll appear. She might not look exactly the same, but you won't be complaining, I can tell you. The circle and the candles keep her in your control, and as soon as you come, the spell breaks and she vanishes."

"Does it ever go wrong? What if...I don't know...I get an incubus by mistake?"

“How could that happen?”

“But magicians raise them. I’ve read about it. The mage Allasian raised an incubus and sent it to the Queen of Beriave, and her husband saw her with it and killed her in a jealous rage. It’s what started the Wars of the Undying. Come on, Vinne, you *must* know that.”

Vinne grinned. “Gods, you sound like old Vervain!”

“He’s hardly old. He’s only a few years older than us.” Kit’s cheeks had grown warm just from the sound of Vervain’s name. Hopefully, Vinne would simply assume it was mild embarrassment at being compared to a master.

“Well, you sound like an insufferable know-it-all then,” Vinne said. “Is that better?”

Kit smiled. “Yes, it is. So, what about the incubus thing? Is it the same incantation?”

“I think so, but don’t worry about it. I’ve only ever raised succubi. It’s easy enough. The most difficult part is staying hard throughout. But nothing bad happens if you don’t. She just doesn’t appear.”

Kit nodded. “Thanks, Vinne.”

“You’re all right, Palgarin. You work too hard anyway. You can get black candles at Cabot’s. They’re expensive, but you can reuse them. It’s a hell of a lot cheaper than whores, I can tell you. And you won’t get the clap.” Vinne winked and turned back to his friends.

Kit had bought the candles and the salt, and now here he was.

He took a moment longer to imagine Master Vervain ripping aside his black robe, unbuttoning his trousers, showing Kit his cock. It would be curved like a Kembardy scimitar. Perhaps, before they fucked, he would let Kit suck it and—

Despite all Kit’s preparations, the temptation to bring himself off *right now* was almost overwhelming. But hadn’t he done that a hundred times already? Yes, and it was never enough.

Kit might be a good boy, but he was not entirely innocent. He knew there was more to life than one’s own hand and one’s imagination. He’d been with three women because he’d found it was necessary sometimes to have a whore if you were with a group of fellows who were all doing it, and he could do it, if he pretended he was with a man.

He'd been with one man, a stranger in a tavern. Kit had had to share a bed with him on his way to school. The man had stroked Kit's thigh in the middle of the night and, receiving a murmur of approval, had first sucked Kit's cock, then flipped Kit over and attempted to fuck him. The man had not been especially patient, and Kit's initial excitement had quickly vanished, but at the same time, he hadn't wanted it to stop. He'd felt he was learning something important. He tried to relax when the man told him to, had stifled his hisses of pain, and let the man spend inside him. Then the man had sucked Kit to completion, they had both fallen asleep, and in the morning, the man had been gone.

Kit felt it had been one of those "firsts" that you enjoy more the second time. But then, once he got to school, he was too afraid to seek out a second opportunity. Because while other boys might joke about being sent away, Kit couldn't take the risk. His parents had sweated blood to get him here. He knew, because his mother had told him, that his father read all Kit's letters home out loud in the village tavern so that everyone would know how he was getting on. And in any case, Kit's days were an exhausting whirl of lessons, essays, and practicals, and he had little spare money to regularly frequent the taverns and whorehouses like his classmates.

But despite his inexperience, he was sure he would enjoy sex a great deal more with an incubus that looked like Master Vervain. Or perhaps Kit would turn the tables on him. Perhaps he would do the buggering. Or maybe he would try both.

Kit began to speak the incantation. He was good at spells and had memorised the words easily. Now, he had to concentrate on three things at once: on the words, on the crisp image of Vervain that he held in his mind's eye, and on his body, which wanted to thrust and jerk. But he wouldn't let it. He moved his hand just enough to stay hard.

He thought of the way Vervain's eyes crinkled when he smiled. Of the backs of his hands with the rune-marks stained blue into his brown skin—although his tan had faded over the year. He thought of how, when Vervain hadn't shaved as closely as he might, half a dozen white hairs appeared on his chin, pinpoints of silver like an unknown constellation. The rest of his beard would grow in black, except for those six hairs. Kit imagined the rasp of them compared to the softness of Vervain's lips, which would open to kiss Kit's fingertips.

He thought, too, of the books of love poetry that Vervain kept on the overstuffed

shelves in his study, and of the fact that he never laughed if Kit mispronounced a word he'd learned from a book, but simply corrected him without fuss. Also, that it was possible to be silent with Vervain; he never hurried Kit if he was thinking.

And, lastly, he remembered that look in Vervain's eyes from this morning, when he'd said, "It's never long enough, is it?"

The words of the incantation slipped off Kit's tongue like honey and the spell was done, and an incubus that looked exactly like Vervain stood before him, as handsome as could be.

Kit got to his feet, stomach clenching with excitement, cock throbbing.

Only, something was wrong.

Because Vinne had said an incubus always comes naked, but this one was dressed in narrow black boots and trousers and a white linen undershirt that was open at the throat. Because, an incubus was supposed to smoulder at you, ready for whatever sexual games you might desire. This one stumbled backwards, an expression of astonishment on its face, raising its hands in a defensive gesture that Kit recognised as one of the postures for a killing spell.

But mainly, because an incubus wasn't supposed to say, "*Kit? What the hell?*"

The not-incubus took in Kit's naked, aroused state—although that was swiftly changing—and the salt circle and the five black candles, and lowered his hands and frowned.

Kit had just enough wit to put his hands over his crotch. The blood was leaving all his extremities. He was frozen to the spot. Soon he would die, because it was impossible that anyone could live after this.

Somehow, he had got the real thing. The real Master Vervain stood in Kit's shabby lodging room, his back to the wall. Kit was so appalled he could only stare. He could not speak. He would have shut his eyes, but he couldn't even do that. And Master Vervain was staring back.

It was only after a silence that lasted longer than the Wars of the Undying that Master Vervain cleared his throat and said, "Well, Mr. Palgarin." He sounded stunned. "This is a bit unexpected."

"Oh, gods," Kit croaked, and sank to his knees.

"You appear to have summoned me, using only a salt circle and a few candles and

er...your own self. I didn't even know that was possible. Although I suppose you are the exception to every rule I know. What incantation did you use, may I ask?"

"Sir. I...I didn't mean..."

"What incantation, Mr. Palgarin? Or can't you remember?"

"It was to bring an...an..."

Kit hung his head. Tears were beginning to sting his eyes. He couldn't rub them away because he couldn't raise his hands from his crotch. There was no point trying to explain. The situation was obvious. He was expelled. His life was over.

"Oh, gods, I'm sorry, sir."

Something hit him on the chest. He thought it was a spell, because it hit light and soft, the way a spell did when it was the brutal kind that was impossible to undo. But it wasn't a spell; it was the grey blanket from Kit's bed. He clutched it around himself with one hand and wiped his eyes with the other.

"Still don't know your own strength, do you, Mr. Palgarin? Do you realise what kind of power it takes to summon someone like me? How on earth did you manage it?"

"I just...thought about you, sir."

"Did you? In some detail, clearly. Did you use the standard incantation for an incubus or succubus that starts with a salutation to Andras?"

So Vervain had guessed without being told.

"Uh, yes, sir."

Vervain looked about the room, and said blankly, "I have an audience with the vizier in ten minutes. I'm going to be late. We're in the old town, I suppose? You lodge in Black Horse Lane, don't you, or thereabouts?"

"Bone Street, sir. Sir, I...please... I swear, I've never done it before, and I'll never do it again. I...I'll leave. Maybe instead of expelling me, I could just leave?"

"Well, you've certainly erred in your judgement."

"Yes, sir." A tear slipped down Kit's cheek.

"Kit, don't cry. You're not going to be expelled. Come now, do I look angry?"

But Kit couldn't look at him any more than he could stop the tears that were now running down his face.

"Damn," Vervain said. "Damn and blast. Your timing really is appalling. Viziers don't like to be kept waiting. I have to go."

Vervain advanced and crouched in front of him. If Kit had been able to lift his head, they would have been face-to-face.

“Kit, I don’t like leaving you like this, but really, I have to go. You’re not in trouble, do you understand? But I would like to talk to you. Will you meet me later? In an hour, say? In my study?”

“Uh, yes, sir. Of course, if you want.” Kit choked the words out.

“All right. And please don’t do anything silly, like running away, because I’ll have to come after you and that’ll be tiresome. And do stop crying. Do you have any idea how impressed I am that you can perform a summoning? Even if you did do it by mistake.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“All right. I’ll see you soon.” Vervain half stood, paused. “Kit?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t worry about anything.”

And then Vervain was gone. Whether by magic or the stairs, Kit neither knew nor cared. He stayed where he was, kneeling on the floor, and curled over the blanket Vervain had thrown at him, groaning. Vervain’s reassurances notwithstanding, humiliation burned Kit’s face and wilted his soul. Vervain, the real Vervain, had arrived in Kit’s room and had seen him handling his red and jutting cock. What had seemed so necessary, so natural, now felt impossibly obscene. Had Kit known a reliable spell that would have made him vanish into the floorboards, he would have used it.

Eventually, he got up and put his clothes on. Dressed in his red trousers and scholar’s robe, he felt a little better. Less vulnerable, more like clever Kit Palgarin who was going to make something of himself. He tied his hair back into a queue, and then thought better of it and let it fall about his face. When he blushed scarlet at whatever it was Master Vervain was going to say to him, a curtain of hair would be better than nothing to hide behind.

Vervain had said he was not in trouble. But why not? Perhaps Vervain was used to students doing things like this? Or was it because Kit was his best student? Kit remembered once, Vervain setting some reading. Kit had scanned the list of books and said, apologetically, “I’ve already read these, sir. Can you recommend anything else?” Vervain had said, “Gods, what a delight you are, Palgarin!” and then looked flustered and added, “Sorry, I shouldn’t say things like that. But you are.” Vervain *liked* him.

Some of Kit's other teachers liked him, too, but that was different, somehow. Kit's stomach twisted with sudden hope at the realisation.

But despite the hope, his legs seemed barely his own as he left his room and walked through the teeming streets of the old town. The streets grew quieter as he reached the old stone building in the upper town where the masters had their studies. Classes were over for the day, the masters had gone to the refectory or to their homes. The cressets were lit, and the stars were coming out in a sky of deep blue. Further up the hill, the palace was shining like a huge ornamental lantern. Kit skirted the dark courtyard garden, stopped in front of Master Vervain's door, and knocked before he could lose his nerve. No answer, although the tower bell had rung and he was on time.

The minutes stretched out. Crickets chirped in the garden. Spring was coming. As soon as Kit had his journeyman's robe, he would leave town. He had a couple of job offers, including one up north on the border patrol. It sounded cold and boring, but he would take it so he need never see Vervain again after this. Perhaps he would skip Vervain's remaining classes. Kit had two more tutorials with Vervain; he could skip those as well. Kit hadn't missed a class in three years. To miss a few now would hardly count against him.

Yet, it was awful to think of Master Vervain teaching a class and Kit not being there for it. Vervain's classes were so *interesting*. Not only because they gave Kit a reason to gaze at him, not only because he had to be on his toes to avoid mortification, but also because Vervain illustrated points of history with the sorts of stories one usually only heard on street corners.

Such as that the tradition of spirit-worship in Javal meant they buried the bones of their dead beneath the floorboards of their houses and made regular offerings to them. Which meant the floorboards were loose and easy to prise up. Which meant that if you were trying to escape the royal guard in Javal, hiding under the floorboards was as stunningly obvious as hiding in a wardrobe at home. And all this *also* meant that if you found yourself in a spot of bother in Javal, and you hadn't read the texts Master Vervain set, or you hadn't listened in his classes, you might be dead as well as stupid.

It was growing colder. Kit wrapped his arms around himself.

Perhaps Vervain wouldn't come after all. Perhaps he'd been kind by default, out of shock, but had grown angry as he realised the enormity of what Kit had done. Or

perhaps he had never meant to come. Perhaps he had always intended to leave Kit here to kick his heels. Perhaps instead of Vervain, the school proctors would come and arrest him. Kit had seen a student arrested by the proctors in his first year; the rumour was that the lad had made a college maidservant pregnant, and for that, he was marched out of the school's bounds, scholar's robe taken, banished forever, sent home. Kit had a sudden sick vision of his parents, faces averted with shame. He had to duck into the dark garden to retch behind the box hedging.

Even if none of his nightmares came to pass, at the very least he was due a toe-curling lecture on all the reasons it was wrong to conjure an incubus that looked like a real person. And likely all the reasons it was wrong to have tried for an incubus in the first place. Perhaps it would be best to lie, to say he'd meant to get a succubus—one that looked like that fair-haired barmaid from the Taproom. But, perhaps—he felt again that sudden hope, a twist of excitement in his belly that had nothing to do with nausea. But what was there to feel excited about? Was he really so pathetic that even a stern lecture from Master Vervain was better than not seeing him at all?

Running footsteps sounded on the stone flags. Vervain came around the southwest corner, robe swirling behind him. He slowed when he saw Kit waiting for him, hitched his robe forwards, and approached at a more sober pace. Kit fought a sudden urge to flee.

“Kit.” Vervain was breathing heavily. Had he run all the way from the palace? In the torchlight, his red eyes blazed. The guild marks on his chin and forehead flickered as though they were alive. “Sorry to keep you waiting. The vizier kept me.”

“I hope you weren't late to see him, sir.”

“I *was* late. And then I was distracted. I'm afraid he found me a sore disappointment this evening.”

“Sorry,” Kit said.

If he said it a hundred times, would that be enough?

Vervain was unlocking the door with a charm. “You're white as a ghost. Didn't I say you're not in trouble? Don't you believe me?”

It was dark inside the study. Vervain froze on the threshold as if realising something. “Oh, gods, this was a terrible place to meet, wasn't it? Shall we walk down to your lodgings? Or we could go to a tavern if you prefer. You know, somewhere public.”

“No, thank you,” Kit said quickly. He had no wish for an audience when he was given his lecture.

“Sorry, I should have thought. There aren’t any books on this sort of thing, are there? It’s the first time this has happened to me too. But I don’t...you know...expect anything from you. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Kit whispered. *I wish you did expect something.*

Inside, Vervain lit the lamps and the fire, gave Kit a glass of wine, and told him to sit down. Kit took the seat by the hearth that he always took for tutorials. It felt like a fever dream to be sitting here now with a glass of wine in his hand and the memory of what had happened threatening to unman him at any moment.

Vervain sat opposite, in his usual place. He’d poured himself a glass of wine too, but he wasn’t drinking it.

“Kit, I know you know the rules about experimenting with magic, so I’m not going to repeat them. Everyone breaks them anyway. All the rules in the world won’t stop people, and I’m sure they won’t stop you, but—can I ask you a personal question?”

*No, just let me go. Or tell me off and let it be over.* “Of course.”

“Did you actually want an incubus? Or did you want me?”

Kit swallowed a mouthful of wine with an inelegant gulp. “I...uh...”

Now was the time to lie. Now was the time to say he’d been trying for a succubus that looked like the Countess of Solgan, with ebony skin and jet-black hair down to her knees. Now was the time to say it had all been a terrible mistake. He had the lies ready, but somehow, when he looked at Vervain’s face, slightly flushed, strangely anxious, the lies wouldn’t come. He’d never seen Vervain like this. He looked...uncertain.

Vervain said, “The thing is, usually when people raise an incubus or a succubus that looks like a real person, they go for a general impression. You understand? Blond hair, perhaps, and blue eyes. They go for a certain kind of feeling. They don’t really want the actual person; it’s more that they like the idea of that person wanting them. To actually manage to summon me—well, I know you’re powerful—so I can see that it could have been a mistake. Perhaps your concentration lapsed at a crucial moment. Perhaps you just wanted an incubus, with no strings attached. Or...or...you might actually have wanted me...uh...a great deal.”

“I...I wanted...” To Kit’s horror, his voice petered out; his throat was growing

tight. Tears were pricking at his eyes. He fumbled the glass of wine onto the floor. It was all catching up with him: a year of wanting and trying not to want, a year of exhilaration and uncertainty, a year of lust and shame. And now, the man who'd inspired all this turmoil was sitting close enough to kiss and asking, in essence, if Kit wanted him.

But what was the right answer?

If Kit gave the wrong one, would Vervain flay him alive? Would Vervain's fiery eyes grow cold with contempt? Would he start asking those awful rhetorical questions that would make Kit die of shame, even alone in a room with no one else to witness it? Kit shook his head, wordless, and burst into tears for the second time that evening.

After a moment, he became dimly aware that Vervain was kneeling at his side, saying, "Kit, don't. Kit, oh gods, I'm sorry. Please don't cry."

But the problem with tears that have been denied for months was that they wouldn't be denied forever. Kit tried to sob quietly and listen. Vervain was cursing, quietly and mundanely.

"Damn, damn, damn. I've messed this whole thing up, haven't I? You were my student, you see, and sometimes these are passing things. You didn't want an incubus, did you?"

"No," Kit managed, voice rough with tears. "I wanted you." He fumbled a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose. He had said it, and the world had not ended. "I have, all year."

"I want you too," Vervain said.

Kit stared at him. At Master Vervain, who was kneeling on the floor by his chair, saying he wanted Kit. The fantasy was made flesh.

Vervain smiled ruefully. "Did you think I was made of stone?"

"N-no?"

"My best student. You've almost read more than I have. So sweet and handsome. You've barely put a foot wrong all year. And now this. You're like a dream. Are you sure you're real?"

"Uh, yes?"

"You know you're free to go." Vervain waved his hand towards the door. "Any time. I won't tell anyone what happened, no matter what you choose to do. You have my word on it."

“I can choose?”

“Of course.”

“You...you want me?”

“Oh, Kit,” Vervain said, a note of desperation in his voice.

And they were kissing. Kit had no memory of sliding off the chair, but he was kneeling on the hearthrug with Vervain’s hands in his hair and Vervain’s mouth on his. It was nothing like the times with girls or with the stranger in the tavern. Vervain kissed as thoroughly and as forcefully as he taught, and Kit kissed *him* too, with no reservations, nothing held back.

Kit went over backwards, a controlled fall, with Vervain’s arms around him. Vervain was over him, pulling at their robes, tugging off boots and trousers, yanking shirts. And then there were two sensations—Vervain’s tongue in Kit’s mouth and Vervain’s hand stroking Kit’s cock, quite slowly but with a firm, possessive grip.

When Vervain broke the kiss and put his hand to his mouth for a moment, Kit thought he must be going to frig him with a wet hand, but instead Vervain reached lower, brushed his slippery fingertips against Kit’s arsehole. Kit’s entire body dissolved into pleasure. He heard himself whimpering.

“Kit, have you done this before?” Vervain murmured in his ear.

“Yes,” Kit gasped, but the memory of the pain leaped forwards. Vervain never punished ignorance if it came from a place of innocence. “But, only once.”

“All right. You want to?”

“Yes, *yes*.”

Vervain kissed him again, more softly, reassuring. Then Vervain’s wet fingers were inside him, stretching, probing. Vervain’s mouth was on his cock, and Kit thought he would come like that, like the green boy that he was. But Vervain pulled away, reached down a vial of oil from a worktable, and began again, only this time, he oiled his fingers first. He was gentle now, infuriatingly so, teasing and stroking until Kit wanted to shout at him to get on and do it. And Vervain knew it. He glanced up and smiled; a wicked, intimate smile that Kit had never seen before. Then Vervain poured more oil from the vial and anointed his own cock.

The feeling of being breached was divine and terrifyingly intimate both at once. Vervain moved slowly, making Kit wait for it, making him writhe and thrust, making

him do half the work. Vervain was looking down at him, intent with concentration, eyes shining in the lamplight. Kit's breath was sobbing in his throat, body afire as if Vervain had ignited him with magic. Kit grabbed at Vervain's shoulders, at his hips, trying to get more of him, *all* of him, and for a time they moved as one.

Then Vervain shifted his weight onto one arm and wrapped his free hand tight around Kit's aching cock. Kit cried out with the pleasure of it and came hard, spattering onto his own heaving chest. Vervain's hand wrung every last shudder out of him, every last cry. The moment it was over, Vervain let go of Kit's cock, realigned his weight, and pushed harder, faster, eyes closing. It hurt now, but before Kit could tell him so, Vervain groaned his name and thrust three or four more times, very hard, and then went still.

Kit lay on his back with Master Vervain in his arms. The study ceiling seemed to be flickering with coloured lights. Kit kept half expecting Vervain to vanish like an incubus, and perhaps Vervain expected the same of him, because he lifted his weight onto his elbows and examined Kit closely, touching his face as if surprised by his corporeal nature. Then Vervain withdrew, slipping his half-hard cock out. Kit winced.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No. A little."

"Sorry." Vervain kissed Kit's cheek in apology. "But it was good, wasn't it? Better than good. It was worth the wait. Wasn't it?"

"I...wanted you...all year," Kit said. He was dazed, the way you can feel with too much magic. What if he was imagining it all?

"Perhaps I should have spoken to you," Vervain said. "It can't have been easy. Gods, it wasn't for me and I've got about eight years on you. Those tutorials were a bloody torment, weren't they? Except that at least I got to talk to you. I'm sorry, Kit. I should have handled it better. I wasn't sure, you see. I kept thinking, if I say something and you don't feel the same, it'll be awful. I was trying to get through the year, and then I was going to approach you. I wanted it to be man to man, not master to apprentice."

Kit thought back: a year of living on tenterhooks, hoping to see Vervain, living half his life incandescent with the knowledge that Vervain was somewhere in the same town, the same building, the same room. Easy? No, it hadn't been easy. But the magnitude of what had just happened—what was still happening, because he and Vervain were still lying together on the rug—seemed to transform everything else that

had ever happened. The past was an irrelevance. He was lying on the floor, naked, with Vervain. That was really all that mattered.

Vervain said, in a low voice. “Are you angry with me?”

Kit realised that he hadn’t spoken and that his silence could have been taken as annoyance.

“No.” He felt as if he was learning to talk all over again, as if his vocabulary was changed forever.

“You can tell me if you are. I know I should have done better.”

“I’m not angry. Just because you’re older, and a master, it doesn’t mean you always have to know what to do.”

Kit touched the guild mark on Vervain’s chin, marvelling that he was allowed. One day, he would have one too. Vervain ducked his head to kiss Kit’s fingers.

“You’ve a generous spirit, Kit. I’m still sorry, and I’ll make it up to you, if I can.”

Kit found himself smiling, more in wonder than anything else. He had only the dimmest idea of what Vervain trying to ‘make it up’ to him might mean, but he fancied it would be wonderful because Vervain never did anything by halves. Perhaps Vervain would let Kit sleep with him in the same bed? Perhaps they might dine or walk about the town together? Perhaps there would be other delights?

Vervain shifted his weight to the side, one hand resting on Kit’s chest. “Er...have you given any thought to what you’ll do next year?”

Kit forced himself to think of practicalities. “I have an offer from Master Perilan to work in the library. And from Master Menesser to go north with him, to the border patrol.”

“But you’re not promised to either one, are you?”

“No.”

“Have you ever thought about Kembardy? I’m going back there next year.”

Vervain took a deep breath, let it out. It whispered across Kit’s skin. “Kit? I’ll need a partner. Someone I trust. What do you think? Would you go with me? I was going to ask you at our next tutorial.”

“Kembardy?” It was a name to conjure with. A distant place where they used soul trees and scimitars and people said they had sex with animals, and ate only fish and stank of it. “Is it dangerous?”

“I won’t lie to you. Sometimes it is. The main problems are pirates and rogue magicians from our country trying to get into Kembardy. It’s our job to help stop them. It improves diplomatic relations.”

“Is it very different?” Kit breathed.

“Oh, yes, it’s packed with barbarians. The women are in charge. It’s hot, and people go around half-naked and swim in the sea, and in the markets, you can buy tiny dragons to keep as pets. And they think keeping servants is wrong and that poets are more important than princes. And men kiss in the street and live openly as lovers. Women, too, for that matter.”

Kit felt his jaw dropping.

“You’d hate it,” Vervain added, smiling.

“My father’s a carter,” Kit said.

He’d lied so much by omission all year that it suddenly felt vitally important to tell Vervain everything, to lay his cards on the table so he couldn’t misrepresent himself later even if he wanted to. He had no money behind him, no influence. Vervain had to be told.

“I know. I asked about you,” Vervain said.

“He doesn’t own a carting business or anything like that. He just drives the cart. My mother takes in sewing.”

“I know.” Vervain was silent for a moment. “Perhaps you ought to know: I never met my father. My mother was a whore down at the docks. I envied boys like you growing up.”

Kit blinked. “Oh.”

“Is it a problem?” Vervain cocked his head to one side.

“What? Of course not!”

“It is to some men,” Vervain said, simply.

“Your mother, is she still...I mean...”

“Still a whore?”

“No! Still around. Still alive.”

“She owns the Taproom now. I expect you know it.”

“Of course. Everybody goes there.”

Kit couldn’t remember the landlady’s face, only an impression of amused

observant authority that only an idiot would cross. Actually, not dissimilar from Vervain, but larger and more scented and less sarcastic.

“She’s quite respectable these days.” Vervain was saying. “Your parents live in Londia, don’t they? To the south.” Vervain took a strand of Kit’s hair, smoothed it to the side. “If you come with me to Kembardy, we could call in to see them on the way. If you’d like to.”

Kit thought of the sensation it would cause in the village; Kit Palgarin coming home in his magician’s robes, with a guild master by his side. Vervain would impress anyone. Kit’s parents were humble people, who never boasted. All the same, they would live off a visit like that for the rest of their lives: their son, introducing them to a guild master.

“What’s your name?” Kit asked.

“What?” Vervain’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“I know what you wrote on the board at the beginning of the year, and I know I mustn’t make any dull jokes about Vervain flowers because you’ve heard them all before and they were feeble enough the first time. But should I call you ‘sir’ when we’re lying naked on the floor of your study?”

Vervain laughed. “I thought you knew. My name’s Senet. My friends call me Sen. In Kembardy, they say Senya. If they like me, that is.”

“All right. I thought I should know.”

“Kit, are you going to keep me in suspense forever, or are you going to answer my question? Will you come with me to Kembardy?”

The answer was as clear and as triumphant in Kit’s mind as a dawn trumpet. There was no shadow of doubt. There was no wrong answer, but all the same, he was going to give the right one. And he knew the question went deeper, that Vervain was actually asking him several things, that this wasn’t just about a job and a year or two in the field. And the wonder of being asked such a question, by such a man, robbed Kit of speech.

But sometimes, wordless answers are the best ones, and as Kit began to smile, Vervain began to smile, too, and soon they were laughing, kissing, and laughing again for the sheer joy of being alive and—finally—being together in a way that was pure magic.

## THE END

### **About ‘A Spell for Master Vervain’**

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### **Cover art**

Cover art shows a detail of an artwork by @bloodwrit

### **About the author**

Lee Welch lives in a house on a hill in the windiest city in the world—Wellington, New Zealand. Lee studied ancient history at Auckland University and creative writing at Birkbeck, University of London. She likes crumbling mansions, cavernous libraries and handsome magicians.

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