

CHAPTER 1

I couldn't believe I was returning to the College of Immortals feeling calm and relaxed after a stint in Immortal Divorce Court. I hadn't lost a Relic, gotten sent to Hell for contempt, or lost the ability to spend time with Benedita, my new baby with the Countess. Sure, we weren't going to be *together* together, but we would parent together, and that was just as important for Benedita's sake. And, in Immortal Divorce Court, the long-forbidden love of Ignatious Murfield and Breeze was legitimized at the same time as Templeton Braddock was soundly defeated. Who knew that Immortal Divorce Court could also be a happy place? In my absence, Hedley Edrick had gotten rid of the old wooden table that had graced the faculty lounge, and replaced it with a much larger, completely round version that resembled King Arthur's Round Table. But no one sat at this table. The lounge was packed with focused, angry immortals of which a large number were related to me. I found myself standing next to Hedley Edrick, and the great Master of Masters looked upon this group of humanity's best just beaming with pride. I wasn't going to argue with him. For the first time in our relationship, Hedley Edrick asked me to speak first to the group. Had the torch just been passed? And, if so, did that mean I had to get my own portrait done so that I too would always be aware of leadership's toll? I smiled—there really was a reason it was so lonely at the top.

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"People, this is not an ordinary faculty meeting," I said. "It's a call to action. And, as I meet the strong gaze of each and every one of you, I know you are ready for it!"

The roar was so deafening I was fairly certain it had been heard in London. I turned and grinned at the Master of Masters. "They are all yours," I said. "But, then again, they always were . . ."

"I can share," Hedley said. First, he dispatched an army led by Lovely, and supported by a generous land force, to help the Queen rebuild her capital city. Mary Grace wanted to go and support her husband, but her inability to breathe underwater made that a nonstarter.

Next, Hedley sent a team to help Don Indigo reconstruct the House of Indigo. Contessa was crying uncontrollably during this entire discussion, and finally Don Indigo suggested that perhaps she should just stay at the College of Immortals with their children. I had never seen her act this way. The Contessa I knew was as tough as nails. Though once she was assured she would stay at the college, her tears dried instantly, and she was intently focused on Mary Grace. Did she know something that I didn't? Or was it centuries of sisterly discord showing itself at the oddest of times? It seemed that Contessa had not wanted to leave Mary Grace alone with so many others soon to be absent from the college.

I sighed, vowing to keep an eye on both of them. For even without their sisterly drama, I was worried that we were leaving the college vulnerable with so many strong warriors like Lovely, the Wood brothers, Adelaide and Beatrice, Oliver, and Don Indigo all gone. I was so concerned about this that I even made a mental note to summon back Donald Glastonbury from working for Persephone in Hell. I was

guessing the netherworld would be reverting to Hades's control anytime now, and thus the gardening goblin would need a place to stay that wasn't an inferno. Of course, I had no idea how to exactly summon him back, but maybe if I ate a blood orange, and Hedley gave me more of Persephone's wine, I would find a way. But then again, what could Glastonbury actually do to save the day, other than give Scorn or Orcinus a stern talking-to after they tromped on his daisies?

The faculty lounge had cleared out, leaving Hedley, Justice, Maria, a very pregnant Tayanita, and me. Garlic contented herself with being picked up and petted by Maria, making happy grunting sounds, though I knew she was listening to all that was said. Maria saw my eyes go to

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Tayanita's belly and smirked. She knew I still wanted to know how all of that came to be. And apparently I wasn't the only one.

"So, ladies, are you ever going to tell us who is responsible for that?" Justice blurted out.

Maria and Tayanita exchanged a glance, while the Master of Masters decided at that moment to study his left pinky finger in excruciating detail. "Well," Maria said. "Actually, you are!"

"What the fuck?" Justice exclaimed.

"For the record, I second the 'what the fuck?'" I said, folding my arms across my chest. I couldn't wait to hear how Justice was involved. It couldn't possibly be . . . you know. I scanned the room for some tequila, and seeing none, I plopped down in a chair at Hedley's Round Table and braced my ears for the incomprehensible.

The Master of Masters looked up from his last-digit documentation, and smiled weakly. "I do not have any tequila here, Sirius," he said.

"And, Maria, I am not thirring the fuck—that is more my old man's style, so you can tell these two, if you so choose . . ."

Maria looked at Tayanita again, who nodded her assent. "Well," Maria started. "When I said Justice was responsible, I did not mean literally."

"Of course, of course," I agreed. "I *knew* that."

Justice frowned. "Fuck you very much, Sinister," the affronted attorney said. "I mean, it could have happened, I mean it didn't, but it could have because you are not the only one that brings a little something special in the briefs to the table, if you know what I am saying . . ."

"Thank the heavens that you do not," Hedley said to his half brother. "It was bad enough for me that I grew up having to see your dictum one too many times. We get it—your edict has issued many a long and storied proclamation in its time. Maria, will you please ignore my dear half brother's ego, and go on with your tale!"

"In the course of my research into Gulth Scorn, it became necessary to return to the scene of the crime," Maria said. "And by that, I mean the cave where his life was forever changed by his encounter with the basilisk. What if there was something that we had all missed? What if there was more to the story?"

"You should not have gone there," I lectured in my best fatherly tone. "Scorn could have been setting a trap for you."

"We did think about that," Tayanita said. "But ultimately our conclusion was that the cave of his demise was the last place in the world he would choose to be."

"I didn't mean that he would be there," I explained. "I was thinking Kunchen, or another one of his proxies."

"Yeah, Father," Maria agreed. "That was a possibility for us too. But when we arrived at the site to scout it, we found it quite impenetrable. You remember how the passageway to the cave where Justice found Knowledge and Wisdom collapsed? Well, it turns out that the earthquake of 1303 had eliminated all the other ways of entering. We were about to turn around and head back to the college when Tayanita spotted a way in."

"Spending my formative years in the wilderness has given me an eye to see what nature truly wants to show us," Tayanita said. "Turns out that a boulder hid the one entrance that was not collapsed, and was set in such a way that it could be moved out with your pinky finger."

"Tayanita and I made our way very, very carefully into the cavern," Maria continued. "The path led straight back into the den of the basilisk. But aside from a few scales and feathers, there was nothing to be found. The last humans to have been in that cave were Scorn, Hedley, and Justice."

"I mean, that is a fascinating story and all," I said, "but you found a whole lot of nothing, and then went somewhere . . . and that is the place you met that, uh, who . . . right?"

"Wrong," Tayanita said. "On our way out of the cave, a bit of the cavern floor collapsed, sending us careening down a rockslide, right into the mysterious garden that Justice had put his arm into! He came home with Knowledge and Wisdom. We came home with something else entirely."

"We could not go back the way we came," Maria said. "So, we had no choice but to explore the garden. The previously undiscovered plants and insects we saw there were amazing!"

"And that is not all that was amazing," Tayanita added, blushing. Now it was Maria's turn to blush. "We saw the most beautiful flower," she exclaimed. "Even now, I can't find the words to describe it! We bent down to inhale its fragrance, and then other things started to happen . . ."

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"Like what kind of things?" Justice asked. "What are you talking about, Maria?"

Hedley shook his head. "So much for your storied jurisprudence," he said. "Your phallus is really a fallacy, Max." Justice stuck his tongue out at the Master of Masters.

"They had a moment," I said, rolling my eyes. "But that doesn't explain *that*." I pointed to Tayanita's belly. "Unless I am as clueless as the barrister over there."

"No," Tayanita said. "You are not clueless, and neither are we. All we can tell you is that when we woke up from a pleasure-induced nap, I was very much with child."

"But whose?" Justice prodded.

"Ours," Maria and Tayanita said at the exact same time.

"Can you explain how Wisdom and Knowledge came to be?"

Hedley asked his befuddled brother. "They just were, now weren't they?"

After hearing Tayanita and Maria, I would say that you had something to do with the creation of Wisdom and Knowledge, but since you are displaying neither at the moment, it seems that the new creation of Tayanita and Maria and the worms that became Wisdom and Knowledge are two entirely different things. The eggs on your arm hair were not of your doing, but the eggs of Maria and Tayanita have everything to do with this."

"You mean egg, not eggs," I prompted the Master of Masters.

"No, I don't," the Teacher of Teachers scolded. "I say eggs, and I mean eggs. Tayanita is not carrying one baby from one egg—she is carrying twins from two separate eggs, one from each of them. A mysterious case of immortal parthenogenesis has occurred."

"Do you think that is a bad thing?" Maria said, looking rather concerned.

Hedley smiled, and patted Justice on the rump. "Not at all, my dear," he said. "I mean, I know exactly where this lump of a lawyer came from, and frankly I'd rather wish it was a mystery."

"Oh, ha ha, Hedley," Justice said. "You are a real hoot. In any event the important thing is that you two care about each other and will be fantastic parents. I really do think the universe gives us what we need to know and lets us know when things are good, and when things are not so good. This bit of happenstance for you two is nothing but good!"

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"Thanks, Justice," Tayanita said, reaching out to touch the barrister's arm, but failing to keep him from falling suddenly to the floor with a sickening thud. "Oh my, are you all right?" she shouted. Justice rose slowly to his feet with the help of Hedley and me.

"What's wrong?" I said, trying to figure out if I had ever seen him looking so pale and shaken.

"Uh-oh . . .," Hedley started.

Justice's eyes were wild and frantic. "I think the universe is telling me that something is not right in my world," he said, his knees still wobbling as we eased him into a chair.

"Damn," I exclaimed, looking at Hedley. "Could something have happened to Wisdom and Knowledge?" Garlic growled, dropping out of Maria's arms onto the floor. She took up a defensive posture, causing me to do the same.

There was an all too familiar flash of light and a pop, and a rather enraged and completely shit-covered Buttercup, the faerie process server, appeared in the faculty lounge. "Just a guess," Hedley said. "But, I am thinking that is a no!"

"It can't be!" Justice mumbled.

"Sadly, it does appear to be the case," Hedley said quietly. "My condolences."

"Why are you talking to him and not me?" I said, confused.

"Crapcup over there is obviously here for me!" Garlic took one look

at Buttercup, and declined to approach him, saving her yellow stream of greeting for another time, when it would actually send a message instead of cleaning off the feces-ridden faerie. Instead, she padded back to Maria, who snatched her up into her arms.

“Surely you are not here on one of Scorn or Martin’s little schemes to hale me back to Immortal Divorce Court,” I said to the flummoxed faerie. “Uh, Buttercup, if you can stop spitting shit on our new rug and tell me why you are here, I would very much appreciate it! And the sooner the better because I have my lawyer here, and I am certain he is already starting his clock to charge me attorney’s fees!”

I had never seen the normally levelheaded faerie so angry. And apparently I wasn’t the only one. “Buttercup,” Hedley said softly. “Is it true? Because if it isn’t, then Sirius Sinister has some rather important things to do . . .”

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Buttercup nodded slowly. “It’s true, Master of Masters,” he said. “I am serving an inquest summons that will stop Sirius Sinister’s questing dead in its tracks.” He glared at me, his eyes wet and full of emotion. “How could you do it, Sirius? The loss of life, the assault on history, and the destruction are just unfathomable.”

“Would you mind telling me what in the hell you are talking about?” I asked.

The faerie’s shoulders slumped for a moment. “And to think you are pretending that you have no idea,” he said. “I thought you were my friend.”

“You have served me countless times, and cost me gold beyond gold,” I said, getting angry. “We are hardly friends—associates perhaps, better yet mere acquaintances. Now, come on, Buttercup, what is going on here?”

Buttercup pulled out a rather tattered scroll that was singed black on one side and hopelessly covered in crap on the other, and peered at the only clean spot. “Sirius Sinister,” he said. “I hereby summon you to an inquest to determine your fate if it is found that you destroyed the Immortal Divorce Court.”

I wished I could have dodged the rainbow beam of light that shot from the scroll and liberated my pockets. “What a load of shit!” I said. “No offense to you, Buttercup, and do tell us how you are standing in front of us as a literal load of shit, but I did not destroy the Immortal Divorce Court. I mean, come on, that is not even possible, right?” I looked to Justice and Hedley for support, but got nothing but blank stares in response. “Oh, great,” I said to Buttercup. “Why am I the prime suspect anyway?”

“I am not sure I can tell you,” Buttercup answered. “Though I am not sure who even survived to levy some sort of punishment on me for doing so . . .”

“Why don’t you think about it over a lengthy shower, a clean change of clothes, and a glass of my finest tequila that will be waiting for you in my office,” Hedley suggested. “No man thinks clearly while he is covered in attorney ass residue.”

Buttercup just nodded, and let Hedley point him in the direction of the faculty lounge bathroom. Hedley stared at his ruined rug in disappointment.

"I know that you had nothing to do with the destruction

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of Immortal Divorce Court," he said reassuringly. "And we all know Scorn is behind this scheme. He would have gotten you last time you were in court, but for the providence of a quick-thinking Thief. We need a plan, just as much as we need a new carpet."

Maria and Tayanita had departed from the faculty lounge after much whispering with each other, and then with Hedley. I did not even care to know what they were talking about, because I was so focused on hearing from Buttercup. And I got my wish much faster than I would have thought, as I was counting on hours aplenty for a man to rid himself of the unconscionable amount of poop adorning his person. But there we all were, enjoying the company of a sweeter-smelling Buttercup in just a quarter of an hour as he plopped down in a chair in Hedley Edrick's office, took a long draught of his tequila, and closed his eyes as its warmth rushed down his gullet. "I have thought on this," he announced. "And I too, though just a lowly process server, have sincere doubts as to whether Sirius Sinister is guilty of that with which he has been charged."

"So, Buttercup," I said, enjoying my own tequila. "What happened to Immortal Divorce Court?"

"Well, the plumbing there goes down deep, and yes, I am talking about nearly all the way to Hell, and dumps into a cesspool of sorts, a cesspool that abuts—oh, that was a bad choice of words, I have had enough of butts—*is next to Hell*," the frazzled faerie said. "Someone believed to be the notorious Sirius Sinister reversed the valves that kept the hellfire away, and ignited the entire septic system, causing an explosion that destroyed Immortal Divorce Court literally from the inside out."

"And, again, why am I deemed to be the one that caused this crap conflagration?" I asked.

"Because the initial investigation revealed that the explosion's starting point was the bathroom where your file room is—or rather was—located," Buttercup answered.

"So, why would I care about the file room?" I asked, looking particularly at Justice for an answer. "I don't have any open cases, and I certainly have never even set foot in that room. I don't know what was in it, and frankly I have other things to do—you know, like stopping

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Scorn and Martin and Orcinus and Angus and whoever the fuck else from destroying the world!"

"Valid points one and all," Justice agreed. "But, with all things Immortal Divorce Court, nothing is ever exactly what it seems. Remember, you nearly destroyed Immortal Divorce Court once . . ."

"I was imprisoned in a cell, and Garlic blasted some walls trying to find me," I said, ignoring the "why did you just throw me under the public horse carriage" look from my infernal vampire Maltese, now resting by the hearth. "We were just kids, or puppies then, so to speak.

Surely, that cannot be a factor!"

"You are the only one to survive defecating on the Head Magistrate's bench," Buttercup said. "The clerks still talk about it, or I guess used to, since now they are all dead." He began crying softly, and the Master of Masters reached over and deftly refilled the faerie's glass.

"Wait a minute, Buttercup," I said. "I didn't drop my breeches in the courtroom and lay a log on the then Breaker of the Bold's bench. Garlic did that too." That got me a bark, and a huff of irritation, but it was the truth, and my petulant pup knew it.

"There was also that one time when you were foolish enough to act as your own attorney," Justice said. "Remember when your stupid ass divorced the beautiful, intelligent, amazing, sweet, driven, humble, did I say beautiful, best-thing-that-ever-happened-to-you woman known as the Queen?"

"Yes, I remember it," I said, seeing it was now my turn to act miffed.

"Because none of you people are *ever* going to let me forget it. So, are you trying to draw the inference that my little showdown with Hades that had hellhounds running roughshod over the Immortal Divorce Court, and hellfire nearly burning the place down, was on purpose?"

"Oh no, not me at all," Buttercup said, recovering. "But Head Magistrate Dough surely will . . ."

"Damn, the judgy judge lived," I said. "So, she is behind this, at least in part. I just know deep down that she is in league with Scorn."

"I don't think that is the case, Sirius," Hedley said. "Part of the power of Immortal Divorce Court is its mystique as an indestructible institution that cannot be trifled with. Well, now it has not only been trifled with, it has been wiped off the face of the earth."

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I nodded. "She is not in league with anyone but herself," I said.

"She's worried that Immortal Divorce Court not only lost a building, but its centuries of reputation for showing no mercy to immortal mankind. She needs to make an example out of someone."

"And who better than the most famous litigant in Immortal Divorce Court history—Sirius Sinister," Justice said quietly. "Sirius Sinister took Immortal Divorce Court down, and now Immortal Divorce Court is going to take Sirius Sinister down permanently. It really makes a whole lot of sense from Head Magistrate Dough's perspective."

"But doesn't the Head Magistrate know what I am trying to do?"

I said. "If I am gone, who is to say the Immortal Divorce Court would survive Scorn's purge?"

"In her mind, I think she will figure that out as she goes along," Hedley said.

I looked to Buttercup. "Did Donigus Mithos survive the blast?"

The faerie nodded. "He was the one that pulled me out of the rubble," he answered. "I am wagering that Honeysuckle and his squadron did too, because all of us had a split second to harden up before the literal shitstorm of rubble descended upon us. Anybody that wasn't a faerie was probably pulverized into a million bits."

I slapped Justice on the knee. "I guess you are going to be busy until the end of time, or the destruction of the planet, what with barristers

like Sir Gareth Flockingham and Smith James not making it. Oh well, too bad, so sad—not!”

“Actually, not a single attorney perished in the explosion,” Buttercup said. “They were all at a mandatory meeting of the Immortal Divorce Court Bar Association down the street at Cabernet’s place, which was absolutely untouched.”

“Let me guess who the guest speaker was—the Head Magistrate, right?” I said.

“Why yes, how did you know that?” Buttercup exclaimed. “Did I already say that?”

“No, just a lucky guess on my part,” I fumed. “So, let me get this straight, you have centuries of counselor caca ignited into the biggest fireball in recorded history, and the attorneys come out smelling like a rose. That is some colossal bullshit!”

“Are you done with the excrement references?” Hedley asked.

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“Am I ever,” I said. “I am sick of this shit. Okay, that was the last one. Buttercup, where is this inquest being held now that Immortal Divorce Court is so nearly, and not so dearly departed.”

“The Old Bailey in London,” the faerie answered. “So at least you don’t have to travel very far to attempt to defend yourself.”

“No attempt, my good man,” I said. “I am going to mount a formidable defense, with Justice’s help, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” Buttercup agreed. “If you say so.” I smiled as Garlic chose the perfect moment to let the faerie know exactly what she thought of his shoes, and his attitude. “Damn it, Garlic—I just got all clean, and now you’ve peed on me. Again. That’s it! I am taking my tequila and heading back to the showers.”

“Don’t you just have to pop out of here?” I said, injecting as much meanness as possible into my voice. “You know, don’t you have somewhere to go?” Okay, I did feel a little bad when the faerie began to cry as he realized once again that the only home he had known was really gone.

“Buttercup,” Hedley said, exchanging a glance with Justice. “What happened to the file room for the other litigants—you know, the nice people that did not choose to blow up the Immortal Divorce Court. It was heavily fortified, so did it survive?”

“It suffered some heavy damage, but my understanding is that certain files were completely spared,” Buttercup sniffed. “Donigus did say he was going to be sending you something he managed to salvage from that file room for safekeeping under a writ of emergency possession. He said you would know what I was talking about.”

“Oh hell, that accursed thing?” Justice grimaced. “Now I know how Sirius feels every time I mention that he divorced the Queen.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, not expecting an answer from the elusive brothers. Hedley just looked at me blankly, making it clear I wasn’t getting one. “All right, that’s fine then,” I continued.

“Justice, how much is it going to cost to have you defend me in this inquest?”

"Nothing," Hedley answered for his brother. "For the first time in his life, Justice will be doing something—totalmente gratis!"

"What?" Justice yelled. "First that wretched thing, and now you are making me work for free? I will have you know that this is against the

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rules of the Immortal Divorce Court bar. We don't, and can't work for free!"

"That's not true, and you know it," Hedley replied. "You ever hear of pro bono publico work? Oh wait, you are a lawyer, so of course you have. You are going to give Sirius the pro bono publico treatment."

"I don't want anything to do with Justice's bono," I replied. "It's okay, Hedley, I don't mind paying."

"Pro bono means free to you," Hedley said. "Think of it as charity work."

"Nothing is free," I said. "There is always a price. And Justice knows as much about charity as Garlic knows about meowing."

Hedley chuckled as Garlic and Justice both protested. "Fine, I will pay Justice," he said. "Put it on my brotherly tab."

"You don't have a tab," Justice clarified.

"I do now," his Brother of Brothers answered.

"So, when does this fiasco, I mean inquest, convene?" I asked

Buttercup, who jumped out of his chair like he had sat on a tack.

"Uh, now," he said. "Of course, since I haven't returned, they are probably thinking that you either killed me, I deserted the faerie service ranks, or . . ."

There was a series of flashes of light and pops, and Hedley's office suddenly had more faeries in it than the cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "Or you would be sitting drinking the Master of Masters' finest tequila in a comfy chair, smelling as sweet as a buttercup, Buttercup," Pansy said, gnashing his teeth. He and the other faeries were also covered in a plethora of poo, much to Hedley's great chagrin.

He handed Pansy a glass of tequila. "Don't touch anything else," the Master of Masters commanded. "And you can keep the glass . . ."

Pansy could have chosen that moment to become indignant or downright hostile even to the Master of Masters, but instead he chose to sip the proffered tequila. "This drink is liquid pleasure, and not of the squirting kind," he said. He turned to look at Buttercup. "You are off the hook, but I can't stop the inquest much longer before they break out the wormholes and summon you all in."

Justice nodded in understanding. "My theory is that access to hot baths, clean clothes, and tequila would buy me some time for needed legal research," he said.

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"Can you throw in some hos," Pansy said. "Then we would be good."

"Gardening tools, sure," Hedley said. "That is awful nice of you to volunteer to take care of the College of Immortals' gardens."

"No, hos without the e," Pansy said. "You know, the ones that need their lady gardens plowed."

"That is a no," Hedley said sternly. "Take the bath and the tequila, or get the fuck out of my office."

Pansy frowned, and looked to the other faeries, who were all rather jealous that they did not have any tequila in their hands. "Fine, you drive a hard bargain, Master of Masters," he said. "It's a deal. Shake on it?" He extended his manure-covered mitt.

"Uh, no," Hedley replied. "Norville will show you boys to the showers. And, yeah, one last thing, no faerie circle jerks, got it? That would never get out of our drains."

"That's what drains are *for* in showers—what a load of bullshit," Pansy protested, seeing his men's faces get even glummer.

"No, you are covered in shit," Hedley said. "You have the bargaining power of a flower, Pansy. And, I am one badass bee-yatch. Now, get out of my office before the barrister here retches on his boots at the smell of the lot of you!"

The faeries departed and Justice did too, promising to meet me at the Old Bailey. "Let me guess," I said to him before he left. "There has never been an inquest before, right?"

"That is immaterial, irrelevant, and what you say has no basis in fact," he replied, disappearing in a puff of smoke.

I was left staring at Hedley and a bemused Buttercup. "Are you coming with me to the Old Bailey?" I asked Buttercup.

He stared into his tequila, and looked longingly at the Master of Masters, who refilled his glass for the third time. "No, I don't think I am going to be able to," he said. "I have no reason to go to the Old Bailey. Usually, we faeries have assignment after assignment, until our shift ends, but not this time. You were it, and Immortal Divorce Court is closed for now, so for once in my life I am on sabbatical. May I audit some classes while I am here, Hedley?"

"Indeed, you may," Hedley replied. "Sirius, why don't you go down to the stables, where you will find Tempest saddled and ready to fly."

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"Fine," I said. "Come on, Garlic, let's have a fest at the inquest." My infernal vampire Maltese popped to her feet and fairly hopped around Hedley's office in her excitement.

"Are you sure that is a good idea?" Hedley cautioned. "They will be ready for all of your tricks, you know?"

"Maybe we have some new ones up our sleeves and paws, respectively," I said. "We got into this Immortal Divorce Court mess together, and we'll get out of it together!" I smiled as Garlic put her paws up on my knee and barked happily.

"Not my problem," Buttercup mumbled to himself. "Good luck, Sirius," he continued. "Be careful, you just don't know what Head Magistrate Dough is capable of!"