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Mistral's Kiss

Laurell K. Hamilton

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About the Author

LAURELL K. HAMILTON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Merry Gentry novels and the Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter novels. She lives in St Louis, Missouri with her family.

Don't miss these other Merry Gentry adventures: *A Kiss of Shadows*, *A Caress of Twilight*, *Seduced by Moonlight*, *A Stroke of Midnight* and *A Lick of Frost*.

And to find out more about Laurell K. Hamilton and her books visit www.laurellkhamilton.org

Just look at what the reviewers have said about the steamy
Merry Gentry novels:

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Romantic Times

'Infused with Hamilton's characteristic appealing blend of sex, magic, wit, and romantic dilemma'

amazon.com

To Jonathon

Worrying about the perfect words makes me miss the perfect moment. You remind me it's not perfection I'm seeking but happiness.

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MISTRAL'S KISS

Laurell K. Hamilton



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Chapter 1

I DREAMT OF WARM FLESH AND COOKIES. THE SEX I understood, but the cookies . . . Why cookies? Why not cake, or meat? But that's what my subconscious chose as I dreamt. We were eating in the tiny kitchen of my Los Angeles apartment - an apartment I didn't live in anymore, outside of dreams. The we were me, Princess Meredith - the only faerie royal ever born on American soil - and my royal guards, more than a dozen of them.

They moved around me with skin the color of darkest night, whitest snow, the pale of newborn leaves, the brown of leaves that have gone down to die on the forest floor, a rainbow of men moving nude around the kitchen.

The real apartment kitchen would have barely held three of us, but in the dream everyone walked through that narrow space between sink and stove and cabinets as if there were all the room in the world.

We were having cookies because we'd just had sex and it was hungry work, or something like that. The men moved around me graceful and perfectly nude. Several of the men were ones I'd never seen nude. They moved with skin the color of summer sunshine, the transparent white of crystals, colors I had no name for, for the colors did not exist outside of faerie. It should have been a good dream, but it wasn't. I knew something was wrong, that feeling of unease that you get in dreams when you know that the happy sights are just a disguise, an illusion to hide the ugliness to come.

The plate of cookies was so innocent, so ordinary, but it bothered me. I tried to pay attention to the men, touching their bodies, holding them, but each of them in turn would pick up a cookie and take a bite, as if I weren't there.

Galen with his pale, pale green skin and greener eyes bit into a cookie, and something squirted out the side. Something thick and dark. The dark liquid dripped down the edge of his kissable mouth and fell onto the white countertop. That single drop splattered and spread and was red, so red, so fresh. The cookies were bleeding.

I slapped it from Galen's hand. I picked up the tray to keep the men from eating any more. The tray was full of blood. It dripped down the edges, poured over my hands. I dropped the tray, which shattered, and the men bent as if they would eat from the floor and the broken glass. I pushed them back, screaming, 'No!'

Doyle looked up at me with his black eyes and said, 'But it is all we have had to eat for so long.'

The dream changed, as dreams will. I stood in an open field with a ring of distant trees encircling it. Beyond the trees, hills rode up into the paleness of a moonlit winter's night. Snow lay like a smooth blanket across the ground. I was standing ankle-deep in snow. I was wearing a loose sweeping gown as white as the snow. My arms were bare to the cold night. I should have been freezing, but I wasn't. Dream, just a dream.

Then I noticed something in the center of the clearing. It was an animal, a small white animal, and I thought, *That's why I didn't see it*, for it was white, whiter than the snow. Whiter than my gown, than my skin, so white that it seemed to glow.

The animal raised its head, sniffing the air. It was a small pig, but its snout was longer, and its legs taller, than those of any pig I'd ever seen. Though it stood in the middle of the snowy field, there were no hoofprints in that smooth snow, no way for the piglet to have walked to the center of the field. As if the animal had simply appeared there.

I glanced at the circle of trees, for only a moment, and when I looked again at the piglet, it was bigger. A hundred pounds heavier, and taller than my knees. I didn't look away

again, but the pig just got bigger. I couldn't see it happening, it was like trying to watch a flower bloom, but it was growing bigger. As tall at the shoulder as my waist, long and broad, and furry. I'd never seen a pig so fuzzy before, as if it had a thick winter coat. It looked positively pettable, that pelt. It raised that strangely long-snouted face toward me, and I saw tusks curving from its mouth, small tusks. The moment I saw them, gleaming ivory in the snow light, another whisper of unease washed through me.

I should leave this place, I thought. I turned to walk out through that ring of trees. A ring of trees that now looked entirely too even, too well planned, to be accidental.

A woman stood behind me, so close that when the wind blew through the dead trees her hooded cloak brushed against the hem of my gown. I formed my lips to say, *Who?* but never finished the word. She held out a hand that was wrinkled and colored with age, but it was a small, slender hand, still lovely, still full of a quiet strength. Not full of the remnants of youthful strength, but full of the strength that comes only with age. A strength born of knowledge accumulated, wisdom pondered over many a long winter's night. Here was someone who held the knowledge of a lifetime - no, several lifetimes.

The crone, the hag, has been vilified as ugly and weak. But that is not what the true crone aspect of the Goddess is, and it was not what I saw. She smiled at me, and that smile held all the warmth you would ever need. It was a smile that held a thousand fireside chats, a hundred dozen questions asked and answered, endless lifetimes of knowledge collected and remembered. There was nothing she would not know, if only I could think of the questions to ask.

I took her hand, and the skin was so soft, soft the way a baby's is. It was wrinkled, but smooth is not always best, and there is beauty in age that youth knows not.

I held the crone's hand and felt safe, completely and utterly safe, as if nothing could ever disturb this sense of

quiet peace. She smiled at me, the rest of her face lost in the shadow of her hood. She drew her hand out of mine, and I tried to hold on, but she shook her head and said, though her lips did not move, 'You have work to do.'

'I don't understand,' I said, and my breath steamed in the cold night, though hers had not.

'Give them other food to eat.'

I frowned. 'I don't understand . . .'

'Turn around,' she said, and this time her lips did move, but still her breath did not color the night. It was as if she spoke but did not breathe, or as if her breath were as cold as the winter night. I tried to remember if her hand had been warm or cold, but could not. All I remembered was the sense of peace and rightness. 'Turn around,' she said again, and this time I did.

A white bull stood in the center of the clearing - at least that's what it looked like at first glance. Its shoulder stood as tall as the top of my head. It must have been more than nine feet long. Its shoulders were a huge broad spread of muscle humped behind its lowered head. The head raised, revealing a snout framed by long, pointed tusks. This was no bull, but a huge boar - the thing that had begun as a little pig. Tusks like ivory blades gleamed as it looked at me.

I glanced back, but knew the crone was gone. I was alone in the winter night. Well, not as alone as I wanted to be. I looked back and found the monstrous boar still standing there, still staring at me. The snow was cold under my bare feet now. My arms ran with goose bumps, and I wasn't sure if I shivered from cold, or fear.

I recognized the thick white hair on the boar now. It still looked so soft. But its tail stuck straight out from its body, and it raised that long snout skyward. Its breath smoked in the air as it sniffed. That was bad. That meant it was real - or real enough to hurt me, anyway.

I stood as still as I could. I don't think I moved at all, but suddenly it charged. Snow plumed underneath its hooves as

it came for me.

It was like watching some great machine barreling down. Too big to be real, too huge to be possible. I had no weapon. I turned and ran.

I heard the boar behind me. Its hooves sliced the frozen ground. It let out a sound that was almost a scream. I glanced back; I couldn't help it. The gown tangled under my feet, and I went down. I rolled in the snow, fighting to come to my feet, but the gown tangled around my legs. I couldn't get free of it. Couldn't stand. Couldn't run.

The boar was almost on top of me. Its breath steamed in clouds. Snow spilled around its legs, bits of frozen black earth sliced up in all that white. I had one of those interminable moments where you have all the time in the world to watch death come for you. White boar, white snow, white tusks, all aglow in the moonlight, except for the rich black earth that marred the whiteness with dark scars. The boar gave that horrible screaming squeal again.

Its thick winter coat looked so soft. It was going to look soft while it gored me to death and trampled me into the snow.

I reached behind me, feeling for a tree branch, anything to pull myself up out of the snow. Something brushed my hand, and I grabbed it. Thorns cut into my hand. Thorn-covered vines filled the space between the trees. I used the vines to drag myself to my feet. The thorns were biting into my hands, my arms, but they were all I could grasp. The boar was so close, I could smell its scent, sharp and acrid on the cold air. I would not die lying in the snow.

The thorns bled me, splattered the white gown with blood, the snow covered in minute crimson drops. The vines moved under my hands like something more alive than a plant. I felt the boar's breath like heat on the back of my body, and the thorny vines opened like a door. The world seemed to spin, and when I could see again, be sure of where I was again, I was standing on the other side of the

thorns. The white boar hit the vines hard and fast, as if it expected to tear its way through. For a moment I thought it would do just that; then it was in the thorns, slowing. It stopped rushing forward and started slashing at the vines with its great snout and tusks. It would tear them out, trample them underfoot, but its white coat was bedecked with tiny bloody scratches. It would break through, but the thorns bled it.

I'd never owned any magic in dream, or vision, that I didn't own in waking life. But I had magic now. I wielded the hand of blood. I put my bleeding hand out toward the boar and thought, *Bleed*. I made all those small scratches pour blood. But still the beast fought through the thorns. The vines ripped from the earth. I thought, *More*. I made a fist of my hand, and when I opened it wide, the scratches slashed wide. Hundreds of red mouths, gaping on that white hide. Blood poured down its sides, and now its squeal was not a scream of anger, or challenge. It was a squeal of pain.

The vines tightened around it of their own accord. The boar's knees buckled, and the vines roped it to the frozen ground. It was no longer a white boar, but a red one. Red with blood.

There was a knife in my hand. It was a shining white blade that glowed like a star. I knew what I needed to do. I walked across the blood-spattered snow. The boar rolled its eyes at me, but I knew that if it could, even now, it would kill me.

I plunged the knife into its throat, and when the blade came out, blood gushed into the snow, over my gown, onto my skin. The blood was hot. A crimson fountain of heat and life.

The blood melted the snow down to rich black earth. From that earth came a tiny piglet, not white this time, but tawny and striped with gold. It was colored more like a fawn. The piglet cried, but I knew there would be no answer.

I picked it up, and it curled up in my arms like a puppy. It was so warm, so alive. I wrapped the hooded cloak I now

wore around us both. My gown was black now, not black with blood, but simply black. The piglet settled into the soft warm cloth. I had boots that were lined with fur, soft and warm. The white knife was still in my hand, but it was clean, as if the blood had burned away.

I smelled roses. I turned back and found that the white boar's body was gone. The thorny vines were covered in green leaves and flowers. The flowers were white and pink, from palest blush to dark salmon. Some of the roses were so deeply pink, they were almost purple.

The wonderful sweet scent of wild roses filled the air. The dead trees in the circle were dead no more, but began to bud and leaf as I watched. The thaw spread from the boar's death and that spill of warm blood.

The tiny piglet was heavier. I looked down and found that it had doubled in size. I put it onto the melting snow, and as the boar had gotten bigger, so now this piglet grew. Again, I could not see the change, but like a flower unfurling undetectably, it changed all the same.

I began to walk over the snow, and the rapidly growing pig came at my side like an obedient dog. Where we stepped the snow melted, and life returned to the land. The pig lost its baby stripes, and grew black and as tall at the shoulder as my waist, and still it grew. I touched its back, and the hair was not soft, but coarse. I stroked its side, and it nestled against me. We walked the land, and where we walked, the world became green once more.

We came to the crest of a small hill, where a slab of stone lay grey and cold in the growing light. Dawn had come, breaking like a crimson wound across the eastern sky. The sun returns in blood, and dies in blood.

The boar had tusks now, small curling things, but I wasn't afraid. He nuzzled my hand, and his snout was softer, and more nimble, more like a great finger, than any pig's snout I'd ever touched. He made a sound that was pleasant and made me smile. Then he turned and ran down the other

side of the hill, with his tail straight out behind him like a flag. Everywhere his hooves touched, the earth sprang green.

A robed figure was beside me on the hill, but it was not the grey-robed figure of the crone Goddess in winter. This was a male figure taller than I, broad of shoulder, and cloaked in a hood as black as the boar that was growing small in the distance.

He held out his hands, and in them was a horn. The curved tusk of a great boar. It was white and fresh, with blood still on it, as if he had just that moment cut it from the white boar. But as I moved over toward him, the horn became clean and polished, as if with many years of use, as if many hands had touched it. The horn was no longer white, but a rich amber color that spoke of age. Just before I touched his hands, I realized the horn was set in gold, formed into a cup.

I laid my hands on either side of his and found that his hands were as dark as his cloak, but I knew this was not my Doyle, my Darkness. This was the God. I looked up into his hood and saw for an instant the boar's head; then I saw a human mouth that smiled at me. His face, like the face of the Goddess, was covered in shadow - for the face of deity was ever a mystery.

He wrapped my hands around the smooth horn of the cup, the carved gold almost soft under my fingers. He pressed my hands to the cup. I wondered, where had the white knife gone?

A deep voice that was no man's voice and every man's voice said, 'Where it belongs.' The knife appeared in the cup, blade-down, and it was shining again, as if a star had fallen into that cup of horn and gold. 'Drink and be merry.' He laughed then at his own pun. He raised the shining cup to my lips and vanished to the warm sound of his own laughter.

I drank from the horn and found it full of the sweetest mead I had ever drunk, thick with honey, and warm as if the heat of the summer itself slipped across my tongue, caressed my throat. I swallowed and it was more intoxicating than any mere drink.

Power is the most intoxicating drink of all.

Chapter 2

I WOKE SURROUNDED BY A CIRCLE OF FACES, IN A BED that was not mine. Faces the color of darkest night, whitest snow, the pale green of new leaves, the gold of summer sunshine, the brown of leaves trodden underfoot destined to be rich earth. But there was no pale skin that held all the colors of a brilliant crystal, like a diamond carved into flesh. I blinked up at all of them, and wondered - remembering my dream - where were the cookies?

Doyle's voice, deep and thick, as if it came from a great distance, said, 'Princess Meredith, are you well?'

I sat up, nude in the bed with black silk sheets, cold against my skin. The queen had loaned us her room for the night. Real fur, soft and nearly alive, pressed against my hip. The fur covering moved, and Kitto's face blinked up at me. His huge blue eyes dominated his pale face and held no white in all that color. The color was Seelie sidhe, but the eyes themselves were goblin. He had been a child of the last great goblin-sidhe war. His pale perfect body was barely four feet tall, a delicate man, the only one of my men who was shorter than I was. He looked child-like cuddled down in the fur, his face framed like some cherub for a Valentine's Day card. He had been more than a thousand years old before Christianity was a word. He'd been part of my treaty with the goblins. They were my allies because he shared my bed.

His hand found my arm and stroked up and down my skin, seeking comfort as we all did when we were nervous. He didn't like me staring at him without saying anything. He had been curled up close to me, and the power of the Goddess and the God in my dream must have slipped across

his skin. The faces of the fifteen men standing in their circle around the bed showed clearly that they had felt something, too.

Doyle repeated his question: 'Princess Meredith, are you well?'

I looked at my captain of the guard, my lover, his face as black as the cloak I had worn in vision, or the fur of the boar that had run out into the snow and brought spring back to the land. I had to close my eyes and breathe deeply, trying to break free of the last vestiges of vision and dream. Trying to be in the here and now.

I raised my hands from the tangle of sheets. In my right hand was a cup formed of horn, the horn ancient and yellowed, held in gold that bore symbols that few outside faerie could read now. In my left hand I expected to find the white knife, but it was not there. My left hand was empty. I stared at it for a moment, then raised the cup with both hands.

'My God,' Rhys whispered, though the whisper was strangely loud.

'Yes,' Doyle said, 'that is exactly what it is.'

'What did he say when he gave you the cup of horn?' It was Abe who asked. Abe with his hair striped in shades of pale grey, dark grey, black, and white, perfect strands of color. His eyes were a few shades darker grey than most human eyes, but not otherworldly, not really. If you dressed him like a modern Goth, he'd be the hit of any club scene.

His eyes were strangely solemn. He'd been the drunk and joke of the court for more years than I could remember. But now there was a different person looking out from his face, a glimpse of what he might once have been. Someone who thought before he spoke, someone who had other preoccupations than getting drunk as quickly and as often as he could.

Abe swallowed hard and asked again, 'What did he say?'

I answered him this time. 'Drink and be merry.'

Abe smiled, wistful, sorrow-filled. 'That sounds like him.'

'Like who?' I asked.

'The cup used to be mine. My symbol.'

I crawled to the edge of the bed and knelt on it. I held the cup up with both hands toward him. 'Drink and be merry, Abeloeec.'

He shook his head. 'I do not deserve the God's favor, Princess. I do not deserve anyone's favor.'

I suddenly knew - not by way of a vision - I just suddenly possessed the knowledge. 'You weren't thrown out of the Seelie Court for seducing the wrong woman, as everyone believes. You were thrown out because you lost your powers, and once you could no longer make the courtiers merry with drink and revelry, Taranis kicked you out of the golden court.'

A tear trembled on the edge of one eye. Abeloeec stood there, straight and proud in a way that I had never seen him. I'd never seen him sober, as he appeared to be now. Clearly he'd drunk to forget, but he was still immortal and sidhe, which meant that no drug, no drink, could ever truly help him find oblivion. He could be clouded, but never truly know the rush of any drug.

He finally nodded, and that was enough to spill the tear onto his cheek. I caught the tear on the edge of the horn cup. That tiny drop seemed to race down the inside of the cup faster than gravity should pull it. I don't know if the others could see what was happening, but Abe and I watched the tear race for the bottom of that cup. The tear slid inside the dark curve of the bottom, and suddenly there was liquid spilling up, bubbling up like a spring from the dark inner curve of the horn.

Deep gold liquid filled the cup to its brim, and the smell of honey and berries and the pungent smell of alcohol filled the room.

Abe's hands cupped over mine in the same way I had held the cup in the vision with the God. I raised it up, and as

Abeloec's lips touched the rim, I said, 'Drink and be merry. Drink and be mine.'

He hesitated before he drank, and I observed an intelligence in those grey eyes that I'd never glimpsed before. He spoke with his lips brushing the edge of the cup. He wanted to drink. I could feel it in the eager tremble in his hands as they covered mine.

'I belonged to a king once. When I was no longer his court fool, he cast me out.' The trembling in his hands slowed, as if each word steadied him. 'I belonged to a queen once. She hated me, always, and made certain by her words and her deeds that I knew just how much she hated me.' His hands were warm and firm against mine. His eyes were deep, dark grey, charcoal grey, with a hint of black somewhere in the center. 'I have never belonged to a princess, but I fear you. I fear what you will do to me. What you will make me do to others. I fear taking this drink and binding myself to your fate.'

I shook my head but never lost the concentration of his eyes. 'I do not bind you to my fate, Abeloec, nor me to yours. I merely say, drink of the power that was once yours to wield. Be what you once were. This is not my gift to give to you. This cup belongs to the God, the Consort. He gave it to me and bid me share it with you.'

'He spoke of me?'

'No, not you specifically, but he bid me to share it with others. The Goddess told me to give you all something else to eat.' I frowned, unsure how to explain everything I'd seen, or done. Vision is always more sensible inside your head than on your tongue.

I tried to put into words what I felt in my heart. 'The first drink is yours, but not the last. Drink, and we will see what happens.'

'I am afraid,' he whispered.

'Be afraid, but take your drink, Abeloec.'

'You do not think less of me for being afraid.'

‘Only those who have never known fear are allowed to think less of others for being afraid. Frankly, I think anyone who has never been afraid of anything in their entire life is either a liar or lacks imagination.’

It made him smile, then laugh, and in that laughter I heard the echo of the God. Some piece of Abeloece’s old godhead had kept this cup safe for centuries. Some shadow of his old power had waited and kept watch. Watched for someone who could find their way through vision to a hill on the edge of winter and spring; on the edge of darkness and dawn; a place between, where mortal and immortal could touch.

His laughter made me smile, and there were answering chuckles from around the room. It was the kind of laughter that would be infectious. He would laugh and you would have to laugh with him.

‘Just by holding the cup in your hand,’ Rhys said, ‘your laughter makes me smile. You haven’t been that amusing in centuries.’ He turned his boyishly handsome face to us, with its scars where his other tricolored blue eye would have been. ‘Drink, and see what is left of who you thought you were, or don’t drink, and go back to being shadow and a joke.’

‘A bad joke,’ Abeloece said.

Rhys nodded and came to stand close to us. His white curls fell to his waist, framing a body that was the most seriously muscled of any of the guards. He was also the shortest of them, a full-blooded sidhe who was only five foot six – unheard of. ‘What do you have to lose?’

‘I would have to try again. I would have to care again,’ said Abe. He stared at Rhys as completely as he had at me, as if what we were saying meant everything.

‘If all you want is to crawl back into another bottle or another bag of powder, then do it. Step away from the cup and let someone else drink,’ Rhys said.

A look of pain crossed Abeloece’s face. ‘It’s mine. It’s part of who I was.’