

Beauty's Stone Beast 1: Rachel's Inheritance



Rachel's Inheritance

Book One of Beauty's Stone Beast Series

by
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Gypsy Shadow Publishing

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Dedication

To everyone who ever found love, just by letting themselves look a little deeper at the person within. Sometimes the love of your life doesn't come in a pretty package. The beauty is wrapped deeply within.



Chapter One

Rachel was fourteen when she visited Nephelium Manor the first time. When her parents died in a car crash, her grandmother, who had also been widowed earlier that same year, decided the two of them needed a change of scenery.

She remembered her Grandmother Ester, who had only been in her early fifties at the time, wiping away her tears and cooing to her softly in her lovely French accent. "Ah, no more tears, my love. We have done entirely too much crying this year!"

Soon afterward, she ushered Rachel onto a plane, and they made the journey from their home in Seattle, Washington, to a small community in the French countryside.

Rachel had been enthralled and enchanted by the beauty of the landscape, the accents of the people who surrounded her. Many of the people she met first were friends of her grandmother, who greeted her with open arms and spoke to her in a language Rachel did not understand.

She had not known then that her journey had only just begun. She watched, perplexed, as her grandmother rented a little car, packed their bags in the trunk, and then began a leisurely drive through the countryside.

When they finally arrived at Aunt Geraldine's home, Rachel was amazed and a little intimidated. Four huge stone beasts guarded the four towers, standing tall and proud with wingspans that seemed to reach from edge to edge of the towers they protected. Rachel thought they were angels at first, but Grandmother Ester explained to her that they were in fact, gargoyles.

"But, I thought gargoyles had ugly faces and grotesque bodies," Rachel commented, curiously. "These statues are beautiful!"

Ester smiled and nodded. "Yes, my dear. These beasts are not what one would deem average gargoyles. They are quite stunning, in fact. But then," she added with a smile, "they are meant to please a woman's eyes."

The castle had a total of seventy-six rooms. The building itself took up two acres, with the surrounding grounds sprawling another ten, totaling out at twelve acres on the estate. By far, Rachel thought it the kind of place that if a child got lost within its walls, it could have easily taken weeks, if not months, to find them. Though the perception was exaggerated, Rachel found herself feeling very small as she took in the sheer size of the vast estate. She found the old family estate to be much like a beautiful dream, and she never wanted to reawaken to the *real* world after being in the fairytale realm of Nephelium Manor.

The magnitude of the estate was one of the first facts Grand Aunt Geraldine explained quite meticulously to Rachel, along with a warning to watch out for the gargoyles at night.

"They come to life!" she told her with an excited smile. "And do you know what they like to do?"

Enthralled, Rachel shook her head. "No, Aunt Geraldine. Please tell me. What do they like to do?"

The woman's eyes glittered with excited mirth as she reached to tickle Rachel on her ribs. "They like to seduce innocent young maidens!"

Aunt Geraldine's laughter was contagious, and Rachel found herself laughing along with her, as the older woman enveloped her in an affectionate hug. As she hugged Rachel to her warmly, she whispered, "The truth is that those stone statues are not really monsters, but each one is a prince. They are placed under an enchantment, one that allows each one of them to be freed from the curse only when the woman who can love them forever comes along."

Rachel leaned back to look in her aunt's eyes. "Have any of them found themselves to be free yet?"

Geraldine shook her head, her smile turning sad. "Unfortunately, no." She gestured to herself. "Of course, I love them, each and every one. But alas, I am not the true love of any of them."



The memories of that summer flooded over Rachel now as she sat in the attorney's office, listening to him read the last will and testament of her aunt. Tears flowed silently down her cheeks as she listened with a heavy heart to this woman's final wishes.

She had been a spinster. Therefore, she had no children to leave her estate to. Because of this, she had decided to leave Nephelium's Keep to Rachel.

Rachel would have been overwhelmed by the gesture, if not for the fact she was faced with making this trip to Nephelium by herself. There was no one to go with her.

Aunt Geraldine had passed away only weeks after her Grandmother Esther. She had gone to bed that night, and not awakened the next morning. The doctor said her heart had simply stopped beating. Rachel had been stunned. It had been hard for her to accept that a woman who was barely past middle age could have just died quietly in her sleep. Just when she was beginning to accept the first death, the second came, and in the same way, both women quitting this world in their sleep. Now that Rachel considered it, she realized it was a good way to die. When her time came, she hoped she could go as peacefully. She just felt so lonely without either of them to talk to.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the lawyer cleared his throat. "Miss Delacroix? Did you hear what I told you?" he asked, looking at her expectantly with unemotional eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Rachel nodded. "Yes. You just told me it doesn't matter that I'm all alone in the world because even though they left me, they left me rich." She dropped her gaze to her hands. "So I guess that's supposed to make everything all better."

The attorney had the decency to look regretful for a moment before he spoke. "Miss, your guardians loved you very much. Please, take that as consolation for your loss. Other heirs of fortunes never know the love of their benefactors." He offered her a sad smile. "You are far more fortunate."

Tears fell again as she nodded and bent to retrieve her purse. "Thank you, Mr. Collins. I appreciate everything you've done."

He watched as she rose, standing from his desk and offering her the documents with all the information on the account, which had been opened in her name. "You are most welcome, my dear. If there is anything else I can help you with, please let me know."

She nodded and started to turn away. For a moment she stood there, considering, before turning back to offer Mr. Collins a sweet smile. "Actually, I think I'm going to take an extended vacation in France. Would you make the arrangements for me?"



Two weeks later Rachel found herself standing before the mansion she had never been able to put from her mind for long. It had been so long. Rachel was a grown woman now, but if anything, the estate appeared even larger than it had when she first saw it. Sadly though, the home seemed to have fallen into a state of disrepair.

The gardens she fondly recalled as being so lovingly well-tended and full of fragrant flowers, were still as vibrant as she had always remembered; though now, they appeared overgrown and unkempt. The stone of the mansion seemed stark and gray against the beautiful countryside, almost foreboding in its appearance, as if warning visitors away . . . as if warning Rachel away.

Taking a deep breath, she took her bags from the taxi driver and paid him, throwing in a generous tip. "*Merci*."

He looked from her to the manor and then back at her again, a look of concern crossing his features. "Is *mademoiselle* certain she wouldn't rather stay at one of the villas in town?" His accent was deep but his English good. "I

would not charge you to take you back. It might be dangerous, or at least frightening, here at night."

She shook her head, smiling. "No, thank you." She turned back to the manor and looked it over with affection. "Some of my best memories are of this place." She shrugged when he looked at her as if she'd grown a second head. "This is my home."

The driver looked confused, but bowed his head in acceptance. "Very well, *mademoiselle*. Have a good evening." He pulled a card out of his pocket. "My cell number is on the back if you should change your mind." He looked again at the mansion. "Even if it should be the middle of the night." He offered her a hesitant, almost shy, smile before getting into his car and driving away, leaving her to stare after him, baffled.

Turning, Rachel started up the steps to the door. When she reached it, it was opened by a middle-aged woman with a welcoming smile.

"Oh, *mademoiselle*! You have come! We knew you would be here soon!" She reached out and grabbed one of the suitcases from Rachel's hand. "We have the master suite prepared for you. Your *tante* was very specific in her instructions."

The woman ushered her in and closed the door behind them. "Welcome to Nephelium Keep. Everything is in order." She smiled brightly. "This way, please."

She led Rachael in the direction of the middle tower. Rachel paused as she realized where they were going. "Umm, I'm sorry. Are we going to the center tower?"

The other lady turned and nodded, "*Oui, mademoiselle*. Mistress Geraldine insisted you be made at home in the master suite." She bowed her head, adding, "That is where it is now located."

Rachel paused, suddenly nervous. The central tower was where the largest gargoyle perched. He knelt at the top of the tower, his wings wrapped protectively around it. The architecture of that tower was the most amazing of the entire home, easily stunning any observer to silence.

As they neared the entrance of the tower, the housekeeper turned and looked expectantly back in Rachel's direction. "*Mademoiselle?* Come with me. I promise, the suite will be to your liking. We even lit a fire in the hearth to take the chill out of the room."

Knowing the housekeeper had probably gone to a great deal of trouble to prepare the rooms for her, Rachel moved to follow her. "Lead the way. I'm sure I'll love whatever you've done."

With a smile, the woman turned and proceeded up the huge spiral staircase, which curved along the wall leading up to the large wooden door that opened into the fantastic room.

As Rachel stepped through, she couldn't help but gape at the magnificence before her. She had never seen this part of the home, or the inside any of the towers, for that matter. They had been locked, and Aunt Geraldine had refused to allow her entry.

"Believe me, child. All good things come to those who wait. You will one day see what lies within that tower; I will make sure of it. But those rooms are special. Inside those walls will be where your dreams will cross into your reality."

Aunt Geraldine's words had made no sense to her at the time. But now as she stood in the center of the first room of the tower, she smiled. A fireplace blazed warmly on one side. A plush sofa with matching chairs and a coffee table made for a cozy grouping around it.

Turning, she saw the small kitchenette area, which had only enough room for a refrigerator and microwave with a coffee pot beside it. The sink was small, but decent. A wall beside the kitchen area hid the bedroom from the sitting area and kitchen. Curious, she stepped into the room, and found herself giggling in excitement.

A king size bed stood on a platform with four steps leading up to it. Huge canopy drapes made of shimmering gossamer cascaded from the ceiling to the floor.

Past the bed, on the far wall, were French doors leading out to the balcony. The rails of the balcony were made of shiny marble. Rachel opened the doors and stepped through. Looking out at the surrounding land, she breathed deeply. For the first time since the death of the two most important people in her world, she truly smiled. She knew Aunt Geraldine had prepared this suite for her. It was everything she had ever dreamed of having.

Turning back to the maid, who had followed her out, she asked, "Are all the towers equipped with apartments like this?"

The elderly lady nodded. "Yes. Your *tante* was insistent they be each done in similar fashion. But for this one, she was very specific on how it was to be decorated." she offered Rachel a knowing smile. "She said she promised it to you."

Tears came unbidden to Rachel's eyes as she nodded. "Yes, we spoke of it once when I was a child." She shook her head. "But I never dreamed . . ."

The other lady smiled. "I know, *mademoiselle*. She told me how the two of you had spoken of it." She inclined her head. "She believed you may desire to turn the estate into a bed and breakfast." Another nod. "A good investment with property such as this, if I may be so bold."

Rachel smiled at her. "What is your name?"

With a smile, the older lady curtsied slowly. "I am Catherine. My husband Luigi is the grounds keeper, but refuses to come in the house often. We share the guest house with the others. I do the cooking as well as some light cleaning. The household consists of five other maids who clean, as well as a butler who sees to the rest."

As she let Catherine lead her back into the bedroom, Rachel found herself asking in confusion, "What guest house? I don't remember a guest house. And why won't your husband come in the manor?"

"The guest house is behind the manor," Catherine said, waving her hand in dismissal. "You must not be offended, *mademoiselle*. Luigi is simply superstitious." She pointed upward and lowered her voice to a whisper. "He's afraid of the gargoyles; says they stir at night."

Rachel stared at Catherine for a moment before saying, "So did Aunt Geraldine. She said they seduced young women."

Catherine scoffed. "Well, my husband was here ever since Miss Geraldine inherited the manor, so he probably is privy to some knowledge I don't have. However, I've lived and worked here for the better part of ten years." She shook her head. "In all those years, I've never seen even one of them move so much as an inch. Not even in the middle of the worst of the winter storms we sometimes get." She laughed. "I think your Aunt Geraldine may have been playing upon a child's fancy."

Rachel grinned, nodding. "Yes, I have always believed that as well." Her expression cracked, offering the housekeeper another glimpse of her grief. "She was always so full of life. It's hard to think of her as gone."

At that moment, the older woman turned and embraced her in a caring hug. "She has not left you, child. She will live always within your heart."

Pulling away, Catherine shook her head and wiped at the tears in her own eyes. "Look at me. Here I am taking up all your time when you must be exhausted. Morning is soon enough for reminiscing. It will be dark soon; you must need some rest. Would you like anything to eat before you retire? I have some stew in the kitchen. It wouldn't be hard to warm some."

Rachel nodded. "Yes, please, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. Would you mind bringing it to me here? I just want to get comfortable and out of these clothes."

Catherine smiled and nodded. "Of course. And I'll bring up some mulled wine to go with it. It'll help you sleep."

Rachel nodded. "Thank you, Catherine. I appreciate how welcoming you've been. It means a lot to me."

Nodding, the woman quit the room, leaving Rachel alone with her thoughts.



Chapter Two

She slept so peacefully. Arthmael watched her in silence from the balcony. He had broken free of the stone that held him the moment the sun had set. The very beat of her heart had tormented him from the moment she had entered the manor.

Shrinking from his stone size to that of the man he had been before the curse he now shared with his three brothers, he moved to stand on the balcony. He looked completely normal now, aside from the pale color of his skin and the huge black wings protruding from his back. Wrapping them around himself, he looked almost like he was wearing a black cloak.

His first thought had been of her. Seeing her. He remembered the beauty of the girl who had visited all those years ago, when she was but a child. He had kept his distance then. He scowled inwardly. He should keep his distance now.

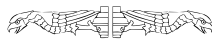
Now, he stared at the beauty within the bed. Long, brunette hair fell across the pillow as she slumbered, unaware of his presence. Her lips were slightly parted. Her chest rose and fell with each rhythmic breath she took.

His heart sped up as he considered going to her and invading her dreams with soft touches and whispered words of love, spoken in passion. He could give her such dreams. Glancing up, he watched as his brothers flew out across the night sky. They knew that Geraldine had intended Rachel for him. They would not interfere.

In exchange for the love he could receive from her in her dreams, he'd be her hidden protector. She need never know he was real. He would not interfere in her waking life. He only wanted a small piece of her dreams.

Unable to deny himself any longer, he stepped up beside her bed and watched her closely for several minutes. The one pleasure he received was when he could enter into another's dreams and explore their fantasies with them.

Kneeling, he ran his forefinger across her cheek, pushing back a stray hair as he went. When he wiped her brow, he took a deep breath, releasing it as he pressed his thumb over the center of her forehead. Closing his eyes, he slipped easily into her dreams . . .



. . . Rachel stood in the middle of the manor, looking around. Her dreams usually brought her here. It was where she had been happiest.

This dream seemed different. Usually, she was joined by her aunt and her grandmother, regaling her with stories of their youth and the lives they had. But this time, the manor was strangely silent. No voices came to her. No one was here at all, it seemed, save her.

"You're not completely alone." A deep voice with a full French accent spoke from behind her.

Turning, she saw him standing at the foot of the staircase. Bare-chested, he wore only a pair of black pants. His long black hair fell past his shoulders in soft waves. Rachel had never seen him before. A little alarmed, she took an involuntary step back. "Who are you?"

He smiled then, giving her a view of the whitest teeth she had ever seen, making his already handsome face breathtaking. "My name is Arthmael. And I have waited for what feels like an eternity to meet you."

Perplexed, Rachel considered his words before asking, "Then why haven't I met you before now?"

He moved closer, closing the distance between them to give her a better view of his fantastic, yet startling, emerald eyes. "It wasn't time. I could not come to you until you were a woman grown." His eyes twinkled with mirth. "Last time, you were too young. I can't take form for children unless I am needed to protect them."

His words puzzled her even more. She didn't know this man. What's more, she didn't think her imagination could have come up with him. He was gorgeous! "Really? Then why are you here now?"

He was much closer and even more imposing now. His breath touched her cheek like the caress of a lover. Reaching out, he traced her cheek with the back of his hand. "You wanted me. Your soul has been calling to me since the moment you returned."

Suddenly, it all fit together in her head. "Oh! I get it! You're my fantasy of the gargoyle my aunt said liked to seduce young women!" She laughed, shaking her head. "Of course! Well," she cleared her throat. "Okay, sure . . . I haven't had any wet dreams lately. Why not?"

She reached out and ran her hand down his chest slowly, reveling in the shudder that coursed through him at her touch. The feel of his hard, smooth skin beneath her hand sent a thrilling sensation through her body, down to her toes. "Seduce me." She whispered softly.

Needing no more encouragement, he pulled her into his embrace, and cupped her chin, turning her head up to make her mouth readily available.

When their lips touched, Rachel gasped at how real the contact felt. Before she could pull away, he took advantage, driving his tongue into her waiting mouth. His tongue dueled with hers and she found herself holding onto him for support, should she go weak in the knees. Her whole body trembled in response to his touch.

She didn't have to worry she'd fall for long. Breaking the kiss, he lifted her into his arms and turned toward the stairs. As he took them two at a time up to her room, she held tightly to him, enjoying the feel of his arms holding her.

Longing filled her. It had been a long time since a man had held her. She had almost forgotten how nice it felt. Wanting the dream to last, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and studied his face.

He reached her room and kicked the door closed behind them. Moving through the suite to her bedroom, he again closed the next door, seemingly to give them all the more privacy. When he stood before her bed, he lowered her slowly to her feet. She looked around the room, then back at him with a smile. "How did you know this was my room?"

He returned her smile before offering, "It's your dream, thus your subconscious tells me where you want me to go."

Satisfied with that answer, Rachel chuckled. "Okay, that makes sense to me." She looked him up and down. "So, what do you want to do?"

Arthmael reached out, gripping her hips and pressing himself into her belly. He was rewarded by her moan. "I want to caress every inch of you. I want to feel you come apart for me as I drive myself into your moist heat."

His voice was hoarse as he began lifting her gown, scraping his fingers across the sensitive skin of her hips. "I want to lose myself in the sensations we can give each other."

He paused when he had her gown lifted high enough that it barely covered her breasts. "What do you want?" As he spoke, his thumbs brushed the tips of her nipples even as the other fingers of his hands lightly touched the underside of her breasts.

Gasping, she raised her arms, and he followed her cue by ridding her of the gown. Standing naked, she fought the urge to cover herself. Instead, she stood before him, offering herself to him. She suppressed a nervous laugh. This was a dream. It was just a dream. A wonderful fantasy dream brought on by coming back to Nephelium Manor. That, combined with the stories her aunt used to tell her, was what made this dream so vivid.

He stood back, just watching her. He knew that the dream, to her, was just that. A vision. It held no real substance and would be forgotten soon after she awoke. But to him, it was very real. He could smell her shampoo, feel her skin. Even though her body was, in reality, still tucked away in bed, safe from his hands that ached to hold her. He had no time to consider stepping out of her dream, because just as he began to, her dream self reached for him. Her hands pulled him free of his pants, and her breasts pressed against his chest. But that wasn't his undoing. What made him lose his battle was what she did next.

"Please? Please make love to me. It's been so long since I've been touched. Held." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. She cupped his manhood in

her hand and squeezed gently, making him grow even harder. "I don't care if this is a dream. It's a glorious one."

With a low growl, he pulled her again into his embrace with one hand. With the other, he found the spot between her legs, wet and sweet for him.

She moaned, grinding herself against his hand where he touched her. She felt his fingers part the folds of her flesh and thrust into her moist heat. Gasping at the unexpected sensation, she held onto him as he lowered her onto the bed, forcing him to follow her down.

His fingers thrust repeatedly into her, even as his thumb teased her clit. Leaning down, he captured her lips with his own and kissed her deeply, taking her soft moans into himself.

She lifted her hips in time with his touch, meeting his quickening pace. She swiftly found herself crying out in ecstasy as he pushed her over the edge, by moving down to suckle her nipple. Giving herself over to the sensations, she came violently in his arms. Even as she did, she found herself wondering at it. She had never had such an orgasm in her waking life. But she had just had one in her dreams. It was so intense it nearly had her screaming for mercy.

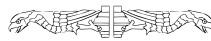
Panting, she held him to her as the tremors in her body grew. As the second orgasm hit, she wailed, cradling his head as he suckled her breast. It seemed as if his hands were everywhere, drawing pleasure from her like a hidden spring.

When the final orgasm subsided, he moved up and kissed her gently. She returned his kiss, but frowned when he pulled away. As she watched, he moved to the foot of the bed where his breeches had been discarded and retrieved them.

Confused, she asked, "Where are you going?" She worried she had angered him. "Did I do something wrong?"

Turning, Arthmael met her gaze with one of pure longing. "You have done nothing wrong." He hesitantly turned and moved to the balcony. "But morning comes, and I must leave." He turned back, giving her a sad smile. "I shall return to you each and every night that you will have me. But, for now, I must go."

No sooner had he said the words than he disappeared, leaving Rachel feeling bereft and alone . . .



. . . She awoke, startled. Sitting up, she looked around the room. She searched for some sign, any sign, that he had been there. Nothing looked any different. Had it really been just a dream? Was it possible a dream could feel so real?

She watched the early morning light streaming in through the balcony doors. Releasing a sigh of disappointment, she started to look away, but stopped when she saw the doors to the balcony were slightly ajar.

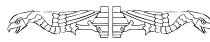
She rose from the bed and went to examine the doors. That was strange. She was sure she had closed them before she had gone to bed. Hadn't she? Walking out onto the balcony, she turned and looked up at the huge gargoyle that stood guard over her tower. His wings enveloped the tower from top to bottom, as if they themselves were a part of the tower. He was kneeling and appeared to be looking down at the balcony below, guarding it against would-be intruders.

As Rachel stood there, looking up at the face that was as tall as her body, she fancied its features bore a striking resemblance to the man in her dream. She stared for several moments before dismissing the idea. "Right!" she

muttered, moving back into the safety of her room, closing the door behind her.

"As if . . ."

However, even as she closed the door and dismissed the idea, some part of her was still unsure.



Chapter Three

When Rachel made her way downstairs, Catherine met her with boxes. "Oh, good morning, *mademoiselle*! I do hope you slept well."

Nodding, Rachel looked from Catherine to the boxes that now lined the walls of the parlor. "What is all this?" she asked in a small voice.

Catherine gestured to the boxes. "These are your *tante*'s personal items." She offered Rachel a sympathetic smile. "She wanted you to go through them all and decide what you want." Turning, she looked over the things. "The rest is to be given to charity."

Rachel looked from Catherine to the boxes. "We have to go through all of these today? I'm not sure I'm ready to do this."

The other woman gave her a smile that was encouraging. "It will be all right, *mademoiselle*. I will help you."

Rachel turned her full attention to Catherine. "Thank you, but you must do one other thing first."

Catherine tilted her head, curious. "Yes?"

Rachel stepped closer to her. "Call me Rachel. I can't stand such formality with people that I will be living with. Please?"

Catherine nodded, clasping Rachel's hand. "That will be easily done." she smiled broadly. "Now, let's do this so you can truly claim this home as your own."

Biting her bottom lip, Rachel nodded slowly. "Okay. I'll do my best." Rolling up her sleeves she prepared herself for a day's worth of work.



The sun set over the horizon, leaving the castle to the shadows cast by the moonlight. Slowly, stone began to soften, moving as muscles stretched and became flesh. Each brother shrunk from the giants the gargoyle curse made them to the size they had been as humans.

Slowly, the three brothers on the outer towers began making their way down the bridges to the one brother who stood alone in the center, waiting for them.

The first to join Arthmael was Dionde. He was the youngest of them and a complete opposite to Arthmael.

Where Arthmael and Corentin were dark-complexioned with ebony hair and wings, Dionde and Bastian were light-skinned, with platinum hair and wings. The brothers regarded each other for a few moments in silence before any broke the silence.

Corentin nodded with a smile. "Good twilight, brothers."

Bastian moved to clasp Arthmael's arm in recognition. "How are you, brother? Are you ready to claim your bride?"

Arthmael took a deep breath, considering his words carefully. "I will go to her tonight. But it is too soon to assume she will be receptive to me."

Dionde shook his head. "She is your freedom, brother. Don't doubt it. She is the beginning of the end of our curse. I am certain of it."

Arthmael tilted his head, considering Dionde's words. He felt the weight of his responsibility to his brothers weighing heavily on his shoulders.

He was afraid to be as optimistic as they each were. He had lived this way for so long. He wanted his freedom so badly, but the idea it wasn't meant to be weighed heavy on his heart.

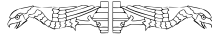
"Go to her, Arthmael. She will not turn you away. I feel it in my soul, brother. She is your mate." Bastian, who had always been sensitive to unseen truths, offered Arthmael courage with his words.

He hesitated for another moment before nodding and making his way to her quarters. It would do no good to prolong the inevitable. If she flew into hysterics at the sight of him, he would know she wasn't his after all.



By the end of the day, Rachel was exhausted. Her muscles were sore from going through all of her aunt's clothes and belongings. It had been emotionally draining, as well as physically overwhelming. Finally, the entire day behind her, she wearily made her way to the huge bathroom at her disposal. Stripping down to nothing, she sank into the tub.

As she soaked in her garden tub, she relaxed and let the hot water poured over her muscles. It was soothing, and she found herself lying back as the water lapped at her skin. Closing her eyes, she sighed in bliss at the feel of the water. Within moments, she had drifted off to sleep.



Arthmael stared in awe at the beautiful body laid bare before him. The water was sparkling and clear, hiding nothing from his hungry eyes. Kneeling beside the tub, he leaned closer to her, inhaling the clean fragrance of her skin, recently bathed with the enticing floral-scented soap. The length of his manhood grew in response.

Taking a deep breath, he fought to calm himself so as to not awaken her. Standing, he turned to grab a towel to dry her. She was sleeping so deeply, he knew he could not leave her in the water. Bending, he swept her limp body into his arms, and then wrapped her in the towel as gently as he could. When he was sure she slept still, he took her to her bed.

Using one arm to cradle her sleeping form, he used the opposite hand to pull the covers back on the bed. Slowly, he lowered her onto it and covered her back up. He was so immersed in putting her to bed without waking her, he failed to notice the gaze upon him until he pulled back. Seeing her awake, he waited for the screaming, silently cursing himself for interfering. He should have just left her alone. She would have awakened and taken herself to bed on her own.

Rachel looked at the man standing before her. He was the man from her dream. Blinking, she tried to focus better on him. She was groggy, her eyesight blurred with sleep. Finally, she smiled slowly. "You're my dream."

With a contented sigh, she reached out to him, grasping his hand. The touch sent a jolt through him, and he took an involuntary step back, his breathing once again becoming labored. His reaction broke through her sleepiness and had her suddenly alert and rising from the bed. "Oh, my God. You're real! I-I mean . . . I'm not really still dreaming, am I?"

Gently pulling his hand from hers, he backed up another step, putting more distance between them. "No. No, you're no longer dreaming," he answered quietly.

Not even aware of her state of undress, she moved from the bed, closing the distance between them and touching him again. "This is . . . " Her hands slowly caressed his face, and then moved to his shoulder, squeezing gently as if trying to assure herself he was indeed flesh and standing before her. "Amazing. Simply amazing!"

Circling him, she let her hands continue to touch his bare skin, pausing to study his wings. They were blacker than night, but the feathers were glossy with a hint of indigo highlighting them. He had them folded in a way that kept them small but somehow she knew in truth they were huge.

She was shocked at herself. She could hardly believe she was being so brave, but for some reason, she just couldn't bring herself to stop touching him. His skin felt so cool to the touch.

Watching her as she came back around to the front of him, he waited. When she stopped toe to toe with him, he met her gaze. "So, what will you do now that you know we are real? Will you tell all? Or will we be able to trust you?"

Dropping her hands to her sides, she whispered, "I'm no threat to you. I would never endanger your existence, if that's what you are asking."

Overwhelmed by the urge to touch her, he gave in and raised his hand to stroke her hair. "So soft," he whispered, almost to himself.

His touch made her tingle everywhere. It also made her aware of her nudity for the first time. Squeaking in shocked surprise, she spun and pulled the sheet from the bed, wrapping it around herself quickly. When she turned back to face him, she didn't miss the mirth and amusement that crossed his face.

"I saw all of you last night in your dreams. I carried your sleeping body from your bath to the bed. What must I have missed that you still choose to hide?"

Blushing, she clutched the sheet that much tighter to her. "I was not conscious during either of those moments. Surely you don't fault me for my modesty now that I am awake?"

Smiling, he shook his head. "I merely play with you, princess. It is in my nature to be a playful lover. Should you choose to indulge yourself with me, that is."

Intrigued, she asked, "What if I don't choose to indulge myself with you?"

With a tilt of his head, he answered, "You may choose one of my brothers if one of them pleases you better."

Shaking her head, Rachel answered, "No. I have no desire to take a lover," she lied. The truth was she did want him. Her womb fairly ached to have him inside. However, pride kept her from admitting it.

Arthmael closed the small space between them and gathered her into his arms. "Something you should know about my brothers and me, princess." One hand gripped the sheet she held so tightly, ripping it from her hands and tossing it away, even as the other gathered her closer.

Gasping in shock, she brought her hands up with the intent of pushing

him away. When her breasts brushed against his hard, hairless chest, the fight went out of her. Instead, she whispered, "What might that be?"

His lips brushed lightly over hers before he answered, "We can smell women's desire. You may deny it all you like. But your musky fragrance is filling this room, and I cannot help but answer the call your body is sending me." His mouth pressed more insistently to hers; his tongue traced the curve of her lips gently, as if requesting entry.

Unable to deny the desire that burned her from the inside, she opened to him on a sigh, and moaned when his tongue thrust forcefully forward.

His hands roamed her naked body as he urged her slowly toward the bed. When she lowered herself onto it, he followed her, letting his mouth leave hers and start a slow, tantalizing trail down her neck, settling at the base and tasting her with his tongue.

Turning her head to the side to afford him better access, she caressed the smooth skin of his chest and back. When one hand found a taut nipple, she circled it slowly with her index finger, drawing a deep groan from him.

Rising just enough to free himself from his loincloth, he dropped back down to her, covering her with his body. His lips again found hers, even as his hand skimmed over the small curve of her stomach, down to the silky curls of her thatch. His fingers parted her already slick folds, and his thumb began rubbing her clit as his forefinger pressed slowly into her core.

Almost as if her body had a mind of its own, her hips rose to welcome his intrusion. His fingers were rough, as if calloused through hard work. But the friction of their texture almost had her coming in his hand.

Crying out, she reached for him, as if trying to mold her body tighter to his. Her mouth opened readily to his when he leaned in to claim her mouth once again in another soul-scorching kiss.

Arthmael worked his way lower, setting her body on fire in the wake of his touch. She began shaking when his lips hovered over her sex. His breath felt like the warmth of the sun against her core.

Trembling, she closed her eyes, waiting for him to release her from her newfound agony. Never before had a man made her feel such loss of control. His hands continued to move over her skin, teasing her breasts and fondling her nipples until they stood rigid. As his tongue snaked out to touch her clit, she found herself almost coming off the bed, her response was so powerful. Her shivering grew wilder as she came closer to release.

She could feel the climax growing inside and knew he took pleasure from his potency to make her come so close so quickly. Her confusion at her response to him was overwhelmed by her desperation to continue her exploration of the desire and pleasure she felt so fully and deeply for the first time.

Stunned by the level of emotion she perceived during this intimate moment with a complete stranger, she inquired softly, "What are you doing to me? How can this feel so intense when I just met you?"

Arthmael rose above her, gently urging her legs further apart to afford access to her moist treasure. His eyes pierced hers a moment before he answered, "It is intense because you are the gift meant to be mine. Our souls are destined to be joined together for eternity." Without waiting for her answer of understanding to his words, he thrust forward, breaching her tight channel and filling her with his girth. The intensity of him within her was so exquisite

she cried out raggedly, almost coming again at that first moment of their joining.

Rachel was overpowered by the energy of his lovemaking. Her body seemed made to couple with his. She knew she should question him as to the meaning behind his words. But the way his body fit to hers took her breath away, and she found herself lifting her hips to meet his thrusts as he carried her away, driving her higher and higher to an ecstasy she had never before known.

As they moved together, Rachel felt her insides start to heat, almost as if they were catching on fire and burning her alive. The sensation was not painful, but an intensified sweet torture, nonetheless. With one hand supporting Rachel's neck and the other under her ass, Arthmael stood. Flexing his strong muscles, he eased her down fully on his engorged cock. His wings unfurled as he moved, and Rachel was awed by their beauty.

Filled completely by his shaft, she felt a mixture of pleasure and pain that took her breath away. She held onto him in a mixture of fear and excitement. Fear that he might take flight at any moment; excitement in the thought that he would.

As he began moving her faster over him, she gave over to the urge to cry out. Her head fell back and her eyes closed as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed through her.

As if urged by her orgasm, Arthmael followed closely behind with his own. Moving back to the bed, he fell onto it with her, careful not to crush her as he succumbed to his own release.

When Rachel came to her senses, it was to find Arthmael lying beside her. One wing was folded over her like a blanket, and his eyes softened when her gaze met his.

Snuggling closer to him, she reached out to trace his brow. "Amazing. To think I always believed my aunt was just spinning tales." She smiled like a schoolgirl before growing solemn. "But you're real. All of you. The others? Do they come to life too?"

A shadow crossed his expression as he nodded. "They are my brothers. We have lived as such for centuries." He looked away, growling, "It is our curse."

Propping her head up on her hand, she looked at him curiously. "What curse? Aunt Geraldine never said anything about a curse."

Catching his breath, he released a sigh. "My family once lived here, in this castle." He touched his chest. "It was my birthright. I stood to inherit when father passed on."

As he turned to lie on his back, he folded his wings into a soft cushion beneath himself. He stared at a spot on the ceiling for several minutes. When he finally spoke again, his voice was even softer. Rachel found herself having to strain to listen.

"My father wasn't a pleasant man. He treated the peasants poorly." Arthmael groaned, as if it pained him to remember such a bad memory. "One maid, however, made him feel something again. Our mother had died a few years before she came to the village, and he had been very lonely. He charmed the maid, and she believed he loved her. If he could love her, then he could be made a man who would care for others. She bore him a daughter from their little tryst."

He shook his head. "It was sad, really. My father was a bitter man. The only woman he had ever given his heart to had been my mother. When she died, he swore to love no other." He paused before adding, "I believe that included his sons."

His hand caressed her bare back; he was seemingly lost to a memory for a moment. When he glanced down to see her looking at him expectantly, he continued. "After he had used her for what he wanted, he had nothing else to do with her. Refusing to acknowledge the daughter she bore him from their affair, he denied my sister, Cecilia." He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "If I had only known."

Rachel felt icy fingers of dread close around her heart. "What happened?"

Turning to meet her gaze, Arthmael's eyes glistened with tears. "Cecilia married one of the peasant boys and was going to have his child," he said, his hand rubbing at his forehead in frustrated anger.

"When it was time for the babe to come, Cecilia did not do well. The midwife was unable to help birth the baby, and sent for one of father's physicians." He snorted in humorless mirth. "The bastard had four of them. He could easily have spared one."

Biting her lip, Rachel whispered, "The baby died?"

Arthmael's tears spilled from his eyes. "She bled to death, begging for her father to help her while her mother held her hand. After Cecilia was gone, her mother cut the stillborn babe from her womb and brought the babe here. She laid it at my father's feet and told him she held him responsible.

"She took a dagger from her cloak and held it out, declaring my father would have no descendants to claim his homestead once he was gone. She vowed his sons would be turned to the same stone which she knew encased his heart, until women came to them who would love them enough to end their curse. Then she slit her own throat."

Rachel covered her mouth in horror and shook her head. "Oh no! That's terrible!"

He reached out, pushing a stray hair out of her face. "Her death was the beginning of our curse. And it remains the reason we are the way we are."

Rachel silently considered his words before asking, "But she said until women loved you enough to release you. How would said woman do that?"

He looked away. "I have never dared to hope there would be such a woman for me. She would have to be willing to accept me fully as I am now."

Rachel smiled. "I accept you. I didn't even scream or get all hysterical when I discovered you were real. Yes?"

He returned her smile and found her hand, bringing it to his lips. "You received me graciously, *Mon Amour*. And I am eternally grateful. It was a nice change in the six hundred years of my existence to be able to be your lover truly, instead of only being allowed to come to you in your dreams."

Rachel's shock was evident in her expression. "Six hundred years? You're that old? Has it . . .? Am I . . .? Have you been with anyone else the way you were just with me?"

His gaze was solemn when he shook his head. "I'd never wanted to be with any other outside of their dreams as I just was with you. You are the first I have ever wanted to stay with."

His words touched her heart, and she found herself leaning in to kiss him deeply. He opened to her as she invaded his mouth with her tongue, sharing in her passion. When she broke the kiss, her breathing was labored. Offering him a weak smile, she asked, "So, what do we do to break this curse you're under? Does breaking the curse for you free your brothers as well?"

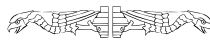
He chuckled darkly and kissed her again. "I cannot tell you how to break my curse, beloved. It is a secret I am not allowed to share. I do know it is something not many women would think to do; it would free only me. My brothers each have to be freed by the women who are meant for them."

Rachel frowned, "But then how can I break the curse if I don't know how?"

He smiled at her as if guarding a carefully kept secret. "In the morning, you will be presented with a unique situation. How you react to it is entirely up to you."

Before she could think to ask, he closed his arms around her, forcing her to rest her head on his chest. "Rest now. Morning comes soon, and I want to be able simply to hold you for a while longer before I must go."

Disappointed by his refusal to continue the conversation, but realizing they had mere hours till dawn, she nestled contentedly against him. Within moments, she drifted off to sleep.



Chapter Four

Arthmael lay facing the sleeping woman beside him, his heart thundering loudly in his ears. This was it. She was the one. Her heart had spoken to him the moment she had realized he was real. She hadn't gone screaming from the room in terror, as he had feared.

He could feel the dawn drawing near, but still, he was unsure. Was she ready for the challenge that would be laid before her when she awoke? He was not certain he was ready for it. What if she recognized it and acted upon it? Would it really free him, or would it just be an embarrassing moment for both of them later?

Arthmael was so immersed in his thoughts of her that he was unaware his brothers had joined them until one of them spoke. "She's beautiful, Arth. A goddess for certain."

Startled, Arthmael covered Rachel with the sheet before turning to glare at Corentin. "What are you doing here? If she awakens, you're liable to scare her to death!"

Corentin's brow simply rose in response, but Bastian chuckled. "More likely, she'll simply be disappointed to have chosen the least attractive of us." He smiled in his jest, even as he spoke.

Dionde, the youngest of the brothers ignored the banter between his siblings, and instead moved to gaze at the beauty lying in the bed. It was several seconds before he spoke. "Congratulations, brother. She *will* free you. I am sure she will understand what she must do."

Arthmael looked then from Dionde to the woman lying beside him. His gaze softened. She slumbered so peacefully, blissfully unaware of what was to come. He sighed, thinking of what he must do. It was nothing dangerous. It could not harm her in any way, but it was going to be hard for him to open himself in such a manner. It would put him at her mercy.

What if she laughed and walked away? What if she was appalled and refused to speak to him later? The fears coursing through his mind made him want to back out and do nothing more than climb his tower and turn again to stone for all eternity.

Bastian's voice found him and broke through his reverie. "You must prepare yourself, brother. Stop filling your mind with excess worry and have faith she will not desert you."

He paused in his words to look at the sleeping woman lying next to his eldest brother and smiled. "She did not run from you last night."

Corentin moved closer to the bed, shushing the brothers. "The dawn draws near. Decide your fate, Arthmael. Your destiny is upon you." Grabbing Bastian by the shoulder, he ushered him back toward the balcony.

Dionde followed, glancing back to lock gazes with Arthmael. After a moment, he smiled. "I shall miss flying with you, brother. But I would gladly trade places with you, were she intended for me."

When they were gone and the first rays of sunlight began to flicker into the room, Arthmael leaned down and placed a light kiss on Rachel's cheek. When he pulled back, he whispered, "I will hold no grudge if you refuse this test, my love."

Standing, he slowly took position where he needed to be. As the sun's light began to illuminate the tower he drew a shaky breath and forced himself to relax as his stone prison once again encased him.



Rachel woke feeling fantastic. Her lips curled into a broad smile as she stretched, before reaching out to touch the pillow where Arthmael had lain beside her during the night.

Cuddling the pillow, she inhaled deeply, trying to catch some scent that would remind her of his visit the night before. There was a faint trace of a musky scent, but it was so faint, she barely caught it.

Saddened at the thought she would not see him again until the night came, she reluctantly threw back the covers and moved to sit on the side of the bed, smiling when her womb fluttered, reminding her of their lovemaking the night before.

When she stood, she turned and stopped short at the sight before her. Her hands went to her cheeks, certain if she could see herself, she would be redder

than a beet. She was quite taken aback by this surprise; so much so, she was unsure at first how to react.

There, sitting on the love seat facing her bed was the glorious naked, and very much stone, Arthmael. His expression was guarded, as if trying to keep his own emotions hidden. His huge, resplendent wings were folded high, allowing him to be in a semi-reclined position.

His arms were stretched out across the back of the love seat in a non-threatening pose. He was a beautiful sight to behold, like a work of art to be treasured and enjoyed. When Rachel let her eyes move lower, her gasp turned into a soft moan.

His phallus stood long, thick and erect. It curved ever so slightly in open invitation for her to take what she might want. Shocked at her sudden urge to do just that, she took a step back, biting her bottom lip.

He was incapacitated. Wasn't he? It would be like taking advantage of an unconscious man. Wouldn't it? Shame filled her at the idea of taking him as though he were her personal dildo. At the thought, warmth flooded her nether regions. To have him beneath her as she worked herself over his hard form made her heart quicken. She liked the idea. New waves of embarrassment flooded her as she found herself moving closer to inspect the stone prince before her.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. Might this be her test? What if by being bold enough to take him when he was in this state, she could free him from the curse? "No," she whispered to herself. "Surely it couldn't be that simple." Leaning forward, she ran her hand down Arthmael's chest. The stone was smooth, like polished granite. Her eyes followed the trail of her hand as she went down on her knees before him.

When she looked back up into his face, it seemed as if his eyes followed her, waiting. She felt silly, but offered the statue a smile anyway. "Well, I could try it, and surely if it doesn't work, you won't hold it against me, will you?" She rolled her eyes. "What am I saying? If it doesn't work, you probably won't even know!"

Her choice made, she stood and took off the towel she had wrapped around herself. Looking at his stiff manhood, she paused. "We're going to need a little bit of lubricant for that," she whispered, before turning and going to her night stand.

Within seconds, she found what she sought. With the baby oil in her hand, she returned to his side. An apologetic smile on her lips, she told him, "I'll clean you off after this is all over if it doesn't work. But if it does . . . " She left the rest unsaid and drew a deep breath.

Pouring a small amount into her palm, she wrapped the hand around his staff and rubbed it over him, and then rubbed her mound with it as well. Looking him over once again, she shook her head. "I better do this before I lose my nerve. I hope if it doesn't do the trick, you won't have any memory of it. That would be too humiliating."

Moving to straddle his hips, she positioned herself so his hardness was even with her core. With one hand she braced herself on his shoulder, while she spread herself open with the other. Easing slowly down over him, she moaned as his girth spread her. "Oh, God. This could be quite intense." Her gaze moved to his face. "You aren't missing it, are you?" Somehow, she didn't think he was.

Closing her eyes again, she pushed herself down fully over him, taking him entirely inside of herself. Moving slowly, she began to rub her clit as she

worked herself over him, gasping when she began to feel the first orgasm rising.

Lost to the sensation, she missed his first breath. Stone began to transform to flesh. His wings, so long a permanent fixture on his back, simply crumbled to dust. His breathing joined hers as his eyes were able to take in the view of her beautiful body moving over his. He groaned aloud, his arms finally his to control.

Wrapping her in his embrace, he gave her a wicked smile when her eyes popped open. Before she could utter a sound, he claimed hers in a fiery, passionate kiss. His hips lifted to meet hers as she pushed downward, once again impaling herself on his cock.

They began moving together. Each was desperate to feel more of the other as they worked together toward release, groaning in unison once it hit. His arms wrapped tightly around her, he stood and moved to brace her against the wall, continuing to slide in and out of her moist heat.

Rachel wrapped her legs around his hips and moaned as the movement let him go even deeper inside. The ecstasy was intense, driving her over the edge and making her whole body quiver. Emotion made her babble his name as wave after wave of completion traveled through her.

His lips melded once again with hers. He traced the contours of her mouth, eliciting a moan from her as her tongue joined his in the dance his had started. Just when she'd begun to think they were almost at an end of their lovemaking, she felt Arthmael grow harder still within her.

Supporting her weight, he staggered across the room and sat down on the edge of her bed. Once again, she was on top. "Thank you for freeing me, *ma*

cherie une." He smiled as he lay back on the bed. "Now, where were you before I interrupted?"

Her eyes went wide. "Oh, uh . . . I was just . . . well, you said . . . so I thought, well, what if?"

His smile grew broader. "You were right. I thank you for taking the chance." His hands pushed lightly on her hips, urging her to move over him. "Now, as I said . . . where were we?"

Her shy smile grew a little broader. "Uh . . . I was going for a little ride?"

He lifted a brow at her choice of words. "Oh, yes, my love, that was a good ride . . . but I think you should be able to finish what you started. Don't you agree?"

At her slow nod, he lifted his hips slightly, making her coo as his cock pushed into her, reminding her it was still there, and hard for the taking. "Well, then? Such a beautiful rider should be allowed to finish her ride."

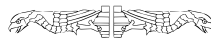
A deep blush filled Rachel's cheeks making her bloom before him. He lifted his hand to brush the hair out of her face, and whispered, "Ride me, *amour*. Take what you want from me, now with the sunlight filtering into the room so I can see you in all your naked glory. My Angel, you have freed me."

Slowly, she began to move over him. Her hands rested on his chest as she lifted herself, and then pushed back down. The friction between them was exquisite, making them both moan, wailing as they held to each other.

Suddenly, she began to feel Arthmael shiver beneath her. "Oh, my love. I can feel it. I'm going to come." He reached to gather her into his arms. "Come with me. Let me feel you come with me." Even as he spoke, he let one hand trail down her body to begin fondling her clit.

The pressure he used on her most sensitive spot, coupled with the massage of his manhood inside her drove her over the edge. Screaming his name, she convulsed as he too gave himself over to the magic they had built between themselves.

Too spent to move, Rachel collapsed on top of him, lying her head on his chest. Within moments, they both succumbed to the need for sleep.



"Look at them. Just look at them." Catherine nudged Luigi in her excitement. He stood in the doorway of Rachel's room, but refused to come any further inside. They stood observing the happy couple, lost to their dreams.

"*Oui*, my dear. I can see them very well from here," he mumbled, turning and making his way from the room, and down the stairs of the tower.

She followed after him, disappointed in his reaction. "Well, I thought you'd be happy to see your son has been freed."

Turning abruptly, Luigi pinned Catherine with a level stare. "Of course I am proud for him," he sighed, running his hand over his face before he continued.

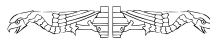
"Catherine, I am the reincarnation of the man who fathered those boys. I shouldn't even have any memory of what happened all those centuries ago, but I do. I have come back to this place in every lifetime I have had, and served as a grounds keeper, just to be close to my boys. Still, they have no knowledge of who I am. But I am continually tormented to know every little thing about them and the lives they have led."

Tears glistened in his eyes. "Of course I am happy for Arthmael. And my heart still breaks for the other three. It has taken six centuries for one of them

to find his true love. But how much longer will the others have to wait?" With a sad smile at his loving wife, he turned and continued his journey down the spiral staircase.

Her heart burdened by the pain her husband still felt, Catherine followed him down the narrow stairway. As she sulked an idea struck her, making the smile return to her lips. Perhaps she could convince Rachel to do something else besides turn the castle into a bed and breakfast.

Her mind started working up a mess of mischief. Yes, perhaps there would be a way to bring women to the other brothers as well. Of course! It would be easy! Surely, Rachel had friends.



Chapter Five

"Well, Tarrah . . . I just thought, since you hadn't really decided what to do with that career of yours right now, you might consider coming out here for a little while. That's all."

Rachel clicked her nails on the table between her and Catherine as she waited for her friend on the other end of the line to answer. After a moment, she continued speaking, "No. Good heavens, no. I don't need you to come live here just because I want someone to pay me rent. Actually . . ." Rachel gave Catherine a frustrated look before she rolled her eyes. "Well, the truth is that I miss having a friendly face around here. And I have lots of room for you to have your own private apartment. I swear!"

Another pause, "Heck, you might even take some classes out here! I mean, come on, Tarrah, this is France!"

She stopped speaking again, and Catherine leaned forward in her chair, desperately trying to hear the words from the woman on the other end of the line.

A smile broke across Rachel's face and she gave Catherine the thumbs up gesture. "Yes! Oh, I know you're gonna love it here! Oh, thank you, Tarrah! I

can't wait to see you!"

When she hung up the phone, she and Catherine both giggled madly. Catherine grabbed Rachel's hand. "I am so happy I'm not plotting all alone anymore, my dear!" She scowled. "That was so tedious and rarely gave me the desired effect."

Arthmael entered the kitchen with a suspicious expression. "Plotting what? What are you two ladies doing?" He smiled, leaning down to claim Rachel's lips in a passionate kiss before pulling back and smiling at Catherine. "My brothers will be awake soon, and they were hoping you'd made that delicious cake you promised."

Catherine nodded and rose from the chair to take the cake out of the pantry. "Of course I did. But I had to hide it so you wouldn't eat it all before they got here!"

Arthmael feigned hurt feelings as he let Rachel nudge him out the door. She led him from the kitchen to the library. After she had closed the door behind them, she turned and offered him a quick smile. "How was your visit with your father?"

He sighed and smiled. "It was nice. Strange to call him father when he doesn't look as old as he did when he was really my father."

She chuckled, closing the distance between them and wrapping her arms around him. "I missed you today."

He leaned in to kiss her deeply, returning her hug. "I missed you as well. But I did enjoy working beside Luigi for a time today. The grounds are beginning to look as beautiful as they once did."

Wondering if she should tell him what she and Catherine were planning, she bit her lip. Deciding to brave it, she spoke, using the loving nickname she had given him. "Arthey? I need to tell you something."

Her words gave him pause, and he found himself leaning back and assessing her with his catlike eyes. "What have you done?"

She offered him a big smile. "I've invited one of my friends to come live with us for a while."

He tilted his head, smirking at her knowingly. "Oh, really?" Crossing his arms over his chest, he asked, "And why did you do that?"

Once again closing the distance between them, she took his hands in hers and pulled him close, so she could maneuver his arms around her. "I just thought maybe if one of your brothers met her . . . well, it worked for us, didn't it?"

Arthmael watched her closely for a moment before nodding slowly. "Yes, but you're forgetting something, my dear."

She looked up into his eyes, giving her best innocent look. "What's that?"

He leaned down and let his lips skim lightly over hers. "I lost my heart to you when you were still a young girl, even if you didn't know me. I had much longer to deal with losing my heart to you."

Rachel gave him a dazzling smile, and his heart skipped a beat. "I didn't know you were real then. But I loved the idea that you might be. Tarrah is a lover of the unusual. She's one of the best friends I ever had when I was in school." Her smile grew. "I can think of no one I would rather have one of your brothers come to love."

He chuckled deep in his throat. "And I thought I had a great deal to overcome in giving myself over to the idea of loving you." He shook his head,

smiling. "I fear with this girl you have invited here . . . whichever brother you have decided on giving to her isn't going to know what hit him."

Returning his smile, Rachel pulled him down to her level and kissed him deeply. *Yes, she thought happily. This is the beginning of a wonderful thing!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shiloh grew up in an average, mid-sized town in West Texas. As a child, she had a very hard time learning to read. Not only did it seem to her to be a waste of time; it was also hard for her to focus on the words. And let's just admit it . . . it was so much more fun to daydream of romantic adventures. As a kid, she was full of them! In fact, she could often spin a better story from the pictures in her storybooks than the authors themselves did.

When she was twelve years old, still reading at a second grade level, her mother fought her illiteracy by giving Shiloh her very first Harlequin romance. It took her a month to read the story, but reading it did the trick and flipped the switch for her. By the end of her fifth grade year, she was reading at a seventh grade level and anxious for the next book she could get.

Soon, Shiloh was reading any and every romantic book (translate that term as mostly romance novels) she could get her hands on. At the age of fifteen, she discovered Bram Stoker, whose work inspired the beginnings of her own written storytelling. She wanted to tell stories of love that surpassed time and broke through the barriers of life and death, but with touches of adventure and paranormal suspense as well.

She began writing short stories and poetry, all haunting tales of love between mortal and immortal souls. At eighteen, she started mapping out her ideas for *The Order of Eternals*. The result of her meticulous plotting and planning is a staggering list of novels her readers can anticipate with gusto, two of which are currently available in eBook format.

She lives with her own soul mate and her two children, along with their very own zoo (cats and dogs and elephants—no wait! Scratch the elephants . . . but Shiloh's daughter does have a python. Did we mention she also loves animals, in addition to reading and writing?). She enjoys reading everything from thrillers to mystery; paranormal romance to Gothic novels, as well as writing her own.

Shiloh loves to hear from her readers. Their responses to her writing are what motivates her to keep telling her stories. You can drop her an eMail at: ShilohDarke@theorderofeternals.com, or visit her website at: www.theorderofeternals.com. At the website, be sure to join her newsletter to get the latest information on upcoming stories.