

Beauty's Stone Beast 2: Tarrak's Dream



Tarrah's Dream

Book Two of Beauty's Stone Beast Series

by

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Tarrah's Dream
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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

Tarrah folded the last shirt and packed it into the suitcase, her mind still trying to wrap around the idea of her taking this trip. It wasn't just any jaunt. This was her *dream* journey, in more ways than simple explanation could describe.

France was the one place she had always wanted to be. When she was a child, she had often begged her mother to move there. When her mother responded once by asking her why she wanted to go there so badly, Tarrah had looked at her as if she was daft and answered, "Because that's where I belong."

To her, it had always seemed she did belong there. From a very young age she had been enamored with everything about it; the language, the history. The country was not merely beautiful to her, but it also felt right, like it was where she was destined to be. But it wasn't merely her attraction to the country that made her desire to go there so much half so much as the recurring dreams that had visited her ever since the night she had turned seventeen.

The dreams had started simply. A castle. A moonlit sky from the balcony. A man's voice, whispering her name and calling to her, entreating her to come to him. Over time, the dreams had become more vivid. Everything was clear to her

except his face. His body finally joined the voice, enticing her and promising her tempting delights. He beckoned her to come to him in those beautiful dreams; he spoke of the nights and how he felt free whenever she came to him.

The dream she held most dear was when he had touched her the first time. She had felt the cool caress of his hands as they touched her, pulling her gently into his embrace.

The strangest thing about this dream was that she never saw the owner of the arms or the voice. His face was always surrounded in shadow. Never once in all these years had she been able to put a face to her dream lover. But the one thing she did know was, if he existed, he was in France.

So when Rachel had called and begged her to come join her there, it had not taken much to convince Tarrah to throw caution to the wind and ready herself to go. It had taken her all of two minutes to get up the gumption to call her boss and tell him to go screw himself. He was the most hot-headed, conceited ass she had ever had endure.

For nearly a decade, she had worked at the Law Offices of Franklin and Stuart as a lowly filing clerk. For the first four years, she had loved it. But that was before Allen Franklin, Jr., had seen her. From the moment she got the promotion to work as his personal secretary, the man had made her regret being born female.

He gave new meaning to the words *sexual harassment*. It was as if the bastard couldn't go a day without finding an excuse to touch her, or to make inappropriate comments about her body or her looks.

To make things worse, when she tried to report him to the office manager, she had found herself called into the office of Allen Franklin, Sr., who had curtly informed her if she wanted to raise a stink for his son and cause trouble

in the boy's career, he would be more than happy to kick her to the curb without so much as a severance check. She had been young then. No one had told her if her boss threatened her, it was as bad as sexual harassment and was a lawsuit almost any other firm would have picked up, *pro bono*.

Instead, she had been quiet and suffered through the abuse with nary a word. For six years she endured that man's wandering hands and insulting comments. That's why she had felt so very happy to call in that morning and tell them she wouldn't be back.

Junior had called her personally and tried to goad her into staying, but she had simply laughed and told him she was going where he could never touch her. He had sputtered like the idiot she believed him to be, but she had just smiled sweetly to herself and told him he could find himself another pretty girl to try to bully into sleeping with him. She doubted he would be able to, since these days every young woman out there knew her rights when it came to being heckled in the workplace.

Rachel had told her she wanted her to stay indefinitely if she decided she liked it there. She had even promised Tarrah instead of just having a room to herself, she would have her own apartment. If she was going to live in France, there was little reason to worry over keeping a job in the States, especially working for a boss she hated.

When Tarrah called her mother to tell her the news, she had voiced all the nervous concerns of a loving parent. But when Tarrah explained she was going to be staying with Rachel, her mother had quickly agreed the trip would do her good. "Just take care of yourself, dear, and keep in touch with me. I want to know everything." Then she added, "Send me something from Paris."

Laughing, Tarrah agreed. "Okay, Mom. I promise. I'm taking my computer, and I know Rachel has Internet, 'cause that's how she makes her living. I'll email you all the time, and call you once a week."

Her mother chuckled. "Oh, and if you find yourself one of those beautiful Frenchmen, you have my permission to get started working on my grandchildren."

"*Mother*," Tarrah scolded, taken aback.

"What? I don't want to be so old I can't enjoy my grand babies a little. If you wait much longer I won't even be alive to see them," her mother had come back jokingly.

"Mom! You're only forty-nine!"

"Exactly!" she answered. "I had you when I was twenty-two! Now you're twenty-seven. The older you get, the harder it'll be on your poor body to lose that baby fat."

Even as she opened her mouth to argue, images of the evasive lover from her dreams filled her mind, making her smile. "Okay, you win. If I find the man I'm looking for in France, the birth control will be the first thing to go . . . okay?"

Her mother scoffed, "Well, get the ring on your finger first. Make sure he's going to be a good father before you jump in, of course . . ."

They had talked another hour before Tarrah made her excuses and got off the phone. She doubted she would be able to sleep, she was so excited, but she knew she needed to try to rest for a while before she left in the morning.

The thought brought a smile to her face. She'd be going to Paris in the morning!



The night was clear. A light breeze feathered her hair away from her face as she stood on the balcony. Her eyes searched the darkness, looking for some sign of the lover she knew would come. He always came.

For what seemed an eternity, he didn't show. She moved closer to the railing of the balcony and looked over the edge. The tower was too tall for him to climb its steep walls. She wondered briefly exactly where he did come from on those nights when he came to her.

She was so lost in her own thoughts as she stared out into the darkness, he caught her by surprise when his arms closed around her from behind. Gasping, she started to struggle before his voice stilled her.

"Ma Belle, you have nothing to fear from me. I want only to be near you. To feel you during this time, when we can be together before the dawn."

Closing her eyes, she relaxed into him, her back pressed against his chest. "Why must you leave me in the dawn? Could we not share the sunrise together?"

A deep chuckle escaped him. "You must wake up, Cherie. And I must return to my place as well."

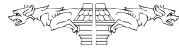
Confusion wrinkled her brows. "Where? Where must you go?" When she started to turn, he stopped her gently, but firmly.

"What is unimportant," he answered softly. "What is important is what we do with this limited time we have." His hands began to move gently over her, opening the robe she wore.

Tarrah's breath caught in her throat when she felt the warmth of his palm touch the soft underside of her breast. She moaned at the sensation as his forefinger rubbed across the tightening skin of her nipple.

He groaned in response as he caressed the skin on her belly with his other hand; his fingers slid through her nether lips to tease her clit. His touch sent shivers spiraling through her.

"Come for me, Mon Amour . . . let me hear you cry out for me." As he spoke, his finger rubbed fast across the tender flesh of her nub, making her writhe in his embrace and try to inch closer into the touch.



Gasping, Tarrah tried to reach out for her lover, only to grasp thin air. Jarred awake by the sudden loss, she sat up as she opened her eyes and looked around the darkened room. Sitting alone in the bed, she pulled the cover up over her and held it to her chin.

She felt bereft and abandoned. The emotion brought tears to her eyes. In her dream, she had felt sheltered and loved. Thrust back into the real world, she was supremely aware of how lonely she really was. She lay on the mattress and pulled the covers around herself, burrowing her head into the pillow. The tears came unbidden, as did her overwhelming sense of loss at the abrupt end of the dream.

She was glad she was going to France. She was glad she would be with Rachel again. Tarrah hadn't seen her since Rachel's grandmother's funeral. It had been too long.

Closing her eyes, she forced her mind to clear and let sleep claim her again. Although, this time, the absence of dreams was unsettling.



Chapter Two

As the sun set the stone became pliant, stretching and softening to transform into flesh. Bastian rose from his crouched position over his tower and looked at each of his remaining brothers as they, too, stirred and stretched.

Sighing wistfully, he looked up at the night sky. His mind was riddled by thoughts of the lady in his dreams. His brothers preferred the nights, because it gave them freedom from the stone prison they were forced to abide during the day. Bastian, however, was irritable when he first awoke in the evenings. He much preferred his dreams. In them, he was able to be with her; the goddess who made his stone existence bearable.

This last dream had left him restless. He ached to truly touch this dream woman. But how could he when he knew she was only a figment of his imagination? Not real. No one could be that beautiful, or smell as heavenly. He had always loved how, in his dreams, she seemed to have the lingering scent that reminded him of a field of exotic, sweet flowers, but he couldn't place the fragrance.

Corentin cleared his throat, breaking in on Bastian's thoughts. "You seem miles away, brother. What I wouldn't give to know what visions are traveling through your head."

Bastian turned to contemplate his brother. "Just pondering . . . regretting how different the life of my dreams is from the one I have." Bastian offered him a slow smile. "Where do your dreams take you?"

Corentin shrugged his shoulders. "After the first century of this, I quit keeping track of my dreams. I'm not even sure I have dreams any longer, it's been so long since I bothered to remember."

They stared at each other for a moment longer before Bastian turned to see Dionde beside him. "I could not survive this torment without the comfort of my dreams. They are the only things that keep me sane in this existence we are forced to live," Bastian said.

Dionde sighed, rubbing his forehead. He had no words to add to Bastian's musings. Instead, he hoped to guide them from the subject. "Come, brothers. I can smell Catherine's cooking. I am hoping Arthmael has left us some, since he no longer has to wait until dusk to eat."

Bastian chuckled. "Oh, I am sure he left us something, even if it is only the bones!"

Corentin growled as he turned to make his way to the inside of the tower apartment. "That bastard better have left us enough to fill our bellies, or I'll make his night a living hell!" His wings trembled as he wrapped them around himself like a cloak.

Dionde laughed outright. Their eldest brother had gained his freedom from their shared curse just months before, when Rachel, the grandniece of the former owner of Nephelium Manor, had come to claim her inheritance.

She had been expecting only the castle, but had found Arthmael as well. He had been so bemused and haunted by her that he had found the courage to offer her the test that would decide if she was truly his mate, and free him from the curse.

Rachel had since become a friend to each of them, and they all trusted and loved her as a sister. She had promised them she would do everything in her power to try to help them gain their own freedom from the curse the last three brothers were still forced to endure.

Bastian had little faith in her truly being able to discover a way to free them, but he was happy at having her as a sister and friend, as well as the perfect wife for his elder brother. He could entertain her desire to aid them in their quest for freedom from their shared stone imprisonment. Hope could certainly do no more damage to them than the curse itself had.

Folding back his wings to make them appear smaller and less threatening, he followed his brothers down the outside stairway that led to the courtyard they used to gain entrance into the home. As they entered, the smell of freshly baked bread and bacon made their bellies betray their hunger, loudly.

Rachel, carrying a large tray of food, popped into the dining hall, where the three men had taken their seats around the heavy wooden table. "Good morning, gentlemen! Catherine has prepared a feast for you."

Arthmael followed her into the room, carrying yet another tray and wearing a contented smile, his eyes never straying from his love. Arthmael's obvious bliss made Bastian want to growl. Of all the brothers, Bastian had always been the one with the most optimism and the best attitude, but this morning, his emotions were clouded, still on edge from waking too soon from his dream of the fiery-haired temptress. She haunted him even in his waking hours. Even

with his stomach wanting the food they brought, he ached for the daylight to return so he could once again find her.

As they began to fill their plates in anticipation of their meal, Rachel cleared her throat. Each of them turned their attention to her. She gave them a bright smile before looking back to Arthmael for encouragement. The brothers exchanged glances and shrugged before returning their gazes to Rachel, who offered them yet another breathtaking smile.

Bastian's heart ached. He was happy for Arthmael and even somewhat envious. Rachel was beautiful. So much so that there wasn't a brother who hadn't lost his heart to her in some way. Even Corentin, who rarely found a reason to smile, was affected by both her beauty and her wit. He had told Arthmael the only reason he was lucky enough to have found her was because she had been placed in his tower.

So lost in his own musings was he that he came back to himself only toward the end of Rachel's announcement. ". . . She doesn't know about any of you yet." She shook her head. "I haven't had the courage to tell her, so I must ask you to refer back to the way you used to exist, if only for the time being."

He opened his mouth to ask her to repeat herself, but his question was preempted by Corentin's outburst. "You want us to go back into hiding?" His voice held a note of near hysteria. "We have to slink around in the shadows . . . *again?*"

Bastian looked from Corentin back to Rachel. "Why?" he spoke so softly that everyone at the table turned to give him their full attention. "Why are you bringing a friend here so soon?" He looked from her to Arthmael. "We have barely begun to feel as if we could live as a family again, and you want us to go back to who we were before?"

Shaking his head, he dropped his fork to his plate and stood. "As you wish, *mademoiselle*." His voice was flat; his eyes had lost their usual sparkle. "I can hide, if it pleases you."

As he neared the door, Rachel's stopped him with a quiet plea. "Bastian?"

For a moment, he debated ignoring her and continuing his departure. Instead, courtesy stilled him as he glanced back over his shoulder to meet her gaze.

Rachel's eyes were on him, and he felt ashamed of himself when he saw the tears in her eyes. "She'll be staying in your tower." Her gaze was hopeful. "If that is okay with you."

Taking a deep breath, he bowed his head. His silvery white hair fell forward, covering one eye. "As you wish," he whispered. Before anyone could utter another word, he quit the room and stepped out into the courtyard.

Unfurling his massive wings he took to the air, carrying himself out into the night to search for some of the solitude he hadn't had, and hadn't wanted, in the past month. He had a feeling his life would never be the same after this night.



The early morning sun was glinting brightly in Tarrah's tired eyes when she got off the plane. She went through customs fairly quickly, all things considered. She had expected the extra protection they had at the airports at home in the States. Of course, after nine-eleven, increased Homeland Security measures were a given, but the security at the Parisian airports was just as strict. In some ways, it was even more so. It surprised her, but on further

consideration, she imagined they needed just as much, if not more security. After all, they were much closer to the threat than America was.

When she got outside she was relieved to see Rachel waiting for her with a huge smile in place. "Thank God!" she sighed. "I was afraid it would take forever to find you!"

Laughing, Rachel grabbed one of her bags. "Come on! Let's get going, we have a bit of a drive!"

Nodding, Tarrah fell into step with her. "I figured as much. How long a drive is it from here to your castle?" she asked with a teasing smile.

Rachel shrugged, moving to open the trunk of a car that had just pulled up beside them. "Not that long, if you don't mind a scenic route." She looked Tarrah over appraisingly. "Do we need to stop and get something to eat first? Are you hungry?"

Tarrah shook her head. "No, they served a decent breakfast right before we landed."

Rachel laughed. "Well, fancy that! They didn't give us anything the last two hours of my flight!"

Tarrah scoffed, "That's the difference between first class and coach, silly! I told you to suck it up and get the good ticket!" As she loaded her suitcase in the back, she glanced at the man behind the driver's seat.

"And who is *this*?" she asked softly. When Rachel's smile grew wider, Tarrah chuckled. "Oh, girl . . . have you been holding out on me?"

Rachel gave an excited giggle before answering, "Tarrah, I want you to meet someone." Holding the door open for her friend, Rachel climbed in the back seat beside her and closed the door before saying, "Tarrah, this is my fiancé, Arthmael."

She clasped her friend's hand tightly, even as she reached up and rubbed her lover's shoulder. "Arthmael, this is my best friend, and the closest thing I've ever had to a sister. This is Tarrah."

Tarrah turned a stunned expression from Rachel to the beautiful man who smiled back at her kindly. His voice, when he spoke, had a deep accent that sent tingles running down her spine. "I am very pleased to meet you, Tarrah. I hope we shall become the best of friends as well."

Holy Toledo! Her thoughts ran away with her. *That voice! It's so much like his voice.* But still, it was different. *Besides*, she admonished herself, *he's Rachel's*. Coming back to herself after a minute, she smiled back and squeezed her best friend's hand. "As long as you make her happy, we'll be the best of friends."

His eyes sparkled when he looked from her back to Rachel, and Tarrah swore she could feel the depth of his love for her friend radiating from him. Happy for her friend, but feeling somewhat left out, she turned to stare out the window at the scenery they passed.

Rachel drew her attention back when she spoke. "It *is* actually quite a drive back home from here," she said, her expression almost apologetic. "I'm sorry for that, because I'm sure you feel jet-lagged."

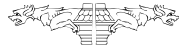
Shrugging, Tarrah tried to sound nonchalant. "I don't mind, but I do have to warn you, I'm so tired I may doze off."

Rachel chuckled. "Then you go right ahead. I'm so happy you came, I can forgive you anything."

Blinking, Tarrah settled back in the seat, but she still inquired, "Are you certain?"

Rachel rolled her eyes before producing a pillow from the front passenger seat. "As a matter of fact, I expected it." When Tarrah still hesitated, she added, "Go on! Rest while we drive back. Trust me, we'll have plenty of time to catch up later."

Reaching out, Tarrah seized Rachel's hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. "Thanks." She closed her eyes and dozed off before Rachel had even let her hand go.



When she found herself standing on the balcony, she saw his figure mere feet away, pacing. Taking hesitant steps toward him, she stopped when he swung to face her. "Where have you been?" he demanded, his expression panicked. "I was sure you would be here, but when I came, you were nowhere to be found."

She watched him for a moment before answering. "I'm taking a trip. I stayed up later than normal. As it is, this is just a nap." She was unsure why she felt the need to explain to him. He was only a dream, wasn't he?

He closed the distance between them and pulled her close. Although his face was still obscured from her, she could make out the outline of his features and see the grayish blue shade of his eyes—and the concern within them. Still she was startled; this was the most she had seen of his face in all these years. Strangely, this small glimpse of him made him even more real than ever to her.

"I worried you had left me. I was afraid you had decided you had no need of me." His words were laced with a desperation that made her feel desired and protected.

"I doubt a time will ever come a time when I do not need you." She smiled and touched her hand tentatively to his chest. "You are more real to me than any other man I've ever known. I can't imagine how I would survive if I could not be with you," she confessed, "even if it is only in my dreams."

His voice broke as he pulled her closer, his lips tickling hers as he whispered the endearment, "My love!" before claiming her mouth in a kiss she felt all the way to her toes.

How could the time she spent with him be only a fantasy, an illusion? Her mind reeled. He felt more substantial to her, his touch more solid and secure, than anything she had ever felt with any of her boyfriends. The boy who had rid her of her virginity had not seemed this tangible, or this honest. She had known he was only a means to an end when she had given herself to him. This man . . . standing before her, claiming her lips with his own, locked in this fairy tale with her at this moment, was the only reality she had ever known, the only truth she ever wanted to know.

When he pressed himself closer to her, she could feel his manhood pushing impatiently against her thigh. A moan of wanton desire escaped her as she slid her hand down between them to rub the turgid flesh.

"I want this," she whispered into his lips. "I want you." Her heart meant every word she spoke. "If the only way I can have you is to dream of you in the night, then so be it!"

As if her words opened a floodgate, her mystery lover groaned deeply and began working at the opening of her blouse. Impatient, he ripped at the fabric, sending buttons flying, as he tugged the material down her arms.

His mouth followed the trail of exposed skin, touching and licking as he went, leaving her feeling hot and flushed, as if molten fire was lapping against her skin

instead. When his mouth covered a puckered nipple and sucked deeply, she felt her knees buckle as she gave herself over to the sensation.

Slowly, he lowered her to the ground, and covered her, pushing her dress up so his flesh could touch hers. He tore her panties away before he pushed his hips between her thighs and fit the head of his cock against her cleft.

Her heart pounded as she realized this would be the moment when her fantasy lover would truly become her lover in every sense of the word. She found herself praying never to awaken. If this was a prelude to death, she'd gladly accept it. If he was the Angel of Death, she'd go anywhere he wanted.

His eyes burned an eerie translucent liquid silver when they met hers. "You belong to me," he uttered as he thrust into her welcoming moist passage.



Coming awake when Rachel touched her arm, she cried out in alarm at the sudden, overpowering emptiness she felt. "No!"

Rachel looked her over with an expression of concern. "Are you all right?"

She tried to calm her breathing and the frantic, runaway beating of her heart. After a moment, she turned to meet the worried gaze of her friend. "Yes. I just . . . it was a dream." She chuckled nervously. "I'm sorry if I startled you."

As she leaned back, she felt the two bottom buttons from her blouse fall into her lap. Glancing at Rachel, who hadn't noticed, she picked them up and stared at them, lying clear as day in her palm.

Shock gave way to relief when she realized the car was no longer idling. Her senses heightened by the sudden awakening, she saw the stonework of the

castle before them, marveling a moment in the grandeur of the structure, before she glanced back at her best friend to see Rachel's wide smile.

"We're here." Rachel, somehow strangely oblivious to Tarrah's quandary, turned and opened the door. "Come with me! I'll show you everything."

Still trying to come to terms with being torn from the arms of her dream lover, Tarrah swallowed hard before answering a little shakily, "I can't wait." Her heart rate had just begun to slow, but sped immediately back up when she stood and felt her panties slip, unhindered, down her thighs to land on the ground between her feet.

Startled, she gasped and bent to scoop them up before either of her companions could see, stuffing the ruined fabric quickly inside her purse. She glanced furtively at the others and was grateful to see they were busy getting the suitcases out of the back. She let out a sigh of relief and joined them. She turned to get a better look at the castle, her breath catching in her throat when she noticed the giant gargoyle-like creatures atop each of the towers. The three of stone creatures on the outside towers seemed almost to have lives of their own. Their features were so expressive, she thought she could almost feel their emotions.

The fourth crouched on the center tower, and although it was just as magnificent architecturally as the others, it lacked the substance of vigor she sensed from the others. Just as she began to turn, she stopped short, staring again at one tower. The expression on its face caught her attention, the curve of the gargoyle's jaw, the intensity of its stare; it all seemed so familiar to her.

A fleeting vision flitted through her mind for a mere second before it was gone. Bemused and self-conscious of the breeze fanning her privates, she turned to find Rachel watching her. "Beautiful, isn't it?" she asked softly.

Tarraah nodded. "Yes, i-it certainly is." She looked back to the tower. "The stonework is amazing. And the gargoyles look so lifelike, it's a bit strange."

Rachel smiled and nodded. "The middle statue had to be restored recently." She explained. "It was damaged during a storm and had to be almost entirely rebuilt."

Arthmael moved to Rachel's side, shifting the luggage as he did. "I am going to put this in Tarraah's suite. Why don't you show her around and introduce her to Father and his wife?" He gave Tarraah a warm smile. "I am glad you came, Tarraah. I hope you like it here enough to stay a while with us."

She returned his smile and nodded. "Thank you, Arthmael. I know I'll love it here. I'm glad Rachel invited me."

As he walked away, Tarraah turned and offered Rachel an envious look. "My God, woman! Where did you find him?"

Laughing, Rachel shrugged. "Actually, he's the caretaker's son. Or . . . well, here . . . let me explain a little better. Aunt Geraldine left only half of the property to me. I have the land with the castle.

"The smaller manor, which stands over on the other side of that hill, actually belongs to Luigi and his wife, Caroline. She is the manager for housekeeping; he is the caretaker. His family has been on this land dating back all the way to the original owners." She smiled again, adding, "This place is so filled with history, it's overwhelming."

Tarraah looked from Rachel, back to the last tower with the lone gargoyle statue that had held her attention. "Oh, trust me, I do."



Chapter Three

After showing Tarrah the grounds and gardens along the outside, Rachel led her inside and gave her a quick tour of the ground floor. Amazed, Tarrah followed and stared in awed wonder at the splendor of the rooms.

Much of the art dated back to the Renaissance period and had to be worth more money than either of them would ever have tried to guess. Tarrah felt as if she were walking through a museum instead of someone's home.

"This place is freakin' fantastic!" she whispered. "I mean, oh my holy God! What do you think is worth more—the castle, or all the treasures in it?"

Smiling, Rachel shook her head. "I don't really give it much thought. At first, I did, of course." She turned back and grabbed Tarrah's hand, squeezing it gently. "But now, I just think of it as home. And you will too! I promise."

Tarrah glanced from her friend back to their surroundings. "If you say so. Right now, I just feel like a bull in a china closet."

"Don't feel that way, dear! This castle is your home now!" an unfamiliar feminine voice caught both women by surprise. Tarrah jumped, but Rachel only smiled and waved the older woman over.

"Caroline, come meet my very best friend." Still clasping Tarrah's hand, she squeezed it again reassuringly. "Tarrah, this is Caroline. Without her help, this castle would fall into ruin."

Caroline shrugged as she moved closer and held a hand out to Tarrah. "I only do what I was taught. And you do just fine on your own now."

She chuckled before addressing Tarrah directly, "And don't you let this one fool you. She can run this castle all on her own now. Believe me, she just keeps me around for kicks, as you would say Stateside!"

Smiling, Tarrah nodded. "I don't doubt it. Rachel's always been able to accomplish anything she put her mind to." Looking back to Rachel, she added, "I don't expect that will ever change."

Nodding, Caroline asked, "Are you hungry? Do you need anything to eat?"

Relaxing, Tarrah shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Truth be told, I'm just really tired. That flight was the longest I've ever been through." The weariness she was feeling had begun to show. "I had started to think it would never end before the flight was finally over."

Immediately, Caroline turned into the ideal mother figure. "Oh, you poor thing! I cannot believe Rachel is trying to show you around today! Let's get you to your suite, so you can get settled!"

Rachel had the decency to look properly chastised. "I'm sorry. I guess I was just so excited finally to have you here."

Tarrah looked between the two women, smiling. "It's okay, really. I didn't mind. This is all so beautiful. I'm just feeling more jet-lagged than I first realized, I guess."

Caroline cut in, wrapping her comforting arm around Tarrah's shoulder. "But there is nothing to see today that can't wait until tomorrow." She gave

Rachel a pointed look. "Right now, nothing is more important than for you to get your sleep."

Sharing a bemused smile with her friend, Tarrah let Caroline lead her to a beautiful spiral staircase and up it. Rachel followed behind with a smile that nearly made Tarrah nervous. What was her friend thinking that had her looking like the cat that swallowed the canary? She knew Rachel too well. The woman was clearly up to something.

"Now, dear, this is your very own suite. Or, I imagine you would call it your apartment back in the States."

When she opened the door and stepped back, Tarrah did a double take for the fourth time that day. The room wasn't a room. It was like its very own house built within the castle walls. She took in the sight in silence, noting the elaborately furnished living area, with a kitchenette off to the side. A fireplace stood at the far wall, and a door at the opposite side of the room led into another beautiful room. Going to that doorway and walking through, Tarrah stared in wonder at the sight of the king size bed that stood on a platform in the center of the room.

Long, sheer canopy curtains fell from the ceiling, making the bed a truly glorious thing to behold. The far wall opened to reveal a huge balcony. The doors opening out to it were like standard French doors, only wider and more ornate than any she had seen before.

But most of the doors and windows were stained glass. One door held up a picture of what looked to be a warrior, wearing chain maille and looking every bit the valiant, sword clutched bravely in his hand.

The other door, less regal but still beautiful, made her feel somewhat sad. It depicted a gargoyle, a beast with head bowed, almost as if afraid or ashamed to

look at those who beheld him. That window's image tore at Tarrah's heart. She could sense the pain he felt. Crossing the room to stand before the door, she raised her hand to the glass and traced the shape of the monster's face. He was still beautiful. Rachel and Caroline both watched her with curious expressions before sharing a smile that she missed.

Caroline was the one to break the silence. "Well now, dear. You get some rest. If you need anything you can always find me in the kitchen."

Rachel smiled and added, "My tower is the middle one, and my balcony faces yours. If you need me, just come and yell to me. I always keep the doors open during the day."

Tarrah returned Rachel's embrace, whispering, "Thank you," before the two women left her alone with her thoughts and her desire to return to her compelling fantasy world.

When they left the room, Tarrah crossed again to the balcony doors. Opening them, she inhaled and smiled as a soft breeze ruffled her hair minutely. It was an easy decision to leave the doors open before she turned her attention again toward the room.

Arthmael had set her suitcases beside the wide, inviting bed. With a tired yawn, she moved to lie on the bed. She was so tired she didn't even bother to change out of her day clothes before stretching out on the bed and falling into the first comforting, deep, dreamless sleep she'd had in a long time.



As Bastian stretched and became flesh, he breathed deeply. The night was filled with scents he knew well. His brothers were already taking flight into the

darkness and away from the castle. He spread his wings and prepared to leap into the air when a new scent hit him.

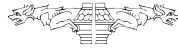
He froze a moment, and then he turned to stare toward the balcony. The doors were open, the fragrance of fresh orchids and jasmine assailing his senses made him turn and stalk slowly toward the doorway. Cautiously, he folded his wings so they draped around him as he peered carefully into the room. When he saw no lights were on and no one stirred within, he found his gaze captured by the figure in the bed. Unable to fight the pull of her scent, he found himself drawn closer to her side.

The woman lay above the covers, still fully dressed, but to his eyes she may as well have been naked. His heart rate and breathing sped to an uncomfortable rate. Her lush auburn hair fell across the pillow in long, silky waves. Her eyes were closed, but it was apparent she was the same woman he had come to love in his dreams. *She was real.* All this time, he had thought of her as a figment of his imagination. *No! She was real . . . and she was here!*

Going down on his knees beside the bed, he reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I never believed I could find a soul mate. I had surrendered to having you only in my dreams. Yet, here you are." His voice was whisper soft, but she still stirred.

Moaning, she turned and nestled close to his hand. She smiled in her sleep, sighing, "I love you."

His heart seized painfully in his chest; he had to make fists to keep from reaching for her right then. Instead, he forced his breathing to slow and slid easily into her dreams.



Standing in the corner, he watched Tarrah closely. She stood in the center of the giant room, looking around as though she might be lost. Her dress swayed gently as the breeze moved it, accentuating her beautiful curves.

Stepping beside her, Bastian made the decision not to hide anything of himself from her this time. He wanted her to see him. It was better for her to know now who, and what, he was.

When she felt his presence, she turned to face him. His heart thudded thunderously in his ears as he waited for her reaction. He worried she might turn and flee.

She surprised him by studying his face for several minutes before looking up at his wings which he had unfurled and stretched out, proud and glorious before her.

A slow smile touched her lips before she asked, "This is why you were always in shadow?"

In response, he nodded once. He didn't yet trust his vocal cords to respond. He still half expected her to bolt in horror.

Instead, she closed the distance between them and reached out to touch him, biting her bottom lip as her eyes followed her hands. He felt as if he was on fire everywhere she touched.

When she looked back up to meet his gaze she asked softly, "So, do those wings allow you to fly?"

His voice was gravelly with lust when he responded,. "Yes, my angel. I will take you out to fly . . . if you will do just one thing for me first."

She tilted her head, as if appraising him. "What can I do for you?"

His voice took on a desperate edge when he answered her, "Wake up. Wake up and see me. I need to have you accept me in reality as well as you do in your dreams."



Chapter Four

Tarrah found herself thrust from the dream world, immediately aware she was no longer alone in the room. Yawning, she stretched and slowly, cautiously opened her eyes.

In the shadows, his intent stare focused on only her, was the being she had dreamed of so many times. His face was indescribably beautiful. His complexion was a dark gray in the night. His hair was so intensely blond it was almost a stark white. But what held her, captivated, were his eyes. They were a dark slate blue, and they held a look of absolute desperation within them. She sensed his entire peace of mind depended on her acceptance of him.

For several moments she said nothing, but just stared back at him as she replayed the dream that was still fresh in her mind. She knew a moment's panic as she realized this was indeed the man from her dreams. Then the panic was replaced by an overwhelming joy. *He was real. Her dream lover wasn't merely a figment of her imagination. He was flesh and blood. A solid, living, breathing being who truly seemed to want her as desperately as she wanted him.*

Reaching out, she touched him, breathing a sigh of relief when her hand didn't pass through him, but found his warm skin. She smiled, whispering,

"You're real. Oh, thank God, you're real!" She sat up and closed the inches between them.

Immediately, he took her into his arms and laid his forehead against her own. She felt the tears as they fell. She didn't know if they were his or hers. She didn't care. All she knew was, he was here, he was touching her, and he was *real*.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she sought and found his lips. Tentatively at first, she touched her mouth to his. He opened to her but let her lead as she deepened the kiss, testing, tasting. When he groaned, she plunged her tongue into his mouth and traced his lips slowly before moving to mingle her tongue with his.

Her tongue wriggling against his was his undoing. Grasping her closer, he laid her flat on the bed and covered her body with his own. His erection pressed against her thigh as she shifted, moving her legs apart to give him access.

Almost violently, he ripped the dress from her, discarding the tattered material to the floor. She gasped in surprise. It drove her almost to orgasm just to know how desperately he wanted her.

When he turned back to her, he realized she now only wore her bra. The panties she had worn earlier were gone. He smiled as he remembered the dream and reached out to touch her most private sensitive spot. As he ran a finger past her silken folds, she raised her hips, encouraging him.

His eyes met hers as he gripped her sex, whispering, "Mine." with much more than simple primal possessiveness in his tone. The single word was more like a plea, and Tarrah found herself nodding in agreement. "Only yours." she responded softly, holding his gaze.

Whimpering, he went down on her, his finger probing gently even as his nose nudged her clit. He was rewarded by her cry of shocked pleasure. Encouraged, he let his tongue tease it as he added a second finger to the first and prodded into her core.

Within seconds, she was lifting her hips off the bed and grasping the covers with her hands to keep from grabbing at him. "Oh, my . . . you have to . . . I can't . . ." Reaching for him, she begged. "I need you. Please, let me. I want to . . . can we?"

Coming up over her, he pressed his cock to her cleft. "Yes," he whispered before breaching her core, claiming her easily. She had grown so wet there was little resistance.

They exclaimed together at the feel of their bodies completing one another. He paused, adjusting to the tightness of her core, before beginning to move again within her.

As he bore into her, she lifted her hips to his every thrust. Together, they worked to appease their body's demand for each other. When she felt her body reaching its crest again, he instinctively began moving faster, pushing her easily over the edge.

She called out, screaming as the orgasm hit her. She felt as if she were falling. But he carried her, pushing her further, relentlessly pulling every bit of her pleasure to her center.

Her core felt like it was on fire. As if he felt it to, he cried out as his seed spilled into her womb. The flames burnt between them and instead of dying out, it seemed to them, the fire only grew higher.

Without pulling out of her, he rolled, carrying her so she ended up on top of him. She took over the pace then, milking his cock for everything it was worth.

He groaned and whispered to her, encouraging her faster, deeper, harder. "Ride me," he ordered. "Take me deep inside you. I am yours."

Gasping, she forced herself to do as he demanded. She felt the pleasure building within her once again, but rode him faster anyway. His hips moved in time with hers, giving as good as he got. The fire was building once more, and she could feel his seed as it shot deep into her womb yet again.

For a moment, she wondered about pregnancy, but pushed the thought aside. She was in such heaven at the moment, she didn't care. She wished the night would never end. She felt she could have made love with this man for the rest of eternity. If time would only let her.

She didn't know him; didn't know his name, where he came from, or even exactly what he was. But she knew he was hers. She felt it in every fiber of her being. There was just something between them. Some kind of unspoken bond, it was still stronger than anything else she had ever felt in her life.

As the last orgasm tore through her, she collapsed atop him, spent. His arms went around her like a vice and held her to him, as if he were afraid to let her go. When she found her voice, she whispered, "I don't even know your name."

He chuckled. "My name is Bastian. Yours is Tarrah. Rachel told us you were coming." He stroked her hair gently as he confessed, "I was angry at first because I had no clue that you were real, and I wasn't looking forward to having to hide again. We were just finally becoming used to being free to roam around the castle."

Tarrah stilled, digesting that information before she rose up to stare down at him. "We? Who is we?"

He smiled up at her indulgently. "My brothers and I." He watched her face as he added, "Arthmael is the oldest of us. Rachel already released him from the curse."

Pulling the throw off the corner of the bed, she wrapped it around herself as she sat on the bed. "What curse?"

Bastian joined her on the side of the bed, but made no move to cover his nudity. "The one that dooms us to become stone during the day." His eyes lowered, seemingly ashamed of the fact."

Gasping, she covered her mouth as her mind worked to put two and two together. "You're . . . you're the gargoyle! Oh my God! I can't believe I didn't realize it!"

He nodded and started to rise. "Now you no longer desire me. I will leave."

Jumping to her feet, she abandoned her cover. "I never said that!" She blocked his retreat so he couldn't leave her. "I was just surprised is all. I-I had no idea gargoyles were real."

His eyes moved to her exposed breast and he found himself wanting desperately to touch her all over again, but fought the desire. "I don't know if there are any others, save us."

Tarrah realized her nudity affected him. But instead of being ashamed or modest, she only wanted his feel him and have him against her all over again. "So, how did Rachel break the curse for Arthmael? Will the same thing work for you?"

Unable to draw his eyes from her breasts, he shook his head. "Each woman destined to be one of our mates must go through a different test. We can be freed only if she can pass the test."

Wanting him desperately, but needing to know more, she prodded. "So, what will *my* test be, Bastian?" She stepped closer, enjoying the way his gaze stayed glued to her nipples. She could almost feel his lips closing around the areola. "And when?"

He swallowed convulsively, whispering, "I cannot tell you anything of the test. Only that it is coming. And should you fail it, I shall be cursed eternally to be what I now am. Never will I know the sunlight on my skin again, for I will be stone in the day.

Sobered by the implications of his revelation, she released a pent-up breath, and then plopped heavily onto the bed. Her vaginal muscles twitched in complaint, but she pushed the discomfort aside. "Wow . . . that's no pressure," she said lowly. "None at all."

Joining her once more, he tried to be reassuring. "I have faith in you. Why would it be that we found each other in our dreams if you couldn't pass this test?" He shook his head. "I cannot believe you would not know what to do when the time comes."

As he said the last, he reached out and stroked her breast. No longer able to contain his desire, he tweaked the nipple between his fingers, and she arched into his hand in response."

Smiling, he leaned down and traced her neck with his tongue before whispering in her ear. "I like the way you respond to me. I like the way you feel to my hands."

She moaned as his touch became more forceful. "And I like the way you touch me with those hands. I'm glad you came to me."

Watching her, he continued to tease her nipple with one hand while the other again found her core and began once more to work its magic over her.

Surrendering herself to the feeling, she took comfort in the fact they had many more hours before the sun would show its illuminating disposition.



Chapter Five

Arthmael stood at the double doors leading out to Rachel's balcony, wearing a subtle smile. He was happy for his brother. The sounds coming from the tower next to theirs indicated he and Tarrah had found each other.

Rachel came up behind him, wrapping her arms around him, and pressing a tender kiss in the center of his bare back. When she spoke, her breath blew warmly across his shoulder blades.

"It sounds to me as if the two of them agree to the match, wouldn't you say?" She smiled at the sounds of fulfillment coming from the other balcony. "I wonder if she realizes her doors are open."

Arthmael turned into her embrace and offered her a slow smile. "I think perhaps they were so caught up in the moment, they forgot."

Rachel reached out and tucked a stray lock of ebony hair behind his ear. "Well," she said thoughtfully, "we can hear them. Perhaps it's only fair for them to hear us also."

Laughing outright, Arthmael reached out and pulled Rachel to him. "You, know, woman . . . I really like the way you think."

Lifting her into his arms, he strode swiftly to the bed before setting her down gently. He loosened the sash of her robe and watched as it fell off one shoulder, revealing her soft, creamy skin. A wave of lust swept over him as he moved to push the robe completely away from her, uncovering her perfect body to his view. He growled and pushed her lightly onto the soft bed as he followed her down. "I have been blessed. You are so beautiful, *ma belle*."

Reaching for him, Rachel lifted her hips to meet him halfway as he thrust into her moist core. They sighed in unison at the sensation of their joining.

Her nails scored his back as he took her hard, almost savagely. It drove her to the peak of ecstasy. She screamed her pleasure as the first orgasm took her.

He continued thrusting into her relentlessly, causing her to come yet again and leaving her crying out his name when he finally allowed his seed to spill within her womb.

Pulling her to follow him, he collapsed on his side and cuddled her close. Rachel kissed his neck and ran her fingers tenderly across the marks she had left on his back when she clawed him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I got carried away."

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "No apologies required or accepted, *mon chere*. Not for what we do in the heat of our passion. I won't hear of it."

Sighing contentedly, Rachel snuggled closer. "I love you, Arthey."

He chuckled at her pet name. "I love you, too. I shall always love you. You rescued me."

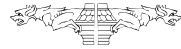
A moment of silence passed between them before Rachel wondered out loud. "Is Tarrah going to go through the same test I did?"

Arthmael shrugged. "I do not know, beloved. I know the test will be similar, but I do not believe it will be quite the same."

Rachel considered this for a moment before giggling. "That's too bad. I rather enjoyed my test!"

Arthmael pinched her butt, causing her to squeal. "You naughty little vixen!" he teased. "I should punish you for making my blood run like fire."

Rachel goggled and rose to straddle his already returning erection. "Promise?" she asked in a voice deep with desire.



When Tarrah awoke the next morning, she felt refreshed and excited. She yawned and stretched, turning toward the side of the bed where she'd last seen Bastian.

Disappointment made her frown to find his side of the bed empty. Then she remembered. He was back out on the tower. He would be stone right now because the sun was up.

Sighing wistfully, she threw back the covers and rose from the bed. She wouldn't see him again until sunset. Reaching for her robe, she wrapped it around herself and went into the bathroom to relieve herself.

When she returned to the bedroom, she headed toward her suitcases. First things first; she had to get unpacked, and there was no better time than the present.

She had taken no more than just a few steps into the room before a low growl, mere inches from her, froze her. She could feel the breath on her neck. Talon-like claws gripped her arms. Not daring to breathe, Tarrah turned slowly and faced a creature that stood on two legs but had the dangerous face of a snarling white lion. His fangs hung past his jaw, his eyes wild and frightening.

For several heartbeats, she panicked, thinking she had stepped into the twilight zone, before reality settled over her. Well, it was as close to reality as she could get. Taking a deep breath, she whispered in as calm a voice as she could muster, "This is my test, isn't it? You're Bastian. I can tell." Her hand rose to stroke the gloriously long platinum mane. It was still as beautiful as before.

As if spooked by her, but afraid to show it, Bastian reared his head back and roared in a loud, menacing voice, as if to frighten her away. When he stepped back, she glimpsed the whole of his body. He was covered in a fine pelt and his muscles, although still his, seemed somehow broader.

As she let her eyes wander over him, she felt a slight hesitation as her gaze neared his manhood. Almost afraid to look, she closed her eyes. Bastian had grown silent, but when her eyes closed, he roared yet again. Unable to stop herself, she opened her eyes and stared at it for the first time. It was huge. Had it grown as well? She gaped at it, unable to control the sudden intimidation she felt.

As if it had a mind of its own, the damn thing grew still more before her eyes, standing erect, mere inches from her. Stepping back slowly, Tarrah tried to calm herself. This was Bastian. He wouldn't hurt her. He hadn't hurt her last night.

This was her test. Somewhere deep inside, she knew, no matter how strange or impossible it seemed to her, this was her test. She had to be willing to give herself to him as he was now and trust him not to kill her. Even as she told herself this, the fear closed over her heart as she glanced at the four-inch long claws protruding from his fingers. He was just so different now.

Sadness reflected in his eyes when she met his gaze. The way he stared at her stilled her breath. *He thinks I've refused the test.* Even as she thought it, he backed away from her and turned to make good his escape.

Without letting her rational mind give her a reason to stop, she reached out and touched him, stopping his retreat. However, he didn't turn to face her. Instead, he bowed his head, and when she turned him toward her, his eyes were closed.

Overcoming her fear, she let her grasp instead become a caress. Her hands moved over his pelt-covered skin. When her fingers grazed a puckered nipple, he rewarded her with a shudder.

Smiling at him, she made herself forget all about his appearance. Instead, she remembered how it had felt the night before when he had loved her. When he leaned down, she touched her lips to the pulse beating at the base of his neck, placing a tender kiss there before moving lower.

A soft purr started in his throat when she circled a nipple with her tongue. Encouraged, she suckled him gently, letting her hands move lower still, exploring, searching, caressing each hard muscle of his abdomen. She was pleasantly surprised to find that, although he now sported a fur coat, it felt more like peach fuzz to her lips.

She noticed then that he was holding himself rigid, refusing to touch her with his newly claw-clad hands. It melted her heart to think how even now, in his frustration at his predicament, he refused to risk hurting her.

She leaned back from him a few inches, and then reached to move his face so she could look in his eyes. When he opened them, tears sparkled in their depths. She smiled. "You won't hurt me. I know you won't." She leaned in and kissed his now strange mouth gently. "Make love to me, Bastian. Give me that part of you meant for only me."

Shuddering, he pulled away from her and turned his back in a cry of frustration. As she watched, he took several breaths to try to calm himself before answering, "I cannot. I could hurt you. I refuse to hurt you."

His voice was muffled by the huge teeth, and he growled in anger. "Why was my test so different? Arthmael only had to turn to stone, and Rachel picked up on what she had to do." He gestured at himself. "I've been changed from one kind of a monster, into another." He shrugged, looking at her. "Now I am also a freak !"

Immediately, she closed the distance between them. "You are no freak!" She shook her head angrily. "Okay, so you took a little getting used to. But I don't think you look like a freak."

He rolled his eyes and looked at his huge hands, complete with stiletto-like talons. Turning fully toward her, he held them out. "How do I make love to you with these? How can I dare to embrace you without having to worry about hurting you?"

Tarrah nodded her understanding at his words, but answered him without hesitation, certainty calming her now. "This isn't about you loving me, Bastian." She took both of his hands in hers and drew him toward the bed. "This is entirely about my loving you. And accepting you as you are."

His eyes looked almost startled when he met her gaze. Her words had struck a chord deep in his heart. Suddenly, he realized she was right. This

ridiculous situation was actually her test, not his. He also knew the curse would not have made this last transformation of him, were she not the one destined to be his.

Hesitantly, he let her pull him across the room. When she gestured for him to sit down, he gave her a confused look. Holding her index finger out, warning him to be patient, she turned and reached for her suitcase.

After a few minutes, she pulled out a silken sash. "You are so afraid that you will hurt me, right? So, we'll fix it where you won't."

Bastian looked from her face to the sash in her hands. He shook his head in a mocking gesture, pointing at the sash. "This won't restrain me if I get carried away."

Tarrah frowned. "This isn't supposed to restrain you so much as it is to serve as a reminder to think before you act." she smiled. "If we release you from this curse, it won't be necessary for it to work as a restraint for long."

His doubts still showed in his eyes when she took his hand and led him once more toward the bed. At her urging, he sat and then lay down on the bed. Relinquishing his control to her, he let her bind his hands to the headboard of the bed. He watched her silently as she moved over him and removed her robe, growling low in his throat when she leaned down and rubbed her breasts against his chest. Her moan made him close his eyes and grab the bars that were so close to his hands.

Tarrah found she couldn't stop the moaning sigh when she felt the friction the fur caused as her nipples grazed it. "Oh, Bastian," she whispered, "I don't think I mind this at all."

When his eyes snapped open, she knew he was going to say something, but stopped when he found her preparing to straddle him. Her woman's core was

now a mere hair's breath from his erection. Taking him in her hand, she stroked him slowly once, then twice before positioning herself over him. She drew a deep breath before she pushed down onto him, feeling his girth stretch her almost to the point of pain.

Instead of stopping, she continued, taking him as far inside of herself as she could before raising slightly and then pushing down again. They groaned in unison at the exquisite tension between their joined bodies. She massaged her clit as she worked over him, rubbing it as she began moving faster, enjoying the way he stretched her, completed her.

As she continued to take him, he watched her body where it met his. Gritting his teeth, he began lifting his hips to meet each downward thrust she made. His added movement sent her over the edge.

Unable to stop herself, she fell atop him as he continued moving. Her eyes were moist with tears, and she closed them when he finally came within her. The semen shot its hot flood into her, filling her with a warmth that made her come again. Crying out, she arched into him. His arms went around her even as she opened her eyes and he rolled her onto her back. The sash was shredded; his claws, gone.

As she peered wildly from his bare chest to his beautiful, perfect face, she breathed in astonished wonder. It was surreal to see the beautiful skin, dark tan as it was, against his gleaming platinum hair. His smile revealed perfect white human teeth, his eyes sparkling with the color of twilight.

She opened her mouth to ask him when the change had happened but his lips met hers before she could ask. She felt him growing once more inside of her. Panting, she lifted her hips as he surged forward to fill her once more.

He rode her slowly at first; his arms building a hunger inside of her that took her breath away. She felt as if her insides had melted with the heat of their love making. The warmth of it made her begin moving with him, riding with him to a point of no return.

As he made love to her, he began whispering soft endearments in French. She smiled and relished the sound of his deep voice, unmarred by the sharp teeth that had filled his perfect mouth in the beginning of their morning.

When he finally collapsed atop her and held her to him, she returned his embrace with as much fervor as he had. His words switched from French back to English. "You do not regret this?" he asked softly. His eyes searched her face as he asked, looking for some sign of remorse.

Looking him full in the face, she shook her head. "Why would I regret what we just did?" She asked in return. "How could I possibly? I have believed you to be a fantasy for so long. Now I find not only are you real, but you're mine! I am the happiest woman in the world." She grinned broadly. "Are you kidding? I can't wait to tell Mom about you!"

His smile was as bright as the sun to her; his arms made her feel safe and secure. "I cannot wait to meet her, either. She will like me, yes?"

She chuckled. "She will love you. And she will want to know when to expect the first grandchild."

He closed the distance between them, capturing her lips with his own before answering. "I am in no real hurry, my love . . . but I won't mind if we decide not to make her wait too long."



Epilogue

Rachel, Tarrah and Caroline all sat in the kitchen, waiting as the phone rang. The two younger women had been debating all morning about which one of their friends would be right for the next brother.

Rachel blew out a sigh in frustration. "But Corentin is so stubborn. I don't think Ashley would like him."

Tarrah rolled her eyes. "You know, if she comes out and they don't click, then we can just try again. But, Deanna is definitely not the right one for him, either. She's more bull-headed than he is."

Caroline watched the two girls argue before asking in a soft, somewhat motherly voice, "Girls, perhaps we can just invite them both and see which one draws his fancy?"

Tarrah pursed her lips and considered for a moment. Then, as if a light bulb went off in her head, she pressed her finger down on the button to end the call. "No! I have a better idea." Dialing a new number, she gave Rachel a wicked smile as the other girl watched her with curious interest.

When the a woman's voice replaced the sound of the ring, Tarrah cleared her throat, "Yes, Patricia?"

Rachel's jaw dropped and her eyes grew huge, before she began nodding frantically. "Of course! Why didn't I think of her?"

Tarrah waved at Rachel to shush as she spoke into the phone. "Hey, yeah, it's great to hear your voice too. How is everything?"

She paused as she listened to the other woman for a moment before smiling and answering. "Wow! That bad, huh?"

Again, she paused. "Well, honey, listen. Rachel and I were just thinking. How would you like to come spend a couple of weeks here on your vacation?" She smiled. "You would? No money?" She waved the question off. "Darling, have I got a deal for you."

Corentin, Arthmael, Dionde and Bastian made their way into the kitchen and looked the women over. Arthmael and Bastian shared a secret smile and kept on walking. Corentin and Dionde both stood back and watched the women; Corentin with suspicion and Dionde with open curiosity.

Dionde spoke first, whispering to Corentin as they quit the room, "What do you think they're doing?"

Corentin sighed, shaking his head. "I have no idea. But I can tell you this. Three women, being secretive like that and giggling whenever we turn our backs?" He pointed his finger back toward the females. "They're definitely plotting something, and it cannot be good."

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:

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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.