

The God of Chance is bored,
so beware mortals.

Chance's Game

EVE LANGLAIS

Champagne Bock's Presents

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By

Eve Langlais



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Take A Chance

Prologue

The God of Chance, also known as Chance, twiddled his thumbs and sighed. *Bored. I'm so bloody bored.*

Going out of my mind. . .

Ripping what few strands of hair I have left...

Would pay anything for something new...

Bored.

And he wasn't the only one.

His brothers and sisters, gods like himself, were bored out of their eternal minds too. Well, all that is except for the goddess of love—she always seemed to have fun. But Chance dealt in probability, coincidences, one in a million shots, of which there were tragically few now. His poor brother, the god of war Ares, hadn't enjoyed a good, full scale battle in over a century. The last troll uprising he'd tried to incite had been quickly quashed, to his chagrin.

What is a poor god to do when ennui sets in? Play with mortal lives of course. What else is there to do after all? Together or apart, he and his siblings would choose a few mortal players whom they nudged this way, omened that way—kind of like a game of chess—'til ultimately one of them won. Or at least chased the boredom away for a moment or two.

Being a Higher Power—another name for a god in the magical Realm—used to be such a power trip. People worshipping you. Temples erected in your name. Millions of lives to influence—aka play with. Now though, nothing exciting ever happened. The mortal council of wizards liked things the way they were. God—“Yes?”—forbid they should allow change.

Too many people knew of his existence and because of that didn't take any chances any more. Or at least not as much as he wanted them too. And that wouldn't do at all.

Sure he'd had a little bit of recent fun using that librarian to rescue that wizard, and again when he'd brought the hunter together with the mother of the dragonlings. The fun hadn't lasted though, and now the tedium of his life dragged at his spirits.

Ho-hum.

Of course, if it weren't for that stupid magical boundary separating the Realm from the 'Other Side', he'd have billions upon billions of new mortals to influence. He could catch glimpses of them praying for luck—*"I'm here!"* The power of coincidence and chance overflowed over there, an untapped well of energy that he could bathe in for centuries, if not longer if he played it right. Oodles of raw power and worshippers just waiting for his guiding hand. But no, he had to get stuck in the Realm. How tedious, not to mention way too predictable. Absolutely no fun. God—"Yes?"—his immortal life sucked.

Stupid boundary! Bloody thing is ruining all my fun.

Hey! What if the boundary separating magic from the rest of the mundane world came down? Anybody who looked, could see it showing signs of decay, so really, it was only just a matter of time before the whole thing collapsed. And "The Thirteen"—brilliant wizards way ahead of their time—who erected it, never intended it last forever. Why, just a little nudge from me and a tweak here and there, and things just might get interesting again.

And he held the key—literally. The key that would unlock the box holding the spell that created the boundary. It still made him giggle to think he'd been entrusted with it. But then again their choices had been few. The gods of war and death couldn't be trusted with it because their nature would have let it down possibly earlier in the hope of some chaos. The goddess of love always had her head in a cloud, so that left her out. The god of the beasts and forests, well he had no interest in mortal affairs. His brother—given the grand name of Poseidon by his worshippers, lucky jerk—cared little for those who walked the land, which left him—*Heh!Heh!*—in possession of the key.

Oh yes and the time had come to use it. A marvelous plan even if he had to raise the stakes and change some of the rules, something he excelled at.

But the problem remained, how to get rid of the boundary? Sure, he and the other Higher Powers knew how to break the spell that had created it—find the box, open it. Simple really. Only one problem though, they couldn't do it themselves, only a mortal could—*stupid wizardly clause*. Which meant he needed to find a mortal to play with. However in order to win, he'd need the right kind of mortal, actually mortals—it never paid to put all your eggs in one basket. Who to choose though? He needed someone smart, brave, fun... Hold on a second—hadn't he recently come across an interesting pair in one of his latest games? Oh yes, a perfect duo with just the right qualities needed for a quest of this magnitude.

Chance rubbed his hands gleefully, his boredom forgotten. *Time to put the game in motion and set my players on their path. This is going to be so much fun. Watch out world, here I come!*

And with a roll of his magical dice, he let the game begin.

One

"You will be mine," said a self assured voice from behind her—a hated, nasal voice belonging to one who followed his words with a grab for her ass that she quickly dodged. She'd had enough practice in the last few years. It still pissed her off though. *All men are pigs!*

Breanna spun around furious. "Get your filthy hands away from me, Cedric. For the hundredth time, I will never be yours. Go bug someone with no taste."

The young man named Cedric, narrowed his eyes and sneered at her rebuke, making his unattractive, angular face even uglier. *Yuck—imagine waking up to that nasty face every morning? Not!*

"Who said you had a choice in the matter, Breanna? I've already spoken to my father; he's willing to give your father a sizable dowry. It won't matter what you want. If your father accepts, you will be my wife."

Breanna laughed, a throaty sound that sent more than one admiring male look her way. "My father has a lot more sense than you and your father combined. He won't be bought, so you and your father should shop elsewhere for a bride. Now go away. Can't you see I'm busy?" She shooed him away with an irritated sweep of her hands. *I wonder if you can call browsing odd and ends looking for something interesting, busy? Still better than wasting breath talking to an idiot though.*

"When we are married," Cedric continued obstinately. "I will beat that sharp tongue out of you. Your father obviously did not do his duty by you and teach you the proper manners required of a woman. With great pleasure, I'll teach you how to act respectfully. It's time you learned

your place in the world—on your knees in front of me." Cedric brayed in laughter at his own poor jest.

Breanna just gaped at him in disbelief. The Higher Powers save her from stupid men, which in the last couple of years seemed to have multiplied, judging by the obscene number of pick-up lines she'd been subjected to.

Like "Hey baby, I've got a sausage you can chew on." Or how about, the most common one, "I know you want it, so stop playing hard to get." *Eew! Seriously, do any of those actually work?*

And what was with this subservient crap they all seemed to expect from her. If she ever did marry, which at this point seemed less and less likely, she'd want someone who would respect her as an equal. Just because she lacked something between the legs did not make her stupid or weak. Unfortunately, though she kept pointing out this most obvious fact, her would-be suitors seemed deaf and persisted in their belief that she would eventually swoon at their crude attempts to coerce and bully her into marriage and their beds. *Not bloody likely.*

"Go away, Cedric. You're boring me. I am not going to marry you. Why don't you crawl back to the hole you came from?" Breanna knew she shouldn't have said it. Her father always told her that her smart mouth would get her into trouble one day. But she'd had quite enough of Cedric, actually of all men in general.

Of course though being an idiot, he couldn't grasp the idea that she just wasn't interested and he latched an iron grip, stronger than she would have credited him with, around her wrist and started yanking her towards the alley between the shops. *Oh, come on, he can't be that stupid.* Breanna opened her mouth to give him a chance to let her go before she hurt him, when a deep voice spoke from behind her. "I believe the lady is unwilling."

Cedric stopped pulling and sneered at her would be rescuer over her shoulder.

"Mind your business, stranger. The lady will be willing enough once I get her skirts high enough. I mean to have her one way or another. Now go about your own affairs before things go badly for you." A knife appeared out of nowhere in Cedric's free hand and Breanna cringed.

Now this is going too far and she opened her mouth to say so, but before she could say a word, her unseen savior chuckled in amusement and the deep throaty sound sent a shiver through her. *Mmm, does the rest of him look as hot as he sounds?* Breanna almost gasped aloud at the direction of her thoughts. *Since when do I care what a man looks like?*

"Did your father never teach you to respect women? Or even better, a lesson about not threatening wizards?" said her would-be hero in a sexy, menacing tone and Breanna held back a giggle at the look on Cedric's face which turned quite green when he heard the word wizard.

Breanna felt a tingle of power from behind her and the blade in Cedric's hand turned cherry red as it heated up. Cedric dropped it with a yelp and shoved his blistered fingers into his mouth.

Nice trick, but unfortunate, as resorting to magic probably means my rescuer is going to be some pale, gangly youth with knobby knees. A real hero would have known how to disarm a poor excuse for a man like Cedric. Hell, another minute and I'd have had him crying for his mother.

"Bloody wizard," Cedric said, finally letting go of Breanna and backing away. "This is not over, Breanna," he threatened, still unbelievably stupid given the situation, then he shape-shifted into the rat that he truly was and scurried away.

She made a mental note of Cedric's shifting animal for the next time—knowing there would be a next time, his brain apparently couldn't comprehend the word *No*. She looked forward to his next attempt for she knew a certain feline that would delight in pulling off his pink rat tail. *Meow!*

Breanna whirled to thank her hero, even though she hadn't really needed rescuing, and her eyes went wide when she beheld him.

Wow, he most definitely does not have knobby knees.

Tongue tied, she could only gape at him, for the first time in her life stunned by the looks of a man. *And what a man!*

Towering over her was the epitome of masculinity. Over six feet with shoulders that must surely brush doorways, he had a lean body that tapered at the hips. *Nothing weak looking here.* His entire being oozed power

from his snug breeches hugging his heavily muscled thighs to his square jawed, rugged face. Thick, wavy blond hair brushed his shoulders, silky looking, enough that Breanna had to fight an urge to run her fingers through to see if it the texture would as soft as it looked. He had perfectly arched brows, and even though he was light haired, he had long dark lashes to frame the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen. *Wow.*

Breanna mentally shook herself. What the hell had come over her? *Since when does the sight a man—even one this gorgeous—strike me dumb? And the tingles in my tummy...* Must be hunger, never mind the fact she'd had lunch less than an hour ago. She must be hungry again already, there could be no other explanation for the way she felt.

As those gorgeous eyes crinkled at her perusal, Breanna gathered her wits and said, "Thank you sir wizard for your timely intervention." *Although if he'd given me just another minute I would have handled the situation myself. Just like a man to assume a woman needs saving.*

"'Twas my pleasure," he drawled, the corner of his lips lifting in a half smile. "Perhaps you could thank me by joining me for lunch."

Men, they're all the same, thought Breanna huffily. First he saved her, now he wanted lunch. *What next, a roll in the hay?* Although her tummy still tingled. *Maybe a small bite....*

No! Had he cast a spell on her? A glamour spell that made him look tastier than a multi layered chocolate cake smothered in butter icing? No, because yummy as he looked—and probably tasted—she had no problem turning him down, harmless as lunch might sound.

"Sorry, but I really must be going. My father is waiting for me and I daren't be late." Not quite true, but she didn't really owe him anything. With a nod of her head and a smile at his flabbergasted expression—*ha, not used to rejection are you*—she hurried up the road to escape her newest, would-be suitor.

Sometimes it sucked being a woman. Bloody men always thinking they can do and take what they want. No one ever seems to ask me what I want. Being left alone

would be good for starters. Ever since she'd hit twenty and her secret had accidentally come out, she'd had shifters from all over the Realm decide they had to have her. It wouldn't be so bad if they actually had in an interest in her as a person, but no, their one-track minds only seemed to perceive her as some sort of brood mare. She'd turned down several dozen proposals of marriage, evaded more inappropriate hands than she could count, escaped from four abductions, and well, the list of annoyances went on and on. The worst part? She couldn't even tell her father. Knowing him, he'd get all indignant and try to save her honour, when in truth she could defend herself better than her father ever could. Beside she didn't want him to get all frazzled, his cooking sucked when that happened and she happened to enjoy a good home cooked meal. She'd keep taking care of the problem herself. And eventually maybe they'd stop hounding her. *Or I could always get married,* taunted her mind, *maybe to a big, handsome wizard. Treacherous mind!*

She felt rather than heard the hand coming at her. *Not again. Enough of playing the lady.* Breanna, with a simple thought shifted form, turning into a little mouse that could scurry quickly along the cobbled walk.

Bad choice. Her newest would-be suitor shifted as well into a bloody hawk. *Great, Derek is back. Guess his hand finally healed.* Apparently needing forty stitches—or so she'd heard—hadn't deterred him from making her his wife either.

Little rodent heart pounding, she ran on her four little feet as quickly as possible. Darting through the few pedestrian legs she encountered, hearing the beating of the hawk's wings getting closer and closer, she had no time to shift into something else, she'd be too vulnerable. Her only hope lay in evading him.

The voluminous skirts of someone up ahead brushed the cobblestones and she darted under them, emerging on the other side, whiskers twitching. She never saw the hand that picked her up making her squeak.

Damn! Caught.

Two

Breanna panted in the large hand, waiting to see which of her suitors had caught her. The only good news seemed to be that her capture scared off her aerial pursuer. The hawk let out an angry screech and broke from the chase. Pumping its large wings, it flew away.

Now for her current dilemma. Breanna squeaked, "Thank you,"—her father had raised her with manners after all—and to her surprise the large hand immediately set her down. *Maybe it's not another idiot out to kidnap me.*

Breanna shifted back to human shape out of politeness and bit back a scream of shock. Facing her with an equally surprised look was a well dressed, auburn haired version of herself. *What the hell? A doppelganger? No, aren't they extinct?*

She and the stranger stood in frozen silence, eyes locked on the other. *Talk about uncanny.* Like looking in a mirror, the stranger's face identical except for the hair color.

"Who are you?" Breanna asked, her question echoed as the strange woman said the same thing. *Yikes!* Even their voices were eerily alike.

The man who had picked her up, looked an awful lot like her blond hero from earlier—*what is this twin day?* His face creased in confusion as he looked from the woman—his wife perhaps judging by the hand on her waist—to Breanna.

Breanna wanted to speak, but the words were caught in her throat. *Impossible. No way is this just chance.* Everyone knew there was no such thing in the Realm. Coincidences always had meaning. Or a meddling god.

The man finally answered Breanna's question startling

her. "This is my wife Samantha. She's only recently come to the Realm from over the boundary."

What? The Other Side? No one comes from there. Actually, revised Breanna, nobody I've ever heard of. Well, at least that means this Samantha isn't a doppelganger, but it still doesn't explain just who the hell she is and why we look so alike.

"I'm Breanna," she finally replied at their expectant look. "Breanna Jones from the northern part of the Realm."

"Oh my god!" exclaimed the woman named Samantha. "My mother's name was Breanna Jones." Her words sent a shiver down Breanna's spine. *Someone just walked on my grave. What the hell is going on here?*

"Who are your parents?" asked the older women whose skirts Breanna had run through. Her look and question sounded thoughtful as she looked from Breanna to Samantha.

"My father is Sammuel Jones. I never knew my mother, she left when I was a baby. My father named me after her," Breanna answered, looking at Samantha with troubled eyes. "I think I need to have a talk with my father." *Oh boy, do I ever. Either this is a coincidence of gigantic proportions or something really strange is afoot. Really, really strange even for the Realm.* And with that thought and not another word, Breanna shifted into a small, dark haired fox and trotted away from the troubling trio. Questions racing through her mind.

Do I have a sister? Did father lie to me? Surely, he wouldn't do that to me.

Or would he?

How many times had he evaded her questions about her mother? Changed the subject, distracted her. Now in her twenties, what did she really know about her absent mother? According to her father, she'd left before Breanna had even turned one and never looked back. End of story. No history, no family, nothing. It would seem her past had some secrets—skeletons that had now popped into the light.

That's it, Breanna vowed to herself. Time for me to sit down with father and have a talk about the truth of my past. All of it. I need to know. Do I have a sister? A mother? Other family?

And most saddening of all, had her father lied to her this entire time?

~ * ~

Breanna ran in fox form for several leagues, her shifted body well suited for the kind of scampering required to take the short cut through the woods that led to her home with her father.

When she broke through the foliage into a clearing where the dilapidated tower they resided in sat, she shifted back to human form. Smoothing back her hair and catching her breath, she braced herself to confront her father.

Breanna opened the weather beaten, heavy oaken door that gave entrance to the crumbling tower, ignoring the jumbled mess of her home, looking for her father. She found him in his workshop talking animatedly to a rounded, beaming peddler.

Breanna hated being rude, but what had happened to her earlier fair risked bursting out of her.

"Father! The most extraordinary thing has happened!" she started, but her father interrupted her with a frown.

"Breanna, you're back finally. We've been waiting. This traveler says he's got something for you."

"But..." she said eager to tell him about her morning. *My news and questions are much more important than a mere peddler.*

"Breanna," said her father sharply and Breanna shut up, stunned. Her father rarely rebuked her. "Your news can surely wait. Our guest has been waiting all morning for you."

So what? And since when are peddlers guests? Sighing, Breanna held her tongue, not an easy task for her, and reached out to take object the smiling peddler was holding out to her. As soon as she touched it, Breanna felt a shock run through her hand and she almost opened her hand to let it drop. *What kind of magic is this?*

Uncurling her fingers, she looked down to see he'd given her a large ornate black key. Indecipherable runes were inscribed up and down its length and it vibrated lightly in her hand.

Ooh, a key, albeit an odd one. And this is supposed to be more important than my news? Not. Although a curious

part of her demand to know what in the Realm did the key open?

"Um, this is a very nice key, I'm sure, but shouldn't it have a lock to go with it?" She couldn't resist the edge of sarcasm when she said that. It would have gone against her nature not to have been. After all, come on, all this drama for a key?

The short, balding peddler beamed at her, not bothered at all by her remark. "Indeed it does have a lock. A very special one. You'll have to find it."

Huh? Does he expect me to carry the key around trying out locks 'til I find the right one? That was so not happening.

"What do you mean, find the lock? Don't you know what the key is for?" she asked.

"Oh, I know exactly what the key is for. A large box made of onyx and silver. It is carved with runes similar to those on the key."

And, getting the details were apparently going to be more difficult than catching a muddy pig naked. Don't ask how she'd come by that knowledge, it was still rather embarrassing.

"So where's the box?" she said starting to lose patience. Perhaps the peddler was simple. Or maybe he'd escaped from the tower someone had locked him in since he obviously wasn't all there.

Her father finally spoke up. "Breanna, stop with all the questions. Can't you just be gracious and thank the man for this gift? I'm sure if the Higher Powers will it, that all will come clear."

Oh father and his dratted Higher Powers, she thought with exasperation. *No way am I taking possession of a magical artifact without some kind of background information or instructions.* It would be just like the Higher Powers, known as The Gods of the Realm, to meddle and throw another knot into the current mess known as her life. As if she didn't have enough fighting off can't-take-no-for-an-answer suitors, now it looked like she was being placed on some kind of stupid quest.

"Oh, I don't mind the questions," said the cheery peddler still smiling. See, she knew he was simple, anybody

else would have been frowning at her by now. Her father certainly was.

"She has a right to know since she is the one, along with one other, fated to find it. The box is lost. It has been for quite some time. You'll have to look for it. It's very important to all in the Realm that you find it and open it. Why, one might even say the fate of the Realm hangs in the balance." The mischievous twinkle in his eye somehow lessened the severity of his stark pronouncement.

Breanna wanted to laugh, and did. "Ha! Ha! Fate of the Realm. That's good, next you'll be telling me that you're some kind of a god in disguise. Wait, let me guess. God of Love? No, last I heard that was a woman. Wait, wait, the God of Thieves. You want me to steal the box?"

The peddler shook his head smiling at her. Would nothing break his composure? At this point Breanna had stopped even trying to be polite, she found it much more entertaining seeing how far she could push the peddler before he lost his smile. So far, he was winning.

Her poor father stood in the corner, hands over his face, she could just hear him muttering. "Why does she do this to me? What have I done to deserve this?" It wouldn't be the first time. Breanna really couldn't help herself.

"Ooh, I've got it, the God of Luck. Isn't he the one who likes to play games?"

"Actually, I prefer the name Chance," said the peddler, his smile getting even bigger, and suddenly as Breanna looked at him, he seemed somehow larger and brighter. A light shone out from within his body, surrounding him in a golden nimbus.

Breanna's jaw dropped. *Well, bloody hell, maybe he is a god. Or a very good actor.*

Breanna felt a push of power rock her, strong magical power, thick and static enough to make her hair stand in a halo around her head. Her father sat huddled, face in his hands, seemingly unaware of the supernatural weirdness going on in his workshop.

Then as quickly as it happened, it stopped. The peddler once again just looked like a harmless chubby fellow with a lack of hair on his shiny head.

Breanna swallowed. *Okay, maybe I've screwed around enough.*

"So, I'm looking for a big box, eh? Well, I'll be sure to keep an eye out for it." The last came out a little higher pitched than she would have liked. Surely having a god in her house hadn't rattled her? Well okay maybe a little, not that she'd ever admit it. She did have a reputation to maintain. But she also had to admit, at least to herself, to being intrigued—and a little cowed.

"Splendid," beamed the peddler, looking as harmless as a house fly. "Never fear though, you will have help with your quest. I'm just off to see the gentleman in question who'll be assisting you in locating the box. Oh such a surprise awaits you both when you succeed."

Wait a second, what's this about a man helping me? That's all I need—another lecher following me around. I don't want the help of any man. He'll only get in my way. "I'm sure I won't require any help."

"My dear, I'm not sending him with you for help. It's the entertainment of seeing you clash that I look forward to." Then the peddler actually winked at her and headed out the workroom door.

What? Entertainment! "Wait," she cried grabbing her skirts and darting after him. "What is that supposed to mean?" The peddler just ignored her and kept walking to the front door.

Breanna still had questions though, starting with, "Where do I start looking?"

That last halted him and he turned back to her, eyebrows raised. "Why the library of course—you know the place with all the books that you can use to do research. And because I like your spirit, I'm going to give you a hint. It has to do with The Thirteen."

"Thirteen?" she said puzzled. *What the hell kind of clue is that? Wait a second. He couldn't possibly be referring to...*

"You don't mean *The Thirteen* do you?" she asked, eyes round as saucers. A legend among all in the Realm *The Thirteen* were the most powerful wizards that had ever existed. And he was sending her on a quest that had something to do with them!

But the peddler was done talking. With a jaunty step he went out the door. Breanna flew across the floor after him, determined to stop him and ask some more questions, Higher Power or not, but when she reached the door and looked out, he'd disappeared. Vanished in thin air.

Dammit! She'd just been made into a pawn by a Higher Power. If she'd thought her life complicated before, she'd wager—*ooh the God of Chance would like that wouldn't he*—it was about to become even more so.

Three

Breanna stood in the door and stomped her foot, mumbling under her breath about riddle talking gods when her father came up behind her.

"Breanna, has our guest left?" he asked peering around.

"Yes Father, he's gone."

"Well child," he said rubbing his hands. "How exciting is this? A quest for my little girl."

But Breanna had a more important question for him. "Why did you not tell me I had a sister?"

That threw him for a loop.

Her father's face turned gray and he chuckled nervously. "What on earth would make you ask that? I've never remarried, nor ever begat any other children. You are my one and only daughter."

"Oh please, Father, I met my sister today in the marketplace. She is either a doppelganger or you're lying to me. Her name is Samantha, Samantha Jones. She says her mother's name was Breanna."

"A coincidence I'm sure," said her father nervously puttering around the room straightening things that hadn't been touched in years.

Breanna laughed shrilly, an edge of brittleness in her tone. "Weren't you the one who taught me there are no such things as coincidence? I believe your exact words were that coincidences are merely the God of Chance's way of amusing himself."

"Well, uh..."

And that said it all. "Enough lying Father. I have a

right to know. My mother never left did she, and Samantha is my sister."

Her father sat down heavily and put his face in his hands. "You don't understand," he said, his voice thick and low.

"Then help me to understand," she said softly kneeling beside him and putting a hand on his arm. She hated the anguish she was putting her father through, but she had a right to the truth.

With a deep sigh and shudder that shook his frail frame he began to speak.

"Your mother's name was Breanna, we named you after her. She and I met when we were about your age. And I don't care what skeptics say, it was love at first sight. I still remember how beautiful she looked, dancing in the sunshine like some wild, untamed, wood nymph. I swear my heart just about burst when she looked at me and smiled. You know you're the spitting image of her. The only difference is the hair, hers was auburn."

"Just like my sister," whispered Breanna, remembering her twin's auburn locks.

Her father's eyes grew sad. "Yes, just like Samantha. We married against the wishes of our families. I was the third son of a noble family, the only one to not inherit a power, unless you call my gift for languages and knowledge a power. Your mother as you might have guessed, was a shapeshifter, but of a rare variety. She was a true Were, shifting without a choice on every full moon with no control over her beast or the change. But we didn't care, we were in love. We thought love would help us overcome all obstacles. We ran away and got married and setup a home far from both of our families. Bre got pregnant. We were ecstatic. But we lost the baby after the first full moon. The forced change was just too violent for the fetus to survive. We tried again with the help of healers and wizards, but she kept losing the babies. Your mother was despondent. She so desperately wanted a child. I told her it was okay, that we could adopt. But she went into a depression. She said she felt like she wasn't truly a woman. She talked about killing herself to free me from the burden of having a barren wife."

Breanna sat still as she listened, tears glistening in her eyes at the tragedy she could hear coming in her father's tale. Her mother had been a true Were, almost as rare as Breanna's condition. But a lot more tragic. Breanna had heard stories of other Weres—the miscarriages were only part of the problem. Instead of having one animal to shift into, the true Weres shifted on every full moon into the last creature they'd come into contact with. And sometimes they never shifted back. Eventually the moon madness became too much for them to fight and they stayed in animal form, running off, never to be seen again. Or in worse cases, they went berserk, killing loved ones on a rampage, a menace that could only be taken care of by their being put to death.

One thing didn't add up though, in her father's tale. True Weres couldn't have human babies, the moon made it physically impossible, so how had she managed to birth not one, but two children? Breanna had to know. "You obviously found a way around the Were curse of being childless. I mean how else did she manage to birth my sister and I?

"I'm getting to that. We searched high and low for help. Following legends and rumors. We tried remedies and potions and all kinds of awful concoctions. Nothing worked. 'til finally we ran into someone who told us about a case similar to ours, albeit a hundred or so years back. They told of us of a couple where the wife was also a true Were. Like us they'd tried everything to stay pregnant, nothing worked until they went over the boundary to the Other Side."

Breanna gasped. The Other Side, a place of myth for Realm children. A world separated from their own by a boundary, a boundary that allowed magic to flourish in the Realm, but left the Other Side magicless.

Her father continued his tale. "The lack of magic meant her were powers would be suppressed. If she didn't change on a full moon she could carry a child to term. Determined to make her happy, I agreed to give it a try."

Breanna couldn't believe it. Such tales were usually reserved for legends. "How did you get through the boundary?"

"A portal, of course," said her father. "We pled our case to the portal guardian and to our surprise, it agreed to let us through."

Surprise is right. Portal guardians were known to be extremely strict on who they allowed to pass through. Actually, Breanna had never heard of anyone who had. But the tale was obviously not yet done.

"You crossed the boundary and then what happened?"

"After we crossed, your mother and I tried to assimilate ourselves into the mundane world. It was hard, I tell you. None of the work I did in the Realm was valid over there. I found a job as a laborer, your mother as a seamstress. In short order she found herself pregnant with not one, but two babies. The first full moon we spent in anxiety, but it went and passed without your mother changing. She was so happy." Her father stared off into his space, a smile curving his lips in remembrance.

"When you and your sister were born, I immediately made preparations for our return to the Realm. Your mother delayed it saying you were both too young for such an arduous journey and I went along with it. A month turned into a year and I began to make plans again. It was then your mother finally announced her intentions."

"She didn't want to come back," whispered Breanna starting to see where the story was going.

"No, she didn't. She said for the first time in her life she felt free. Free from the magic that had plagued her, free to be normal. She didn't want to come back, ever." Her father dropped his head and whispered, "But I did. I hated the Other Side—its noise, its lack of magic. Everything. I didn't fit in, didn't belong. I tried to convince her to come with me. But she was adamant. She was staying and that was that. She told me I could go, that I could tell the Realm authorities she had died so I could remarry. I said if she loved me, she'd come back with me. She turned my words around and said if I loved her I'd want her to be happy. I loved her so much, but, in my misery I also hated her. And that was when I did something I'm not proud of."

Breanna held her breath, trembling slightly, fearful of the words she would hear next, the words that would damn her father.

"Your mother had taken your sister Samantha to the doctor, seeking treatment for a cough and, watching you wobble around the room, I made a spurious decision. I

gathered some supplies, bundled you up and made my way back to the portal. And then some Higher Power must have intervened for the guardian let me back into the Realm with you."

"And my mother and sister?" Breanna asked in a quiet voice."

"I never knew what happened to them. Although it seems the Higher Powers ended up bringing your sister home after all."

Breanna listened to him speak, the anger in her building. "You mean to say," Breanna shouted, "without a word or thought about my mother and sister, you kidnapped me and left them without a husband and father?"

"Well, it seemed only fair at the time," said her father sheepishly. "I got one daughter she got the other."

And with those words she saw red. "You abandoned them!" she yelled.

"I did what was best!" he roared back.

"Best for you," retorted Breanna thoroughly disgusted.

"And for you I might remind you." At her raised brow he continued. "I mean look at a you—a true shapeshifter, able to become any animal you've ever met in the blink of an eye. Can you imagine being caught in a mundane body in a mundane world, never knowing your true powers?"

Breanna just looked at him incredulously. "So that justifies leaving your wife alone with a baby to fend for herself. To leave her wondering whatever happened to her other child. To let me and my sister grow up thinking we were alone. Never knowing the other existed. I can't believe you did that."

"But...." her father gazed at her with a lost expression, one that begged she understand, forgive. But she didn't.

"What you did was wrong, Father," she said in a hard voice.

"Breanna," he reached out a hand to her, but Breanna turned away, eyes brimming with tears.

"No, I need some time to myself, to think. All these years you've lied to me. I can't just forgive and forget."

Breanna fled the tower without looking back, her heart a hard stone in her chest that hurt when she breathed.

A sister, all these years of growing up an only child and all along I had a sister. And a mother. A mother who wanted to have me so badly she forsook her world, her family, her friends. Breanna felt her lips tremble, the anguish in her building. *Did my lost mother cry over the child stolen from her?* Perhaps Breanna could find her. Maybe she'd come back to the Realm with her sister. Breanna suddenly had a desperate desire to meet her mother, the woman who hadn't abandoned her after all. To be held in her arms and feel the maternal love she'd lacked all these years. To have answered the questions she'd stored inside over the years.

But even more pressing than the questions she had about her newly discovered family, was her anger, a dark emotion that she vented to the sky with a primal scream.

How dare her father lie to her all these years! To let her think that her mother had abandoned her. To let her think for years that her own mother didn't love her, that something was wrong with her when all along it had never had anything to do with her at all.

Samantha threw herself onto the ground in the open clearing covered in wild flowers and screamed again at the sky. *How could he have done this to me?*

How different would her life have been with a mother and a sister? Someone to share secrets with, to comfort her to... A nagging voice intruded, *Father has always been there for you and you've never lacked for anything.* Yes he had been, but it wasn't the same. Sure they were close, as close as a father and daughter could be, however some things just couldn't be talked about with a father. Like when her body had started changing and she'd bled the first time. Talk about freaky and embarrassing to find out after running around screaming she was dying to find out it was a natural thing that all women go through.

Or her first crush and heartbreak. Okay, so she'd been only fourteen at the time and the man almost thirty. When he got married she'd sworn never to love again. Her father thought her sick and called in some healers and made her swallow all kinds of awful home remedies, until one day she decided she no longer loved him and bounced out of bed. Of course the threat of leeching may have had a lot to do with that.

Breanna sighed. Her father loved her. Of that she had no doubt. And while she felt angry with him, she still loved him. But he did need to atone for some of his actions. Obviously her sister had not stayed in the mundane world, so making her father explain and apologize to her would be a start. And maybe she'd be reunited with her mother. *Oh please*, she prayed to the Higher Powers.

Goal in mind, she headed back to the tower to announce to her father what he'd have to do to make things right again. And as for her quest for the box, it and the Higher Power who'd given it to her would just have to wait. Family came first.

Four

Terrence strode into his house, well actually more of a mansion what with all the rooms, still bemused by his meeting and subsequent rejection by the dark haired woman in the marketplace. *What a wild, spirited beauty!* With her lush curves—no bony hips on that frame—a full bosom a man could suffocate in and long, wild hair that looked like she'd just risen from bed. Porcelain skin, big beautiful eyes and full lips made for kissing. Not his usual type. He tended to prefer slim, petite blondes, yet he felt drawn to this chestnut haired lady, even with her prickly attitude. And he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd seen her before. Something about her seemed familiar somehow, although surely if he'd met her before he wouldn't have forgotten her. No, he definitely wouldn't have forgotten those curves that begged for his touch and that cool smile that he'd love to kiss off her face....

Before he could think of it further, his brother Sinclair and his wife of two months, Samantha, walked in the front door. Terrence took a step back when he realized who the mysterious lady reminded him of. His brother's wife. Same features and lush build, but his lady sported a dark mane whereas his sister-in-law was crowned in auburn.

Wow, talk about freaky. Especially considering he'd never had the hots for Samantha, but had felt an instant surge of lust for the stranger from the marketplace.

"Terrence," said his brother Sinclair, interrupting his thoughts with a broad smile of greeting. "You wouldn't believe the morning we just had. Congratulate us, you're going to be an uncle twice over."

What did he mean twice over? Terrence's jaw dropped.

"You're having twins?"

"Yes," beamed his brother. "Mom says Sam here is about two months along. Boy and a girl, both with magic."

Terrence grabbed his brother in a big bear hug, laughing. "Wow, two baby wizards. Better start screening for nannies now, those who can handle one are hard to find let alone one who could take on two." He gave Samantha a more sedate hug—it wouldn't do to crush his new niece and nephew.

"Think that's crazy, wait 'til you hear this. We ran into a shapeshifter down town who is the spitting image of Sam with dark hair instead. From the brief conversation we had with her before she ran off, it looks like Sam may have a sister."

Coincidences seemed to be cropping up this morning with a vengeance. "Funny you should mention that I think I ran across the same lady fending off the advances of an unwanted suitor. So what's her name? Where does she live?" Not that he wanted to know of course. She'd rejected him, it wasn't like he'd be making another attempt.

"No idea, but like I told Sam, I'm sure she'll be back. I think we kind of took her by surprise."

No doubt you did, Terrence thought, especially if she'd believed like Sam that she was an only child.

A knock sounded on the heavy front door and Sinclair still standing next to it, opened the door startling a messenger in council livery—pompous colors of mauve gold and yes, even red. *Poor fella. You couldn't pay me to wear the eye tiring ensembles the council made them wear for their errands.*

"A missive for the Lords Griffonaire," the messenger said stiffly handing over two sealed letters with the unmistakable sigil of the council. With a sharp salute the messenger took off and Sinclair handed his brother one of the missives and they both tore them open.

"What is it?" asked Sam peering over Sinclair's arm to read what had his brow creasing.

"The council is calling an emergency meeting. All members are to attend."

Terrence frowned. "They've requested my presence too. That's odd because you're the member, not me." And he

had no interest in being a member. He'd taken on that chore for three long, annoying years when his brother had gone missing—turned out an evil sorceress had cast a curse on him. He'd eagerly relinquished his membership as soon as Sinclair had been found. *Politics are not my forte. I'll leave the intrigues and squabbling to my brother.*

"Have you been getting into trouble?" teased Sinclair. "Perhaps bedded the wrong wench."

Terrence laughed. "I stay away from the ladies who'd get me into trouble. My paramours are all quite willing and unencumbered by moral obligations."

"Terrence," exclaimed Samantha her eyes twinkling. "One of these days you're going to get caught by love's net, and I for one will laugh to see you squirming."

"Never," said Terrence confidently. "The thought of shackling myself to one damsel forever is much too frightful a prospect. Besides now that you and Sinclair have ensured our name will continue, there's not as much need now for me to beget a heir." Although, there were times when he saw the happiness his brother shared with his wife, that he wondered if he could ever find the same.

"Don't let mother hear you say that," said Sinclair shaking his head.

"Hear what?" said the lady in question coming down the stairs.

"Oh nothing. Say mother, did you hear anything about the council calling an emergency meeting?"

"No, I haven't my dears. Goodness, the last emergency meeting was what, oh about two years ago when we had that troll problem out in the plains. But I hadn't heard that any of the tribes had been active. They've been keeping a close eye on them since that incident."

"Well, I guess we'll have to go and find out," said Terrence. Odd, that they wanted him there.

Hey, maybe they have a new mission for me. His last one out in the northern deserts to check out rumors of a dragon had been lots of fun. Especially the nights with that sloe eyed courtesan who'd taught him all those tricks with scarves. *Oh yeah, good times. . .*

His mother interrupted his pleasant thoughts. "No use worrying about it. You'll find out soon enough what this is all

about. Now come, cook has prepared a nice luncheon for us and Samantha needs to eat. We wouldn't want her to faint from hunger now would we?"

"Perish the thought," said Sinclair with a smile hugging his wife close. Terrence felt a pang seeing their affection for each other. He led a full life, surely he didn't crave what his brother and wife had, did he?

Probably just horny. It had been two days since he'd last visited his mistress. He'd have to rectify that tonight. *Although maybe it's time to change flavors.* His current mistress was blonde and suddenly he had a craving for something more full figured and dark haired.

~ * ~

The council met in the large domed chamber that had been hosting their meetings for centuries. A grand room with white marbled walls detailed in ornate loops of gold. The Realm's tax dollars at work. Terrence found the council for the most part to be a wasteful bunch, using up monetary resources for things like plush velvet chairs and dragon melted slag floors. What had been wrong with the old dwarf mined slate? Sinclair, his poor deluded brother, had been trying since he'd returned to get them to send their resources to areas that needed it most, but as Terrence had discovered during his short tenure, it's hard to move a bureaucracy that is happy with the status quo.

Sinclair sat in his appointed seat while Terrence sat behind him in to give him support if needed.

A lot of murmuring and whispering ran through the crowd already gathered. It seemed the emergency meeting had caught many by surprise and speculation abounded as to what this could be about.

"They say the Dragon has been resurrected and is promising vengeance..."

"The trolls must be mustering again..."

"Do you think we'll get out in time to catch this evening's play?"

Terrence half listened to the dozens of conversations going on around him. Boring. He found his thoughts inadvertently turning again to the lovely dark haired wench from the morning. Could she really be related to Samantha? How was that even possible? Samantha came from the Other

Side where magic didn't exist. Yet, her supposed sister, given her shapeshifter ability, obviously had power. He kind of hoped she did show up again so they could find out more and, he admitted it to himself, *so I can see if this attraction to her is just a passing fancy. I mean come on, since when do I prefer the more lush curves of a full figured woman? I've always been content with a small handful before—easier to put it all in my mouth.*

A gavel banged down startling him from his naughty thoughts about what his mistress had done to him two nights ago.

"The council is now session. Please be seated so that Lord Moranis may address us."

A portly gentlemen dressed in full length, navy blue robes and a bright purple sash stood. He cleared his throat giving the room time to settle before he spoke.

"Yes, thank you for all coming on such short notice. I'm afraid the situation I have to speak about has been building for several years, but now can no longer be ignored."

"What do you mean building for years? What has the council been hiding?" called one of the spectators.

Yeah, thought Terrence, what has the council hid its head in the sand about now?

"Due to the nature of this problem, we wished to keep quiet, in the hopes of avoiding wide spread panic. We'd hoped it was a temporary aberration, but alas the problem, despite the best efforts by our best wizards has escalated and can no longer be ignored."

"Get on with it," someone heckled.

"Yes, well," said the chubby lord fidgeting, a bead of sweat rolling down his jowl, a sign of his nervousness. "Some of you might be aware that we've been experiencing thin spots in the boundary. Well, the spots are more than thin, in some places, the boundary is almost completely gone."

Immediate uproar. Terrence sat stunned in his seat. Sure, they'd all heard rumors of the thin spots, the council had quashed those rumors as being exaggerated and taken care of.

"So what do thin spots mean?"

A good question, thought Terrence, whose knowledge

of the boundary was fairly sketchy. During that time in school he'd been fascinated with a certain young maid with freckles—he just had to know if the freckles were all over. They had been.

"The thin spots have been allowing some of our Realm inhabitant's passage onto the Other Side and vice versa for some of the mundanes."

Again, an uproar as dozens of voices began speaking at once.

Lord Moranis waved his hands. "We've been dealing with these issues. An agency was setup in the mundane world to deal with these crossovers. Manned by some of our Realm's hunters and most adaptable citizens, they've been charged with the task of returning the crossovers to their proper side. The thing is, that no longer seems to be enough. The boundary is failing us, ladies and gentleman, and if we do not find a way to stop this decay, I fear it may dissolve altogether."

"So let it go," shouted a voice from the audience. "What's the big deal? Magic will be released into the whole world and the mundanes will just have to live with it again."

Sinclair stood. "If I may Lord Moranis. I believe I can answer that question." Terrence held in a snort. It figured his little brother would be the one to know about the boundary. Always did have his face in a book. Terrence had always preferred more lively pursuits—usually ones in skirts.

Lord Moranis looking relieved, sat down and let Sinclair take over.

"When attending our esteemed college I did a paper on the boundary and its creation so I believe I can answer the question of why this decay is of greater concern than you realize. The boundary was created with death magic—namely the death of the thirteen most powerful wizards ever known to the Realm. Because there are souls involved, the boundary will not just simply fade away, the spell can't allow that. The souls give it a sort of prescience, instead of allowing itself to fade into non-existence, it will start sucking at more souls to try and regain its integrity."

For a moment the silence hung heavily in the large room as many tried to grasp what Sinclair had just explained. Terrence had understood right away and knew the

answer did not bode well.

The heckler from earlier spoke up first. "So what you're saying is we need to sacrifice a few wizards to replenish it?"

"First off, who would volunteer for certain suicide, will you?" Sinclair asked leaning forward and staring down the loud mouth. The heckler buttoned his mouth up tight. "And I'm afraid it is not that simple anyway. The Thirteen were powerful. More powerful than any of you could imagine. If my calculations are even close to correct, the power of just one of the thirteen was equal to more than a dozen of our strongest wizards. In order to replace those thirteen souls with new ones we'd need to sacrifice hundreds of our wizards. Are there any among us who are prepared to sacrifice that many lives? And keep in mind, if the spell has become warped, who's to say it will stop taking souls. The spell, if warped enough, might continue taking souls, killing off anyone or anything that is imbued with magic."

An outcry sounded at Sinclair's grim proclamation. Even Terrence had to admit being stunned. If his brother were correct, hundreds, maybe thousands of lives would be taken, all because of one spell originally meant to do good. *Well that kind of sucks.*

"How do we stop this?" Terrence asked in a voice loud enough to be heard.

"We must release the souls and the spell. Only by releasing it can we stop it."

"So do it then," said the heckler with his bravado restored.

"Yes well unfortunately that might be somewhat difficult," said Sinclair shifting and looking embarrassed. "In order to prevent it falling into the wrong hands the box holding the spell was hidden and the knowledge of its location lost. As for the key to open the box, it was given to one of the Higher Powers, which means unfortunately that unless we find the one and are given the other, we could all very well be lost."

Terrence sat back stunned. *This is bad, real bad.*

Sinclair, his face drawn, sat back down heavily, his shoulders drooped with the weight of his speech. Terrence leaned forward and patted his shoulder. *Glad I didn't have to*

be the one to tell everyone the bad news. Poor Sin though.

Lord Moranis stepped back up and cleared his throat. "Um, yes, well thank you Lord Griffonaire for clarifying matters. Now that we all understand the gravity of the situation, something must be done. That said, we need volunteers, people well versed in magic to find the box and the key. But it will be dangerous. There's a possibility that the wizard who locates the box may find his soul unwittingly sucked into the spell before it can be released. The mission may very well be suicidal."

Nice sell job, thought Terrence, who the hell would volunteer now.

"And if we do nothing?" asked a lord from the eastern marshes.

"Then, if my research is correct, the spell will start absorbing the souls of magic users without compunction or warning," said Sinclair with a weary voice. "First it will probably attack the weak-babes, children, the elderly and sick. Then..."

The crowd erupted into a loud babble at this point drowning Sinclair out, the fear in the room palpable. No one wanted to volunteer, yet all were terrified of the consequences if someone didn't.

Hmm, bad odds, exciting quest, save the world-the women would love him.

"I volunteer," said Terrence standing up.

Sinclair turned in his seat and looked at him with a pained expression on his face. "Brother..." he started, but Terrence cut him off.

"No, I was one of the strongest in my class. I've traveled the Realm and have made numerous contacts. I have no dependents, no wife. You've got heirs to the name if I don't succeed. Even you have to admit, I am the best choice."

Immediately a dozen lords started agreeing, muffling Sinclair's protest, yet the sorrow in his eyes shone all too clear.

Lord Moranis pounded his gavel. "Order. Order I say!" The room quieted. Lord Moranis cleared his throat. "Terrence, are you sure of this?"

"Positive. Something must be done. As I said. I'm an

ideal choice. Give me a few days to do some research and gather some supplies, and I'll be on my way."

The meeting adjourned shortly thereafter and Sinclair shoved his way through the crowd patting him on the back when he reached him. Shaking his head at Terrence, he gave a wry smile and clasped him tightly.

"You just can't be content to sit back and let others do the work can you," said Sinclair when he released him, his eyes suspiciously damp.

"What? And miss a chance at all the glory?" Terrence grinned. "Oh please. Do you really think any of these other idiots would be up for the task at hand?"

"Sadly, no. But you're not the one that's going to have to deal with mother when you're gone."

Terrence grinned more widely. "Yeah, good luck with that one."

Sinclair though had the last laugh. "Oh, it'll be a lot easier than the conversation you're going to have when you tell her what you've volunteered to do."

Terrence groaned. *Shit. Mother is going to freak.*

Five

The goddess of love went to visit Chance, the most amusing of her brothers. She found him bustling about excitedly.

"What's got you in a dither?" she asked lounging on a settee in a perfectly wasted seductive pose. She liked to keep in practice though, hence the long golden ringlets and the diaphanous, multi layered gown. One never knew when some poor fool in love would call upon her for help.

"Hey Aphrodite, what's happening," said Chance looking up from his scrying basin.

"Forget Aphrodite, I'm not using that name anymore. Nor am I answering to Venus. They remind me too much of the past. Ah, for the good old days when a fool in love would commit suicide or fight duels in the name of love." She sighed wistfully in remembrance. "Nope, I've decided I want to be called Mindy."

"Mindy—I like it. Reminds me of a belly dancer I used to know up on the plains and—" Chance whistled "—what she could do with a snake. Anyway, you were asking what I was doing, well, I'm taking down the boundary!"

"You're what?" The normally graceful goddess almost fell off her seat when she heard him. Scrambling upright, she knocked her bowl of grapes to the ground.

"The boundary is starting to fail, so it is my godly duty to send some deserving mortals on a quest to save the Realm," Chance said with a straight face.

The goddess of love, now known as Mindy snorted. "Godly duty? Oh please, you're bored out of your skull and looking to play. But you're right, the boundary does need to

come down. Who have you chosen as your players?"

"Here, let me show you."

Waving his hand over some water in a large stone basin, an image appeared of Breanna and Terrence's encounter in the marketplace.

"Meet Breanna the shapeshifter and Terrence the wizard. As you can see I've already started setting the game in motion," he said fast forwarding to show her the actions he'd already taken.

"Oh, how lovely," said the goddess clapping her hands. "I've actually had an eye on these two. Silly mortals, thinking they can escape love. I do so love a challenge. Mind if I play too?"

"Be my guest," said her brother gallantly stepping back with a sweeping bow to give her room.

Mindy pushed up her diaphanous sleeves, which just slid right back down, and stuck her finger in the scrying basin, adding her own special power to the mix Chance had started to brew.

Time to play.

Six

Terrence's conversation with his mother about his upcoming task went better than expected. She railed. She cried. She hit him a few times. But in the end, she gave him her blessing—reluctantly. With that out of the way, Terrence began preparing for his quest.

First he spoke to some of the hunters and agents who'd been keeping track of the boundary's thin spots in the hopes of seeing a pattern to its disintegration and came away baffled. The weak areas seemed random and spanned the breadth of the world. No clue as to the box or keys location to be found there. *That would have been too easy.* He headed onto the next step. Research.

Terrence entered the old library and breathed deep. Much as he'd hate to admit it, he loved the smell of old books and enjoyed even more reading about the past. Stories of battles gone by and heroic tales made him wish—almost—for less civilized times. A time when any man could become a hero and save the world. Actually kind of like the quest the council had sent him on. When he freed the Realm would his name be set to parchment as the savior of their world or would he instead be reviled as the man who ended it all?

Not a pleasant thought.

Giving his head a mental shake, he tried to focus the task at hand—discovering the location of the box and key. Surely The Thirteen would have left some kind of clue—a *map please*—to their location. After all, they had to know the spell would eventually need to be dismantled.

Where to start?

The size of the library went beyond daunting. Row after row of bookshelves marched off into the shadowy recesses of the large edifice and with no idea where to start, he'd need help.

Not seeing the head librarian at his usual post, the large rounded counter just past the entrance, he wandered down the many aisles, which were eerily silent and empty. Odd, as the library usually had a steady stream of scholars researching. He kept walking deeper into the crowded space figuring he'd find the section where the oldest manuscripts were kept. It would be a place to start at least until he found help.

In the farthest corner of the library he found the section that he hoped contained the answers he sought—well at least it looked and smelled really old. Moldering old tomes and crumbling scrolls filled the shelves, and he even detected a faint burnt smell from texts rescued in the dark times when Evil had tried to destroy whatever they could get their hands on in the hopes of prevailing. Didn't work. Score for the good guys and bye-bye for the bad guys.

Spotting a large table with a thick, leather bound book, he went to it and, opened it to the index for this section. Terrence browsed the subjects covered.

Battles, places—many forgotten or destroyed—historical facts, lots of information on the Realm's past and the dark time, but nothing about the boundary or The Thirteen.

Bloody hell. He'd need some help. Slapping the cover shut, sneezing at the dust that puffed up, he tapped a foot impatiently looking at the towering stacks around him.

"Excuse me, but may I be of assistance."

Terrence jumped at the voice behind him and turned to see a smiling, cherubic-faced portly man, balding, and dressed in a robe.

"I'm afraid I will require the assistance of the head librarian." This unknown lackey probably wouldn't have access to the information he needed.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Tell me what you need. I am more than passing familiar with the texts in this library."

Terrence frowned at his presumptuous statement. The guy had cheek that was for sure.

"I am looking for something that covers the creation of the boundary and The Thirteen who created it."

Ha, that will wipe the smile off the little man's face and send him to fetch the person in charge.

To his surprise, the chubby little librarian bobbed his bald head and, with a smile, rubbed his hands..

"Ah yes, the secret texts. I know exactly the thing you are looking for. Follow me if you please."

That took Terrence's arrogance down a notch. Perhaps the short man could be of help.

Winding through the towers of books he followed the rotund figure of his helper as he led them back to the main library area and then through a door to a corridor lined with doors. Down the hall the chubby librarian scurried, throwing the occasional grin over his shoulder, which Terrence found disconcerting. Such a smile seemed too jovial in such a serious place. Grinning and giggling were unspoken no-no's in this bastion of knowledge.

"The secret text is not kept with the rest of the materials from that time period. Sensitive subject matter of course. But you don't seem like the nefarious sort."

Terrence refrained from snorting. As if this chubby guy would know the difference.

"I have been assigned a quest by the council."

The librarian beamed and opened a door. "I knew you were the responsible sort. Just down these steps now."

Down they went, their steps echoing in the narrow stone staircase that Terrence hadn't known existed into an even narrower stone corridor. At the end they came to a blank wall which the little man stopped in front of.

Great, he'd led them to a dead end. Maybe his chubby guide wasn't so knowledgeable as he thought, although he probably knew where the nearest donut shop was, judging by the jiggle around his middle.

"I think you took a wrong turn," said Terrence. "Maybe we should go find your boss now."

"No, this is the right place. Now give me just a moment to remember the spell. It has been quite a while since this section has been opened. Not much demand you know."

The tubby man tapped his chin for a moment with a

finger, then beamed. "I remember it now."

*"When the power of The Thirteen begins to wane,
And the world around is no longer sane,
Allow leave to enter, one with great need,
To save the world and free The Thirteen."*

Terrence had to suppress a grin at this sad excuse for a rhyme. Surely such important information was guarded by more than a silly nursery rhyme. But to his surprise, with a grinding sound, and a puff of dust that made his eyes water, the wall before them swung open.

"Ta-da!" announced his guide with a big smile. "Now if you'll just follow me in."

The helpful librarian scooted through the opening and with a flick of his fingers lit the sconces lining the walls of the cube shaped, dark stone chamber.

Looking around, Terrence found himself disappointed. The only thing of interest in the room was a simple wooden pedestal with one, lonely book sitting on it.

"That's it?" he said dubiously.

"Oh yes, everything you need is in there. I'll leave you to it." And off scurried the odd little man.

Terrence walked over to the book on the pedestal. Its black leather binding had cracked with age, the spidery lines giving it a brittle looking texture. No title graced its cover and he felt a moment's apprehension as he went to touch it. Had it been magically trapped? Opening his inner senses, he looked at the book again and to his surprise saw not a single thread of magical power emanating from it. Bracing himself anyway, he reach out and lifted the cover, sneezing at the thick cloud of the dust that rose up. Definitely old. Once he gained control of his sinuses and his eyes stopped watering, he began to read.

"On this day, we thirteen pledge our lives for the betterment of the Realm. To banish Evil, and free humankind from the folly of those who hunger for power."

Holy crap. This had been written by one of The Thirteen. No wonder they kept this sucker hidden.

Terrence read on. It read like a diary, written by someone called Maerlyn, which if his history lessons were correct had been considered the strongest and oldest of The Thirteen. Skimming the text, Terrence found passages on the

reasons behind the spell, what its effects would be, and a myriad other useless items, yet the text skipped over the spell's actual crafting—probably with good reason. *Imagine the mischief a spell of that magnitude could cause if it fell in the wrong hands.*

At the back of the book, in the beginning of its last section, he found a warning.

"The spell is not a permanent measure and will become dangerous if not dismantled. When the world finally enters a time where magic would be welcome in again, take the key and unlock the box. If your intention is pure the magic will be released upon the entire world once more. But do not wait too long. The spell is like a parasite living off the soul energy of magic casters. If it is not dispelled there is a chance that the magic will attempt to feed itself by sucking in the souls of magic casters closest to it. The clues to finding and dismantling the spell are forthwith. Heed our warning and fare thee well. I go now to my fate and hope what we sacrifice will allow a better future for all."

Closing the book, Terrence felt a pride and sorrow for this Maerlyn who had without regret it seemed given his life for the betterment of others. What strong character and morals these men must have possessed to make such a sacrifice. And as for their warning of the spell acting like a parasite, well, it sounded like the spell had reached the point where it might start feeding off souls to keep itself alive, that is if it hadn't already. Sinclair had said it would start with those who were weak. Which meant he could waste no time. Tucking the book under his arm, Terrence followed the path he'd taken back to the main floor where the echoes of silence still encased the tomblike atmosphere and made Terrence shiver.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Terrence jumped, startled by the voice behind him. *Dammit, did the chubby librarian float above the ground so he could sneak up on people?* Terrence whirled around to find his rotund helper beaming at him.

"Yes, the book seems to be what I need, but I'll need to take it with me. There is too much information within it for a simple, quick read."

"Take it, keep it for as long as you need it. It's an important quest you are on. Will you be having any help with it?"

Not likely. Finding volunteers to aide him on his quest and possibly risk having their souls sucked in by the box would probably deter most. And besides Terrence enjoyed a good challenge, not to mention being in charge. No waiting around for idiots.

"No, my quest is mine alone."

The round man shook his head. "Funny, but I have a feeling you may have an aide in your quest."

Not if I have any say in the matter.

Terrence left the puzzling librarian and his cryptic statements. Stepping out into bright sunlight, he found himself overwhelmed by the noise and bright colors, after the quiet darkness of the library. He stood for a moment letting his eyes adjust to the sudden glare of a sharp morning light before heading for home, which was why he couldn't understand how he managed to almost bowl over a young lady on her way into the library.

She slammed right into his chest and bounced back. Terrence, juggling the book, shot out a hand to steady her. By the Higher Powers, where had she come from?

"Sorry," he mumbled embarrassed at having not noticed her.

The lady he'd bumped into looked up and with a shock of recognition both she and Terrence said simultaneously, "You again!"

~ * ~

Breanna stared up at her would-be savior from the day of before and cursed her wool gathering a moment ago that had somehow made her not notice the most perfect male specimen she'd ever met. *Um... hello, why do I keep thinking of him as perfect?* Handsome is, as handsome does, or so she'd heard say. *Betcha he does do it well.* She quickly hushed her snide inner voice.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, a question he echoed at the same time.

The tall wizard laughed. "It would seem we think alike. I was here researching a matter. I do apologize for not noticing you and almost running you over."

Breanna smiled back. It was kind of funny. "I'm here researching something too. Anyway, sorry, I didn't notice you either." *Ha, bet he doesn't hear that one often.*

They stared at each other awkwardly, then did a shuffle as they each tried to move out of the other's way. With another laugh, he finally swept off to the right side and with a gallant bow swept his arm towards the entrance of the library.

With a final smile, Breanna swept up the steps and into the library. She hoped to find some information about the woman—her sister—whom she'd met the day before. At least she had a name—Samantha Jones, but if she'd married and taken her husband's name, then her task might be more difficult. The fact she'd come from the Other Side would hopefully be a helpful hint.

She hadn't even had a chance to make it to the front desk when a strong hand gripped her arm and spun her around.

"Wait."

Surprise, her overly handsome wizard had returned.

"What?" she asked crossly. Didn't he have better things to do than accost women? Maybe he wanted to ask her to lunch again, although she thought she'd made herself clear yesterday on that point.

"Did you run into my brother and his wife yesterday?"

Samantha eyed him blankly. "And just who are your brother and his wife?"

"Sinclair and Samantha Griffonaire."

This was too much. Talk about the mother of all coincidences. Breanna rolled her eyes and gave a silent mutter to the God of Chance, whom she felt sure watched this chuckling. "So what if I did?"

"Are you Sam's sister?"

"Looks like," she answered evasively.

"Listen, Sam will kill me if I don't bring you back to the house. They've returned to the island, but I can teleport us there. She really wants to see you again."

"I don't even know you and you want me to just go off with you?" *Yeah right, buddy.*

"That's easily rectified. I am Terrence Griffonaire, brother of Sinclair who happens to be Samantha's husband,"

he said sweeping down in an elegant bow.

"I don't know," she said eyeing him dubiously when he straightened back up. Could this be just a ploy to get her alone? Men only ever seemed to have one thought on their minds. However the fact he knew about her meeting with her twin seemed to indicate that perhaps his intentions were honorable. Maybe.

"Listen, my mother is at the house if you're worried about a chaperone."

Had he read her mind? Could wizards do that?

Breanna frowned at him and the cad just smiled lazily back. This all seemed too easy somehow. Here she'd just found out she had a sister and on her way to find out who she was and where she lived, suddenly a man whom she'd met only the day before appears offering to reunite them. Bloody Chance. That little meddlesome god would be due a good shaking once she got her hands on him.

Her hesitation seemed to flounder him. He raised a hand to his head only to suddenly realize it held an old book. Muttering, he tucked his arm back down and sighed loudly again.

"Listen, I know this is really weird, but I swear my brother is married to Samantha who looks just like you. Well, exactly except for the hair. I promise I have no designs on your person or otherwise. Actually, once I take you to her, I have to leave. I've a task that needs my attention."

A task? A nagging suspicion buzzed at Breanna. Oh, surely Chance wouldn't do that to her. But what had he said. *"Never fear though, you will have help with your quest."*

Looking up into his handsome face, Breanna suppressed a sigh and controlled an urge to curse the round little god out, again. She'd have to learn some new curse words if he kept putting his meddlesome fingers into her life. Breanna reached up a hand and gripped the chain around her neck that held the key she'd been given.

"Fine. I'll go with you, but no teleporting, and I want your word as a gentleman and a wizard that you won't be trying anything funny."

He swept her another courtly bow. "My honor as a gentlemen and a wizard, no harm will befall you."

Nice words, now to see if his actions matched them. Holding out the crook of his arm with a smile at her, Breanna sighed before she tucked her hand onto his muscled forearm—*did wizards work out?*—and followed him back out into the sunlight praying she wasn't making a colossal mistake.

~ * ~

Terrence wanted to grin and laugh out loud when she finally accepted his invitation and tentatively put her hand on his arm. Like a skittish mare, she had taken some careful coaxing. And now that she'd agreed, well, it made his whole body tingle and a certain place down south swell uncomfortably.

Down boy. He need to remember who she was—Sam's sister and somehow he didn't think his sister in-law would appreciate him fooling around with her twin. Shame though, cause the prickly rose at his side was hot and seeing her again gave life to a whole bunch of naughty fantasies where clothing became optional and involved lots of kissing.

Talk about disturbing, since Breanna was the spitting image of his brother's wife, but Terrence consoled himself with the fact that while he found Samantha attractive he'd never wanted to kiss her 'til she panted breathlessly.

The little minx beside him though....

But judging by her prickly attitude he'd have a long way to go before he'd ever get that close. Still, it might be worth a try, once he'd completed his quest of course and the Realm had been saved.

Something to look forward and dream about in the long, journeying nights to come.

~ * ~

Breanna kept silent while they walked. Terrence strode alongside her, a big, warm presence that made her feel all tingly again. A feeling she enjoyed, while at the same time it discomfited her. Having never been attracted to a man before, she didn't know what to make of these new feelings. She still hadn't changed her mind about marriage though—no shackles for her. But she did have to admit to being more curious about the sensual side of the marriage bed. How would it feel to have those big hands stroke her and those lips kiss her?

Okay, time to stop the fantasy. Just because her body wanted to experiment didn't mean Terrence did or that she actually wanted to.

She peered up at him, walking alongside her so quietly. He seemed preoccupied, his face vacant except for a half smile on his face. She wondered what he thought about. Surely not the same things she'd been thinking.

He slowed their steps when they reached a big stately home—almost a castle. Breanna craned to look up at it and then turned to look at her escort.

"This is where you live?" she asked incredulously. Her wizard definitely lacked for nothing.

"Yes. I live here with my mother. Sam and Sinclair have their own home on an island, but they come often to visit."

Wow. Her sister had married well.

A stiff man in gold and blue livery opened the door as they reached the top step.

"Could you fetch my mother?" her escort asked. "Tell her I've got a surprise!"

Breanna bristled beside him as the butler scurried off to find Terrence's mother.

"Surprise?" she questioned moving away from him with an arched brow. "I'm not some bauble for you to show off."

"Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. She'll be ecstatic to meet you. She and Sam are quite close and I know she'll be so happy she's found a sister. Sam didn't have any family 'til she met us."

Breanna closed her mouth on a retort. No family. Her mother was dead then? She felt a pang as that one little hope she'd held in her heart died. Hey, at least she had a sister, though. That thought cheered her a little. But what if Samantha didn't like her?

Terrence tugged her into a tastefully decorated, yet ornate front hall and turned to face her with a grin which turned into a look of concern when he saw her face.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Breanna tightly still trying to come to grips with her mother's death and impending meeting with her twin.

Terrence frowned down at her, but an exclamation from the stairs distracted them both.

"Oh, by the Higher Powers. You found her!"

A beautiful older woman came flying down the stairs, all sense of propriety extinguished at the sight of them.

Breanna found her hands clasped tightly by this woman, who had to be Terrence's mother.

"Where did you find her, Terrence? Oh, not that it matters. Sam will be so excited. You must be Breanna."

"Yes, milady."

"Milady posh. With Sam being my daughter-in-law, that makes you family. Call me Elizabeth."

Family? Breanna hadn't thought of that. It had been only her and her father for so long that the idea seemed alien.

"Well, now that you've met my mother and see that I've kept my word, I'll leave you ladies be."

Yes he had kept his word to be a gentleman. What a shame. Not that she would have encouraged any forwardness on his part, no matter what her newly awakened body seemed to think.

"Thank you, Terrence," beamed his mother, watching him walk away. "Such a dear son. *Eligible* son," she added pointedly.

Breanna bit back a laugh at her blatant attempt at matchmaking. *Looks like someone's mama wants him to settle down.* Breanna felt like telling her not to waste her breath. She had no intention of ever getting married. And yet just the thought of him marrying someone else made her want to grit her teeth and smack something. *Jealous? Surely not.*

"Sam's on the island," continued his mother blithely, oblivious to Breanna's inner thoughts. "So if you'll just hold on tight to my hand, I'll teleport us there."

Breanna took a quick step back and shook her head. "No way. I don't teleport."

That surprised his mother. "Why ever not?"

"I don't trust teleporting. I say if you can't get there on your own two feet, then it is just not worth going to." Breanna had long had a fear of teleporting. The idea of her body disappearing and reappearing somewhere else gave her

the shakes. What if parts of her body didn't reappear? What if she didn't show up on the other end?

"But..."

Breanna shook her head more violently. "No, over my dead body. Non-negotiable. I do not teleport."

Taken aback, Elizabeth frowned. "Well then, I'll have to fetch Samantha for you."

"That sounds like a better plan," agreed Breanna, sorry to cause a fuss, but not willing to budge.

"Very well. Why don't you make yourself comfortable in the parlor and I'll be right back with Samantha."

Leaving her in a plush parlor, Elizabeth took off to get Samantha while Breanna wandered around aimlessly, palms sweating suddenly nervous at the prospect of finally meeting and speaking with her sister.

The day before, she hadn't known anything, but now...

A sister and a family by marriage and so many new things happening all at once.

Talk about overwhelming. Breanna sat down hard on a thick sofa and looked around the room. More signs of largesse could be seen everywhere she looked. Opulently furnished with brocade settees and armchairs, the room probably cost several times over everything she and her father owned. She noted hanging over a marble lined fireplace, a large painting of an elegantly dressed couple. The woman had to be Elizabeth at a younger age, and the man without a doubt Terrence's father. A handsome couple who'd produced a handsome son. Not that she cared what he looked like.

A bustle at the doorway drew her attention and she stood seeing her sister, her twin with auburn hair, come in looking flustered.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Samantha. "It really is uncanny how much we look alike. Elizabeth says Terrence found you. How wonderful!"

Breanna for the first time in her life, felt tongue tied standing in front of her twin. While they might look alike facially, they differed it seemed in so many ways.

For one, her twin wore a beautifully trimmed blue day dress, tight in the bodice and flaring over her hips. Her hair lay coiled in elegant ringlets on her head, with a few wisps

escaping to the sides to frame her face. And here stood Breanna wearing a gown several years old, a faded greyish color with several mended spots. Her hair lay in a long jumbled mess down her back—she had brushed it before leaving the tower, but somehow she always ended up a tangled mess. Taking time with her appearance had never been important to her before, but now standing before her impeccably groomed sister, she felt dowdy and not quite up to par.

Breanna still couldn't speak. Perhaps she'd made a mistake coming here. She didn't fit in here, and really how could she dim the joyful light in her sister's eyes with the tale of what their father had done. So many things she'd planned to say now stuck in her throat.

Samantha seemed to sense her hesitation and her smile drooped a little. "Is everything all right? I realize that our looking alike could just be a coincidence, but is there any chance we're related? I know it's a farfetched idea with me coming from the Other Side, but I thought, with you having my mother's name and such that perhaps..." Samantha trailed off, shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry, you must think I'm nuts."

Breanna hated the misery she saw in her twin's face. What did it matter if her sister dressed well? By the sound of it she wanted the same thing as Breanna did—family. And Breanna was the only one who could give that to her. Taking a deep breath she finally spoke. "We're sisters, twins to be exact."

"Oh," Samantha's eyes glistened with unshed tears—hopefully of joy—and she threw herself on Breanna, hugging her tight. "I've always wanted a sister," she whispered in Breanna's ear, sounding choked. Breanna felt her own eyes dampen. She'd always wanted a sister too.

"But I don't understand. How is this possible?" Samantha asked.

Breanna gently led her sister to a couch and sat her down before sitting beside her, holding her sister's hands.

Taking a deep breath she tried to organize her thoughts. "I only found out yesterday we were sisters when I badgered it out of Father after meeting you."

"My father's alive?" said Samantha, a stunned look on

her face.

"He was when I left him this morning," said Breanna then took a deep breath and asked her question in a rush. "Our mother, is she...."

Samantha shook her head, her face drooping sadly. "I'm so sorry. She died on the Other Side. She'd been sick for years and finally gave up the fight a few years ago."

Breanna felt an ache in her heart—silently mourning for the mother she'd never know.

"Did she ever talk about me?" asked Breanna hopefully. Had she remembered the other daughter stolen from her?

At that question, Samantha's face got tight. "No. I never knew I had a sister 'til just now. She told me that my father, sorry *our* father, abandoned me when I was little. I never even knew his name. She never told me I had a sister. She never told me anything. Although it explains her last words to me."

"What did she say?"

"She said she was sorry. At that time I thought she meant for being sick for so long, but now after meeting you, I think it had more to do with what she never told me."

Lies, so many lies. Breanna felt heartsick. "Our father hid the truth from me as well. His name is Sammuel Jones and he is the reason we grew up apart." Breanna recounted the tale she'd heard from her father. Her heart and throat squeezed tight at the anguish she felt and could see mirrored on Samantha's face.

"He left me," said Samantha, eyes brimming with tears. She sniffled. "I know it sounds stupid, after all, my mother told me he had, but I guess some little part of me always thought that something else had happened. That he'd come back someday to find me. Tell me, was he a good father to you?"

Breanna felt like saying no but that would be lying. "Until I found you, I thought he was the most wonderful father ever. Slightly absent-minded at times, but still very loving. He loves his books and research and makes the most amazing meals when he remembers we need to eat. And our mother?"

"The best, strict, but I always knew she loved me," said Samantha. "Oh, how things would have been different had he not left or if mother had returned to the Realm with him."

Breanna silently agreed.

"Do you think father would meet me?" asked Samantha quietly.

"I honestly don't know."

"Oh."

It came as such a small dejected sound that Breanna felt compelled to say. "I'll make sure he does. He owes it to you, to both of us. Let me talk to him."

"Would you? I just want to meet my father. I know I should hate him for what he's done, but I can't. I know how it can feel to be lost in a strange world, in my case though I embraced it. And having lived on the Other Side I understand why he'd want to leave. It is a noisy, confusing place. I have to say I much prefer the Realm."

"I'll talk to him." If she could get his distracted mind off scholarly pursuits long enough to listen, that is.

"Thank you. So where do we go from here?" asked Samantha wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

Where indeed? "We catch up and make up for lost time. Just because we missed out on growing up together doesn't mean we can't become sisters now." Enough time had been wasted through lies. Now that they were out in the open, maybe even though it came more than twenty years late, she could finally have the sister she'd always wanted. And it seemed Samantha felt the same way too.

"Oh that would be wonderful!" Samantha beamed through her watery eyes at Breanna and clasped her hand tightly.

Uncomfortable with all the emotion, Breanna decided to change the subject. "So you're married then?"

Her mirror image smiled beatifically. "Yes, to Sinclair whom you met the other day. And," Samantha smiled shyly. "You're going to be an aunt."

An aunt! Breanna's mouth opened and shut a few times. "That's wonderful! When is the baby due?" *Oh my god, an aunt! Wait 'til I tell Father. He'll have to come meet Samantha now.*

"They are due in about six or seven months."

They? Breanna's brain took a moment to process what Samantha told her. "Twins?" Apparently it ran in the family. Good thing none of her would-be suitors knew about that or they'd be redoubling their efforts to get her leg shackled to them.

Samantha nodded her head smiling again. "Yes a girl and a boy and magic users too. I only found out recently myself. I'm kind of freaked out by it all. This whole magic thing is still new to me."

"You mentioned you came here from the Other Side. How did you get here?"

"In a nutshell, the God of Chance gave me a book that teleported me from my home in Canada, a place on the Other Side of the boundary, and dropped me onto an island where Sinclair was being held captive by a curse."

Chance again. My, but that god got around. "That must have been startling."

Samantha laughed. "Oh, that's understating it. I thought I was hallucinating at first, but I quickly realized that shocking as it seemed, it was all real. Sinclair and I fell in love, which broke the curse, then we destroyed the sorceress who'd caused it and have pretty much been living happily ever after since."

"Wow. It's like something out of an olden tale." *Talk about romantic,* thought Breanna. *Why can't something exciting like that happen to me? Hold on, I don't want to fall in love or get married. Remember?*

"And you?" asked Samantha. "Are you married or seeing someone special?"

Breanna laughed. "Oh goodness no. I don't ever want to get married. I'm quite content to stay single. Not that I haven't had offers, some of them quite persistent. But the idea of letting one man tell me what to do and when to do it, not mention treat me like a brood mare, has no appeal." Breanna then looked at Samantha's tummy and winced. Foot in her mouth again. "Not that marriage is bad for everyone, it is just not the right thing for me." *Ooh, lame recovery,* but her sister just laughed.

"Oh, I think perhaps you just haven't found the right man yet. Sin, that's my nickname for him because he is just

so sinfully delicious, wouldn't dare try to dictate to me. Well, actually." she said with a grin. "He might try, but I just don't listen. And as for the babies, I am ecstatic. I can't wait to hold them, but I understand motherhood isn't for everyone."

Breanna tried to correct her earlier gaffe. "Don't get me wrong. It's not that I don't like children, I do actually, but it seems all the men who keep trying to coerce me into marriage only want to have me so they can control me and have super babies."

"Super babies?" asked Samantha puzzled. "I thought shapeshifting was fairly common. Do you have a rare animal?"

Breanna looked at her sister and suddenly realized that while they might look alike, they apparently hadn't inherited the same gifts.

"I'm a multi shapeshifter."

"That sounds cool, but I have to admit some ignorance, what the hell is a multi shapeshifter?"

"I can pretty much change into any animal I want. My only restriction seems to be size, my body can only stretch so far, so the larger animal forms aren't possible, but I can do, wolves, birds and even small animals like mice, and large cats like panthers. I can't do fish though, I tried when I was young and well, good thing Father was there to yank me out. Apparently underwater breathing isn't something I can replicate. My other restriction is magical creatures. I can't become a unicorn for example or a basilisk."

Samantha regarded her with saucer wide eyes. "Can you change into another person?"

"Nope, that would be doppelgangers. Nuisance creatures that only rarely pop up and when they do the clan tends to hunt them down. So anyway, the fact that I can shift into almost any animal I want is a pretty rare gift and when word got out a few years ago, all of a sudden all the shifter clans wanted me to marry their sons and make super babies."

"That's awful," said Samantha. "I can see why you don't want to get married now. But I thought there was no guarantee of the parent passing on the power to their child."

"Yeah, well men aren't always that bright and apparently a lot of them are thinking with parts that don't

seem to care."

Samantha laughed. "Oh that's too funny. Yes they can be quite dense at times. But you'll see, not all men are the same. I hope you'll find one someday that makes you feel as special as I do with Sin."

"Yes well don't hold your breath," said Breanna. Although for some reason her mind strayed to Terrence. *Would a wizard care about my shapeshifting abilities?* Intermarriage, while not common still happened. Not that she wanted to marry Terrence of course. She didn't even know where that thought had come from. Must be the joyful vibes she kept getting off her happily married sister.

The twins chatted the rest of the afternoon, telling each other stories of their childhood finding a lot of common ground even though they had grown up in such vastly different circumstances.

Late afternoon, Sinclair—the wonderful husband, or so Breanna kept hearing—came into the room and smiled gently at his wife. He looked at her with such adoring eyes that Breanna felt nauseated—and envious. If only she could find someone who would look at her like that, maybe then she'd reconsider marriage.

"I take it you both cleared things up," Sinclair said smiling softly at his wife.

"Sinclair," said Samantha beaming. "I'd like you to meet my twin, Breanna. Breanna, this is my husband whom you've heard too much about."

"A pleasure to meet you, Breanna," he said turning blue eyes to her that sparkled with warmth. "I didn't want to interrupt, but mother says dinner is ready and I'm sure you're both famished after all that talking. I know Sam has to be. She never lets anything delay a meal." Samantha laughed and slapped him playfully on the arm. "Shall we?" Holding out both his arms he escorted them to the dining hall.

~ * ~

Terrence had left Breanna reluctantly, casting a look over his shoulder before heading to his study. He'd have liked to stay for her meeting with Sam. *Boy, would that have been an interesting time*, but he'd done enough dallying. He had work to do.

Heaving the book onto his wide wooden desk he sat down with a sigh and started to read.

The spidery script, faded in spots, proved difficult to read, but fascinating.

It detailed the events and reasons leading up to the creation of the boundary. Essentially, evil magic had run amuck. Power hungry wizards in their greed for more power, laid waste to a good portion of the world, killing and destroying without compunction. Those who suffered most during this mad time were the mundanes—those born with no magic. 'Twas their farms that got destroyed, their livestock and children who were being killed. All for the sake of a few who just refused to be content with what they had.

Finally enough became enough. Humans, who by nature were the most populous species, came from all reaches of the world to petition The Great Thirteen—the most powerful wizards in the land. They asked The Thirteen for a way to live free of magic. Of course a task like that proved to be far from simple. The world was a vast place—to root out evil everywhere would be an impossible feat.

After many years of debate and more destruction by the dark forces, The Thirteen finally devised a spell, one that would separate the world into two—one part with magic, the other without. Quietly word made its way around the world—those who required magic to live needed to be in designated areas before a certain date. Those who failed to make it...

The spell they wove took thirteen days and thirteen nights. At the end of it, all The Thirteen gave up their souls—*ouch*—to power the spell and thus the Realm and the Other Side were born.

In the Realm magic continued on as it always had, but on the Other Side, any who hadn't made the crossover into Realm lands found themselves without any magic. Not even a spark.

The Thirteen, having been careful and secretive about their plan, succeeded in ridding the world of most evil magic as many of the dark lords suddenly found themselves as mundane as the next human in the new magicless land and were easily killed by vengeful humans. And the few who remained in the Realm were systematically hunted down and destroyed, finally establishing peace and the possibility of

prosperity.

Nice story, but one Terrence already knew. He needed to find out more about the spell and that of course didn't happen 'til just about the very end where he finally came across some hand drawn images of a box and a key.

Hunching forward with interest he studied the box—made of onyx and silver—inscribed all over with magical runes. *Well at least once I find the damned thing I should recognize it.* Of course finding it might prove a little tricky. They hadn't included a map of its whereabouts.

No, instead they'd given him a bunch of clues in a rhyme. And Terrence hated rhymes.

*Central in magic, but not in land,
Hidden by magic, yet not magically found,
Recognized when seen, but soon forgotten,
In a land that is barren, but teems with life.
Found by one who is human, yet something more,
Absent of innate magic, but magically gifted,
Seek it not with thy senses, but with the mind.
Pure intentions shall lead the way.*

Oh yeah, the rhyme made it all so clear. *Not!* And obviously not easily found, as once hidden, it had never been heard of again.

Skip the box then for now. What about the key? The book described it as large, black and ornate with runes. In other words unmistakable, but how to find it? The reference in the book for the key seemed even more puzzling.

Entrusted to one who is not mortal with mortal interest.

*Neither good nor evil, yet hardly neutral.
Who understands risks and plays the game.
When they decide to meddle nothing stays the same.
Given to one who will hopefully know best.
When the time comes they shall be put to the test.*

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Stupid rhymes. Why couldn't anyone ever say things plainly?

Terrence decided to take it apart line by line.

Entrusted to one who is not mortal with mortal interest. So no mortals had it. Well that cut out a massive chunk of the population. Not surprising they wouldn't have entrusted this key to someone who would die, whereabouts

unknown, before the time came. Who did that leave then? Elves, full blood dragons, dryads—heck it could even mean the Higher Powers. Okay that list narrowed it down, but still held too many options.

Neither good nor evil, yet hardly neutral. Well that took out pretty much his list. All of them swung both ways to varying degrees. Unless it meant a specific being and not a species. But that fourth line, where it talked about meddling.

Oh blast it all to Hades and back. It had to be the Higher Powers. Who else fit the bill—immortal, sitting the line between good and evil, not to mention meddlesome. But which one?

Terrence wanted to smack himself. *Chance.* It had to be. *Who understands risks...* Who else could that describe other than the mischievous, meddlesome God of Chance? There were enough stories of his shenanigans to make the smartest run in the opposite direction if he appeared.

Terrence groaned and finally did smack himself in the forehead.

The man in the library whom he'd never met before even though he thought he knew all the library staff. Terrence would place a large wager that he hadn't been an employee of the library at all. Nope, he'd bet it all that he'd met Chance, that pesky god, in disguise. Well at least he seemed willing to help him.

"Okay, Chance. You gave me the book, so now where's the key? he said aloud.

Terrence almost fell off his chair when a cheerful voice replied. *The key is right under your nose. Simply follow your heart's desire and find it with the rose.*

Looking around the room wildly, finding no one of course, he pondered those words which of course made no sense.

What the hell is my heart's desire?

A knock on the door interrupted his pondering.

"Enter."

The shiny bald head—*he must polish it to get that gleam*—of the family's butler stuck his head around the jamb. "Your mother requests your presence for dinner."

"I'll be right there," Terrence replied and tidied up his notes on the desk. He took a moment to straighten his

clothes, not that he cared what he looked like or who he hoped would be at dinner.

He was simply hungry. Right.

As soon as he entered, he saw her, and couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face. *Okay, he admitted to himself, I'm happy to see her. It means nothing.*

During the boisterous family dinner, one that Terrence quite enjoyed, he had many opportunities to watch Breanna, although he would have denied it if asked. The twins were radiant in their joy and to the family's amusement had already started ending each other sentences to gales of laughter.

Terrence noticed though that Breanna still seemed nervous at times. He could tell because she kept grasping something hanging on a chain about her neck. A good luck charm perhaps?

All too soon, as far as the sisters where concerned, the evening came to an end. Samantha's eyes drooped with fatigue.

"You need to get to bed," said Sinclair, the ever doting husband.

"Oh but there's so much I still want to say," said Samantha looking at Breanna.

"Your husband's right. You need to rest. Making babies is tiring work, I'm told. I'll be back. Never fear. "

"Oh but you can't leave now, it's dark out. You could be kidnapped, or ambushed or worse," said Samantha fretfully.

"I'll be fine," Breanna reassured her. "I can take care of myself.

But Samantha gnawed her lower lip, her eyes tight with worry.

Terrence spoke up. "I'll take her home, Sam. She'll be safe with me."

At this words Sam's face brightened. "Oh would you, Ter? Thank you."

Terrence could see Breanna controlling an urge to refuse. *Ha, apparently much as she dislikes my offer, she doesn't like seeing her sister upset. And I get to spend more time with her. In a nice brotherly way of course. Right.*

After hugs and kisses and promises to come back

within a few days, Breanna finally permitted Terrence to guide her out the door.

She pulled her hand out from where he'd tucked it onto his arm and with a smile said. "Thanks for the offer, but I really can get home on my own."

"Sorry, but I told Sam I'd escort you and she'd kill me if I didn't."

Breanna grumbled, but he just smiled serenely at her. They strolled together in silence, the evening air still warm, a shame because had she shivered Terrence would have had an excuse to wrap his arm around her. *Down boy.*

He could tell his presence made her nervous by the way she kept grabbing at the talisman that hung around her neck.

Good. Kind of gratifying to know he disturbed her just like she disturbed him. Although could you call wanting to strip her naked and have his way disturbing? More like distracting especially when he had that thought at dinner.

Delicious...

~ * ~

Breanna walked beside Terrence, miffed at his presence, yet pleased at the same time, a feeling she didn't understand. For years she'd been going where she wanted; on her own. She didn't need a protector. She could take care of herself, although judging by the way her heart kept quickening in his presence maybe a chaperone would have been a good idea. The things she kept thinking about doing to him...

Bad girl!

When he asked her about her visit, glad to have something to break the silence, she told him what she and Samantha had found out about their past. Anything to stop the steamy thoughts running through her head.

"Wow, that is some pretty intense stuff. Have you and Sam decided what you're going to do about your father? Is Sam going to meet him?"

"I'm going to have a talk with Father. I kind of left him in the lurch yesterday after he told me. Besides what do you care?"

"I care, because Sam is like a little sister to me. Do you have a problem with her meeting your father?"

"Why in the Realm would I have a problem?" she asked confused.

"Well you've been Daddy's girl for so long, maybe you don't want to share the attention."

"Daddy's girl!" Breanna let out a ringing peal of laughter and once started she couldn't stop. *Daddy's girl?* She snorted. *If he only knew.* She'd been the one to take care of her father all these years—reminding him to get his nose out of books long enough to eat, prancing around almost naked in front of him because he hadn't noticed she'd outgrown all her clothes, mending his clothes and washing them because such things didn't occur to him.

"Um, my father, while well-meaning and loving, tends to get easily distracted. Things like regular meals and even bathing sometimes escape his attention. Trust me, I have no problem sharing him if Samantha can manage to get his nose out of whatever subject he's researching."

"So your dad is a scholar?"

"Kind of," said Breanna hesitantly. "He loves to read up on the past and stuff, but he doesn't really do it for money or any real purpose. He just likes doing it. His knowledge has made him useful to the clans, though. When they have a dispute that involves the laws or over who owns what piece of land or who is related to whom they call in my father. That's how he makes money, but it's not his main reason for doing it." *No, he did it because he had to know. His curiosity went deep, like a fissure running down to the core of the world, and it seemed no matter how much information he poured down, it never became full, it always required more.*

Once they hit the edge of the woods, she tried to ditch Terrence again.

"I can make it home fine from here." She hoped he'd take the hint. Walking through the woods in human form with her appointed guardian chafed. Her inner beasts longed to be running wild and free through the shadows and dim light from the stars overhead. Of course though, he wouldn't understand that.

"I'm sure you can make it home, however I would never forgive myself, not to mention Sam would kill me, if something happened to you. It's not safe for a woman to be

out by herself." *He dared to patronize her? Oh, tell me he didn't say that!*

Breanna stopped walking and whirled to face him. "Listen here, wizard boy. I've been running in the woods since I was a wee cub. I am quite capable of taking care of myself and don't need you or anybody else to help me."

"And if you run into that unpleasant fellow from the marketplace again?"

"I'd take care of him, just like I would have taken care of him the other day had you not interfered." Stupid man, thinking she couldn't take care of herself. *Overbearing jerk, probably thought women should stay in the kitchen too.*

"Really?" he drawled sarcastically. "And I take it you'd have no problems should he decide to bring reinforcements?"

Breanna hadn't quite thought of that, but it changed nothing. Quick and tricky had always served her well in the past. She glared at him silently in answer.

So of course the cad smiled. "See? You do need protection. A group of vagrants is no match for a wizard of my power."

Well, he certainly doesn't lack self-esteem. And then she couldn't help herself. "A real man wouldn't need magic to protect a lady."

"A real man! You certainly are a feisty thing. I can see why some men would think you're in need of a husband. With that tongue of yours, I'll bet you just get into all kinds of trouble."

Perceptive. Her tongue had gotten her into a lot of trouble. Some people just couldn't handle the truth. "I don't need a husband," she said stubbornly, pricked by his comment.

"All women need a husband."

Of all the arrogant things to say. "I'm not all women. I am perfectly content to remain single. I have no intention of being some ornament for a man, taken out only on special occasions. Treated like I have no brains and whose only worth is in birthing children."

"You would deny yourself then the pleasure that can be found between a man and a woman?" he said softly, stepping closer, making her feel small in his shadow.

She held her ground and tilted her chin up defiantly.

"From what I can see the pleasure is fleeting and not worth the trouble that comes with it."

"And I think," he said stepping even closer so that their bodies were almost touching, an act that had her body tingling oddly. "That you only say that because you have yet to taste real passion." And with those last whispered words, his head dipped down and his lips touched hers.

Seven

Instant, tingling awareness shot through her body, lighting fire in places she'd never known could feel heat. His lips slid against hers softly, nibbling gently on them, tasting her.

Bite him, she thought. He wouldn't be so handsome without any lips, but a coiling warmth, a spark deep inside her that had been coaxed to life by his kiss, made her hesitate. The feel of his lips, firm yet somehow soft, caressing hers made her feel slightly dizzy and warm.

Breanna's knees trembled with weakness, but his arms were there to support her and press her up against the hardness of his body.

A wet tongue slid between her lips, laving her and making her sigh against his mouth.

So many sensations filled her—heat, awareness, longing, hunger....

Breanna's eyes shot open wide in shock. *What devilish magic is this?*

Pushing at him, she took a step back and slapped him hard. His head rocked with the force of her blow and she waited for his anger, yet once again he surprised her by laughing.

Her hand reached up to rub her still tingling lips. "You cast a spell on me didn't you?" she accused. *No way did I lose control to a man.*

"A spell?" he chuckled. "No magic, my sweet little rose, unless you think lust, or should I say passion, is unnatural."

"I don't desire you." She lied, her lips and body

throbbing.

"Oh, I'd say you do judging by your reaction a moment ago," he said with a lazy smile and smoky eyes.

He seemed so certain, and she felt completely uncertain, and boy did that annoy her. "Well I have news for you, I don't desire you," she repeated stubbornly. Although her tummy did have the same funny tingles as at the marketplace. She clutched the key on the chain tucked in her bosom and pulled at it.

No, I don't want him, she tried to convince herself. Confused, and pissed off, she shifted into fox form and ran away from him.

To give him credit, he managed to follow her a short ways, crashing and bumbling around the forest calling her name.

But she knew these woods and soon lost him. Making her way home, she tried to forget the scorching kiss. The one that she still felt. The one that made her yearn for...

Something I have no interest in, she told herself sternly.

If only her body would listen.

~ * ~

Terrence tried to follow Breanna when she changed into a fox, however, she quickly lost him. Wizardry did not translate into tracking skills. With nothing else to do, he headed home lost in his thoughts of a prickly rose.

Wow, what a little spitfire. Defiant and strong willed, yet sweet and delicate as a rose. Even her scent captivated him, soft and womanly like flowers on a gentle spring breeze.

He'd never met a woman like her. Determined to do things on her own, in her own way. Even his mother, strong as she seemed, had her soft moments and knew when to cave to society's proprieties.

But Breanna...

She wanted to tackle the world alone. She wanted no man, yet she'd melted for him—for a second—and that simple fact made his manly pride puff up and his heart beat faster.

And he wanted to show her so much more. He longed to be one to taste the wildness in her. To see her eyes glow

with pleasure when she looked at him. Grow wanton with desire as he pleased her. Wake up in the morn with her. See her body swell with his child. . .

Whoa! His musings were sounding more and more like marriage, something he'd decided long ago he wanted no part of. Single men just had more fun.

Okay, so I want her body. Big deal. I've wanted women before. It's the fact she's forbidden that makes me want her so much, that and the fact she'd look so good naked and moaning my name.

Dammit! The one woman he couldn't seduce, and he mooned after her like a moonstruck calf.

Maybe Sam would forgive him if he bedded her. They could be discreet. And Breanna had made it clear she didn't want to get hitched. No, she seemed adamantly opposed.

Definitely an interesting avenue to pursue.

But not before he'd completed his quest. *Argh*, just the thought of going over those stupid rhymes again made his head ache.

Perhaps he'd make another trip to the library on the morrow instead. Some scholarly insight in this instance might be useful.

And until the morrow, maybe he'd fantasize a little more about his wild rose and how soft and sweet her skin would taste. A sane man would have visited his mistress and sated his urges, however Terrence had lost some of his sanity since he'd met her and besides, he didn't want just any woman to ease the ache between his legs, he wanted Breanna.

~ * ~

Mindy, formerly known as Aphrodite, clapped her hands. "Oh, I do so love a first kiss."

"Only a kiss?" teased her brother Chance. "You must be losing your touch."

"I haven't lost anything," she stated frowning at him with her hands on her hips, lips pursed in a moue of displeasure. "You can't rush love—or sex. Why if she gave it away that easily, where would the challenge be? Nope, first I have to build their attraction to each other. Occasional touches, hot looks, steamy dreams..."

"Hey, how come you've never sent me any steamy dreams?" Chance protested.

"Oh please," said Mindy flinging her golden locks in a sexy move wasted on her brother. She really needed to find herself a man to practice her seductive wiles on. "You're my brother. Like eww! It just wouldn't be right. Besides, you could have your pick of mortals as a lover."

"If any took me seriously," said Chance pouting.

"Hey, it's not my fault you chose the short, pudgy Mr. Hooper look. Why don't you put on your real face? The ladies would fall over themselves trying to grope you."

"Yeah, well it is harder to play with mortals when all they can do is gape at my magnificence."

"Magnificence?" Mindy held her sides laughing. "Oh brother, you always were the amusing one."

Chance shot her an indignant look and huffed.

"All right, enough of your pouting. Tell, what do you have planned for these two?" asked Mindy. "Are you throwing any dragons or undead minions at them?"

"I want them to succeed, little sister, not get killed. They'll have a hard enough time fighting the magic and finding the source of the spell without my throwing extra roadblocks in their way."

"Oh, you're no fun. Can't we have at least one bad guy? Come on. I need Terrence to do something big and heroic—something Breanna will be oh so grateful for. Women dig that kind of thing." Mindy smiled dreamily remembering some of the romantic gestures she'd seen in the past. Rescues from pirates and brigands, duels...

Chance interrupted her pleasant thoughts. "Do you really think Breanna will be swayed by something like that?"

"Hey, she might be independent and ornery, but she's still a woman. And women like heroes. Especially big hunky ones like Terrence," said Mindy with a dreamy smile.

"Fine. I'll throw a little something in there to make you happy, but don't blame me, if it doesn't work." Chance bent over his scrying basin and shook his playing dice.

Time to get back to the game.

Eight

"Breanna, have you had any luck with that key the peddler gave you?"

Breanna rolled over in her bed and looked at her father blearily. "Wha-a-at?" she asked, her muddled brain still waking up.

"The key. Did you learn anything?" her father asked, his eyes bright.

Ever the scholar and mild adventurer, he never did have his priorities straight.

"Nope. I met my sister instead, and her family by marriage."

"Really," said her father nervously plucking a thread on his vest, eyes downcast.

"Aren't you going to ask me how it went with Samantha yesterday? You know, the daughter you abandoned." Breanna felt bad the moment the words came out of her mouth, especially when she caught the flash of pain in her father's eyes.

"I assumed you'd tell me. Is she here with your mother?"

With no soft way to put it, Breanna said it bluntly. "Mother is dead. She died a few years ago on the Other Side."

"Oh," he said in a small voice, turning to stare out the window. Breanna felt a pang of sorrow for him and clambered out of her bed to lay a comforting hand on his shoulder. She remembered how she had felt when she'd heard the mother she'd never known no longer walked this world.

After a moment of silent commiseration, he whispered, "And your sister?"

"Samantha was brought over by a magical book that teleported her to a tropical island where she met her husband, Sinclair."

"I thought the mundanes had no magic," he said turning to face her, his face creased in confusion, but also lit with interest. *Aha, something new for his mind to chew on.*

"Apparently one of the Higher Powers managed to meddle and bring her over. She really wants to meet you."

"I don't know. After what I did, how could I ever face her?"

"You have to sooner or later. You can apologize for what you did and try to make up for lost time."

"I don't know. She must hate me," he said with a dejected shrug.

"Enough of the self-pity. You need to face up to your mistakes. You have another daughter now who for some strange reason wants to meet you and even be a part of your life."

"How can she still want to see me after what I did?" Her father seemed genuinely baffled.

"You're her father. As simple as that. If Mother was alive, I'd want to meet her too. You've already wasted over twenty years, don't waste any more."

"I'll think about it. Just give me a little time to build up my courage. I've never been as fearless as you, my daughter. And now not to change subjects too abruptly, what about the key? Have you decided what to do about it?"

Breanna sighed. Father would never change. Mysteries had always intrigued him. "Tell you what, you plan a date to meet with Samantha and I'll go to the library and see if I can find out anything."

"Deal."

Wait, that had been too easy. Breanna eyed her father suspiciously, who in turn smiled back benignly.

"Hey," she said indignantly. "You were already planning to go see her weren't you?"

"Of course I was. I may be scared, but you're right, I am her father and I owe it to her. Now get a move on, daughter. You need to get dressed to go to town and get

started on finding out more about that key."

Breanna grumbled as she got ready. *Men!* And they said women were hard to understand.

In short order Breanna had gotten dressed, eaten breakfast and with a peck on her distracted father's cheek, she took off through the woods to town, stumbling only slightly when she went past the spot where Terrence had kissed her the night before.

Well that wouldn't happen again. Getting involved with him, no matter what her body thought went beyond the term "bad idea." Think about it—they were pretty much family now because of her sister. It just wouldn't be right. If she felt a need to assuage her curiosity about matters between men and women she'd do so with someone she wouldn't have to run into at every family function. Talk about awkward!

Shifting back to human form at the edge of town, she smoothed down her worn skirt. She'd never questioned how her clothes made the transition when she shifted, she just thanked the fact they always appeared when she went from animal to human form.

She quickly made her way through the streets to her destination. The morning sun had barely risen in the eastern sky and few folk were about yet at this hour. Turning onto the deserted street leading to the library, Breanna heard the scrape of footsteps behind her, but thought nothing of it, after all, the library lay just ahead of her and even at this early hour, she probably wasn't the only one with questions to ask. A thought quickly dashed when Cedric stepped out of the shadows of a doorway in front of her and signaled to a person behind her who grabbed her arms in a tight vise. *Oh no, not again.*

"I told you I'd be back," he sneered, cradling his burned hand against his chest. "Where's your big bad wizard now?"

"I don't need anyone to save me. I can take care of myself," she spat defiantly. *Although the tight grip holding her arms back might be a little problematic. But only a little.*

Cedric brayed like a donkey. Pity his shifting animal was a rat, he'd have made a great ass.

"Oh please, without your wizard you're no match for

me and my servant. And we haven't got far to go. Just be a good girl and come along to the carriage I've got waiting for you. Before the day is done, we'll be man and wife." He licked his lips obscenely making Breanna ill to her stomach. *Eew! He is so not touching me.*

But she kept her look of disgust to herself, no need to aggravate him further yet and besides she preferred to keep him off balance.

"You keep forgetting one important thing, Cedric," she said smiling sweetly and batting her eyes coquettishly. "I have no intention of getting married."

Slamming down her foot on the instep of the man holding her, she swung her head back at the same time and smashed her skull hard into his nose. The end result being he let go of her arms to hold his bleeding nose while hopping around on his uninjured foot, hollering. Quite the spectacle actually, one that she would have liked to enjoy but Cedric, with a growl lunged at her. Too predictable. Breanna expecting this, stepped sideways letting him crash into his hopping compatriot. Together they went down in a bellowing chaotic heap.

Breanna watched them flailing on the ground with satisfaction and yes, even a smidgen of amusement. *That would show them!* Too bad a certain wizard didn't happen to be around to see. It would have shown him how wrong he'd been about her needing a protector.

"Consider that a no," she said tartly to the tangled duo thus not hearing the other suitor who snuck up behind her and grabbed her in a now getting old, arm vise.

"Breanna, my dove," he lisped in her ear. "At last you are mine."

Great, the snake shifter from last year had returned. Apparently he'd gotten over her initial dismissal of his suit. She'd tied him in a knot while he'd been in snake form. A feat she still found entertaining.

"I see you managed to untangle yourself," she said all too sweetly.

Then before she had time to shift into an animal that liked to play huntress, the hands holding her went limp and she heard a thud.

Whirling around, she saw a thunderous looking Terrence rubbing his fist while glaring down at the unconscious body of the idiot who'd just tried to claim her.

Terrence again to her rescue looking ruffled and vibrant and sexy...

Still, she'd had matters in hand.

"Thank you for hitting him, but really, you shouldn't have. I had things quite under control."

Terrence looked from her to the heap at his feet to the scurrying, still bellowing Cedric and his henchman, then back. Incredulity marked his face and his tone. "You call this under control? You my prickly wild rose are a menace to society. And I can't for the life of me fathom why all these men keep trying to wed and bed you. By the Higher Powers, woman, don't they realize you'll probably kill them before they manage to get the deed done?"

"I prefer maiming," she answered a little miffed, enjoying the wince on his face. And what did he mean she was a menace to society? How could it be her fault these idiots couldn't take no for an answer and that they kept forcing her to defend herself? She kept telling them to leave her alone, but no, they had to be pig headed mules and keep trying.

She didn't feel bad about her actions—they deserved the ass-kicking she kept giving them. And if Terrence had a problem with her being able to take care of herself then, screw him too!

Pissed, she yanked on the chain around her neck. Out flopped the key and she grabbed it in a tight fist. She started stalking towards the library again only to have Terrence move himself directly in front of her.

"Hold on," he said holding his hands up to stop her.

"Why?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"Listen, sorry if I cramped your style. I saw that guy grab you and I went kind of ballistic. It won't happen again."

"Good." Exactly what she wanted to hear, so why did she feel a pang of disappointment? Maybe because he'd looked so hot acting all manly on her behalf.

"Thanks, I guess," she said begrudgingly. "I can see why you might have thought I needed help."

A little bit calmer now, she let go of the key and let it fall onto the front of her dress instead of tucking it back in her bodice.

Terrence's eyes followed its descent and then stayed hovering on her chest, long enough she opened her mouth to tell him what she thought of it, but he interrupted her before she began.

"Where did you get that key?"

"Why do you ask?" she replied carefully. She knew who'd given it to her, but what exactly did he know about it?

"I've been looking for a key for that task I've been assigned and against all odds I think you're wearing it around your neck."

"Oh yeah, like I'm gonna fall for that one."

"Can I see it?" he asked reaching out a hand to touch it.

Breanna backed away. "No you may not. And I'll thank you to keep your hands to yourself." Oh please, like she'd never had someone try that line on her before to try and cop a feel.

"Do you know what you have around your neck?" he continued persistently.

"I have a pretty good idea."

That made him frown.

"Listen," she said. "This key was given to me by someone special." *Yeah special all right—cuckoo Chance.* "And that same someone gave me a task, a quest of sorts regarding it. So it doesn't matter what you think it is or what it is for. The key is mine and that's that."

"You don't understand," said Terrence flinging his hands out in frustration, a state of mind Breanna seemed to cause with ease. "The fate of the whole Realm depends on my getting that key."

Breanna laughed. "Oh please. The fate of the whole Realm? A little dramatic don't you think?"

"I'm serious. The boundary is failing. The council has appointed me to find the key and the box so that I can release the spell holding the boundary together before it starts claiming lives."

That stopped her laughter and sobered her up. "I'm going to kill him," she muttered, cursing Chance for the third day in a row.

Then she shifted into fox form and trotted away from Terrence, heading fast for her home in the woods, her mind a turmoil of thoughts and curses.

Bloody hell. Find the box and open it, he'd told her. Higher Power or not, she was so going to hurt that mischievous god when she got her hands on him. Who gave him the right to make her a pawn in one of his games?

And what had Terrence meant, the boundary had begun failing and the fate of the Realm depended on the key?

Double dog damn!

~ * ~

Terrence restrained a howl of frustration when she shifted into fox form and bounded away. Not fair! First, he'd felt his heart up in his throat when he'd seen her captured by that miserable excuse for a man. Then he found the key he'd been researching, hanging on a cord around her neck, which made sense now of the rose hint he'd been given, and then she had the nerve to run off—again!

Not this time. And Terrence knew just the person to help him find her again. The second best hunter in the Realm. Sister to the number one tracker in the Realm, Natalie, and it just so happened she awaited him in the library to give him a report on the boundary failings.

Striding quickly into the edifice, today bustling as it should have been the previous day, he found Nat lounging against the front desk making the librarian behind it twitch nervously.

A tall, blonde Valkyrie, Nat had the ability to make a lot of men feel inadequate. Toned arms and body, encased in brown leather with a wicked looking sword at her side, somehow even dressed like a barbarian princess, she looked womanly. Not that he'd ever entertained romantic notions about her—he preferred his women a little more delicate and besides, who wanted to bed a woman who could beat you in an arm wrestling match? Talk about devastating to the male ego!

"Nat," he called out to her drawing her attention. "I need your help tracking someone for me."

"I thought you wanted to know about the boundary problems?" she said with a puzzled look.

"I still do, you can tell me on the way. I need you to track a shifter for me. She just left a few minutes ago outside."

"She?" she said with a grin and an arched brow. "Don't tell me you've found a woman who isn't bowled over by your good looks and status. Poor baby."

Terrence felt his cheeks redden. "Listen, it's not what you think. Yes, she's hot, but she's got something I need for my quest and she took off with it. I need you to find her for me so I can get my hands on the key she won't hand over."

"Yeah sure," said Nat rolling her eyes. "What happened to 'this is of the utmost importance? I need this information like yesterday.'"

"I still need your intel, but I need this key even more." Terrence growled in frustration. "Listen are you going to help me or not?"

"Course I'll help you, sounds entertaining" Nat said with an unapologetic grin. "And I'll even tell you about the boundary problems on the way. Come on."

Striding with long legs out the front doors, Terrence matched her pace and led her to the spot he'd lost Breanna.

Nat crouched down, one hand on the cobblestones, and sniffed the air. Enhanced senses were a common trait among hunters, one they were born with. Some said it had to do with magic or shifter blood further back in the family. Whatever the cause, there was nothing and nobody a hunter couldn't find if given a scent.

"Mmm," said Nat inhaling deeply. "She smells of the forest and flowers. And," she sniffed again. "Musky. She likes the fox form, does she? Well come along, my friend, she's got a head start on us, but we should be able to catch up, that is if you can keep up with me."

Nat took off in a loping run, one hand on her sword to keep it from bouncing. Terrence jogged along behind her—good thing he kept in shape because she set a brisk pace. He followed Natalie through the streets of town, listening to her unembellished report on the boundary problems. In a

nutshell, she told him exactly what the council had—crossovers were happening with no pattern or warning throughout the world where the boundary had thinned enough. The problem seemed to be escalating and those sent to deal with it could no longer keep up.

"What's gonna happen?" asked Nat who still breathed evenly as she jogged alongside him, her alert eyes taking in everything around her. "I heard the council had some big meeting about the problem,"

"The boundary has to be dismantled."

Nat stumbled. "Holy shit!" She looked up at him stunned, then started jogging again. "Wow, that is huge. Wait 'til I tell the guys."

"Listen, you can't say anything yet. I'm still not sure how to even find the damn spell let alone let it loose."

"My lips are sealed. But hey, I'll help you find it if you want. Sounds like it's going to be quite the adventure and my skills might come in handy."

Terrence hesitated for a moment, tempted to take her offer. A hunter might make things easier, but then again, what they were looking for had eluded everyone for centuries. It would take more than a keen sense of smell to find the box. It would take smarts—or at least an ability to figure out a stupid rhyme. Too bad he wasn't acquainted with any children, they'd probably muddle through it faster than he'd been able to so far.

"Thanks, but I think your talents are of better use keeping the Realm safe, although to be honest, if I succeed in my task then the work you are currently doing will be for naught. Once the boundary comes down, there'll be no stopping the flood of Realm denizens or mundanes."

"Ah, it won't be so bad. I've been working the other side for a while now and trust me, they're more than ready for us, they have been for a while. Whoo-ee, are the media over there gonna have a field day when the boundary is gone!"

Terrence didn't quite follow this talk—Nat seemed to have picked up some strange speaking habits since her assignment on the Other Side, but he had to admit a little relief in knowing that when the boundary came down that perhaps all wouldn't be as tumultuous as he and the council

feared.

While they'd been talking, they reached the outskirts of town where the forest began—a thick dense mass that spanned leagues. Pausing, Nat crouched down to sniff the ground again. Within minutes she had taken off again. Like a shadow on winged feet, she slipped through the trees, following the trail left by his wild rose—who had a lot of explaining to do once he caught up to her.

Terrence now followed behind more slowly, staying well clear of Natalie so she could track properly. It wouldn't do to muddle her senses. He sometimes wished he'd been born with hunter abilities. He'd always envied Nat and her brother their special abilities—a keen sense of smell like a predator with the instincts of one too. *Totally cool, not to mention the chicks totally dug the suave hunter thing.* Although wizards had their share of female admirers—nothing like undressing a lady with no hands. He chuckled almost silently. He'd mastered *that* trick in his teens.

While he followed Nat, he had time to think about the previous day's reading. The rhyme in the book had stated that no mortal hands held the key, yet Breanna had it and she was so obviously mortal. But she'd stated someone special had given it to her.

A Higher Power perhaps? One she'd threatened to kill.

That made Terrence grin. Only his prickly rose would have the guts—insanity—to stand up to a god. But it raised the more interesting question of why had the God of Chance chosen her and not him seeing as how he'd been assigned the task by the council of finding the boundary spell and disarming it. Perhaps the gods didn't mean for him to be the one to release the spell. Maybe the task did belong to Breanna as the god's chosen player.

Nah! If the Higher Powers hadn't meant for him to go on this quest then why show him Maerlyn's book in the first place?

Terrence then suddenly remembered the words of that odd portly librarian—the God of Chance in his version of a disguise—and Terrence felt an urge to throttle the chubby god too, for hadn't he said something to the effect he wouldn't be alone on his quest? Apparently they'd chosen two mortals for this task—Terrence and Breanna.

Breanna made a nice choice if he needed a bed mate, but that didn't seem to be the role she'd been assigned. What a shame. Which meant that her role in this adventure would be of partner.

Hold on a second though, surely they didn't expect him to take a woman along with him on his quest? *A woman who had shown she could take care of herself*, chided his conscience. But still, she was a woman and women were supposed to stay home and let the men go off and face danger. Terrence felt like hooting and thumping his chest—okay so apparently he still had some caveman tendencies.

Still, traveling with a woman? *I mean come on—what if there were no beds and they had to camp out, or eat over an open fire, hell, what about bathing?* He still remembered how long it took to wash off the stench when he'd gone into the field scouting during the troll uprising. A woman wouldn't stand for that. *Or would she*, he thought wryly, glancing ahead at Nat's silently moving form. He hated to admit his reasoning might be faulty, after all he'd have trusted Nat to come along and survive the trip, and right now wasn't he trusting Nat, a woman, to lead him to Breanna?

But Nat had always been different. For one she'd worn breeches for as long as he'd known her. She'd trained alongside men as an equal and besides, she didn't act girly. Whereas Breanna wore dresses, smelled sweet and made his blood pound, not to mention she made him want undress her and worship her 'til her face flushed in passion.

She also had an independent spirit, no fear in the face of adversity and a dislike of men who kept trying to pigeonhole her into their perceived role of womanhood.

Terrence sighed.

Crap. Why do women have to be so damned complicated?

What seemed like forever, but actually was less than an hour later, they reached a poor excuse for a tower in a clearing.

"You sure this is the spot?" he asked Nat dubiously looking at the ramshackle structure. One good breeze and the whole thing would probably collapse.

Nat just arched a brow her expression saying eloquently, *How dare you doubt me?*

"Sorry I asked," he said sheepishly. "I guess I expected something grander."

"Well, I'll leave you and your lady lovebird to patch things up."

"She's not my lady!" *Unfortunately.*

Nat shrugged and grinned. "Whatever you say Ter. Good luck. I'll be in town for a few days staying at the Wanderer's Inn. Swing by if you still need more info."

"Thanks, Nat." But he spoke to empty air, Nat having already vanished into the depths of the woods. Another skill he wouldn't mind having.

Taking a deep breath—surely he wasn't nervous—he strode up to the wooden door of the structure and knocked. With a creak the door opened and an older man peered out.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"Hi. I'm looking for Breanna. You must be her father. I'm Terrence, Terrence Griffonaire."

"Oh," that seemed to fluster the old gent for a moment, but he still opened the door wide to invite him in.

"I'm Sammuel, her father. Breanna got home just moments ago looking rather flustered. I don't suppose you'd know anything about that?" asked her father with a twinkle in his old eyes.

Terrence felt like grinning. *Flustered her did I? She'll be more than that when I'm done with her.* "I think she's coming to grips with a certain task she's been set to."

"Ahh, the key," nodded her father sagely. "Yes, she told me she was going to do some research on it this morning. I take it she discovered something."

"You could say that," answered Terrence evasively.

"Before I get her, are you related to Sinclair Griffonaire by any chance?"

"He's my brother."

"Oh, so you know my other daughter then?" asked Sammuel with interest.

"Sam? Yeah, she's my sister-in-law. Still can't believe, she's having twins. Guess it runs in the family eh?"

The old man's face blanched. "Twins? Oh my. Breanna neglected to mention that part."

Oops. Nothing like putting your foot in your mouth to shut you up. Breanna had given him the gist of yesterday's

conversation between the reunited sisters. Sounded like the old man hadn't gotten the whole story from Breanna yet. Aw well, too late, the cat had escaped this particular bag, it just sucked that he'd given her another reason for her to get annoyed with him.

"You know," said Terrence, "You really should go and meet with Sam. She's a nice person, and I know she'd like to meet you."

"I am planning to," said Breanna's father. "This has all just been so sudden. It is hard to have one's past mistakes show back up to haunt you, not to mention the regret that goes along with it. This has all been a bit much for an old man to take. But, I know Breanna wants me to and I guess if I can face her fury, I can face that of my other daughter too."

"Oh, I don't think you'll have to worry about Sam freaking out. Her temperament is quite different from Breanna's."

"Really?" The old man's eyes brightened. "Not that Breanna's that bad, most of the time."

Terrence just arched a brow. "Really, because from what I've seen so far, I've got to say, it doesn't seem to take much to get her going. She's like a rose, beautiful to look at, but watch out for those thorns," said Terrence with a grin. Apparently Sammuel liked Terrence's analogy for he began laughing uproariously, a laughter Terrence joined, which was, unfortunately, how Breanna found them.

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The sound of her father and Terrence laughing their heads off brought Breanna out of hiding from her room to scowl at them both.

"What's so funny?" she asked looking at them suspiciously and to her irritation they looked at each other and broke out into louder gales of laughter.

Breanna sniffed. *Men!*

Finally they both calmed down, although the sober expressions they tried to adopt kept cracking into grins every time they looked at her not too happy countenance.

"Why did you follow me?" she asked Terrence crossly, arms across her chest, foot tapping loudly, the perfect picture of indignation and irritation.

"I told you before you ran off, I need that key for my task."

Oh sure, he'll follow me home for the key, not because he wants to see me. I mean not that I care. I don't want to see him either. "I already told you, you can't have it."

"What's this, Breanna? Does Terrence know what the key is for?" interrupted her father.

"Actually I do. The boundary is failing. The spell The Thirteen set so long ago is unraveling. I need that key to unlock the box that holds the spell. "

"Oh dear," said Sammuel. "The time has come."

"The time? What are you talking about, Father?" asked Breanna transferring her frown to her father. She believed in equally sharing her displeasure.

"In my youth I admit to being quite fascinated with The Thirteen. I spent many hours researching their spell. According to my findings, once the spell starts to fail it's only a matter of time before it starts killing magic users to try and keep itself alive."

Terrence nodded. "Exactly the problem we are now facing. I've been tasked by the council to find the source of the spell and release it before it starts claiming lives."

"Starts? Oh my dear boy, if the spell has begun to fail, then I fear lives have already been taken."

"What are you talking about?"

"The spell, while not a living entity, has a sort of sentience, one of self-preservation. I think you'll find if you search that people have already started dying."

"I've heard nothing of people dying. Surely the council would have received word."

"You might not notice it at first. The spell is probably only taking those too weak to fight it. Old men, young children, those who are infirm."

Terrence raked a hand through his head and Breanna could see the turmoil in his eyes. The thought that people were dying really bothered him.

"Then my task is even more urgent than before. I need that key. Breanna?"

"And I told you that the key and task are mine. I don't care what the bloody council told you." Stubbornness had always been one of her more enduring traits. Besides why

should she just hand it over? She didn't care if the council had sent him on a quest. She'd been handed her quest by an actual god. Didn't that give her precedence?

"Stop playing your games, Breanna. You have no idea what you're looking for or where. Hand the key over like a good little girl and let a man handle this."

For a second she just gaped at him, her mouth open and shutting in disbelief. How dare he patronize her and call her a little girl!

"Oh!" she screeched. "You are such a pompous jerk! I am just as capable of finding the box and releasing the spell as you are."

"Are not!"

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

"Are too!"

"Children, children," said Sammuell stepping between them, brave considering they were now standing nose to nose shouting. "Has it perhaps not occurred to either of you that you should be working together? Isn't it obvious that the Higher Powers have decided to set you both the same task, so wouldn't it stand to reason that you're both needed?"

Breanna and Terrence turned to glare at her father who shrugged his shoulders and smiled placidly.

"Now, do either of you have any idea of where the box is located?" asked Sammuell, unperturbed by their irate faces.

A unified, "No." *Finally something they agreed on.*

Terrence added, "I found a rhyme, but it makes no sense." He recited it.

Sammuel nodded. "Ah yes, it is rather vague isn't it? But there is a better way to find it."

"There is?" asked Breanna.

"Of course. Find out who's been dying."

"How does that help us? People die every day," said Terrence. "And like I said nothing suspicious has been reported."

"You're not thinking, children. First off the box wouldn't have been hidden anywhere near a city or largely populated area."

"How do you know that?"

"Because a spell of that magnitude would be hard to hide surrounded by magic users. So, if we go on the assumption that they've placed it somewhere remote, then start searching the rumors of strange happenings in the small towns located in remote areas. Deaths probably aren't the only things that are happening. Look for sudden stories of hauntings, people acting oddly, voices in their heads maybe or magic acting erratically. Once you find a pattern, chart it. I'll wager you'll find that the events radiate out from a central location. And in that spot you'll find the box."

"You know," said Terrence to Breanna. "I think your father might be right. At least we have a direction to start our search. I'll talk to the hunters and see if any of them have heard any rumors. I'll start teleporting in the morning."

"I wouldn't recommend that," said Sammuell shaking his head.

"Why ever not?" asked Terrence. "It is the quickest way to get around."

"The closer you get to the actual location of the box, the more dangerous teleporting or magic of any kind will be. Think of your magic as a beacon, and with magic strong as yours.... Well I wouldn't recommend it."

Terrence scowled. "It'll take forever if I don't."

"But at least you'll be alive. Besides, Breanna doesn't teleport," said her father.

"Who said she was coming with me?" replied Terrence.

Breanna saw red. "Don't worry, I am not going with you. I'll be going on my own. I'll just change into a bird. I can reach most of the remote towns in a few days."

Sammuel shook his head. "Your shifting ability is magical as well. While the spell won't suck your soul like it would Terrence's here, it might however cause you to shift while flying and human bodies don't bounce very well if dropped from great heights. You'll have to stick to four legged forms and even then, it could be dangerous."

"So what do you suggest?" she said sighing. Father obviously had an idea in mind, it just took forever to get it out.

"Well , luckily for you, I know which direction you need to start in. Head to the mountain range."

"Why the mountains?" asked Terrence.

"Because it is the only place in the Realm that never became well populated, making it very suspicious. And of course there's the fact that we've had a lot of recent migration by some of the more reclusive shifters from the mountains claiming there's something not right going on up there."

"Why didn't you tell us that in the first place?" said Breanna crossly. All this run around when he knew the stupid answer.

"If I gave you the answer, you wouldn't learn anything, my child," said her father sagely.

"Yes, Father," she said by rote. *Thanks for making me feel like a kid again too*, she muttered inside her head; a thought she suspected Terrence echoed judging by the chagrined look on his face. "Okay, so now I know where to start. I'll leave first thing in the morning."

"You are not going by yourself. It is way too dangerous," said Terrence.

"You can't stop me," she said and in a move that surprised them both, ran out of the tower into the woods.

Ha, he'll never find me now. I'll just hide in the woods 'til he leaves, then I'll prepare to go on my quest.

Breanna gathered herself to shift, but instead gave a grunt as she hit the ground, a heavy body landing on top of hers.

Immediately she thrashed, stopping only when she heard Terrence in a loud no nonsense voice say, "Enough."

Then realizing he wouldn't actually hurt her—and that he'd dared to give her an order—she started rolling and flailing again trying to get him off.

"Would you stop that?" he growled in her ear, tickling it and making that molten heat start spreading through her body. *Not again*. Stupid body betraying her.

She quieted again, hoping her body would go back to sleep to, but awakened, it just got warmer with the weight of his body pressing down on hers.

"Listen, I'm going to let you roll over, but I'm not getting off of you 'til we reach an understanding."

"Oh, I understand," she said spitting mad. "You're just trying to cop a feel so you can feel like a big man."

"No," he said sighing. "Pleasant as you feel beneath

me, this has to do with making sure you don't take the coward's way out and run off again before we've talked."

Coward? He called me a coward! She hadn't been running away, she'd been getting a head start. Yeah, *coward*, her treacherous mind agreed.

"Fine," she grumbled.

The pressure on her back eased enough she could roll over, his powerful forearms braced on either side of her body. She looked up into his face and almost spit for his blue eyes twinkled merrily at her and his lips curled into a half smile. Lowering his body onto hers again, he trapped her beneath his masculine weight, his smile widening.

"Now, doesn't that feel better?" he asked suggestively, his hips snug against her lower parts.

And oh by the Higher Powers, it did feel good. Breanna had to fight an urge to thrust her hips up to rub against him. He'd enjoy that way too much—but then again so would she.

"Okay, now that I've got your attention, let's talk" he said seriously. "I know you don't want to be partners on this; trust me I'm not too keen on the idea either, but your father's right. It would seem the Higher Powers want us together on this."

"Oh please, I'd hardly call the council a Higher Power."

"I wasn't talking about them. I do believe I've met your good friend Chance as well. Pudgy bald guy who seems to smile incessantly?"

"My, but that god gets around," she muttered.

"He led me to a book written by The Thirteen that gives me info on the creation and location of the box. He's also the one who gave me the clue to find the key—in other words you. And he told me I wouldn't be alone."

"He said the same thing to me, too," she grudgingly admitted. "So now what?"

"I guess we go together," he said.

"How do I trust that you won't just ditch me?" she asked suspiciously. He'd capitulated too easily. No way would he agree to have her along all of a sudden.

"You keep the key."

That surprised her, so of course she had to taunt him. "And how do you know you can trust me?" she asked smiling

at him wickedly. *With the key already in hand, I don't technically need him. Silly man.*

"And this is where the trust comes in," he said. "Listen, obviously we're supposed to go together—you have the key, I have the knowledge. If we team up, between the two of us we can tackle this thing and both be heroes."

He sounded so sincere. Breanna felt herself struggling, her independent nature unused to collaboration. But a chance to be a hero, to go on a real quest? With Terrence...

"All right, but if you double-cross me wizard boy, I will shift into a panther and eat your man parts."

To his credit, Terrence only blanched a little at her threat, and then took her by surprise by dipping his head down and whispering, "Now, let's seal the deal with a kiss."

And then his lips were sliding over hers.

Nine

Immediately her body came alive—her nerve endings tingling with awareness. The feel of his body atop of hers, his heavy weight—and hardness—pressing at the junction of her thighs making her moan against his lips and give into her earlier thought. She thrust up against him. A gratifying groan met that action and he ground his pelvis back against hers, shooting a wave of pleasure through her body.

Breanna felt herself falling into a deep well of bliss. Her breathing grew ragged as his lips devoured hers hungrily. She ran her hands up around his torso and rubbed her palms against the muscular planes of his back. The thin linen of his shirt annoyed her; she wanted to feel the heat of his flesh.

"Um, I take it you've resolved your differences?" came her father's voice as if from miles away.

And like a cold bucket of water, she suddenly woke up and realized where she lay and what she was doing.

"Pig, get off me," she hissed, pushing at him with the same hands that had been groping him seconds earlier.

"Of course, my little rose," and as gallantly as possible under the circumstances, he rolled off her and gave her a hand to get up. Which she of course ignored, getting up by herself and scowling at him.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're getting along," said her father beaming at them. Breanna felt like screaming—*hey as my father shouldn't you be defending my honor?*

But oh, no, her father looked pleased as punch to have discovered some pig mauling his daughter. And to be fair she'd been mauling him back. Terrence just stood there cool

as a cucumber, a ghost of smile on his lips, his hair tousled and looking sexy. Ooh, she hated him... and still wanted him.

"I'll be here at dawn for us to start our journey," Terrence said. "Be ready." And with a cocky smile for her and a salute for her father, he left, whistling, while Breanna restrained the urge to throw a rock at him.

Insufferable wizard. He'd better not hope he'd be taking liberties on this trip or he'd find himself singing soprano awfully quick.

~ * ~

Terrence was still whistling when he teleported back to the house. Screw walking, he had things to do, preparations to make.

"You look pleased, son," said his mother coming out of the parlor.

"I'm leaving on my quest tomorrow," he said and *I won't be alone*, he thought gleefully. Interesting didn't even start to describe what this trip would be like. His earlier qualms about taking a woman along had disappeared. *Why fight the will of the Higher Powers?*

"You're leaving so soon?" said his mother, concern creasing her still youthful looking features.

"I got a tip from Breanna's dad. She and I leave first thing in the morning."

"Breanna's going with you? Are you out of your mind, Terrence? You can't take a woman on a trip like that? What will her father say?"

"Actually her father is all for it. And besides it would seem the Higher Powers want it that way. She's got the key needed to unlock the box containing the spell."

"This better not be some ploy to seduce her, Terrence," his mother railed.

Oops, I guess she's heard rumors of my reputation as a rake. "I have no intention of seducing her. This is purely business." *With added perks if I'm lucky. Oh Chance, are you listening?*

As if she read his mind, his mother continued to harangue him. "This isn't proper, Terrence, and you know it. She's Sam's sister, which means you can't seduce her. You can't fool me. I saw the way you looked at her over dinner the other night."

Terrence suppressed a sigh. "And just how was I looking, Mother?"

"Like she was the tastiest thing you'd ever seen."

"Was not," he muttered trying to deny it when in truth he'd actually imagined her at one point smothered in cream and cherries that he....

"Ha! See you're thinking about her again. I will not have you dishonor this girl, Terrence! You're both unmarried and it is completely unsuitable for you both to be going together on this task. Maybe I should come along to chaperone," she mused.

Terrence felt himself in the grip of panic. "No, there's no need for that mother. I'll behave. I promise." An easy promise to make because if his usual charm and good looks worked, she'd be the one throwing herself at him. "Besides, you don't really want to go. You hate camping in the woods and bathing in icy cold streams. And who'll take care of Sam? She'll need you nearby with this being her first pregnancy." A little overmuch, but to his relief his mother nodded.

"You're right, Sam needs me here. But still, what will people say? She'll ruin her chances for a good marriage."

"I don't think she cares about that, Mother. Breanna is quite determined never to marry."

"As is someone else I know," she said looking pointedly at Terrence, who unabashedly grinned.

"Hey, you've got grandbabies on the way, so why do I have to get shackled? I like my freedom and the ladies too much."

"Terrence Gerald Griffonaire. You watch your mouth."

Terrence blushed at his mother's tone. "Yes, Mother."

"One day, you'll find the one meant for you and you'll marry and have children of your own. Love is a force stronger than you, my son. You can try and fight it, but it always wins." And with that cryptic remark, his mother smiled serenely and walked away.

Love. Ha! Love is for wussies. And as for children—no thank you. He'd rather be an uncle. At least then if the little critter started crying or puked on him, he could hand it off to its parents. Nope, he had no intentions of getting trapped into marriage and fatherhood.

And with that thought, he dove into his preparations—sending out notices of his departure, packing the essentials, renting some horses, and trying not grin every time he thought of being alone with Breanna. He couldn't wait for the morrow.

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Breanna prepared for her upcoming trip, her father getting underfoot as she packed a knapsack with the essentials. With her hunting and wood skills, she had no need for food supplies—she knew how to live off the land. Clothing, however, along with a blanket and cloak were a must.

"This is so exciting," babbled her father, animatedly. "My little girl is going off on her first quest. Be sure to make note of everything you do and see. I want to make a record of your journey when you get back."

"Yes, Father," she said sighing. Like she'd have time to take notes.

"Oh and don't forget, no magic."

"I'll make sure Terrence behaves."

"That goes for you, too, daughter. Once you get close to the source of the spell, you may find your shapeshifting magic behaving oddly. Try and stay in human form if possible."

"Yes, Father. Is that all? I have an errand I need to run."

"Where are you off to?" asked Sammuell.

"I wanted to see Samantha and tell her about my trip. I thought she might like to hear about it from me. You should come with me."

"Um—I—" stuttered her father. "I don't know—."

"Come on, get dressed," said Breanna interrupting him and shoving him lightly in the direction of his room so he could change.

Thus they found themselves a while later—after much hemming and hawing on her father's part—standing and staring up at the large mansion Terrence called home.

"Goodness!" exclaimed her father. "How does one live in a home that large?"

"The same way we do," said Breanna acting like the size didn't impress her, even though it had when she'd first

seen it.

Knocking on the door, the butler, whose bald crown shone brighter than a mirror in the sun, escorted them to the parlor while he fetched the mistress of the house.

Sammuel wandered around nervously, stopping to stare up at the painting of Elizabeth and her husband in their younger days. "My, she's a handsome woman."

"Thank you," said the lady in question walking into the room.

Flustered, Sammuel blushed beet red and Breanna smothered a giggle.

"You must be Sammuel, I'm Elizabeth."

Sammuel tongue tied, could only nod his head.

"I hear you're going on a journey with my son," said Elizabeth, turning to Breanna. "Are you quite sure you want to do that? The lack of a chaperone on your journey will have an effect on your reputation in society."

Screw society. Maybe they'll leave me alone if they think I'm compromised. "I don't really care what society thinks. A Higher Power set me to this task, so if society doesn't if like they can take it up with them."

Elizabeth laughed. "Oh, I wish I could go along with you. This journey looks like it will be quite entertaining."

Why does everyone keep saying that? she grumbled to herself.

"I take it you're here to see Samantha and let her know about your trip."

"Yes please. I hope you don't mind. I didn't know how else to contact her."

"My pleasure, dear. I'll fetch her and be right back." Elizabeth left, long skirts swishing and Sammuel regained his wits.

"What a formidable woman," he said looking at the empty doorway with admiration.

Breanna now found herself struck dumb. *Father's got a crush!* This had to be the first time she'd ever seen her father show any interest in a member of the opposite sex. And of course it would be Terrence's mother.

Only moments passed before Elizabeth reappeared, a shy Samantha behind her.

Sammuel just stared at his other daughter, then with tears in his eyes, he approached her with his arms open wide. "Oh my dear daughter, I am so sorry," he said his voice choking.

Samantha, her eyes, pools of liquid, flew into the open arms and tightly hugged the father she'd never known.

"Thank you so much for coming," said Samantha her voice tight with tears, tears that Breanna felt running down her cheeks. *My family, together at last.*

With his arm still around Samantha's shoulders, Sammuel turned a damp face to Breanna. "Come here. Family hug time." Breanna walked quickly to them and the three hugged and laughed and cried. The past now just that, past.

Elizabeth had left sometime during their love-fest, so the trio now alone, sat down, Sammuel between his two daughters, clasping their hands tight.

"I am truly sorry for what I did. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me," said Sammuel ducking his head.

"We all make mistakes," said Samantha sagely. "I'm just glad that we still have a chance to become a real family."

What, no yelling? Hard to believe we're twins. I'd have yelled at least a little bit.

"Thank you for forgiving me if I have yet to forgive myself. I have to admit it is quite uncanny looking at you as you are the spitting image of your mother," he said. "I was sorry to hear of her passing."

"Do I truly look like her? Her illness made her lose so much weight that I found it hard to tell and her hair turned gray when I was still a little girl. Back on the island, I've got pictures myself growing up, and of her. . . When I came to live here permanently, the agency in my old world boxed up my stuff and had it sent over."

Breanna perked up. "You have images of our mother? Oh, I would love to see those when I return."

"Return? Are you going somewhere?" asked Samantha.

"Terrence and I are going on a quest together to release the magic holding the boundary in place."

"What? But how? I thought the council only appointed Terrence to that task. How did you get roped in?" asked Samantha, her brow creased in puzzlement.

"The God of Chance roped me in."

Samantha giggled. "My, but he seems awfully interested in our family. It's because of him I ended up living here married to Sinclair." Then she sobered. "I heard though, that this task could be quite dangerous. Are you sure you should go?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" grouched Breanna. "Yes I'm sure. And yes, I'll be fine. And no, my virtue isn't in any danger."

"Who said anything about your virtue, sister of mine?" replied Samantha with a smile.

Breanna just gaped at her and Samantha laughed while Sammuel merely looked puzzled.

"Should I be worried about this Terrence fellow?" he finally asked.

"No!" Breanna came close to shouting.

Both her father and sister laughed making her frown. Why did everyone think she'd be allowing Terrence to touch her? *Kiss her... Make love to... It's their fault I'm getting these thoughts in my head. We're partners, nothing more. There won't be any compromising going on. I don't care what they or my body think.*

"What about you, Sammuel?" asked Samantha. "What will you be doing while Breanna is gone?"

"Oh goodness, I realize we've just met and have a lot of catching up to do, but it would please me greatly if you would call me Father."

Samantha smiled. "Then let me rephrase that. What are your plans while Breanna is off on her journey, Father?"

"Oh just puttering around the tower I guess. The usual."

"I don't suppose you'd like to putter around an island instead. I'd love for you to come visit with me. It would be nice to get to know you. And to keep you busy, we have a fully stocked library and a village full of Undines."

Sammuel's face stretched into a wide smile. "That actually sounds delightful. It would be my pleasure to be your guest."

The new family chatted for a bit about the island, especially the Undines, who seemed to fascinate Sammuell. Breanna, wanting to get a good night's sleep finally stood up and prepared to leave. Sammuell elected to stay behind and return with Samantha that evening to the island, claiming he had no need of anything from the tower, although Breanna suspected it was more likely the long walk to and fro that made him decide against packing a bag. Just before Breanna departed, Samantha hugged her tight whispering, "Please be careful. I don't want to lose you now that I've found you."

"You won't lose me," said Breanna through a throat dammed with tears.

Her father hugged her next and said, "Save the Realm, my little fox. I know you can do it."

Good thing someone has faith in me.

Only when she returned to the tower did she realize she'd forgotten to ask her father how long the journey to the first village would take. *No big deal, I'll just ask Terrence on the morrow.*

Sliding between the sheets of her bed, a bed she would sorely miss, she wondered what would happen on their journey. Would they fight ruffians? Battle evil magic? Make love under the stars? *What?*

And with her repeating the mantra, "I do not want to make love to Terrence. I do not want to..." She fell asleep dreaming of guess who, Terrence.

~ * ~

The following morning, about an hour into their trip...

"You know this would be a lot quicker if you would let me teleport us to Stone Hallow." The place Sammuell had told them to start with. A journey whose distance she still didn't know as Terrence had only given her a vague answer in reply when asked. A few days, maybe more he'd said. Long enough to get some pretty decent blisters on his feet with the stupid boots he'd chosen to wear.

"You heard what father said and much as I dislike you, I don't intend to turn you into a beacon for magic gone bad. And just so you know, this would also be a lot quicker if instead of being a useless wizard you could shape shift into an animal." *He'd make a wonderful panther, all sleek grace*

and muscles, she thought. It did occur to her to shift and take off running, but then the blasted jerk would probably just teleport there ahead of her, so she'd still end up losing instead of getting ahead.

This totally sucked.

So they walked.

"I still say we should at least have taken horses," he grumbled after an hour of stiff silence, still miffed at being forced to leave them behind at the tower.

"How would you like someone sitting their fat ass on your back all day?" she retorted. No, she wasn't a vegetarian, nor did she have a problem with animals being used for work, what she did take issue with was using animals to transport them when they had two perfectly good legs of their own to walk on. Although, personally, she preferred to go on all four.

Terrence craned around and Breanna watching him contort had to ask. "What the hell are you looking for?"

"You implied I had a fat ass," he said. "I was just checking, but my ass seems fine. Maybe you were referring to yours," he said following his comment with a quick swat on her butt.

Even through her dress and petticoat she felt the sting of his big hand as it made contact. "Oh tell me you didn't just do that," she hollered.

"I did," he grinned unrepentantly. "I can do it again if you'd like."

"Don't you dare or I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what? Spank me back? Please do." The comical leer on his face ended up being the icing on the cake. Breanna burst into gales of laughter. *Stupid jerk just had to be funny.*

After a moment of surprise, Terrence laughed along with her. It occurred to her that, for the first time since they met, they weren't actually fighting and he'd managed to make her laugh. A feat her father deemed impossible at times with her acerbic temperament.

With the ice now broken between them, their walk became much more pleasant than she'd expected. They joked and talked about everything. She learned more about

him and his family, then turned around and told him about her upbringing with her father.

Breanna found herself quite enjoying his companionship—talk about a surprise. Breanna had never been the type to make friends easily—most people couldn't handle her sharp tongue. That and moving around a lot meant that the only friend she could truly say she had was her father. How pathetic some would say—she didn't care. She'd never met anyone who interested her before. Now in the space of a week, she'd discovered a sister she actually liked and a wizard who made her realize just how much fun it could be to interact with someone who didn't treat her like just a woman or an idiot. Her mind and spirit felt stimulated... alive. Maybe too alive she thought when her eyes caught his and her heart started thumping faster. *How does he do that?* She'd never felt her pulse race like this before, unless she'd been exerting herself. Yet just a simple glance from him and she felt like she'd been running a race. A hot, sweaty, blood pumping. . .

"So when did you start getting the mass proposals?" he asked.

Startled from her thoughts—steamy thoughts—Breanna answered a little breathlessly. "It all started about three years ago. My father warned me when I was still just a little girl in pigtails to shift only into one animal form around the clans so as to not let out my secret."

"The secret being that you're a multi shapeshifter."

"Right. I chose the fox as my main form because it is quick, tricky and fun. When I had to wear a shape, that's the one I used when the clans had celebrations we were invited to. But I screwed up one day when I thought I was alone. See, my dad had been called to confer on some matter so he was closeted with the clan lord. I was bored and the sun shone brightly in a blue sky that just beckoned me. Like an idiot, I went and found a clearing, made a quick check to see if I was alone, then changed into a dove so I could fly in that perfect sky."

"Did it feel wonderful?" he asked interrupting her.

"It was glorious," she said still smiling at the memory of the freedom she'd felt soaring in that wide blue expanse, a freedom that had since been curtailed because of her

stupidity. That dampened her smile. "But I was an idiot. The lord's son saw me change in the clearing and told his father who confronted my father. Father denied my ability but he wasn't believed. An offer of marriage was made by the lord, which we declined. And we hoped that would be that."

"But I take it that wasn't the end of it. I guess word got around." Terrence said.

"It did. Next thing I knew, we were besieged by offers and visitors, all showing off their sons. At first it was amusing. We turned them away saying I wasn't ready and what not. Then it got annoying, which is why father and I packed our things and moved into that tower we live in now, not letting anyone know where we'd gone."

"I take it that didn't stop them?"

"Nope, they just got more persistent. Father and I would surface for some of the clan gatherings, in the hopes that crowds would dissuade them from foolishness, instead they started trying to take liberties. Trying to compromise me in the hopes that I'd agree. A few even tried to abduct me. All have regretted it." *Oh, had they ever. Still didn't stop them. Stupid jerks.*

"Well, I can see why you've no mind to marry."

That was for sure. Men were pigs. "And what about you?" she asked with curiosity. "How come you're not married or engaged? Your mother certainly seems to wish you were."

Terrence grimaced. "Yes, Mother would love to see me leg shackled. Not enough that Sinclair got married and is giving her grandkids, she still thinks I should too."

"So why don't you want to get married?" Did he secretly pine for a woman he couldn't have? She'd tear her eyes out. *No, no, I am so not jealous.*

"I like my freedom. Nobody to answer to. No one to tell me when to come home. Or drag me to stupid operas. I enjoy variety in my love life and the freedom to pursue whom I choose."

A rake in other words. She should have known. Pity; she'd thought better of him, not that she thought of him of course. "I don't think your mother's going to give up. She's given me some pretty blatant hints about how eligible you are."

"Wish she'd bother my sister instead," he grumbled.

"I heard mention of a sister, she's out of town right. How come she gets to be single?"

"Widowed actually. Her husband was part of the plot that cursed my brother, I'm sure Sam told you how their love for each other broke the curse holding him prisoner on a deserted island. Ariel had to kill her husband, it was that or let Sinclair die. Talk about a rough deal. She's off traveling the Realm still recuperating and finding herself or something like that."

"Oh that sucks." *No kidding. To have to kill one's own husband for being a traitor. Ouch.*

"Yeah, well her last letters have been a lot more upbeat. I think she's coming to terms with it and starting to get on with her life."

"Well I hope she realizes that she doesn't need a man messing up her life. Us single women can do fine on our own."

"Oh yeah, I've seen your idea of fine. You leave crippled men everywhere you go." And with that remark and a wicked grin, Terrence took off running, Breanna hot on his heels, ready to pound him when she caught him.

Ten

Terrence surreptitiously renewed the fast walking magic he'd been using to speed their foot journey. Okay, that might be considered cheating, but dammit it, they needed to get where they were going sometime this century. And while the idea of teleporting tempted him, Sammuell's words of warning tempered that urge. Thus he compromised with a little spell, one that made every step they took actually turn into a league, a magic so subtle that you couldn't even see it or feel it. Thank the Higher Powers, or Breanna would probably hurt him.

On second thought, that sounded like fun. Especially if she hurt him naked!

Bad boy. The temptation to kiss her again, to taste her sweet lips—*damn*. Only by great strength of will did he hold himself back. He'd promised his mother to behave and he'd decided to more or less keep that promise. He could wait, the wait itself acted like a tease for both of them. He'd noticed the way she kept eyeing him and blushing. He knew when she relived their previous kisses by the way her eyes glazed over slightly while watching his lips. He had her right where he wanted her—aroused.

And being a cocky sort, he knew that she'd come to him sooner or later. Her body begging for his touch. Her lips pliant under his. Her flesh warm and wet at the junction of her thighs. . .

Oops. Time to change the direction of his thoughts before he forgot his vow and threw her on the ground to ravish her.

They continued on their way, their playful bantering

passing the time and they traveled like this for three days, setting camp each night with their beds setup on opposite sides of the fire. He grinned where she couldn't see every time he saw her glance at him, a crease of puzzlement between her brows as he kept his hands—and lips—to himself. If only she knew how hard he fought to act nonchalant around her.

As they headed out on the fourth day, only a few hours walks from the first village, Stone Hallow—where his jig with the fast walking magic would probably be finally discovered—Terrence started hearing whispers all around him in the dense woods.

"Do you hear that?" he asked peering about the thick foliage, looking for the owners of the voices.

"Hear what?" asked Breanna looking at him.

"I thought I heard voices."

Breanna stopped walking and cocked her head listening. "Nope, just regular forest noises. What's wrong, wizard boy, scared of the big bad woods? Don't worry, I'll protect you."

Terrence bit back a retort, for he could still hear the whispers. Faint, but definitely there, so why couldn't Breanna hear them, she had better hearing than him. Unless...

What had her father said about odd things happening—oh yeah, hauntings or voices. Well, at least they were on the right track, he'd found the voices!

While annoying, the whispers didn't seem harmful. Like the buzz of an insect in his ear, he managed with only a little difficulty, to tune them out.

When they finally could see the outskirts of Stone Hallow, Terrence turned to her. "Okay, once we get in town, let me ask the questions."

"Oh? And who put you in charge? I am just as capable of asking questions as you are."

Why did his rose have to argue at every turn? "Listen, as a wizard sent by the council, they're more likely to answer me than some woman they don't know."

"And as a shapeshifter with no agenda they're more likely to trust me than some high and mighty wizard sent from the council."

"You know what," he said truly annoyed, "Just do what

you want. But don't get in my way."

And off he stalked towards the village center, to the excited buzz of phantom voices in his head.

~ * ~

Breanna watched him stomp off and felt a little sorry for pushing his buttons again, but she shrugged. *That's just who I am. And besides, I'm right.* She had access through her shifter connection to people and info he'd never even come close to.

While Terrence went looking for a village chief, she went sniffing out others of her kind—shifters had their own kind of scent—and found one on the outskirts of town tending her garden.

"Hello, and sunny day to you, good mother," she said approaching in plain view. Shifters did not like to be startled.

"And to you, my child. Would thee perhaps like to refresh yerself with an old woman?"

"That would be mighty pleasant, thank you." Breanna followed the old lady with gray hair piled loosely in a bun into her thatched cottage. "I've been journeying for quite some days now. I've been sent on a task."

"A task, eh?" said the old woman puttering around setting a tray with tea things. "One that requires a handsome wizard?"

Breanna blushed and squirmed in her seat. Word always got around quickly with shifters. "Well, uh, we're kind of together," she stammered. "But only 'til the task is done. We seek odd happenings."

The old lady's hands, which had been pouring some tea, suddenly trembled and the hot liquid splashed over the edge of the cup.

"Are you all right?" asked Breanna reaching out to grab the cup.

"I be fine, dear child. Just startled. I think I might know of what ye speak. The others thinks me mad."

"Why?" asked Breanna finishing the pouring of the tea and wrapping the old lady's icy cold hands around the warm cup.

"Me husband, the gods rest his soul, was a wizard. Not much of one, could barely light a fire, but he had the spark just the same. A few weeks ago, he caught a really bad chest

cold. Laid him low and once he recovered, felt weak as a newborn kitten. Not uncommon when you gets to be our age. It's also when he began complaining he could hear voices. Whispers he said, in his head."

"What did the voices say?" asked Breanna leaning forward eagerly. *Their first clue!*

"He said he couldn't quite make them out. I thought it might be a fever of the brain or hallucinations from his illness. The healer came by and said she couldna see nothing wrong with him and left me some tisanes to help him sleep. He kept complaining about the voices. Then a few days later, after a really bad night, he sat up in bed and started a screaming. Said they wanted him to join 'em and that the voices had come to get him. His body started a-shaking something fierce. I tried to hold him down, but he was like a man possessed and he threw me off and just kept shaking and a screaming. A couple minutes after it started he died, the most horrible look of fear on his face, like he'd seen something terrible."

Breanna listened in horror to the old lady's tale. *How awful.* "I take it you never heard the voices yourself?"

"Nothing. Like I said, I thought maybe he had some fever of the brain. But I know folks hereabouts are spooked. There's been a bunch of shifters come down from the mountains, saying something bad is in the air. Arounds here, nobody's saying nothing, but you can see the look in their eyes. Especially the ones with the spark like my husband had. Ye just knows they's hearing the voices too. Do ye know what's causing this?"

"Maybe. What your husband suffered sounds just like the type of thing we're looking for. I'm real sorry about your husband. If I succeed in my task then I should be able to stop what's been happening and make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else." *And protect Terrence*, she thought with worry, who had mentioned hearing voices earlier. *Is he under attack already?*

"What evil is causing this?" asked the old woman.

"A spell gone awry. We've been tasked to find its source and dismantle it."

"Bloody wizards and their meddling," said the matron shaking her head.

"Have you heard about any other villages with problems?"

"I heard a rumor that Blacksmoke, a couple of days walk from here had some of their old folk all die on the same night. Sounds like an awful big coincidence to me."

"Me too, good mother."

"Call me Agatha. And me husband was Herman. A good man he was, who dinna deserve what happened to him. I wish ye luck on your quest and do not envy thee thy task."

Breanna, however, felt no qualms. The magic supporting the boundary had gone bad and she intended to put a stop to it so that no other Hermans—or God forbid Terrence—fell victim to it.

~ * ~

Terrence wanted to shake the village chief—a pompous looking idiot in a motley colored robe and of all things a pillbox hat. Without a dreg of magic—or sense—this buffoon kept diverting his questions and Terrence had gone past the point of frustration.

"So you're sure you haven't heard about anything odd happening hereabouts?" asked Terrence.

"Nope."

"What about people dying?" asked Terrence.

"Folk die. Old Herman there died a few weeks back and his widow spouted some bull that it wasn't natural. But everyone knew old Herman was done for when he never recovered from a bad bout." Terrence noticed how he shifted his eyes nervously when he spoke about old Herman, a sure sign of lying, or at the very least half truths.

Terrence prodded him. "What did his widow think it was?"

"Bah, that old shapeshifter sees shadows and portents everywhere. I wouldn't pay no attention to her mutterings."

Well, Terrence intended to go listen to her, maybe her mutterings held a sliver of truth. "What about some of the other villages in the area?"

"Blacksmoke had a couple old folk die on them, but old folk die. It's just the circle of life."

"Well, thanks for your time." *And thanks for barely answering my questions.* Now he almost hoped Breanna

came up with something else they might go around in circles for months before ever getting closer to their goal. But this Blacksmoke definitely bore looking into. Old folk did die, yes, however, several at once seemed kind of fishy. And he needed to find Herman's wife. "One last question, where does Herman's widow live?"

"Outskirts of the village, that away," said the clearly relieved village chief pointing off into the distance.

Without a word of thanks—why waste the breath—Terrence began walking through the small village and exiting it, came across a cottage where Breanna stood out front hugging an old woman. Figured. She'd found the old woman first.

"I see thy wizard found ye, lovey," said the old woman with a crinkly smile.

Terrence could swear he heard Breanna mutter, "He's not my wizard." But she turned to face him with a smile.

"Terrence, this is Agatha. Her husband Herman recently passed away under suspicious circumstance."

"So I heard," said Terrence. "Although the village chief seemed to think it was more related to an illness than bad magic."

"Bah!" snorted Agatha. "That idiot who calls himself chief wouldn't know magic if it hit him in the ass. I knows what I seen and it was evil."

"Don't worry," said Breanna in a menacing tone. "We will find what killed your husband and we will take care of it. In the meantime, take care of yourself."

"Good luck on ye quest me lovies. Me, I think I'll be visiting me son. There's nothing for me here now."

With a final hug for Agatha, Breanna joined him and they started walking again, following the trodden trail that led from the village to the dense woods, on their way to the next village.

"Did you find anything out?" she asked.

"Did you hear about Blacksmoke?"

"The old people dying all on the same night, I did. I guess that's our next destination."

"It is," and then swallowing his manly pride Terrence said in a low voice. "Good job finding the old lady. I, uh, didn't have much luck with the village chief. I guess I owe

you an apology. And when we hit Blacksmoke, I think we should work together to get info."

Breanna grinned at him and said cheekily, "Oh, did the big bad wizard get the run around?"

Terrence could only grin sheepishly. "All right. I deserved that. So partners in everything?" he said holding out a hand.

Breanna looked at his hand, and then placed hers in it for a shake. Her small hand fitted so nicely inside of his. With great regret Terrence let it go.

He'd promised mother he'd behave. Admonishing his aroused libido—down boy—off they went to their next destination.

~ * ~

Mindy, formerly known as Venus, growled at the image in the scrying bowl.

"What's up, sis?" asked Chance, peeking over the edge of his newspaper—Immortal Times.

"Stupid bloody Terrence. He's been a ladies man since his teens. He's seduced many a woman with no regret, and here he is suddenly getting a conscience. Bloody hell. He's supposed to be a rake, but because he promised his mommy, he won't even so much as hold her hand. Tell me this—" Mindy stamped her foot in frustration. "How is he supposed to seduce her if he won't even touch her?"

"Perhaps you should attack this from a different angle," replied Chance, folding his paper and giving her his full attention.

"Are you telling me I'm going about this wrong? I am Aphro—um, Mindy that is—the Goddess Of Love,," she said. "And I've been doing this for—well the number of years doesn't matter." Whew—she'd almost given away her age—a woman over a certain number of years knew better than to tell, even her own younger brother, who might blab. "I know what I'm doing, he's just not cooperating."

Chance shrugged. "Well, he did promise his mother. He's the honorable sort. One of the reasons why I chose him for this quest. But he's also a man."

"And?" said Mindy impatiently.

"Well, think for a second, sis. What if instead of waiting for him to put the first move on Breanna, she made

the first move on him? He's a man. Do you really see him saying no?"

"It'll never happen. She's a stubborn nut to crack."

"She might make the first move if the conditions were right," said Chance waggling his brows suggestively. "Move aside, dear sister, and watch the master of puppets weave his magic."

Mindy let her brother take her place at the basin. Peering over his shoulder intently, she watched as he wove a new element into the game.

~ * ~

A day's walk from the village—the voices in his head having freaked him out a little—Terrence had decided against using his magic to quicken their pace—they came across a large clearing in the woods filled with fragrant blooms and soft grasses. Butterflies flitted, birds swooped, crickets chirped—a veritable paradise hidden in the middle of the forest where a spring bubbled and created a small pool.

"Oh, let's stay here for the night," said Breanna clasping her hands with delight. "I've never seen anything so pretty."

Terrence took one look at her shining face and fervently agreed. He'd do anything to keep that smile on her face, one that made his heart feel soft, but his groin go hard.

This not touching her, tasting her, was slowly driving him mad. The little sips he'd taken of her lips before the journey had begun had just whetted his appetite for more. He needed to get her out of his system, to sate his carnal urge for her. Now if only she would agree... Tearing up some grass he made two plush piles over which he lay their cloaks—the outdoor version of a bed. Clearing another spot and ringing it with stones, he built a small fire. Not quite the comforts of home, but the view—and company—more than made up for it.

The plaguing mental voices had quieted now since he'd stopped using any magic upon leaving the last village. Could they have been attracted to his magic like Sammu~~el~~ had warned?

Well, he'd find out in the morning as they needed to start moving faster. As soon as they resumed their journey, he'd cast the spell of fast walking and then he'd see if the

magic beacon theory held true. It still surprised him that Breanna hadn't caught onto to his magic spell to speed their journey. He must have her more off kilter than he'd realized. *Oh yeah, it's just a matter of time before she falls into my arms.*

Speaking of whom, Breanna had disappeared off into the woods, and Terrence tried not to worry about her. Since he'd met her, he'd proven herself capable of taking care of herself, yet he breathed an inaudible sigh of relief when he saw her emerge from the dark forest canopy a short while later.

"Look what I caught," she cried out with a smile, holding up a pair of jackrabbits. "Dinner."

Good thing he felt secure in his manhood, else the fact he kept letting a woman catch dinner would be rather emasculating. He scratched his manly parts though just to be sure they were intact.

"Dare I ask how you caught them?" he asked grabbing them from her to skin and spit.

"Depends on how squeamish you are," she replied with a grin.

He decided he'd rather not know, although he assumed she'd used her fox form or some other shape to catch them. Much more efficient than snares he had to admit. But the thought of his wild rose catching them with her teeth...

Shudder. Nope, better not to think about it.

Soon the smell of roasting meat filled the air as twilight settled over the land. Breanna reclined on her bed of grass and watched him—kind of nerve wracking actually, since the look in her eyes seemed hungry and when he met her gaze she didn't blush or turn away like she usually did.

What's come over her?

When the rabbits were roasted with a nice crispy exterior, but still dripping with juice, he handed her one on a stick and took the other for himself. He sat across from her on his own grass bed, watching as she tore into the meat with her neat white teeth, and then licked her lips, a sensuous flick of her tongue that had him harder than a rock. Did she even realize how hot a simple gesture like that came across?

They didn't speak as they ate, yet he kept catching

her looking at him, her eyes bright in the gloom, alive with a wild energy he'd never seen in her before. A look that both excited and discomfited him.

Full night fell as they cleaned up the mess from dinner and fed the fire for the night. With the deep darkness came a glowing light from a big, fat, full moon.

Uh-oh. Terrence felt truly uneasy now. Hadn't he heard mention that Breanna's mother had been a true Were, affected by the moonlight? And judging by the glint in Breanna's eyes, she'd perhaps inherited some of that moon madness. Yet she retained her human shape, surely that meant she had control. Still, he couldn't help but jump when she stood up and stared at the moon, her face tilted towards it bright light, eyes half closed and mouth parted on a sigh.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she murmured.

"Yes, it is," he said, not looking at the moon, his gaze instead focused on his wild rose who seemed more untamed than ever.

"I've always loved the first night of the full moon. It has a kind of magic to it that makes me want to sing and dance. Did you know all shifters feel the pull of the moon to a certain extent?"

Lesson One on shifters—full moon made them act strange. Not something he'd learned in college. Nothing like a hands-on experience. One he hoped he'd survive. *Gulp.*

"Do you ever give in to the impulse and let go?" he asked. Had she ever dared? What would she look like, act like, if she totally let loose?

"When I was little, I used to sneak out of bed and dance in the moon's light for hours. I haven't done that in years. Hadn't even thought of it. For some reason though, tonight I can feel the call. The urge...." She said the last with a wistful note.

"So let loose. There's no one around to see."

"I can't, you're here. It would be too embarrassing." She suddenly sat down, gaze lowered. However, the moon's call wouldn't allow her to sit still for long and she jumped up again to pace and stare at the big white globe in the sky.

Terrence could feel the energy radiating off of her, a wild energy that even called to him. How did she fight it? He knew he didn't want to.

"It can't be embarrassing if we're both doing it. Come on." Terrence gave in to the feeling and stood, grabbing her hands.

"But there's no music to dance to," she said plaintively.

"Really, that's funny, because I can hear music," he said, pulling her closer so he could whisper against her ear. For once, she didn't fight him, instead she allowed herself to nestle in the curve of his arms. Terrence, with a swallow at her closeness, began talking to her softly. "Open yourself up my sweet rose. Listen to the music of the night, can't you hear it singing to you? The chirruping melody of crickets singing in concert. A natural symphony is playing all around you, the buzz of night flyers, a harmony complemented by the gentle breeze weaving through the grass." He smiled as she relaxed even further, leaning back against him, in his arms. "Listen to the hum of the night insects come to play. Feel the vibrations of their sound, the beat." Terrence slowly moved her away from him and turned her to see her face, a face lit with a sweet smile and closed eyes, as she finally found her song.

Slowly he began a weaving dance with her, his hands holding hers loosely, swaying with her softly 'til she finally let the moon's song rise in her. He felt the difference. The way her body suddenly completely relaxed and began undulating in a dance as old as the universe. A primal song that beckoned to all who ever bathed in the moon's silvery light.

Tugging her hands from his, she twirled and swayed, her luscious body gyrating in the moonlight, her movements matching the music in her soul. A subtle yet wild melody that radiated out from her and touched him, whispered across his skin, creating a desire in him to join her in this primitive worship.

Shaking his head, stunned at the power that swept through the night, Terrence stood back and watched her. His body throbbed with the need to claim this wild spirit—so free and beautiful. So strong. A woman like no other.

She pirouetted around the clearing, her long, dark tresses flying about in silken disarray, her movements gathering speed. She leapt high and graceful as a doe,

landing in the long grass only to spin with abandon, her rich, throaty laughter rising up into the glowing night sky.

Terrence could have watched her all night. He'd never seen anything so arousing in his life as this woman letting loose and dancing in the moonlight.

As if she heard him—or felt his need—her eyes drifted open and locked onto his. Bespelled, he could not look away, nor did he wish to. Continuing her dance, she swayed and floated up to him, trailing a hand across his chest, scorching him with her energy. Setting him aflame with desire...

She circled him, like a huntress scenting her prey. She radiated sensuality, looking hot enough to make him tremble like a teenager about to taste his first kiss.

Coming up behind him, she rubbed herself against his back, her full breasts, tips erect, pressing into him, her warm breath whispering over his ear sending shivers down his spine.

Oh dear gods, did he crave her.

Circling again, her hands sliding across his body, feather-light caresses, she came around to face him, her eyes luminous and wide. Leaning in, she licked a molten trail up his neck and standing on tiptoe, the tip of her tongue flicked his earlobe.

That small gesture became his undoing. His hands, which had lain dormant at his side 'til now, grabbed her about the waist and he lifted her so that she could continue her sinuous exploration. As if delighted by his actions, she sucked his earlobe, nipping it gently with her sharp teeth.

Terrence groaned. If she kept this up, he'd spill his seed in his pants before he ever even touched her. When her lips finally left his ear and seared across his face to find his, he scorched her with the force of his kiss. She kissed him back fervently, her mouth open against his, her tongue inside his mouth dueling with his own. The passion in her, in both of them, tasted exquisite, like the most powerful of aphrodisiacs.

Without even realizing it, he lay her on the ground and covered her body with his, her legs falling open to allow his heavier—and *oh so hard*—body to nestle between them. He worshiped her lips, paying them homage with his tongue, caressing them with his own. He ground his hips against

hers, his swelling manhood nudging up against the apex of her thighs and he moaned when he felt her gyrate back. An urgency entered him—he had to taste more of her, feel her... His lips trailed a blaze down her chin to her neck which she arched back to give him, a creamy expanse that he sucked and licked with relish as she moaned and writhed beneath him.

Her skin glowed in the moonlight, giving her an ethereal appearance, something Terrence noticed briefly when he came up for air. Her eyes were open and glazed with passion, and Terrence felt himself close to the edge. She looked like a wet dream come true.

He reached down and began tugging up her skirts, eager to touch her, to feel her wetness upon his fingers. His fingers began a tickling walk up her thigh that had her gasping and arching when suddenly the clearing went dark as a passing cloud covered the moon.

Terrence intent upon his goal, didn't notice her shake her head, but he felt the hands that pushed at him.

"No, please, I can't," she whispered.

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle," he whispered stopping his exploration with his hand for a moment to reassure her.

But he could sense the moment had been lost. Without the moon's magic, her wild abandon had gone. She shook her head moaning, "Oh god, what did I almost do?"

Terrence sighed, but at heart—much as he hated to admit it—he was a gentleman and a gentleman did not force a lady. He rolled off of her and the moment he did, she shifted into fox form and took off running for the woods.

Dammit. Why did she have to be so scared of the passion she harbored inside? He knew she'd been enjoying herself. Having seduced enough women, he could tell. Yet off she'd run like she'd been about to commit the worst atrocity ever. Did he repulse her? No, he knew she desired him. The problem lay elsewhere. She feared losing control, something he well understood and so she ran.

But, she'd be back. Where did this certainty come from? He didn't know. What he did know was after what they'd almost shared, they were now tied together somehow. A thought that didn't freak him out as much as he'd have thought it would. He wondered how long it would take her to

realize the same thing.

And considering how blue his balls were now, he could only imagine the state she found herself in. *Oh yes, he thought grinning. Soon I'll get to fully taste my wild rose, I only hope that after a few sips from her sweetness that I'll be able to assuage my thirst for her. If not, I may be in trouble!*

~ * ~

The Goddess of Love, now known as Mindy, wiped at the sweat beading on her brow, intent on the scene unfolding in the scrying basin.

"Not again!" She threw up her hands in exasperation and stalked off to sit in a pout—still looking gorgeous, if frazzled—on her brother's settee.

"What is it sister dear?" Chance asked.

"Those two mortals. They want each other so bad it hurts, and yet, do they give in to the glorious passion for which they both yearn? Do they swoon into each other's arms and declare undying love?"

"I take it that's a no," he said hiding a smile. His sister could have quite the temper when things didn't go her way and he'd learned the hard way that it was best not to bait her.

Mindy just glared at him. "I've never seen such a stubborn pair in my life. Actually, he's just about where I want him, but her. She just refuses to give in. It's been a while since I've had someone fight my power like that," she complained, stalking back and forth across the chamber, filmy gown billowing.

"Marvelous isn't it?" grinned her brother.

The goddess of love stopped pacing and whirled to face him. She tried to hold onto her pout, but lost the battle and laughed. "Yes, it is rather refreshing. Most times, when I pair two people up, all it takes is one look and BAM they're declaring love and getting married. These two, though, what a challenge."

Chance chuckled. "Hey, you know what that reminds me of, when you were chasing that there boy. What was his name again?"

"Adonis," she spat. "Stupid boy. You'd have thought he'd have been happy to have me, the Goddess of Love, take

an interest in him. But no he just had to play hard to get. And you want to know the worst part?"

"What?"

"He sucked as a lover."

Chance howled. "My poor sister. All that work for a bad lay."

"Oh shut up," she scowled. "At least I got a famous poem out of it. Besides, this situation is nothing like that one. These two want each other, they just need to relent a little bit, well she does anyway, and WHAM, true love, baby."

"Thatta girl! You go get 'em Mindy."

"I will," she said narrowing her eyes and diving back into the game.

Eleven

Breanna ran and ran, her lithe fox form flitting through the shadows of the trees running away from...

Myself.

Gods what an idiot. Just what the hell came over me? I ravished him like an animal in heat—not that he complained. But still where did my self-control go? I don't want to feel this way—confused, aroused, tempted. . .

Breanna ran, afraid to go back, even though she knew eventually she would have to. They had a task to complete and she couldn't let him go by himself. Not with the fear that the voices would come back and take him like they'd taken the old lady's husband. A chill gripped her heart at the thought of Terrence dying. Sure she cared about him, she'd care about anybody caught in a twisted fatal magic.

Or maybe her fear signaled something more. Something she daredn't think of. Didn't dare imagine. It couldn't be love. It just couldn't.

Running away from her thoughts, her feelings, her hunger, she tried to escape the turmoil within. Hours later, feeling exhaustion finally seeping through her limbs, she headed back to the clearing, but halted short of it, making herself a nest instead in a pile of leaves to sleep in, not trusting herself to lie beside him again, human form or not. If the moon came back, even tired as her body now felt, would she be able to resist its pull?

A restless sleep didn't take care of the throbbing that had started last night between her legs or the tingling that still had her nipples erect when she shifted back to human form.

Stupid moon madness. She'd never acted like that before, but then again she'd never been in lust before. And now she was certain she felt lust, not love. During her run, she'd made that decision. She never intended to fall in love, a useless emotion. Where did love get people? Shackled and popping babies. Sometimes even abandoned like her mother.

Although my sister sure looks happy. She squelched that thought, reminding herself that she and her sister were completely different people in completely different situations and what worked for Brianna wouldn't work for her. Definitely not. *Even if Terrence makes my legs turn to rubber and my intimate parts get hot. More like a raging inferno that threatens to consume me.* "Hey," she muttered aloud. "I am not thinking about that, remember!"

Her body now knew passion and having had a taste wouldn't go back to sleep. *Stupid body.* But she'd done the right thing last night—making love to him would have been a big mistake.

But looking at Terrence slowly rousing on his pallet of grass, she almost wished she had given in.

Approaching the pallet he lay on, making small noises so as to not startle him, she saw a blue eye regard her with caution. She couldn't blame him. She'd come close to raping him last night, it didn't matter that he'd been willing.

Sucking in a deep breath she said in a rush, "I'm okay now. Sorry about last night. The moon made me lose control. I promise it won't happen again."

Terrence shot up to a sitting position with a horrified look on his face. "Don't say that. Last night was wonderful, well would have been if you hadn't run off. Why are so scared of letting go?"

"I mauled you with no care or thought for what you wanted and you ask why I shouldn't let go?"

"Did you hear me complaining? You can't stop it. You want me and I want you. It's only a matter of time before we make love, so why not give in gracefully?" he said with a rakish grin.

"Ooh, I should know better than to talk to you—you pig!" Breanna jumped up and stood towering over him as he grinned up at her. "For the millionth time, I don't want you. Last night was the moon's fault. You'll see, it won't happen

again."

"Oh yes it will," he said with smug assurance. "You can't help it. You want my body, and I am more than willing to let you have your way with it."

Breanna grabbed her stuff and started stomping through the woods forgoing breakfast in her annoyance. Terrence quickly caught up, whistling a jaunty air.

Breanna darted a look over at him and snorted in disgust at his jovial attitude. He just had to act so bloody cocky. Well, she'd show him. She could control herself and her body. She could. She knew she could.

So why did she have to fight hard against the urge to throw him on the ground and rain kisses all over his face?

No moon in sight, no excuse. Crap.

~ * ~

Terrence whistled away, quite pleased with himself. Last night he'd come so close to heaven and judging by her disgruntled expression and scowls, she knew it. *And the best part is I know—I just know—she wishes we hadn't stopped. It will only a matter of time now before my wild rose lets herself be plucked. And oh, am I going to enjoy it.*

Silently they walked onto their next destination—a three day journey still that Terrence once again shortened with his quick walking spell. They needed to make better time.

And almost immediately the voices came back, scratching at his mental barriers, whispering in his head, louder now, enough that he could catch snippets.

"Cold... Join... Protect..."

Okay, so Sammuell had been right—the magic acted like a beacon, calling the boundary spell's attention to him. Annoying, yet he felt in no way threatened. Did it only attack and kill those who were weak?

Terrence looked at Breanna's stiff back and decided not to mention his little experiment. *Although, said his insidious inner voice, maybe if she knew I was under spectral attack, she'd lavish sympathy on me and cradle me to her bosom. Her full luscious bosom...*

No, she was much more likely to smack him over the head and call him an idiot for using magic and attracting the notice.

Terrence held in a sigh. He had a long ways to go before his prickly rose comforted him. A long, long way.

The silence between them held 'til they set up camp, then she finally deigned to look his way and speak. Good thing he hadn't been holding his breath.

"Is it me or are we making better time that we should be?"

"What do mean?" asked Terrence innocently ducking his head to poke at the fire.

Her brows creased and then a finger flew up and stabbed in his direction. "You've been using magic haven't you?"

A man knows when he's caught, but he'll still try to wriggle free. "Maybe, but seeing as how you've just noticed what's the big deal? I don't want to be wandering these woods for the next year. I only used up a little magic to speed up our walk."

Her mouth opened and closed for a minute like a gasping fish on land. "You—you are such an idiot!" Then her mind made an intuitive leap and Terrence now cringed back from her next attack. "Those voices you heard before the last village, you're hearing them again aren't you?"

"A little." More like a lot, although they'd quieted again once he released the spell.

"I don't believe you. How stupid can you be? The boundary spell is targeting magic users, wizards like yourself, dummy. Why in this Realm would you be doing spells and acting like a target. Why not just paint a big red bulls eye on your ass?"

Terrence just shrugged. What else could he say. Sure it might be stupid, but then again not using horses to speed up their journey hadn't been one of her brightest ideas either.

Breanna tapped her foot on the ground glaring at him, hands on her hips. And mad as she looked, he couldn't help wanting her. Even furious, she was sexier than hell. And even better was the reason for her anger—worry for his welfare.

Oh yeah, she wants me.

~ * ~

After Terrence had fallen asleep, reassuring her that

the voices were gone, Breanna went into the woods and changed form.

Stupid man, using magic. Did he have a suicide wish? It pissed her off that he was right about the journey needing to be speeded up, but teleporting was still out of the question. Which meant she'd have to relent on another aspect.

She found him a mount. One he might not be crazy about, but at least they'd be moving faster.

The next morning while she packed up camp, she heard a yelp and turned to see Terrence getting acquainted with the new addition to their party.

Scrambling up from his sleeping spot, he backed away from the nuzzling, dappled unicorn.

"Oh Breanna," he said in a too calm voice.

"Yes, Terrence?" she replied, suppressing a grin.

"There's a unicorn in our camp."

"I know. I called him."

"You what?" he said taking his eyes off the unicorn to flash her a look. Ooh wild eyes. How funny—the big wizard totally freaked out by a cute, fluffy unicorn. Of course the legends might be part of the cause. After all, unicorns were usually partial to virgin girls and really aggressive about sexually active men. Good thing this unicorn was special.

"Listen up, wizard, because you'll probably never hear these words again. You were right. Happy? We're going too slow and need to pick up the pace. But it's obvious you can't use magic anymore without possibly coming under attack from those voices. So I found you a creature that was willing to let you ride it for the sake of the Realm."

"But a unicorn? I thought unicorns only let virgins come near them. And," he said gulping, as the unicorn rubbed its long pointed horn against his arm. "Don't they hurt men who aren't chaste?"

"Yes well, usually that's the case, but Devon here is kind of special."

"Special how?" asked Terrence suspiciously.

Breanna blushed a bit as she prepared to tell him about Devon's particular penchant. "Devon's kind of an oddball among his kind. See he prefers randy men to female

virgins."

Terrence's look—jaw dropped, eyes wide, and hair standing on end—was priceless. "He—uhh—you mean you found me a gay unicorn? Oh *man*," he said running fingers through already tousled hair.

Breanna took a defensive stance. "Listen, he was all I could find on short notice. You could at least say thank you."

"Thank you," said Terrence once again backing away from the nuzzling Devon.

Breanna bit her lip so as to not giggle. Her big bad wizard completely undone by a gay unicorn. *Way too entertaining!*

After much nervous twitching—on Terrence's part whenever the unicorn touched him—they set off on their journey again. Devon's quick trot easy for her to keep up with in fox form.

By the end of their first day's travel with their new member, Terrence had settled down enough that the tic in his cheek had mostly subsided, although he still shot her the occasional glare.

Bedding down though, he came close to a conniption when Devon tried to snuggle up to him. After heated words, which Devon replied to via neigh, Terrence settled down—curled in a protective fetal ball—on his pallet, one eye open, watching his new mount who grazed across the camp from them.

Breanna restrained a giggle, but she must have betrayed herself somehow for Terrence growled. "Think that's funny do you, rose? Ha, let's see how much you giggle when I teleport your ass for the first time."

And on that scary thought, Breanna tried to sleep—with one eye open, watching Terrence in case he tried to teleport her.

The next morning, Breanna woke to feminine giggles. *What the hell?*

Instantly her eyes snapped open to see a gorgeous, shapely blonde in their camp, chatting animatedly with Terrence. She blinked—*I must be dreaming*—however, the giggling blonde did not disappear, which irritated her for some reason, an annoyance that turned instantly—irrationally—into rage when she saw the hussy had a hand

on *her* wizard's arm.

Breanna growled and jumped up, startling the cozy pair.

"What's going on?" she snapped, her eyes shooting daggers at the way too pretty blonde. Who the hell wore diaphanous, layered gowns anymore and in the middle of the woods at that?

Terrence didn't even seem to notice Breanna's agitated state of mind—*it must be nice to be an oblivious man*—he just smiled at Breanna and made introductions. "Hey Breanna, you're up. Look who wandered into camp. Meet Mindy. Mindy this is my companion, Breanna."

Breanna bit back a growl again. *Companion. How dull.* That word didn't even come close to explaining their relationship. *What relationship?* sneered her inner voice. She'd rebuffed him at every turn.

Terrence, unaware of her inner turmoil blithely went on. "Mindy's horse threw her in the woods and she needs help getting him back."

Yeah right. "Hello Mindy," said Breanna in a tight voice. Breanna had already decided she didn't like or trust this Mindy—something about her just didn't seem right. Why would a drop dead gorgeous woman be riding by herself in the middle of nowhere? Something definitely seemed fishy. Terrence, being a man of course, seemed completely oblivious to that incongruity.

Mindy though, as if reading her mind, just smiled wider at Breanna with impossibly straight white teeth. With a big dimpled smile, she said—in a sweet musical voice of course. "Oh Ter, thank you so much for agreeing to help me. I do so love a big strong man. I'm glad I found you."

Breanna gritted her teeth at the disgusting sweetness of Mindy's tone. Surely Terrence wouldn't fall for the damsel in distress routine?

Terrence smothered under the full force of that smile, fell for it hook, line and sinker and stammered out a, "No problem. I'll go round up your mount and you can be on your way again. I shan't be long."

And with that he strode away, leaving the two women to watch his departing tight, hot looking ass. One of those women harbored murderous thoughts.

"Oh you are so lucky to have a man like that," sighed Mindy.

"He's not my man," said Breanna tersely clenching her hands down by her sides, fighting the urge to slug this interloper.

"Really?" said Mindy with way too much interest. "Wow, however do you manage to keep your hands off him? He is just so yummy."

"He's not available, so keep your hands to yourself." *Why in the Realm did I say that?* Breanna, in the grips of jealousy—an emotion she didn't recognize—found herself thinking really evil thoughts of what she'd like to do to this way too cutesy woman. Just what had come over her? "So what are you doing out here?" she finally said instead of some of the nastier things that sat on the tip of her tongue.

"Oh this and that," said Mindy vaguely, waving her hands. "But really, why haven't you hooked up with him? Is he like married or something?"

"No, he's not married or engaged or anything like that. I'm just not interested in him like that." A lie, but one she'd told so many times, it just slipped out.

Mindy's blue eyes opened wide. "What's not to be interested in? I mean, he's got a super-hot body. Come on, did you see that ass? He's got a nice laugh that makes a girl tingly all over and the most gorgeous eyes. Hey, if you don't want him, mind if I take a run at him?"

Breanna restrained herself from launching herself at Mindy. How dare she notice how blue Terrence's eyes were? Terrence belonged to her. "He's not available for the moment. He has a task he needs to complete." *And he is mine*, Breanna wanted to scream.

"Oh, what a shame," said Mindy with a crestfallen look. "Well, maybe I'll look him up when he's done. Where does he live?"

And then Breanna did something she didn't understand. She lied. "Yes, well, I'm afraid he won't be coming back. See his task is going to take him to the Other Side and well, he won't be available. You'll have to find yourself another man to steal." Breanna couldn't believe the words that came out of her mouth. She sounded so—so... possessive.

"Excuse me, but did you just accuse me of stealing a man? I thought you said he was available and that you didn't want him."

"I changed my mind. I do want him so you can't have him," said Breanna, glad Terrence wasn't here for this really strange conversation.

"But I thought you didn't want him?" Mindy said with a perplexed look on her picture perfect face.

"I don't want him, but I do and... See our relationship, well, it's kind of complicated and until I figure out what I want, you can't have him. No one can. So there." Breanna blushed. Where had she gotten the nerve to claim him like that? Even though she spoke the truth. She did want him; she just didn't want to want him. Oh, how confusing. She definitely knew though, that she didn't want Mindy to have him.

With a sly smile, Mindy replied, "Well, why don't we let Terrence decide what he wants?" Then she turned with a beaming smile to the man in question who returned, leading a beautiful white stallion behind him.

"Oh Ter, you found him!" Mindy squealed. Then she did something so stupid that Breanna watching her could only gape in disbelief. The little bitch pranced right up to Terrence and, throwing her arms around his neck, kissed him—on the lips!

A red film—tinged in green—descended over Breanna's eyes and she bolted toward the kissing pair. Although to be fair, Terrence didn't seem to be participating. His eyes were wide open in shock and he had his hands held away from his body to avoid touching Mindy. Good thing or he might have gotten hurt.

Breanna, having had enough of the little blonde hussy, grabbed her by the arm—very tightly—and yanked her back. Mindy let out a little shriek of dismay.

In an overly bright voice, Breanna said, "Well, Terrence now that you've found Mindy's horse, she'd best on her way. Come on, Mindy," she said shoving her towards her stallion. "Let me help you onto your horse."

"Um," stuttered Mindy trying to move away from the tightly wound up Breanna. "I—um. You know I think I'll be fine from here. Good luck with that task of yours."

"No, I insist," said Breanna with a wolfish grin that made Mindy swallow hard. Lacing her hands she gestured for Mindy to put her foot in them so she could boost her back atop her horse.

Mindy, biting her bottom lip, placed her delicately slippered foot—*oh yeah this bitch so didn't belong in the woods*—in Breanna's hand. Breanna hoisted Mindy up, way up onto her horse—restraining herself from flinging her right over it to crash on the other side.

But she didn't hold back from her next action, she slapped the horse's rump hard, startling the stallion and sending it bolting into the woods with a shrieking Mindy holding on for dear life. If Breanna was real lucky maybe the horse would head for a low lying branch.

A chuckle from behind made Breanna turn around. Terrence, instead of being annoyed with her treatment of Miss Perfect seemed rather amused.

"What's so funny?" she demanded crossly still simmering over the sight of that hussy kissing him.

"You're jealous," he stated with a self-satisfied, male grin.

"Am not," she retorted. She just didn't want Terrence distracted from their task. Yeah, that's why her temper still boiled. Why should she care who kissed him?

"Oh please," said His Smugness. "You couldn't get Mindy out of here fast enough, especially once she thanked me for my help. Admit it, the thought of me being with another woman drives you wild."

She so would not admit that. Jealousy hadn't even entered into the equation. She hadn't liked Mindy and her fishy story. Simple really, it had nothing to do with Terrence.

"Why should I care if you want to let every little hussy with a story so full of holes it could be a sieve, kiss you? Kiss whomever you like, I don't care. Next time, I'll let the little witch cast a spell on you or whatnot. Anyone could see Mindy was trouble. I just did what you in your besotted state couldn't."

"Besotted? Oh no, I'll grant you Mindy was kind of attractive, but there's only one woman I truly find myself craving."

Breanna didn't move as he edged up to her 'til he

stood looking down at her.

"Oh really?" she said breathlessly, her heart racing with an emotion other than anger. "Who is that?"

"You," he said before leaning down to kiss her.

Breanna felt herself instantly afire, a fire that was quickly quenched when she caught the lingering scent of the little hussy still hovering on Terrence's lips.

"Ooh, I can still taste her on you," she yelled, shoving at his chest, making him stumble back.

"Well, what did you expect, she kissed me," he said, eyes flashing with annoyance.

"And you let her, you cad."

Terrence raised both brows, his look incredulous. "What was I supposed to do? I didn't ask her to kiss me and I didn't even kiss her back."

"You shouldn't have let her kiss you in the first place," said Breanna stubbornly. Okay, so she sounded irrational, her ire still ran high and she couldn't erase the image of the little hussy touching him. Marking him. She wanted to scream with frustration—that and chase the little bitch down to inflict some more permanent damage.

Terrence just chuckled some more, which of course, further infuriated her. *Stupid wizard. I am not jealous.*

"Come on, let's go," she snapped. "We've wasted enough time this morning as is."

"Yes, my sweet rose. Anything you desire," said Terrence, with an inflection of desire that made her tummy do flip flops.

Oh why, oh why, do I want him?

~ * ~

When a sopping wet Mindy materialized in his chambers, Chance howled with laughter.

"What happened to you?"

"Stupid horse! She slapped my horse and made him take off like a bat out of hell. Then before I could materialize out of there, it threw me into a stream. A very cold, wet stream."

"Oh you just had to meddle didn't you?" Chance said, snorting with glee. It wasn't often he got to see his usually impeccable sister looking like a mess with her hair hanging in straggling wet strands and her gown muddied and stained.

Mindy shook herself dry—being a goddess did have its uses—and instead of blasting him, smiled. "Actually that went better than I'd hoped. I wanted to make her green with jealousy and surprise, it worked."

"I guess it did," said Chance. "Although did you really have to kiss him? You're lucky he didn't fall in love with you. Not all mortals can handle a kiss from a goddess."

"Yes, well, how could I resist? He looked so yummy. But I wasn't worried about him falling in love with me, he's already in love with Breanna so my aura doesn't affect him. Ah the sacrifices I make to help true love find its way," Mindy said with a melodramatic sigh. Then she giggled. "Oh, the look on her face when I kissed him." She giggled. "I do so love a good jealous fit. It means my task is almost done."

"Wish mine were closer to done," grumbled Chance. "This journey is taking forever."

"Ah, but dear brother, like a wonderfully prepared meal, some things can't be rushed if you want them to turn out right," she said sagely. "Don't worry, they'll be finished their quest soon. Then we'll have a whole new world to play with."

Mollified Chance grinned. "Yes, the prize at the end of this game is worth a little wait. So sister of mine, ready to play some more?"

And with a shared smile of complicity they turned their attention once more to the game in progress.

~ * ~

After the Mindy incident, as Breanna now thought of it, they spoke little. Although she did notice Terrence scrub his face surreptitiously, erasing Mindy's lingering scent—too late now. Things hung in the air between them—unresolved things. Things Breanna wouldn't face—feelings she didn't understand.

They walked in silence 'til they finally reached Blacksmoke, a very clean—no smoke in sight—deserted looking village. Not a soul walked the streets, the windows of the houses and cottages shuttered. Heck, not even the barking of a dog could be heard in the deathly silence of this town. The only thing missing from this picture was tumbleweed.

Devon—not the bravest of unicorns, spooked and

refused to enter the village. A creeped out part of Breanna wished she could stay with him. But hadn't she been the one to brag about how brave she was? Crap—now would have been a good time to be womanly, cause this place oozed creepy. Had the spell gone on a rampage and killed everyone? She shivered and sidled up to Terrence, hating the reassurance she felt at his presence. Dammit, she didn't want to be a swooning damsel like you read about in those stupid penny novels.

He, of course, stood tall and unafraid, surveying the town with only a tiny crease between his brows. Jerk, no matter what he always had to look hot.

"Halloo," he shouted, his voice echoing emptily and answered by surprise—nothing.

"I think nobody's home."

"There are people here," he insisted stubbornly.

"Are you sure they're not of the undead variety?" she joked nervously, eyes darting around to make sure nothing snuck up on them.

"No, my magic senses are sensing others. I think they're just afraid. *Hello!*" he shouted again. "We mean you no harm."

Breanna, about to tug him away from this eerie place, swallowed a scream when someone answered in a gravelly voice. "What do ya want?"

Startled, they both peered around looking for a face to go with the voice. Not seeing anything, Terrence shrugged and answered. "I've been sent on a quest by the council."

"The council? Bah," said the voice followed by a juicy spitting sound. "Whatsa de council messing in now?" Breanna finally located the speaker, who peered around the side of one of the cottages. A grizzled old man who looked like he hadn't seen a plate of food in a while, nor a bath she judged by the reek that wafted towards them. No wonder she hadn't scented any life, he smelled more like a midden heap than a person.

Terrence spotted the old man too and turned to speak to him. "I seek rumors or sightings of odd happenings. Voices, hauntings, unexplained deaths..."

The old man stepped out from behind the cottage he'd been hiding behind and pointed his finger at them. "What do

ye know of de voices?"

"You've heard them, then?"

"Aye, I've heard dem, me and every other mage in de village. The ones that died heard dem too."

"How many have died?" asked Breanna still seeing no other signs of life other than their cantankerous old fellow.

"Too damn many."

"How long ago did the voices and deaths start?" asked Terrence taking over the questioning again.

A voice from behind them spoke up, spooking Breanna who hadn't even heard anyone approach—she almost peed her pants. Wouldn't Terrence have busted a gut if she had?

"My wife started hearing her voices about three moons ago."

And like a dam let loose, suddenly frightened faces surrounded them, flowing out from the closed cottages, all speaking at once.

"Jaramy hears them just days before dey tooked him."

"Sarah heard 'em for only two moons before she went."

"My baby, I don't know if she heard them, but she died too."

Terrence held up his hands, overwhelmed with the sudden influx of information—mostly tragedies by the sound of it. "Hold on. I want to speak to all of you, but I need to do so one at a time. We're here to help." Looking around at the sea of faces—about three dozen, Terrence ran a hand through his hair. "Listen, why don't the men who have something to say come with me and the women go with Breanna, my companion on my quest. Your tales will be heard. We believe you. We're here to help."

Several people in the crowd began to cry, fat tears rolling down their dirty faces making Breanna's heart ache for them. How horrible, to feel so afraid that you would hide away and feel relief just because someone said they would believe you. Just what had these poor people suffered through—and from the looks of it, still suffered with.

Breanna, eager to find out more, yet at the same time not, led her group of women away from the men and at the

invitation of one of the women entered one of the larger homes where they settled around a large wooden table.

"Okay," said Breanna a little daunted by the faces looking at her so expectantly. "Who wants to start?"

As one, the group turned to look to the woman who had offered her home for the meeting. A matronly looking type, whose once round cheeks now sagged hollowly in her face. Grey wispy hair crept out from her bun and her mouth and face both bore creased lines of worry. She also seemed to be one of the cleaner ones present, not having succumbed, it would seem, to the terror many of the others felt.

The woman sighed as she sat herself down. She bowed her head as if to collect her thoughts, her hands knotted on the table in agitation. "My name is Mary, I used to be married to the village chief. He's one of the voices' victims. My children thankfully all moved away from here years ago to live in the cities. I will tell you what has happened to us and then maybe you can answer some questions for us."

She looked up at Breanna then, her eyes ringed in dark shadows, but still her gaze held a thread of iron—a strong will that refused to be crushed even by personal tragedy. Mary's friends and fellow villagers had evidently succumbed to fear, one just had to take a glance at their unwashed bodies, tattered clothing and gaunt faces to see the tragedy. Just how bad had it gotten?

"I'll do my best to answer any questions you have," stated Breanna. "Now please, tell me your story."

Taking a deep breath, Mary began. "First I think you need a little history about our village. Blacksmoke has a high ratio of magic users compared to other villages. Many of us started out in bigger towns and cities working as industry mages, but wanting a quieter life, we chose to move out here. A place where magic wasn't the be all and end all of everything. And a fine life it has been too up to now." Many of the women nodded in agreement, a few even smiled reminiscently.

"About three moons ago, the voices began. First afflicted were three elderly folk, two men and a women, then a small child who was frail of health. They all claimed to hear

voices before dying horribly, limbs thrashing, screaming." Mary paused and brushed at eyes gone watery. Taking a deep, not so steady breath, Mary continued. "At first we thought it some kind of illness—a fever of the brain. We tried healing them—to no avail. We couldn't find anything wrong with their bodies or their minds. Then other people started complaining and dying, and not just the older folk and those suffering from ill health. Anytime someone used magic, they heard the voices too and once they heard them, they never left."

"Can you understand what they're saying?"

"Cold—they say they're cold. That they need us," said Mary wrapping her arms around herself, shivering, her eyes vacant in remembrance.

"They say we need to join them so they can protect the Realm." piped in one of the seated women with a sad, worn face.

Breanna felt a shiver run through her body at her words. Oh dear gods, they had to hurry their quest. All these poor people, suffering from a magic now gone bad—and Terrence. He'd heard the voices too. She couldn't let him die.

"How many have died in total?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"Thirty-five of us have perished—and since the last moon, the deaths have been coming faster. There's less than thirty of us left now and if this keeps up, there'll be no one around in a month."

"Why don't you leave?" cried Breanna horrified.

"And go where? We've thought about it, but what if it is a curse that's within us? Can we truly leave and possibly infect others?"

"But the children..." Breanna said with tears in her eyes. How could they just sit here waiting for the voices to claim them?

"We sent the children away once we realized the voices were deadly," said Mary. "They're fostering with family and friends closer to the cities. The news we've received is that they escaped before being infected by the voices."

"Join them. The voices aren't contagious and the further you get from here, the more likely they'll disappear

from anyone who is hearing them."

"How can you know that for sure?" asked a heavyset woman, her sharp voice laced with suspicion. "What do you and your wizard know?"

Why does everyone call him my wizard? "The voices are being caused by the boundary spell The Thirteen set. The spell is unraveling and is seeking out new souls to power itself."

"How long has the council known about this and not warned us?" spat the same heavyset woman who stood up menacingly.

"It was only recently that they realized the danger, that's why Terrence and I are here. We're looking for the source of the spell so we can release it. Once we do the voices should stop and so will the deaths."

"That won't bring me husband or my baby back now though will it," cried the big woman, now sitting back down hard, shoulders heaving as those around her tried to offer her comfort while glaring at Breanna.

Breanna opened her mouth to speak and realized she had no words to make this better. Unfair—this whole affair stank and even worse, they had no one they could blame, although it looked like a few of them wanted to blame her. And even more frightening, if Breanna and Terrence couldn't find the box or even they did and failed to release the spell, the voices and deaths would continue.

"So the council sent just one girl and a wizard to fix this?" A gaunt woman laughed harshly in derision. "Great. And if you fail, what then?"

The unknown woman, having echoed her own doubts, tied Breanna's tongue in a knot. She had no smart-ass retort for once. The situation had become much too grave. She could make no promises—hell she couldn't even really give them reassurance. She and Terrance had the only key for the box. If they failed, then the whole Realm would be doomed.

"Nothing to say eh, girlie?" taunted another woman. "Bloody useless chit. We're all going to die because the council sent some stupid little girl and one wizard to fix a spell created by the strongest wizards ever known. Or did the council even send you? I can't see why they'd send a

nonmagic user to for a job like this. Hmph!," snorted the woman, who with her words made Breanna feel smaller and smaller. "I'll bet your job is more of the bed warming variety. That's all a hussy like you would be good for."

And with that word, hussy, finally Breanna had something to say. "Enough. You're right, the council didn't send me," Hisses met her words, but Breanna raised her voice to be heard over them. "The god of Chance did."

"You lie! As if a god would have chosen you."

Okay, her claim did sound farfetched. But what else could Breanna do or say to prove she had come to help them?

"You know, I don't care what you think. I know that you've all suffered from this, and I can't even begin to understand the pain many of you are going through, but at least I'm trying to do something to fix this. I haven't given up like the lot of you. Instead of attacking me, help me. Help me find where we need to go next. I need information, anything, that will point us in the right direction. I may not be a wizard or sorceress like most of you, but I swear that I will not stop 'til I've released the spell or died trying."

A clamor of words raised in response, but Mary's voice cut through them.

"Enough! This problem is not her fault. If you want to blame someone blame The Thirteen, they're the ones who created the spell in the first place. At least she's got the guts to try and fix this. Now are we going to help her or sit her caterwauling and assigning blame?"

Mary's iron gaze tempered the crowd of women who slowly one by one nodded. Breanna felt a rush admiration for Mary. With all she'd suffered, she alone seemed to have to not bowed down and let the harsh hand she'd been dealt control her. Breanna could only hope she would face life as bravely as this woman did.

"I'm not sure if this will help, but here's what we know."

Breanna listened attentively as the women gave her the information she needed for her and Terrence to continue on their quest, hopefully in time to prevent any more deaths—especially Terrence's.

~ * ~

Seated with the men in the village alehouse, which given the tragedy, was running dry on actual ale, Terrence heard the a similar tale to the one Breanna had listened to.

"So all of you with magic hear the voices now whether you use magic or not?"

Solemn nods all around and Terrence felt like echoing them. Even though he'd stayed away from the magic, the whispers had started again, and he had to admit it worried him. Not that he'd tell Breanna of course—it just wouldn't be manly.

"What can we do to stop them?" asked the grizzled man named Alan who'd first spoken to them.

"Nothing. Until I locate the spell causing this, your best option is to leave Blacksmoke. It seems the further you are from the source, the less likely you are to be affected. Join your children or visit family—just get away from here."

"So whats'a causing dis? Have we gots a black wizard running amok after all this time?"

Terrence pondered for a second what he should say, and decided on the truth. "The boundary spell is failing and in order to keep itself alive the spell is seeking out new souls to power it."

Shocked gasps erupted. And then the grizzled old fellow clued in. "Waits a second. This dere quest of yers. Ye're gonna take the boundary down ain'tcha? That's what yer quest is."

Terrence nodded waiting for the shock, but instead he got a big guffaw.

"Well, I'll be damned. About time too. I'm getting old and I heard some stories dere about dat Other Side and darned me if I won't be checking dem out."

"Don't get too excited yet. I still haven't found the source of the spell. That's why I'm here. We're obviously getting closer, but ..."

"You needs to go to Stonebridge next," interrupted Alan who seemed to be the spokesman for the group.

"Why? What's happened there?"

"Couldn't say. All we knows is everyone's gone—vanished into thin air. Now mind ye, dey didna have a bunch of peoples like we do here, but those dey did have were every single one of dem a mages."

"How could they all be mages?" asked Terrence perplexed. "Magic user births are random. Hell, having two wizards as parents doesn't guarantee the baby will be. It could be a coincidence."

"I don't know why dey all had de magic, but dey did in Stonebridge. I know it sounds odd, aye, but every single child ever born in dat village could use magic, and dey was strong too. It was like dere was something special about dat place. Hard to tell. Dey kept to demselves a lot. Oh, dey'd trade and stuff, and dere sons and daughters would marry our own, but dey always went back. Strange lot dey was. And now dey all gone."

Terrence couldn't wait to tell Breanna their next destination, which he felt in his gut would be their last one. And apparently the voices were excited too.

"Come. Join. Stonebridge. Protect. Magic..."

Twelve

The townsfolk tried to convince the pair to spend the night, but they were both eager to get moving onto Stonebridge. Besides, Breanna still found the town creepy—who in their right mind would stay when people were dying and evil voices kept talking in your head? No thank you, that level of crazy didn't interest her.

They met Devon outside the village, and even Terrence looked happy to see him, reaching out to stroke the unicorn's mane to Devon's rolling eyed delight.

"Do you think Stonebridge is situated somewhere close to the box?" she asked after they'd exchanged stories to see if they'd both gotten the same information.

"I'd say it's a most distinct possibility. And we'd better get a move on. I don't want anybody else to die. This thing looks like it's snowballing out of control."

Swinging himself up on Devon's back, while Breanna shifted shapes, they resumed their journey, both wondering what horrors awaited them in Stonebridge. It definitely didn't bode well, considering what they'd learned.

Breanna kept a close eye on Terrence as she trotted along in fox form beside the unicorn. She couldn't help feeling concerned and with reason. Terrence—her big, usually vital—wizard sat slumped on Devon's back, eyes closed, dozing. Yet even in sleep she could see him twitch and his face occasionally spasm. She had a feeling the voices were back and this time without his using magic, a sure sign they were getting closer to their destination.

Yet the stupid man said not a word. Even though she knew he had to be struggling, he put on a brave face and

still managed to tease her—although he hadn't tried to kiss her again, not that she wanted him to, she thought, looking wistfully at his lips.

Thank god for Devon the unicorn though. It seemed only when he rode Devon did Terrence gain some respite from the voices, not completely, but enough for him to rest.

They had to find the box soon. Breanna couldn't handle the thought of losing Terrence. Why, she still couldn't figure out. At last count she still found him obnoxious, overbearing, chauvinistic, handsome, kind, gentle, humorous... *Argh!*

Somewhere on their journey, she'd begun to think of him as more than just a companion. *Lover*, said her treacherous mind. *Not yet!* Although at this point she couldn't even think of a reason why he shouldn't be.

To allow herself to feel the passion he could arouse, the pleasure...

No point in denying or fighting it anymore—she wanted his body, his touch. And unlike her many other wanna-be suitors, he'd made it clear that marriage was not an option. Heck he seemed to abhor the institution just as much as she did, so why not indulge? Allow herself to fulfill the fantasy of running her fingers through his golden hair, of licking her way up his muscularly etched chest, undressing him to see if the hardness he hid really was as big as it felt.

Breanna blushed, thankfully unseen under the fur she currently sported. Such naughty thoughts. She really needed to...

A whizzing bundle of color flitted in front of her, startling her. Breanna sniffed after it and grinned toothily in her fox shape.

Oh what fun! They'd found pixies.

Shifting back to human form, she motioned at Devon to stop and he did, lifting his head and neighing softly. Terrence roused from his nap lifted his head and looked around blearily, then promptly fell off the unicorn as a little winged creature flew up and hovered an inch before his nose.

Breanna giggled as Terrence landed on his bottom scowling.

"I fail to see the humor," he grumbled rubbing his

posterior.

"Oh please," she said smiling widely. "A big, strong man like yourself scared off his unicorn by a cute little pixie."

Terrence didn't answer, brushing himself off instead as he got up off the ground. *Oh*, she thought devilishly, *the big bad wizard is pouting*.

Not pouting, actually he'd been planning retaliation. "I can't wait to see your face when my big bad dragon finally gets to taste your sweet little pixie." Breanna immediately caught the reference and blushed crimson. *Uncouth jerk*. She so would not be letting him taste anything—and *just how big is his dragon? No, no—not thinking about that*. She tried to block out of the image of him stripping down naked and showing her.

An excited buzzing approached and soon the trio found themselves surrounded in a whirlwind of color as little beings with wings flitted about them babbling excitedly. Imagine miniature humans, oh about a hand span tall, with willowy thin bodies and shimmering hair that ranged in every shade of the rainbow. Even their skin hues varied from light pastels to a translucent pearl. A fascinating species for sure, not to mention cute. Just don't ever call them that—the smaller they are the more they have to prove, usually on the end of one of their razor sharp rapiers.

Having dealt with pixies before, Breanna dug into her pouch and pulled out a lump of sugar, holding it out on her hand. Immediately the babble increased in pitch then died down as a golden pixie—golden skin, hair and even wings—approached. Sprinkles of sparkly dust shimmered in the air at her approach—damn if only she had a felt pouch to catch it. Pixie dust, especially the queen's, paid well in the market. The queen, with a graceful flutter above Breanna's hand, landed and folded her wings.

"Greetings Queen Mother," said Breanna gravely—pixies did so love to be treated with respect, that is 'til they got down and partied.

A high pitched voice replied. "Good tidings, shifter. Why doth thou come to our woods today?"

"I bring thee sweet offerings in exchange for information, oh Exalted Queen." Overdone, but the pixies lapped it up.

With a flick of her golden hand, several of the queen's court darted in and heaved the sugar cube up in their matchstick arms and flew off with it. Sugary treats were the gift of choice when dealing with pixies.

"What kind of tidings seeketh thee, child?" asked the queen melodiously.

Odd to be called a child by something she could squish in her hand, but the pixies were long lived creatures, and to be queen one must be old indeed.

"We seek the source of the boundary spell—the box to be exact. We are on a quest from the council and the god of Chance to release the spell lest its corruption destroy the magic it is meant to save."

Frightened squeaking greeted her words and several in the airborne crowd fled to the woods, but the queen, obviously made of sterner stuff, did not even flinch.

"The magic you speak of has turned against the land. Even we, who should be safe from the affair of mortals feel its pull. Alas, while we can feel its nearness, we cannot lead thee to it, for it is too well hidden."

Breanna hid a pang of disappointment. Of course it would have been too easy had the pixies been able to lead them to it.

"Do you have any idea where it might lie?"

"There is rumor of an area that is barren, surrounded by life. None dare to enter that area and those who doth see it, doth forget it."

"If you don't mind me asking how do you remember then?"

The queen stared at Breanna with kaleidoscope eyes, the swirling colors hinting at a magic beyond Breanna's comprehension. "I do not forget. I was here before the mortals first began to crawl and I will be here, when thou turneth to dust."

Okay, don't question the pixie queen again. Odd how something so little could project so much power in one little glance.

"Thank you queen, if you could show us the way, we will leave your fair presence and be on our task."

"Night falls child. Why doth not thee and thy companions spend the night with us and leave for thy

destination in the morn, refreshed?"

"Um, you're not gonna make us go to sleep for a hundred years or so are you or something?" asked Terrence nervously.

Golden laughter rang, like a string of little bells tinkling. "Doth that old wives' tale still make the rounds? In the past there have been those who have been merry for quite a time with us, but 'twas their choice that kept them with us and not any spells. You have nothing to fear. We eagerly await the completion of thy task. The old lands, long forbidden to us, doth call. Now come, children of the earth, and partake of our bounty and awake refreshed for thy journey."

With those words, the queen fluttered her wings and flew off into the woods, her colorful pixie court following.

With a look over at Terrence who just shrugged in acceptance, Breanna followed the shimmery forms as they led them through the woods. One by one the little beings popped out of sight. Breanna hesitated for a moment and followed, feeling not a thing when she stepped through the magical veil that hid the pixie kingdom. One second they were in a gloomy forest, the next they'd stepped into fairyland.

Thirteen

A valley full of sunshine greeted them even though dusk fell outside the veil. Around lay rolling greens hills covered in a soft blanket of blooms of every shade. Trees with foliage only dreamed about by crazed painters abounded in purples and pinks, hung heavy with fruit never seen in the Realm. Birds sang, brooks babbled—talk about a sensory overload.

Breanna blinked, then blinked again astonished for by some kind of magic, either the pixies grew or Breanna shrank, for past the veil that hid their valley, they all became the same size.

And wow, were the pixies magnificent to look at—although the males still weren't as hot as Terrence. Not that she was interested. Right.

The queen had an otherworldly beauty, so pure and bright, that looking upon her became a chore—watering eyes and all that, not to mention being struck dumb.

As if aware of her effect, the queen laughed, the tinkling sound, ringing with a crystalline sound throughout the valley.

"Welcome, children of the earth, to our land. Please partake of the bounty we have to offer and awake the morrow refreshed for thy journey."

Then with a gliding walk that made Breanna envious—she looked like a lumbering ox beside her—the queen left regally, her court, giggling and twittering behind her.

Not all of them left though. Those that remained directed Breanna to a stream behind some trees with long hanging branches that thankfully hid her as she bathed the

sweat and grime of the journey from her body.

Ah, to be clean again! They took her clothes from her and replaced them with a flowing robe that molded her body in rather embarrassing ways.

When she protested, a blue pixie with pigtails and amethyst eyes reassured her. "Never fear. We will return thy garments to thee after we have washed the signs of thy journey from them."

Hmm, clean body, clean clothes. It would be stupid to argue, so Breanna let them take her clothes, but gnawed on her lip, hiding behind the branches afraid to step out. Then she chided herself. Had she become so vain that she believed Terrence would be so overcome with lust that he would throw himself on her in a crazed passion?

If she should be so lucky!

No, no. She didn't want to get involved. And besides, since that night of the full moon, he hadn't even touched her—or kissed her. Well, except for that one attempt after Mindy, where she'd shut him down. Only his words earlier about introducing her to his dragon—*blush*—still made her believe that he hadn't quite completely lost interest.

A better question would be why did *she* still hesitate? Other than her virginity, what did she have to lose? He had no interest in marriage, so she needn't fear on that account. He made her feel things—wild things. Hot things. Things she so wanted to experience. And being in her twenties—a veritable spinster—she definitely had reached an age where she could make her own decisions in these matters. Why not take the plunge?

Thus she emerged from the covering of the trees in the bathing area with a decided step, to smile brilliantly—if hungrily—at Terrence.

~ * ~

Terrence felt a little overwhelmed—not to mention big and clumsy. While he'd heard stories about pixies and their secret valley, he'd never expected to actually experience it. Totally cool. Now if he could only stop feeling like a giant ogre beside these graceful beings, and remember not to scratch in public.

He'd partaken of the bathing and clothing offered to him, although he looked at the satiny breeches they'd given

him a little dubiously—men didn't wear satin. Hopefully, his little rose wouldn't do anything that would inflame him as his desire would be hard to hide in these suckers—wonderful tenting material.

Of course the moment he saw her, stepping from a screened grove in a gown that hugged her luscious curves—*oh does she ever look yummy*—and she smiled wickedly at him, he immediately looked for cover as all the blood rushed from his head down below.

Shoot!

Dropping his hands over the bulge tenting his breeches, he tried to smile back while looking casual. Maybe he should pretend to scratch. Thankfully, Devon came trotting over, his silky mane brushed and braided with flowers. Using his body as cover, Terrence stroked him to Devon's whinnying delight, while trying to think bland thoughts 'til his body came under control again.

A small frown knitted itself between Breanna's brow and she chewed her lip as she watched him. What had her knickers in a knot?

Under control again, he stepped away from Devon towards her. "What's up? You look like something's pissed you off?" *As usual.*

"Nothing."

The tone said it all. Yes, something was bothering her, but of course being a woman, she wouldn't tell him. *Women!*

Seeing a crowd of giggling pixies walking and fluttering past, their slim bodies barely hidden by strategically placed scraps of fabric, he had a thought, which he apparently should have kept to himself. "Hey, so can you like turn into a pixie? I bet you'd be hot!"

Breanna's mouth pinched and he let out an oomph as she jabbed him. "No, I can't do pixies, you pervert. And just so you know, pixies don't mate with mortals. They consider us too coarse. Not to mention the whole species thing." Then she flounced off in a huff.

Ha! No wonder his little rose seemed piqued. Jealousy had her in its grip again. Terrence wanted to rush and reassure her that he found her a thousand times more beautiful than these ethereal, bony beings, but... A little jealousy might be good for the cause. Underhanded maybe,

but he didn't care. His prickly rose didn't like him looking at other women. *Excellent.*

Watching her with a satisfied male grin as she stalked off, an unfamiliar emotion gripped him as a group of male pixies, all bare chested with muscled stomachs and toned arms, surrounded her and began chatting her up. Hey, what happened to the "species didn't mix" thing? And wait a second, who the hell did that pixie with the blue hair think he was, putting his hand on *his* rose's waist? Terrence suddenly wanted to hit something hard—a certain blue-haired pixie for starters. A grimace crossed his face as he realized what he'd finally succumbed to. Jealousy—apparently that emotion went two ways. And he didn't like it one bit.

~ * ~

Pixies sure knew how to party. Breanna feeling a little tipsy—not to mention dizzy from all the whirling colors as the pixies danced frenetically—watched Terrence morosely. Stupid jerk had females draped all over him—feeding him, fetching him drinks, touching his hair.

At first Breanna had tried to catch his attention by flirting with the males, a plan that quickly lost its attraction as he didn't seem to notice, surrounded as he was by a flock of fawning female pixies.

Apparently her lessons on pixie mating behaviors had been erroneous. *Shoot.*

Feeling glum, Breanna pounded back the shots, getting more and more sloshed—pixie liquor seemed very potent. And finally after way too many, Breanna had enough.

Standing up—swaying only slightly—she staggered over to where Terrence lay with his harem.

"You, thir," she slurred. "Are a p-p-pig!" Breanna pointed a finger at him, or tried to as he seemed to have split into three.

"I think, you've had too much to drink," he said standing up and putting a steadying arm around her.

"Haf not," she said trying to push him away, but succeeding only in having him swoop her up in his big, muscled arms, something she would have probably enjoyed more if it hadn't made her head spin so bad she nearly puked.

Closing her eyes to control the spinning, she felt him

carry her away from the sounds of merriment. Lying her down on a pallet—where the hell had he found a bed?—he brushed her hair back out of her face gently.

Breanna opened an eye and saw his face leaning over hers, an amused look in his eye. "You, my darling rose, are drunk. Why don't you go to sleep? We've got a long journey still to complete in the morning."

As he went to stand up and move away, Breanna whispered. "Why don't you like me anymore?"

Her words startled him, and he crouched back down beside her. "What are you talking about, my wild rose?"

"You haven't tried to kiss me or anything in days. You don't like me anymore," she repeated, the words coming out of her mouth in a spill, the liquor having loosed her tongue too much.

"Oh my sweet rose, I still like you and want you. I want to kiss you every moment of every day. But you made it pretty clear, you'd rather I didn't."

"I lied. I want you to kiss me. Please Terrence," she pleaded, too drunk to care if she sounded pathetic or needy. *Please kiss me and show me you still want me.*

~ * ~

Terrence could see her eyes glittering with unshed tears and the tip of her pink tongue wet her lips. How could she think he didn't want her, when all he'd wanted to do since he'd met her was worship her?

Dipping his head, he let his lips brush hers softly tasting the sweetness of the drinks she'd consumed and licking it off her. She had other ideas though. Her arms came up and clasped him tightly toppling his body onto hers. Instantly, Terrence lost all reason as the feel of her body against his through the thin material burnt him and sent his nerve endings into hyper pleasure drive. Her reckless passion overcame any small resistance he might have had left, enflamed him as her lips devoured his eagerly and she even stabbed her tongue between his lips to meet his tongue in a duel that had him harder than rock.

Beneath him, her body gyrated slightly, her hips pressing up against the bulge in his pants, chafing him pleasurablely.

Terrence let his lips trail from hers, and he licked his

way down her neck to her collar bone. Her fingers tangled themselves in his hair and she pushed him lower, urged on by instinct even in her innocence. Terrence obliged and lowered his mouth to the material stretched tautly over an erect nipple. He drew that peak into his mouth, the material clinging wetly to her erect nub, and Breanna moaned loudly and arched. Terrence turned his attention to the other one, biting it gently through the fabric before laving it with the same attention.

A pulsing need had spread through his body, a need screaming at him to claim this woman as his, to nestle himself inside her soft folds and love her 'til she screamed his name.

Terrence reached down and pulled up the skirt of her gown. His fingers tickled their way her thigh until he reach her soft curls. He looked at her, but her eyes were closed in rapture, so he let his fingers tangle in those curls, her heat still thrusting up at him, begging for him to touch her.

Terrence leaned forward to kiss her while he spread her moist folds and slid one finger in. So goddamn tight and it was that thought, coupled with the taste of liquor on his breath, that made him curse and pull away from her.

Jumping up he stepped a few feet away and watched as she slowly opened her eyes, her face flushed and looking so desirable.

"Why are you stopping?" she said breathily.

"You're drunk," he said raking a hand through his hair.

"So?" she said smiling crookedly. "Come back here, that was fun and I'm not done."

"Tell you what," he said resisting the urge to cover her body with his and take what she offered. "If when you sober up, if you want to finish what we've started then I will be more than happy to do so. But much as I want have you, I won't do so while you're drunk. When we do come together, I want there to be no recriminations the next day."

Breanna's eyes narrowed which in her drunkenness ended up cross eyed. "Are you turning me down?"

"Only 'til you sober up. Then, my rose, if you still want me, I am all yours."

But Breanna never answered, as she succumbed finally to the alcohol running through her system and started

snoring softly.

Oh, by the Higher Powers! Terrence knew he'd done the right thing, *but goddamn it, now what the hell am I supposed to do with the world's biggest hard on?*

Nothing. And the worst part—the need to lie back down right beside her, because in the state she'd put herself in, he couldn't take the chance that some less scrupulous pixie wouldn't take advantage of her.

Why did things with her have to be so goddamned complicated—not to mention painful? He struggled to adjust the damn breeches around the swelling in his groin. If only she hadn't been so wasted for he just knew, that once she woke up in the morning, she'd be appalled and extra prickly. For a moment Terrence had experienced bliss and he knew she had too, it just sucked that she had to be drunk to let it happen.

It begged the question, why hadn't he taken what she offered and served it up as a *fait accompli* in the morning? She would have been pissed—as usual—but the line would already have been crossed and as the old saying went, once you let the cat out of the bag...

But Terrence didn't want her that way. He didn't want to just bed her, although it would be nice—more than nice. He wanted her to want him with a passion like his own—an all-consuming desire that filled his every waking moment, his dreams and set his body afire every time she came near.

Gods, how bloody sappy. Had he fallen prey to that previously most avoided emotion—love. *Dammit. I did. I, Terrence Griffonaire, confirmed bachelor and rake, love a stubborn, independent prickly rose. And I haven't even bedded her yet.*

By all the gods I will make love to her and I'll make her marry me too. A difficult prospect for sure given her current state of mind on the matter, yet Terrence could be persistent. And if all else failed he'd just drive her so delirious with pleasure that she'd say anything to keep him going.

Spooning his body around hers, an arm slung protectively over her waist, he grinned in her hair as he imagined the battle he'd have dragging her down the aisle to

the altar to get married. But by all the gods, the wedding night would be worth it.

~ * ~

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me!" said a very disgusted Mindy, Goddess of Love, stomping away from the scrying basin.

"Maybe you really are losing your touch," said Chance ducking quickly to avoid the priceless Atlantis statue thrown at his head. Crash! Damn, he knew better than to bait her before putting his toys away.

"Hey," he said complaining, staring down at the scattered shards. "That thing was one of a kind. I rescued it just before Atlantis sank."

"Oh boo-hoo," said his sister. "Learn how to scuba dive if you want another. Don't piss me off again or I'll be throwing your Pompeii stuff next!"

"Touchy, touchy," chided Chance grabbing a broom, and then thinking better of it, snapping his fingers to clean up the mess. "Don't take your frustrations out on me just because you can't get two mortals to do the naughty tango."

"The what?"

"Naughty tango," he said suggestively wiggling his brows.

"Eew. Where do you get those stupid expressions?"

"Why? Didn't you like that? Okay then my prudish sister, how about the horizontal mambo, the bump and grind, bouncy-bouncy. Ooh, or how about my fave, doing the wild thing." Chance mimed a dirty act with his hips that only made Mindy madder.

"How about we call it what it is supposed to be—making love."

"Nah, too serious sounding. No wonder Terrence ran away."

Mindy huffed. "He did not run away. He was being a gentleman, refusing to take advantage of Breanna while she was intoxicated and not fully in control of herself."

"But I thought you wanted him to take advantage of her?"

"I do but..." Mindy let out a scream and grabbed Chance's prized Pompeii etchings and threw them at his head. He caught them and put them out of her reach.

"Hey, at least she'll respect him in the morning," he joked. At Mindy's dejected look, Chance threw her a tidbit. "But look, that hero bit you asked for is coming up soon. Isn't that what you were waiting for anyway?"

Mindy's face brightened with a smile that would have blinded Ra, the sun god. "I almost forgot about that. Is it ready then?"

"It is, my dear sister. Here, why don't you take a seat and watch a master at work." Chance only "oomphed" a little at the elbow in his gut before gallantly seating his sister by the scrying basin. Then shaking his dice, he let the game continue.

~ * ~

The following morning Breanna woke up to a horrible pounding in her head, quickly exceeded by the overpowering shame over the way she'd acted the night before.

Oh by the Higher Powers, I'm a slut—one who can't handle her pixie drink apparently. Throwing herself at him like a bitch in heat. *And oh by all the gods it had felt soooo good.*

And Terrence—the bloody cad—had been a perfect gentleman, well almost. Those lips sure could drive a girl wild. He'd been the one to put a halt to what had been the most pleasurable thing she'd ever felt. Stupid man had morals, that, or he didn't want her anymore, a thought that had her sitting up too quickly.

Bad idea. The spinning meadow made her gut churn and she only had a second to throw herself sideways before she puked indelicately in the grass.

Oh pretty. Wiping her mouth and feeling a little better—that is a shade above death—she looked around to find that the meadow she lay in seemed quite ordinary. The pixies and their magical vale had disappeared along with Terrence and Devon.

Crap. Standing up on wobbly legs, she closed her eyes as the whole sky tilted for a second and when she reopened them screamed because Terrence suddenly stood before her.

With a grin he handed her a flask. "Drink this. The pixie queen said you'd need it."

Parched and anxious to find anything that would make this horrible hangover go away, she chugged the contents

and gasped as the fiery liquid made its way down. But almost instantly she felt better. The world stopped spinning and her stomach stopped churning, leaving her only feeling embarrassed, a much harder feeling to erase.

So of course the jerk had to bring it up. "Now that you've sobered up, I don't suppose we can continue where we left off last night?"

Breanna felt red heat staining her cheeks. "Yeah, well, about that. I, um, might have had a bit much to drink. Don't worry, it won't happen again."

Breanna thought she saw a glimpse of disappointment in his eyes as he turned away and she could have sworn she heard him mutter, "I was afraid of that."

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said looking innocent.

Breanna scowled at him as he swung up onto Devon.

Men!

They traveled well that day, making camp just after dusk. They spoke little. Away from the influence of the pixies, Breanna could see that the voices were back to plague Terrence, not that he said anything. She could tell though by the way his shoulders sagged and his forehead kept creasing with furrows of pain and tension. She watched him worriedly, noted his restless sleep that night, and when they awoke and she asked how he felt, he just shrugged and laughed.

"I'm fine except for this ache I've got between my legs. I don't suppose you'd want to fix it?"

The stick of firewood she threw at his head just made him laugh harder, and she grumbled around camp, trying not to think of his body as it had felt lying on hers and his lips teasing her...

The worst part? She wanted to give in. She wanted to feel the passion he could arouse. But, pride stopped her.

Her father had always said it would be her downfall.

Time to swallow her pride and admit—*EEK*—she needed him. Wanted him. Had to have him. Not because she loved him, oh no, never that, yet how come the thought of ever losing him made her want to scream and caused her heart stutter in fear?

After they made camp and ate tonight, she'd make her

move. No more excuses, no more waiting. Time to taste the passion. Time to see if she still felt the desire without the influence of the moon or pixie drink.

Time to give in.

~ * ~

Terrence tried to focus on the terrain around him, hard though, with Breanna looking so lusciously serious and even harder with the damn voices in his head. Way past whispering, they now screamed at him.

"Danger! Danger! We must protect the Realm. Give yourself to us. Give us your soul NOW!"

They repeated this mantra over and over, the voices sometimes alone or in a group, screaming and scrabbling at his mind's inner shields. Chipping away at his mental armor, fighting to get in and claim him. Terrence fought back. He imagined the wall around his mind and his soul as a thick rock wall—impenetrable. Layer upon layer of thick stones, no chinks, no cracks. But the task grew harder and harder.

The brief respite he'd had in the pixie village seemed eons ago instead of just days. Only his strong will kept him going along with the fear of leaving Breanna alone.

He could feel how close they were. The smell of magic in this place overwhelmed to the senses. How had this failed for so long to come to the council's attention? Had the spell been protecting itself better than they knew?

Then, to compound this mental battle, he had the strangest sense of being followed—watched. A prickling at the back of his neck that something—or someone—tracked them. But they remained out of sight, elusive. And Breanna, with her keen senses, said not a word. Had the voices clouded his natural instinct? Made him paranoid? He hoped not, else it meant the power of the voices was gaining more ground than he wanted to give.

~ * ~

They finally reached the village of Stonebridge without incident, and to Breanna's annoyance of course no bridge could be seen. Where in the Realm did people come up with names for these villages? Seriously, it had to have been a man, a woman would have called it something proper like "Another Stupid Empty Village In The Middle of Nowhere".

A scuffle behind made her turn, and if she could have grinned in fox form she would have, for Terrence seemed to be arguing with Devon. It seemed their unicorn refused to step foot into the village—a fact emphasized by his big head swinging frantically back and forth in a *no* gesture. Terrence, with a snort, got off his mount.

"Fine, then have it your way," he grumbled. "We'll be back in a bit."

Still in fox form, Breanna could smell no sign of life—only decay. The stench of meat left out of doors to putrefy and return to the earth. No wonder Devon didn't want to go any further. Neither did she.

If they'd thought Blacksmoke seemed deserted, this place felt and looked like a virtual ghost town. The cottages and houses lining the one, trodden dirt street gaped emptily at them. The doors on many of them hung open, their interiors black cavernous, maws she felt no urge to explore. This reminded her of a scary book she'd read years ago where a stupid heroine had wandered into a ghost town and been attacked by zombies. Great, now she was that stupid heroine. Hopefully though, her tale would have a better ending than that of the book—the heroine had only made it out partially intact. *Shudder!*

The deathly silence—and smell—indicated they'd find no answers here, or least none from any being living. Breanna shifted back to her human shape and looked to Terrence. "Okay, oh great and powerful wizard, now what?"

"We look for answers," he said rubbing his temple, eyes tightly squinted, not even responding to her taunt. Bad sign.

Breanna kept close to him at first as he approached cottages and peered in. But the scent of rotting flesh soon had her gagging and retreating to the middle of the road instead. *Way too gross!*

Terrence didn't seem bothered by the smell and strode right into several of the cottages emerging ashen and grim faced. He said not a word as he kept exploring and Breanna, hugging herself tightly, felt a desperate urge to flee. Her instincts screamed *run*, and some inner sense warned her they were being watched. But if everything had gone to the

grave what was left to watch them? She really didn't want to find out.

After spending a few minutes inside one of the large homes, Terrence stuck his head out and signaled to her. "Come check this out."

Breanna approached him reluctantly. "You'd better not be about to show me some nasty dead body because the smell is enough, I don't need to see it too."

"Well, there is a body, but you need to see what's beside it."

Curious—but still completely grossed out—she crept into the darkness of the cottage, blinking to see in the murkiness.

Terrence murmured and a ball of light sprang up from the palm of his hand.

"You shouldn't be using magic," she said with a tone most often used by annoyed mothers.

"Only for a second," he said, his face tight with strain. "Take a look at this then we'll go outside."

He balanced the ball of light over a spot of the floor—pressed dirt and bits of straw. *Ooh fascinating. But wait. . .*

Breanna peered closer and noticed markings in the dirt—words and a diagram of some sort.

Terrence read it aloud to her as she tried to make sense of the diagram. " 'Find source. East. No magi—'. Or at least I assumed he meant magic, he left off the 'c'."

"So I guess this is a map of some sorts," she said. "The 'sb' in the circle must stand for Stonebridge and the line is an arrow pointing east. But what's the squiggle supposed to be? And then the 'x' on the other side of it must be the spot."

"I think the squiggle might be a river of some sorts."

Breanna nodded then made the mistake of inhaling too deeply to ask her next question. Bent over, gagging and choking over her inhalation of the decay perfuming the air, she ran out of the cottage and hit the road hard on her knees, dry heaving, her chest and stomach contracting painfully, wheezing as she tried to pull in the fresh air of the outdoors in to clean out her lungs.

Terrence came out behind her and patted her on the back. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Still breathing hard, Breanna nodded. "Can we leave?" she gasped. "And talk about this elsewhere?"

"Good plan. This place is not for the living." Holding her hand he walked her to the edge of the village and whistled for Devon. Swinging up on his back, he looked down at her and smiled sadly.

"Those poor people never stood a chance. Come on. It looks like we're close to our goal. Let's end this thing so nobody else has to suffer."

Breanna turned away from him so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes—tears for him. Having seen the tragedy of Stonebridge brought home just how much danger Terrence was in. And getting closer to the source would make it even worse. He couldn't die. He just couldn't.

A thump drew her attention and whirling, she stifled a gasp for Terrence lay knocked out cold on his back in the dirt, while Devon galloped off. Had Devon thrown him or had the voices finally overcome him? Breanna rushed to his side and never noticed the second rock that came sailing out of nowhere to knock her unconscious.

~ * ~

Breanna awoke to a throbbing head—*oh no not again*. She didn't even remember drinking this time. Although... *Wait a second*. She hadn't been drinking, she'd been kneeling over Terrence when something hit her. Breanna's eyes snapped open to see the bare wooden walls of an ill kept cottage around her. Attempting to stand, she realized she'd been bound to a chair. No matter, she'd just shift forms and escape the ropes that held her.

But when she closed her eyes and willed herself to change nothing happened.

What the hell?

Opening her eyes, she looked down at her body and finally felt the first fluttering of panic.

Silver. Finely wrought silver link chains wrapped around her body.

Whoever had captured her knew about her shapeshifting abilities and had used silver to bind her. The one thing all shifters hated on sight. The only material in the whole Realm that made them vulnerable and unable to shift. *Stupid yucky metal and to think some people it pretty*

enough to make into jewelry. Then she remembered Terrence. *Oh dear gods. Where is he?* She peered anxiously around the gloom ridden hut, but saw nothing else, that is unless you counted cobwebs and one really big ugly spider. *Eww!*

Hearing the sound of footsteps, she dropped her head and feigned unconsciousness, hoping to glean some information from whomever entered.

The wooden door creaked as it swung open and she heard the sound of heavy breathing and her nose twitched at a familiar unpleasant smell. *Rat!*

A hand grabbed her roughly by the hair and yanked her head up, making her yelp and tears stung her eyes from the pain. Why did the Higher Powers make hair so sensitive especially, seeing as how it was so easy to grab?

"I see you've awoken, my little bitch," said Cedric with his habitual sneer. "You've taken me for a pretty chase across the Realm. Good thing for me that I hired myself a rogue tracker."

"What the hell do you want?" she asked tightly, resisting the urge to spit on him.

"What I've always wanted, my dear Breanna, you as my wife. Although I have to say I'm disappointed that I won't be the one to deflower you, seeing as how you let that filthy wizard taint you. But no matter, my mother can get me some herbs to get rid of any unwanted surprises, and then my little bitch, you will breed me super shifters."

Breanna decided not to correct his incorrect assumption about her virginity. No need to give him ideas on remedying the situation. But what he said annoyed her enough to say, "Cedric you're an idiot. Do you really think that I'm going to marry you? I'd rather marry a cockroach. Now let me go this instance!"

Cedric replied with a slap that rocked her head back and had her seeing stars. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. *Nice. Figures the little rodent is a woman beater. Wait 'til I get loose, I am going to make him regret that.*

Cedric brayed his donkey laugh, pleased with himself. "I prefer you all tied up," he said licking his lips obscenely. "At my mercy and almost tamed. Why, a man could do anything he wanted to you right now."

And then the idiot tried to kiss her, his garlicky breath and slobber all over her lips. So Breanna did the only thing she could do—she bit him, hard.

With a screech of pain, he pulled away, his lower lip dripping blood. He wiped his hand across his mouth and looked at the red smear. "You bitch!" he screamed before backhanding her. Breanna felt her head snap with the force of his blow, her eyes tearing and once again the taste of blood filled her mouth. *Ouch, that one really hurt.*

She lifted her head defiantly, her check throbbing and surely turning all colors of the rainbow. And even though she saw two of him now, she of course just had to goad him again. "Is that all you got, rat boy? And aren't you a big man, hitting a woman while she's tied up? Why don't you untie me and see what happens? Don't tell me you're scared of little ole me?"

A guffaw from the doorway had them both turning with Breanna hoping for help, a wish quickly dashed at the appearance of a huge stranger whom Cedric scowled at.

"I told you not to interrupt us."

The grizzly stranger shrugged. "I was curious, after all we been chasing her for days. Hey, maybe you should let her go. After everything you done told me, I'd like to see what the little bitch could do. I bet she could whup your ass in sixty seconds flat."

Cedric's scowl deepened. "Shut the hell up. I don't pay to hear you talk. Besides, you've done your job now. I've got the girl, so you can just go."

"Well, see here," said the big mountain man, stepping closer to Cedric looming over him, "you still owes me some money, the way I see it. But I might be persuaded to take it out in pleasure if you know what I mean," he added with a leer at Breanna.

Oh double gross, she thought frantically. Do men only ever think with the one appendage?

"You'll get your money when you return to my father's mansion," said Cedric with a swallow and false bravado.

The mountain man cracked his knuckles with a popping sound. "And what if I say I want it now?"

Cedric backed nervously away from the big man. "Well, it's not like she's untouched goods... But once you've

had her, our deal is done."

Breanna found herself stunned into silence as the men argued over who would get to rape her first. She had to do something. Stall them, 'til she got untied. "Wait!" she cried. "I'm still a virgin. The wizard never touched me." Although she wanted him to. *Dear gods, is he dead?*

"You lie," said Cedric. "No man in his right mind would travel with you for so long and not have you."

"Yeah, well, he tried, I just didn't let him. You know me," she said trying to shrug and feign nonchalance. Breanna prayed she wasn't making a colossal mistake in admitting her virgin state. But anything at this point seemed better than being allowed herself to be raped by this big shaggy bear of a man. Cedric she could handle.

"That changes things, then," Cedric said. "As my future, now untouched bride, the girl's off limits. Tell my father when you reach him to give you twice what you're still owed and begone. I wish to spend some time alone with my fiancée."

"Now see here little man," said the big man menacingly. "I don't like your tone or your attitude. I don't want your money, you puling excuse for a shifter. I've decided I want this here girl. I've got me a hankering for a virgin. And there ain't nothing you can do to stop me."

"But *I* can," said the most welcome voice in the world, Terrence.

~ * ~

Terrence saw red, and it wasn't just the blood still pouring into his eyes. First they'd ambushed him, his own stupid fault since he hadn't listened to his instincts. But then to tie up his beloved and argue over who got to rape her. *Way over the line. Nobody touches Breanna. She is mine, whether she knows it yet or not.*

"Back off both of you," said Terrence in a low menacing voice.

"You told me he was dead," Cedric said.

"Well, his face was covered in blood and he wasn't moving."

"You bloody idiot!"

"Who you calling an idiot, twerp?"

Terrence let out a piercing whistle and all eyes turned

to him. "Excuse me, but entertaining as all this is, the fact of the matter is you not only attacked a wizard sent on a quest by the council, you also had the nerve to touch Breanna. The first I might have forgiven, but for the latter, now you both pay."

Holding his hands out to the side, blocking the doorway, he felt magic all around him. This over endowed, magical area begged to be used and the magic coalesced around his hands eagerly in preparation for when they came charging at him in a bull rush. One hand on each man was all it took to stop them, but it also gave the voices the chink in the wall that they'd been waiting for. They poured into his mind, screaming in triumph.

Terrence staggered at their sudden intrusion, tripping over the cat and mouse—formerly known as mountain man and Cedric—as he made his way to Breanna.

The voices in his head clamored, and his eyes blurred, thus it was with clumsy fingers that he unwound the silver chain from around her. He thought he could hear her speaking to him, but the roaring in his ears drowned out all sound. With a whoosh he felt the voices hammering at his final defenses, and he did a very unmanly thing. He swooned.

~ * ~

Terrence slumped to the floor and began convulsing. He'd loosened most of the silver she'd been tied up with so Breanna was able to slip the remaining knots and loops to escape. Sliding to the floor, she grabbed Terrence's head and cradled it in her lap.

"No, no, no," she cried, the tears running down her cheeks, instantly knowing what had happened. "You can't have him." But she had no magic, no defense for what attacked his body.

The Cedric-mouse scampered out the door with the large scruffy cat fast in pursuit. Any other time that would have amused her, but she didn't feel like laughing, not when Terrence so obviously fought a hideous death.

The shaking suddenly stopped and Terrence went still, his face a ghastly grey color. Breanna shrieked and lay her head down on his chest. Tears rolled unashamedly from her eyes, soaking the linen covering his broad chest, a chest that

still rose with the faint but still beating sound of his heart.

Not dead yet, thank the Higher Powers.

Speaking of which...

Breanna laid his head gently on the floor and stood up, head tilted to the ceiling, a pissed off glint in her eye. "Hey, Chance. I know you're bloody well up there. I hope you're having fun, you little bastard. Just how the hell, am I supposed to complete my quest without Terrence?"

A cheerful voice sounded from the doorway. "Whatever do you mean, my child?" asked the smiling, benign looking God of Chance.

Startled, Breanna opened and shut her mouth a few times like a gaping fish on land. Okay so she'd yelled for him, she actually hadn't expected him to answer or show up.

"I mean," she said, swallowing her startlement and standing up straight to look him in the eye. "That the boundary isn't coming down if Terrence doesn't get better."

"But, you don't need him to complete the quest," said the god of Chance. "You have the key already and the directions too. So just leave the wizard. It's not like you wanted to come with him in the first place."

What? Leave Terrence? Never! "I am not leaving him," she said trying to control the wobble in her voice. "Either we both go, or no one goes."

"I could just send someone else," said the god, no longer laughing. Ha, she'd finally caught his attention.

"It's going to be kind of hard since he won't have the key," she said smirking holding it up.

"And I could just take it back," said Chance finally sounding annoyed.

"Really," said Breanna sweetly. "Try it. I've been looking forward to hitting you. You might be a god, but I am one seriously pissed off shapeshifting mood-swinging woman, and while I might not be able to kill you, I will certainly make you feel pain!"

Chance threw up his hands with exasperation. "I just had to choose players with no respect for a Higher Power. Don't you realize I am a god, child? You aren't supposed to threaten a god. I've been worshiped longer than you can imagine. It's just not done."

"I really don't give a crap who you are. Make Terrence

better."

"Why do you care?"

Breanna opened her mouth to say because she loved him and snapped it shut astonished. *Oh dear god. I love this stupid lug of a wizard. When the hell did that happen?* Chance looked at her expectantly, a smile once again on his cherubic face, a sly smile that Breanna wanted to slap. He'd tricked her. *Jerk!*

"Well," he said. "I'm waiting. Why don't you tell me why you want to save him."

"Oh please," said a woman's voice from behind Chance. "Look at her face. It is so obvious. She loves him."

"Do not," said Breanna stubbornly. And just what the hell was Mindy doing here, looking ethereal in a white gossamer gown and long golden locks? Had she been following them? *And why the hell is she so concerned with my love life and Terrence?*

Breanna now hoped Terrence would hold off on waking up 'til this epitome of all male fantasies disappeared. Love and jealousy went hand in hand, and boy did this beauty make her see green.

"Oh please, Breanna, you can't fool the Goddess of Love. I know," Mindy said.

And now Breanna wanted to slap her even more than Chance. *Like it's not bad enough the stupid God of Chance took an interest in me, now the Goddess of Love wants a piece too? Argh! I am so becoming an atheist when this is all over.*

"So what if I care for him?" said Breanna huffily. "I am still not getting married and popping out babies."

"Eew," said the pretty goddess. "I don't blame you. Stinky diapers, vomit, no sleep. But still nothing wrong with having a bit of fun—no strings attached of course."

Okay, this had to be the weirdest conversation in her life. And one that wasn't helping Terrence one bit. "Listen, are you gods going to help him or not? The boundary isn't going to disappear on its own."

"Oh fine," said Chance with a big sigh marred by the twinkle in his eyes. "I'll fix him, but keep in mind his luck won't last forever, so get on with it and take care of that nasty boundary spell, would you, once and for all." Taking out a pair of golden dice—Breanna refrained from telling him

how tacky that was—Chance shook and rolled the dice over Terrence's body. The dice clacked and rolled, leaving golden streamers of short-lived light where they touched him.

Dropping to her knees beside him, Breanna watched his face and willed him to open his eyes. As she watched his pallor lessened and his breathing evened. With a groan he fluttered his eyes and peered at her blearily. He opened his mouth to speak, but she couldn't hear what he said so she leaned in so that the tip of her ear was just above his lips.

"Please tell me I didn't faint?" he whispered.

That was his important question? She'd begged the gods to save his life and he was worried about looking like a pansy? "Like a little girl seeing her first mouse," she replied.

Apparently his dislike of her smart-ass remark, helped him get his strength back quicker than expected, for before she could stand up from her kneeling position, she found herself flipped onto her back on the floor with him looming over her.

"You know," he said, "most women would have been a little grateful that I saved them from gang rape."

"Most real men would have killed the sorry bastards instead of turning them into a cat and mouse."

"Killing is too quick," said Terrence his face darkening. "I wanted them to suffer before they died. Don't worry, they won't last long out there in the wilds."

And he was right, not that she would admit it.

"So what happened after I passed out?" he asked, his body a heavy weight on hers that had her tingling in very naughty places.

"Well after you fainted, I cursed out a few gods and got them to give you another chance."

Terrence chuckled, then sobered when he saw she wasn't laughing. "No, seriously."

"I am serious," she said. "I told them I wouldn't break the spell if they didn't."

"Aww," he said lowering his lips down to hover over hers. "I knew you cared."

And then he kissed her.

Fourteen

Breanna almost threw him off—years of instinct kicking in—but stopped herself. This was what she wanted. She didn't want to fight the feeling anymore—or the passion—and having almost lost him, she didn't want to take the chance that she'd miss out on something she knew would be magical.

So she let him kiss her, her lips parted, every nerve ending singing with awareness. His body, a welcome heavy weight on hers, pushed her down onto the floor. Not the most comfortable of spots, but she didn't care. She didn't want him to stop.

But he stopped.

"Not here," he murmured, and scooping her up in his capable arms, he carried her from that filthy place out in to the fresh clean air. Breanna felt herself cooling down, apprehension setting in, but before she could change her mind again, he swung her down just under the shelter of a large oak tree that had a pile of leaves around its base. Cupping her face with his wide, callused hands, he kissed her. A tender kiss that said more than words could how much he wanted her.

And she kissed him back, pouring her longing and acceptance into it 'til he wrapped her tight against his body in a hug that left no space between them.

They sank to the ground as one, their lips never parting. She welcomed the feel of his weight and slid her legs apart so that he could lie between them. This put a hard part of him—even through their layers of clothes—up against her molten core, shooting a dagger of pleasure right through

her. She gasped as he ground himself against her, the jolts of pleasure telling her of the bliss still waiting to be found.

His lips scorched their way down her neck to the bodice of her gown, and with fumbling fingers, he unlaced it, laying her bosom bare to his eyes. Breanna looking into his face, felt herself flush and her nipples harden into nubs at the look of reverence in his eyes. An expression *she* had caused.

His calloused thumb stroked the tip of one of her nipples, the slight abrasion making it pucker even more and she bit her lip so as to not moan. His lips followed, a moist cave, enveloping her breast and finally breaking free the moan she'd been holding in.

"Oh dear gods," she cried as he sucked her like a tasty piece of fruit, licking and nibbling on her tender flesh. She arched beneath him, her breath catching, her head thrashing at the new sensations his ministrations elicited from her virgin body.

"I can't wait any longer," he murmured against her lips, leaving her breasts for a deep kiss. Breanna felt fresh air on the flesh of her thighs as he hiked her skirt up. His fingers slid up her legs, stopping at her curls.

Breanna held her breath—she had no idea what to expect. He lay his hand flat against her mound and she felt herself pulse against his palm, while moist heat flooded inside.

She squirmed against his hand and finally he moved it, only to trace a finger between her intimate folds to rub against a spot she hadn't known existed. A spot that made her scream his name.

He swallowed her cry with his mouth as his hand worked magic against her most intimate of places, rubbing, dipping, until she felt her body building towards something—the pleasure a mounting tower that threatened at any moment to topple.

As she whimpered against his mouth, he slowed the torture.

"Are you sure you want this?" he asked. Breanna answered with a thrust of her hips against his hand. He fumbled for a moment at his breeches, then braced both arms on either side of her body and staring down at her—his

beautiful blue eyes awash with desire and tenderness, she felt something hard nudging her. She trembled slightly in trepidation—knowing there would be a little pain to accompany this, her first time. Terrence, hovering above her, trembled as hard as she did, sweat gleaming on his skin.

"I want to go slow," he growled, but Breanna refused to let him treat her like a china doll. Pain didn't scare her, and this waiting was driving her nuts. Reaching around, she grabbed him by the buttocks and thrust up, pushing his slick length inside her body in one fell swoop. She winced at the slight, stinging pain.

"Are you okay?" he gasped. Breanna nodded. "Thank the gods," he groaned, and then he began to move inside her and she lost all coherency as the pressure of her need resumed, building up, stronger and larger, like a balloon being filled 'til, with a hard thrust he set forth a burst of cascading waves of bliss throughout her. Floating on the waves of pleasure that kept crashing through her, she heard him shout then give one mighty thrust and go still, his member sheathed deep inside her, pulsing.

He collapsed on top of her, his arms bent but braced so as to not crush her with his full weight. He nuzzled her neck gently and Breanna smiled dreamily, running her fingers through his silken hair.

"Are you okay?" he asked leaning up on one arm so he could look down at her, his blue eyes soft with concern.

"If you call feeling like a boneless puddle okay, then I'm wonderful," she said with a big smile. *Never better. I don't ever want this moment to end.*

~ * ~

Terrence felt himself, by some kind of miracle, harden again at the sight of that smile. A sweet smile that he'd created. A smile built of trust, trust in him.

And that's when he knew. He loved her. Not that he'd tell her, of course. She'd probably hurt him. But he still loved her, prickly thorns and all.

He grew even harder, still sheathed inside her tight, wet body. Gods, she hid a wild passion in her that exceeded any man's expectation. A passion he wanted to taste again, yet he'd have to wait. She'd been an innocent and as such her body wouldn't be used to the soreness caused by

lovemaking. He'd be a gentleman, he'd let her recover, then he'd take the time to explore her body again—this time in a more leisurely fashion instead of like a randy teenage boy who almost came in his britches.

Only she could drive him wild like that.

He rolled to his side, and with regret, withdrew himself from the warm cavern of her body.

She whimpered, and he instantly felt remorse that even him pulling out would cause her discomfort.

"I'm sorry," he whispered wrapping his arms around her. "I promise the soreness will go away in a day or so. It won't hurt as much next time."

He felt a shaking against his chest where her face lay nestled. *Oh no—did I make my sweet rose cry?* Now he truly felt like a heel even if he knew there was nothing he could have done differently.

"Um, Terrence?" she said in a choked voice.

"Yes, my rose?" he whispered back, stroking her hair.

"I'm not sore."

It took a moment for her words to penetrate and when they did, he stiffened—in more than one place.

"But, I heard you whimper."

"Not in pain, Wizard," Breanna said pushing him flat on his back and leaning up over him, her glorious breasts still spilling out of her gown to brush his chest.

Terrence almost came at her words. Oh gods, surely he couldn't be so lucky. A tentative hand around his shaft told him he was.

"Are you sure?" he gasped as she tightened her hand around him and experimented, stroking her hand up and down his length.

She grinned at him—a hungry look in her eyes, one not caused by the moon this time, but by her desire for him. The gods had blessed him.

She straddled his thighs, her dress bunched up around her hips and below her bosom. But he wanted to see all of her. Grabbing her dress, he pulled on it and she lifted her arms, helping him to take the gown off so he could see all of her—naked and glorious—on top of him.

Her bountiful curves begged to be touched from her indented waist, to her rounded tummy and heavy globes

with large, pert nipples. He wanted to taste every inch of her.

But she had other ideas. She splayed her hands on his chest and, leaning forward, lifted her hips so that her moist center hovered above his swollen shaft, brushing it lightly, teasing him.

Terrence groaned, his man-root twitching and swelling. Then he gasped as she impaled herself on him, sinking down to take all of him inside her, and he had to restrain himself from blowing up with the abrupt pleasure of it.

"Slow down," he managed to gasp. "I can't handle that much torture."

"You mean *this*?" she asked, bobbing her hips up and down.

Terrence felt his eyes roll up in his head as she enveloped him in wave after wave of pleasure, the tightness of her sheath squeezing him. He wanted to tell her to stop, but it was too late, with a bellow, he felt himself spurting inside her, immediately abashed by his lack of control.

She purred on top of him as he lost his solidity inside her. Quickly flipping her onto her back, he slipped his now satiated member out and replaced it with his fingers. He deftly found her little pleasure nubbin and, rubbing it, rapidly thrust his other fingers in and out of her slickness. Her hips thrust up against his hand, while hands scrabbled at her sides looking for purchase as he brought her up and up that hill of pleasure. He felt it when she reached the crest, her womanly flesh clenching and squeezing around his fingers, a scream bursting forth from her.

Slowly she opened her eyes to smile at him dreamily.

"Wow," she whispered.

Terrence, undone by that look and one word, wrapped his arms around her and covered her with kisses.

~ * ~

Mindy sang and danced out of tune in her excitement. "Oh yeah ,they did it, they did it, they did it, yeah."

"Hey," said Chance suspiciously, "Isn't that Dora's theme song?"

Mindy stopped singing and blushed. "Is not."

Chance gave her a look and she blushed even hotter.

"Okay. So I watch Treehouse and like Dora. Go ahead, shoot me. I'll have you know I've learned a lot of Spanish from it. Besides who cares about what I watch? They *did* it."

"I take it you're trying to say they finally did the wild thing."

Mindy, in her excitement, didn't even pounce on his nasty use of words. "If you mean, made love, then yes they did. It was glorious. He, so tender yet powerful. She so overwhelmed by the delightful things he did to her."

Chance pointed a finger at her. "Eew, you watched?"

Mindy at least had the grace to blush. "Only for a while. I had to be sure they'd follow through this time. And I am pleased to say the deed is done."

"So they've declared love to each other and all that then?"

"Um, well, not exactly." Mindy faltered. "I mean, I'm sure that's just a detail at this point."

"Oh, you let him get in her pants before using the 'L' word didn't you. Oh, dear sister of mine. Never let the man milk his cow before he's said the words."

That flustered her. "But the timing was so perfect," she wailed thrusting up her hands. "He saved her from that nasty rat Cedric and she was so grateful, not to mention hot for him. I thought for sure when he took her virginity he'd say it. I know he feels it for her and she for him. As for her, well, she wouldn't have let him make love to her if she didn't love him."

"Ah, but feeling it and saying it are two vastly different things. Sounds like your job isn't quite done, sister of mine."

Mindy's face drew tight in determination, and the glint in her eye as she rolled up her diaphanous sleeves didn't bode well for the two lovers who wouldn't cooperate. "You're right. That boy is going to declare love if I have to kill him to do it and by god, I mean me, she will say it too or my name isn't—isn't—Uh..."

"Mindy," Chance supplied.

"Yeah, Mindy," she repeated with only a slight pink stain in her cheeks.

And with a rattle of dice, and the flinging of golden locks, the game went on.

~ * ~

Terrence awoke with a grin the next morning—he had many reasons to after all. First, the voices that had been plaguing him had stayed silent since his recovery by divine intervention the day before. But the biggest reason for his smile lay spooned into him, naked as the day she was born. His beautiful rose.

If he didn't think she'd hurt him, he'd have crowed to the heavens and done a rooster strutting dance. Their lovemaking the night before had been way beyond expectation. Words like heavenly and "Oh my gods!" didn't even begin to cover it.

And he never wanted it to end, which is why, when she finally cracked an eye open and smiled lazily at him he said the first thing that popped into his head.

"Let's get married."

Well, that woke her up. Scrambling up and away from him, her beautiful naked body a work of art in the early morning light, her face was the picture of incredulity.

"What did you say?" she squeaked.

Uh-oh. Terrence tried to think quickly to cover his gaffe. He'd moved too soon. "I said let's get married." He held up a hand before she could protest. "Think about it. We obviously find pleasure in each other's bodies, and I happen to think we also make a great team. And it would solve your problems with all those men who keep trying to force you to marry them." Each word, he spoke made her face darken and tighten 'til his soft rose turned into a prickly one.

"You are such a *man*! I've told you before I don't want to get married. Last night changes nothing. And if you ever want a repeat, you will forget that leg shackling idea once and for all."

Terrence wisely shut up. At least she wanted to do it again. And he'd make sure the experience blew her away. Actually he'd keep pleasuring her until she finally wore down and said yes. Whether she admitted yet or not, Breanna belonged to him. He wanted her by his side as his wife, surely in time she'd realize it too.

Like a gardener, he'd cultivate her 'til she bloomed and allowed herself to be plucked. Sure, he'd have to put up with a couple of thorns, but hell, a little danger just made the end result all the more worthwhile.

With a secretive smile that drove her nuts, judging by the scowls she threw him, they breakfasted and packed up their camp, ready to be on their way.

Time to complete the last leg of their journey.

But when Terrence whistled for Devon, he didn't appear.

"Where's the unicorn?" he asked Breanna, hands on his hips looking around.

"I don't know," she said with a frown. "I haven't seen him actually since you fell off his back when Cedric's rock took you out. He's probably scared. Call him again. He usually comes when you call him. He likes you," she said with a leer.

Terrence made a grimace and walked to the woods, calling and whistling for his steed, but Devon didn't appear.

"Could something have happened to him?" he asked worried. While Devon's odd nature still made him uncomfortable, he'd grown quite fond of the beast. *I hope nothing's happened to him. I had a stallion back home I was thinking of introducing him to.*

"Let me go take a look around." Shifting into fox form, Breanna scampered off into the woods in search of their horned friend.

Terrence sat down to wait, alternating between worry over his unicorn whom he'd completely forgotten about in his delight over Breanna's acquiescence and unabashed, male pride that he'd finally gotten her to give in to the passion she'd held leashed up 'til now.

I'm the man!

He was still patting himself on the back when Breanna came back. She shifted back to human shape, her head drooping.

"What's wrong? Where's Devon?" he asked rushing over to wrap her in his arms.

Her shoulders shook and he stroked her back, offering her comfort. "I found him, but he's not coming back," she said in a choked voice. "He says—" she paused, taking a deep shaky breath. "He says you've made your choice and it would be too painful for him to see us together. He says he's sorry, he'll always remember you, but he can't be your mount anymore."

"Huh?" Terrence processed her words. Then leaned back to look at her face, that yes was covered in tears of—laughter!

"Oh," she howled. "The look on your face."

Terrence gave her a look of even greater disgust. He wanted to be mad, but how could he in the face of such a funny situation. *The unicorn is jealous. Damn it, I guess that means I'm back to walking.*

"Oh," she said wiping at the tears in her eyes. "He told me to give you a message."

"What's the message?"

"He said you have a really nice ass, but if you're going to be baring it in the woods you really should get a tan."

With a howl of laughter, she took off running, Terrence in hot pursuit.

"Just for that comment you will marry me!" he shouted, amused to see his graceful rose stumble at his words.

~ * ~

Marriage. It had been hours since Terrence had thrown that inane idea at her and even though he seemed to be abiding by her stance—no marriage to anyone—she didn't trust the smile he had plastered to his face whenever she looked at him.

Where in the Realm had he come up with such a crazy idea? Although he had been right about one thing—making love to him had been an experience beyond description. A rapture that she wanted to feel again, right now, even though she still felt tender between her thighs. Just the thought of his lips caressing her skin made her nipples pucker and her crotch get wet. Oh, she had no intention of depriving herself. He'd be lucky if she let him eat dinner when they camped for the night, because she had some naughty ideas she wanted to try—taste... And he'd tried to ruin it with that nasty word—marriage.

But would marriage to her wizard be so bad, asked the little voice in her head, a voice she wanted to throttle. He had no interest in using her as a breeder for super shapeshifting babies. He'd even proven to be an amusing companion on their quest. He treated her as an equal most of the time, except when he was trying to protect her, which

she found kind of cute.

Yet not once in his speech this morning had he said he loved her. Wanted her, yes. Enjoyed her company, yes. Felt protective towards her. But.. No 'L' word. And oddly enough, Breanna realized she wanted to hear it. Of course, she hadn't told him she loved him. Hello? She so wasn't making vulnerable to another person. So why this urge herself that to have him say it? Would it make a difference?

Maybe.

Oh by the Higher Powers, I am turning into a mushy, emotional woman. Eew! Soon, she'd be embroidering and gossiping with the other women while they discussed their husbands, households and children.

No, no and triple no! The domestic scene is so not me.

Enough of this stupid daydreaming. Swiftly, she shifted into fox form. She had a task to concentrate on that didn't involve love, or marriage or even thoughts of what he'd feel like slick and wet in deep inside her, though that reminded her of the music of the babbling stream just on the edge of consciousness.

Wait a second. Water? Perhaps they'd found the squiggle on the map. Shifting back to human form, she signaled to Terrence who followed, hands in his pockets while whistling a jaunty air.

"What's up?" he asked. "Time for a break. I know I have a bone that needs some relaxing."

Breanna ignored his innuendo. "I hear water," she announced. "A lot of it. I think we may have found our river."

"Okay, lead the way my little rose. I don't know about you, but I sure could use a bath."

Breanna decided she liked the wicked glint in his eye when he said that. Probably because it mirrored her thoughts of only a moment ago.

Naked, wet, slick bodies sliding...

Breanna shuddered in pleasure and expectation. With a naughty grin, she began peeling off her clothes and running towards the water. No need to look back, she could hear Terrence crashing through the brush behind her.

Emerging from the woods on to the rocky shore of a fast flowing river she stopped. *Darn.* The current seemed a little strong for her to just dive in.

Warm, muscled arms wrapped around her from behind, and she felt Terrence's body push up against her backside, a throbbing hardness at the base of her spine signaling his pleasure at seeing her.

"I thought we were taking a bath," he said in her ear before nipping it with his teeth and making her legs turn to mush. A strong arm around her waist kept her upright when she would have slid to the ground in a melting muddle.

He kept nibbling her ear, making her thoughts swim incoherently. She managed a breathy, "Current's too strong. Need to find an offshoot or pond."

With a grumble, Breanna felt herself lifted in his arms—no magic needed in those muscled babies—and he began carrying her upstream looking for a quieter spot. Now that she didn't have to worry about walking on wobbly legs, Breanna gave in to temptation, licking his neck and biting it, an act that had him walking quicker and his breathing coming faster. Nice to know she had the same effect on him as he had on her.

She had no warning before being submerged in cold but refreshingly clean water. She came up sputtering, but before she could protest his lips were on hers, his arms wrapped tightly around her torso, and the head of his shaft poking at her belly.

Wow, talk about too many sensations at once! Breanna immediately lost control, her body a thrumming live wire that threatened to snap. She devoured his lips as she wrapped her legs around his waist. She felt him poking at her, but the chilly water made her too tight.

Groaning with frustration, he lifted her up out of the water his lips lapping the droplets of water dangling from her nipples. Breanna threw her head back and moaned. He laved her with his tongue, his strong arms holding her up, making her feel small and delicate, a weightless thing of beauty that he worshiped with his lips and tongue. He slid her down his body, the friction of their skin making her gasp. Holding her still, he waded back towards the shore, and lay her down in the few inches of water that lapped the edges. Kneeling between her legs, he cupped her buttocks and lifted her hips. Through passion glazed eyes, she watched as he lowered his

head to the apex of her thighs and burying his face between them, began lapping at her.

Instant, intense pleasure! Breanna let out a small scream. "Oh, god! Terrence!"

Busy licking her, Terrence didn't reply, but went at his task even more diligently. Breanna felt herself rushing towards that pinnacle of delight he'd shown her the night before. Her head thrashed in the shallow water and when he finally stopped teasing her and lowered her to slide his shaft in she immediately convulsed around him. His hard length just what she needed to make her pleasure complete. And as he pounded inside her, she felt her self tightening and trembling around him, over and over again. A never-ending ride of bliss that threatened to make her expire.

With a bellow, "Oh, my sweet rose! Terrence spilled his seed inside her and collapsed on top of her, heart to heart, both beating frantically.

"Marry me," he said a few moments later, when they both managed to slow their breathing again, his beautiful blue eyes staring intently into hers.

"No," she replied softening her answer with a kiss.

Terrence sighed and rolled off, lying beside her, his back in the water. Breanna felt a crazy urge to take back her no and say yes. *Would it be so bad...?*

Time to change the subject. "Do you think this is the river from that map in the cottage?" she asked when he said nothing for several minutes.

"Well, it is due east and I can feel magic in the air—strong magic."

"What about the voices?" she asked turning on her side worriedly.

"Nothing yet, thank the Higher Powers. I think we should camp here for the night and continue on in the morning. I think we're close and we'd better both be rested before we face what's coming."

"Oh, is my poor wizard feeling weary?" she taunted, running a finger down his chest to the nest of wiry curls between his legs.

A dimpled grin appeared on his face. "Weary no, but I have this ache that needs fixing."

"An ache," she said smiling, wrapping her hand around

his already stirring shaft. "Well, we can't have that, can we? Let me see what I can do to ease your pain."

And then Breanna leaned over to taste him like she'd dreamed of doing all day. He gave a strangled shout, as she licked her way up the length of his shaft, his hips bucking as she teased his sensitive flesh with her lips and tongue.

"Oh by all the gods, my rose. Stop, or this will be over all too quickly," he pled, his face clenched, the pleasure so intense it felt like agony.

"Oh I have a better idea," she whispered, lowering her body onto his, his jutting manhood sliding inside her, a perfect fit. He grabbed at her buttocks, his strong arms helping pump her up and down, an impaling motion that had her throwing her head back and screaming with pleasure. Her hot, wet flesh clung tightly around him, squeezing and convulsing as she rode wave after wave of bliss. She barely felt it when with a shout of his own, he spurted deep inside her, his body going rigid as the pleasure brought him to heaven with her.

"Gods, Breanna. You're going to kill me," he moaned when she collapsed on top of him.

"Not yet. I haven't had my fill," she said nipping his chin when he chuckled, hugging her tight.

~ * ~

Hours later, and for the moment sated, they lay spooned in each other's arms. Terrence felt a contentment inside he'd never imagined. He wished they could forget about going on and just stay entwined like this forever.

After tomorrow, things would change. They'd either succeed in their quest or not. And once they no longer had the quest in common what would happen to this fragile relationship he'd forged with his rose? He'd asked her again, each time they made love to marry him, and each time she'd gently told him no. But he could see her resolve weakening. He just needed a little more time.

What would happen once they released the boundary spell and completed their quest? Would she return to her life as a spinster, living with her father? How would he live without her? He loved her. He knew he should tell her, but fear of her response made him hesitate. What if she didn't feel the same way? Worse, what if she scoffed his love?

A man had his pride, after all. If she rejected his love, would he become just one of her other bothersome suitors, continually hassling her, trying to catch a crumb of her affection?

Bothered by his thoughts, he kept quiet, holding her in his arms 'til he fell asleep and dreamed of a future where his rose smiled at him while rubbing a very pregnant belly. A child, his child. What a dream.

A dream that had him smiling when he awoke. He'd tell her about his love as soon as they'd completed their quest. He knew she cared for him. Hell, maybe he'd call on the goddess of love to help him. Hadn't Breanna said she'd shown an interest in them and their quest?

Kissing her awake, a kiss that turned in to a quick frantic bout of lovemaking, they finally broke camp and set off on the last leg of their journey, each lost in their own thoughts and fears about what they would soon be facing.

Just after midday they found the spot—or so Terrence assumed when Breanna suddenly landed in human form, naked as a jay bird, on her stomach in the dirt.

"What the hell?" she screeched scrambling up while trying to cover her parts.

Terrence howled. "You know I've seen it all before don't you?"

Breanna of course just scowled at him. "I don't understand, though. How come I shifted back without my clothes?"

"Magic, my rose. When you shift your clothes shift with you somehow magically. Take away that magic and apparently the clothes don't come back. Don't worry, I really like this look," he said with a leer. He deserved the rock she threw his way, though she missed, as she did with the second and third one when he still wouldn't stop laughing.

Rummaging through her pack she grumbled while Terrence looked around.

"I do believe we've found the spot," he stated unnecessarily. Surveying the terrain around him, he again had to wonder how the council had never managed to have a record of this anomalous place. Strong, protective magic that was for sure. But had they found the right spot?

They'd emerged from the dense forest they'd

traversed all morning into a vast, barren wasteland which, if he was correct, formed a perfect circle bordered by trees. No rocks, no vegetation, nothing, not even a tingle of magic. A dead zone and if he didn't know better, he'd swear they were on the Other Side

Terrence planted his hands on his hips and looked around the vast open desert, turning in a full circle before coming back to face Breanna who still looked pissed—and beautifully naked.

"I don't know if this is the place," he said. "I sense no magic here at all and something as powerful as the box would definitely be emitting something. I wonder if perhaps we've wandered somehow through the boundary into a dead spot."

Breanna sniffed the air and snorted. "Men, always looking with your eyes and not using the common sense the Higher Powers gave you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said indignantly, although not with a lot of force seeing as how the spectacle of her naked trying to wiggle into her dress—*oh yes, my rose, shake those hips*—was quite distracting.

Distracting or not though, by the feel of this place—in other words the feeling of nothing—made him think they'd come to the wrong place.

Damn, the map had led them in the wrong direction. *Now where do we go?*

~ * ~

Breanna watched Terrence, his face knitted in a frown stalking and staring around them, as she finished dressing.

"We'll have to go back. Maybe we missed something."

"Why? This is the spot," she said. *How doesn't he feel it?*

"There's no magic here," insisted Terrence stubbornly. "This can't be the place."

"Don't you find it a little odd that this place, which shows up on no map, that no one seems to know about, that happens to be surrounded by forests and vegetation is so barren?"

"Well, it is a desert," he said shrugging.

Men could be so stupid. Maybe she should talk slower so his brain could catch up. He might be great as a lover, but

when it came to some things, he could be awfully dense.

"And deserts have life—cacti, insects, rodents, things that live under- ground—yet I sense none of those things here. And I'm telling you the smell of magic is overwhelming. Hell, even in human form I can still smell it. "

"So what are you saying? A masking spell is somehow hiding the location of the box and the feel of magic all at once?" Terrence looked doubtful still.

"Listen, perhaps nobody now can do that kind of thing, but back then... Hell, we're talking about The Thirteen here. The wizards who bound up magic in the first place, something I'm pretty sure all of you would consider impossible now. They were some pretty damn powerful mages who knew things we can only guess at."

"Maybe," Terrence said, thoughtfully stroking his chin. He stepped into the dead area and then back out again. Hopping back and forth like a frog stuck in a loop.

"Um, can I ask what the hell you're doing?" she asked unable to contain her curiosity, and barely holding back the little giggle that erupted.

"Testing the feel of it. See on the forest side, I can feel my magic and use it. Yet when I try to look with magic into the wasteland—nothing. My magic seems to be skipping over it, like this place isn't even there and is coming out on the other side."

"In other words, this spot is invisible to magic."

"Yes and not only that, but as soon as my body, any part of my body, crosses into the wasteland, nothing. It's as if magic doesn't exist. I can't feel it or draw on it."

"Then if you stay on the forest side can you break the spell?" she asked.

"I can't dismantle a magic I can't sense or see," he said, frustration evident in his voice.

Breanna sighed loudly. *Now what are we supposed to do?*

~ * ~

Terrence looked at her expectant face and wished he could say *Yes—I, the mighty wizard, can break this spell!*, but unfortunately he'd hadn't the faintest idea of where to start. Deflating and ego crushing to say the least. Of course he wouldn't admit defeat quite yet, he was a man after all.

He walked back and forth over the invisible line enough times to wear a track in the ground, but inspiration didn't strike him. *This just doesn't make sense. How can magic be hiding the location of the box when there is no magic to be felt?* About to confess his bafflement, his eye caught the glint of sunlight off a piece of metal.

The key. An important little clue he'd forgotten all about.

And... Hold on a second, there had been something about the key in the book. Another stupid rhyme that had made no sense at the time, but now...

Terrence dropped his satchel and kneeling, pawed through the contents 'til he found the book. Leafing through the pages with a foot-tapping Breanna watching, he found the section he wanted and read it aloud.

"'Hidden by magic, yet not magically found'—obvious, since I can't sense it—'In a land that is barren, but teems around with life'—sounds like the spot. But here's the part that's a little odd. 'Absent of innate magic, but magically gifted. Found by one who is human, yet so much more.'" He paused, thinking, and then looked at Breanna. "I think that part is referring to you."

"Why do you think it's referring to me?" she said her expression surprised.

"Think, my rose. You have no innate magic—you can't cast spells right? But, your shifting ability is a magical gift. One that disappears when magic is absent, or have you forgotten your little naked episode?" A bright blush and a glare answered that question. "Now let me finish reading this to you. The text then says 'seek it not with thy senses, but with the mind.'"

"How the hell do I seek with my mind?" she asked the frustration evident in her tone. "I'm a shapeshifter, we smell things with our noses or see things with our keen eyesight. I don't do mind games. I think you're interpreting it wrong. Read it again. I really don't think I'm the one to break the spell."

"Well, the text is definitely not referring to me. I'm a wizard, magic is part of my nature. It would explain why the gods wanted you on this quest. I'm sure the rhyme is referring to you."

"Fine, oh brilliant one. So what do I do next? Close my eyes and wish?" If the irony dripped any heavier from her mouth, he'd be able to butter his bread with it.

"There's no need to be sarcastic. Oh, no, wait. That's just your general disposition." He deserved the smack she gave him on the arm and he grinned at her. *She is so cute when she gets riled*, he thought, but his barb did what it needed and made her lighten up. "Seriously though, I think you need to try." At her still evident skepticism, he gave her a puppy dog look. "Please, do it for me? If it doesn't work then we'll tackle this from another direction." She gave him a short nod and he grinned. "Come on, let's go sit in the middle of the wasteland together. I'll show you a meditation technique I learned back in wizard college."

"Ooh, the great one dares to share his secrets with me? I am so honored," she replied, bowing, but she meekly let him lead her to the centre of the barren desert.

Sitting with his legs crossed, he motioned her to join him. Breanna sat down across from Terrence, folding her legs like he had and looked at him.

"Now, place your hands on your knees like this and start breathing."

"I thought I already was breathing," she muttered.

"In through the nose, out through the mouth," he said ignoring her grumbling and resisting the urge to kiss her. Wouldn't she just hate to know how cute she looked when she griped? As she sat there breathing evenly, eyes shut tight, he watched her feeling a chill creep over him and make his heart feel tight. He should be ecstatic they were so close to their goal so why did he feel like he should take her and run? Fast, and far, *now!*

~ * ~

Breanna felt like an idiot. Sitting on her ass on the hard ground, eyes shut, breathing in and out noisily.

This won't work. I have no magic—like, hello, he's the wizard here. Come on, if he can't even sense the cloaking spell then how does he think I am going to be able to break it?

But she had to try before she begged off. It would make Terrence happy. And somehow during the course of their journey together that had begun to matter. Sure,

they'd started out intending to save the Realm and all that, determined to prove they were each stronger than the other. Yet somewhere along the way, she'd fallen in love. Gasp, it was getting easier and easier to admit this fact to herself. She loved this big lug of a wizard. And maybe once they'd saved the Realm, she'd even tell him. Hell, she might even marry him. That is if he still wanted to, she had turned him down quite a few times already. What if he didn't ask her again?

But remembering the tenderness they'd been sharing in each other's arms, she knew he would. *I'm even beginning to suspect that he loves me too. I think he's just too chicken to say it. Probably afraid I'll laugh at him, which I might have in the past , but now, oh how I'd love to hear those three simple words. It's past time I swallowed my pride and gave him an inch. I could even tell him first. Wouldn't that throw him for a loop?*

Now if only they could find the damned box and get this over with so she could tell him the news. She couldn't wait to see his face when she did.

First though, breathe in and out. Think about finding that which was hidden. They'd probably have been better off bringing a shovel.

About to open her eyes to tell him this stupid breathing wasn't working, she stopped and held her breath, for inside her eyelids, a glow had appeared, a bobbing ball of blue light that seemed to beckon her.

Eyes shut tight, but still seeing the glowing ball, Breanna whispered, a tinge of fear in her voice, "Terrence..."

"What?"

"I see something."

"See what?" he whispered back against her ear as he wrapped his arms around her lending her a solid comfort that made some of her tension ease.

"A glowing ball inside my eyelids. What do I do?"

"Is it trying to make you go in a direction?"

"I don't know." Breanna watched the glowing ball—an odd feeling to watch something with her eyes shut—and yes it did seem to be leaning in a direction. "I think it wants us to go that way."

"That way being...?"

"Oops," she said forgetting Terrence couldn't see the ball. "Here help me stand up, and hold onto me. I'll try and walk in the direction it seems to be leaning towards."

Terrence steadied her as she stood up with her eyes clamped tightly shut. Then like a blind woman she shuffled towards the light which now danced excitedly inside her eyelids. Terrence, a steady rock at her back, lightly holding her waist, followed. It was hard to tell how long or far they walked like this, but suddenly the light stopped bouncing and held steady.

"What's wrong?" Terrence whispered in her ear.

"The light stopped. Where are we?"

"How's the middle of nowhere? And to be honest, there's not a landmark, or even a rock to mark where we're standing. Are you sure this is where the light wants us to be?"

Breanna squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, but the glow remained the same. "It's not moving anymore. So now what?"

"Wait a second, I have an idea." Breanna felt him fumbling at her chest.

"Um, Terrence, much as I like you groping me, don't you think we have more important things going on right now?"

He chuckled in her ear. "Sorry to disappoint, my rose but I was after this."

Breanna felt him place something cold and metallic in her hand—the key. *Duh, although he could have pretended to be groping me at least a little.*

"What do you want me to do with this?" she asked.

"Hold it out like you're unlocking a door."

"But I thought you said there was nothing here."

"Just try it."

Dubious, but willing to try, she held her argumentative tongue and held out the key. To her surprise, she saw the key—floating disembodied in the air front of her—inside of her eye lids. She kept raising it 'til it was level with the ball. The blue ball morphed into a glowing keyhole. Okay, the next step seemed obvious—she inserted the key into the blue keyhole and turned it.

Fifteen

Instantly, a grinding sound filled the air, and the earth beneath her feet trembled.

"Holy shit," she heard Terrence exclaim. Breanna opened her eyes and bit back an exclamation of her own, for in front of them stood a gaping archway. A stone archway with desert beside it, above it, and through it, nothing...

Now she echoed him in a whisper. "Holy shit."

She gazed up in dumbstruck awe at the doorway that shouldn't be. A curved arch of stone blocks with a keystone piece at its apex carved with a large rune she couldn't identify. Past the doorway she could see only a dark murkiness reaching out icy tendrils that made her shiver.

Yay, they'd found the portal to the box, but judging by the chill she felt inside her soul, the box wasn't happy it had been found.

~ * ~

With the appearance of the archway, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by nothing—something Terrence's poor brain had a hard time getting a handle on—came the voices. Back in a screaming rush, they poured inside his mind.

"Danger! Danger! Protect the Realm!" they screamed.

Terrence staggered under their disembodied weight, hands coming up to cover his ears, a futile gesture since the voices screamed from within. *Damn, we'd better take care of this box quick, because I won't be able to withstand the voices long at the rate and force they are hammering at me.*

Even more worrisome than their hammering at his mental defenses, were the violent thoughts they were bombarding him—bad images of him killing the woman who

threatened to jeopardize the Realm. A woman he only recognized with difficulty amidst the clamor as Breanna. *Shit!* He didn't want to hurt her, but the voices were driving him swiftly toward insanity. It made him think of an expression he'd heard some years back—"*The voices in my head don't like you.*" And the voices in his head were going one step further screaming "*Kill her!*"

A hand squeezing his arm and a new voice—one that he heard with his ears rather than felt with his mind, distracted him from his nasty thoughts of death.

"Terrence! Terrence!"

"What?" he asked slowly as if rousing from a deep sleep.

"Are you all right? Are the voices back?"

"Yeah they're back, but I'll be fine. Let's get this show on the road though. It's getting pretty crowded inside my head."

With a wrinkled brow of concern, which he shrugged at, she took the first step into the gaping doorway and disappeared from sight.

Taking a deep breath, Terrence followed, the voices in his head screaming along with him.

"*Kill her! Kill her! Kil-l-l-l her!*"

Sixteen

Breanna did not like the look on Terrence's face—wild with a hint of evil. Terrence didn't scare her, but this place sure as hell did.

Like it wasn't freaky enough that the door had appeared and stood in the middle of nowhere, to actually step through it and end up in a rough stone tunnel, well...

As she shuffled forward in the dark, sudden sparks of light lit the tunnel, as brackets holding milky globes on the wall erupted with a pale yellow light. It didn't improve matters much—the rough stone tunnel extended ahead of them, its depths lost in the as yet unlit murk beyond, a dark that could hide any host of creatures—dead or alive.

Breanna sniffed the stale dead air looking for signs of life—and death. The air smelt lifeless and dusty. "Um, Terrence. Is there somebody down here with us?"

"Not that I can sense," he replied, the strain in his voice evident.

"Then who the heck turned on the lights?" *And please don't day ghosts!*

Terrence gave her wan smile. "I'd say these are probably motion or life force activated. A simple spell actually, that you've probably encountered before but never remarked upon."

Breanna sighed with relief. The thought that somebody might be in here with them had crept her out. Walking slowly down the roughhewn tunnel, the lights illuminating as they approached them, she kept an ear and eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Well more out of the ordinary than they'd seen so far. This was way too easy.

Surely The Thirteen had put more safeguards in place. Problem was, would she recognize them in time?

Terrence apparently shared the same worry for he paused every so often and closed his eyes, reaching his hands out in front of him as if searching.

Good to know I'm not the only paranoid one. Slowly they crept forward, until Breanna's nose twitched. She put her hand up against Terrence's chest to stop him.

"I think there's something just ahead," she whispered.

"Why are we whispering?" he murmured back.

Breanna just gave him a look. Something about this place seemed to discourage loud talking, like a temple—or a tomb.

Bending down, she eyed the rough stone of the tunnel in front of her. She couldn't see anything obvious, about to step forward to look a little further ahead she stopped, her foot hovering over a smooth section, that actually seemed out of place in this rugged place.

Squatting down again, she looked at the smooth spot covered in a dust that hadn't been disturbed in a long time. Taking a deep breath, she blew on it, then immediately choked as the tiny particles lifted and floated in a dusty cloud around her head.

A pounding on her back while she choked and her eyes watered made her irritable. "Stupid wizards!" she wheezed. "Made a spell for lights, but didn't think about cleaning, did they?"

Terrence chuckled and stopped pounding her, instead rubbing circles on her back. Nice firm circles that made her want to lean back against him and rest in the haven of his arms.

But there was business at hand. Restraining a sigh, she leaned forward to look at the smooth section she'd cleared of dust.

With the grime mostly gone, she could see the lines around the slab, which sat higher than the rest of the floor, and she'd wager they'd encountered their first trap, a pressure switch of some sort that would obviously do something not pleasant. Odd that they'd made it a mundane trap and not a magical one.

"Can you sense any magic?" she asked.

"Nope, I take it you found a trap?"

She nodded. "Don't step on this," she cautioned Terrence, taking a wide step over.

Aping her, he followed and they continued on their way, only to stop a short while later when Terrence grabbed her around the waist and picked her up, halting her forward momentum "Hold on. I sense something."

Breanna kept quiet, peering up at him as he closed his eyes and did whatever it was that wizards did to detect magic. Beads of sweat rolled down the sides of his face and she saw him trembling slightly. With a wince, he opened his eyes and said, "It's gone now. They had a flame wall spell on this section of the tunnel. Another step and we would have been crisped."

Breanna shuddered. *Eew, not a nice way to die.*

They walked nervously along the seemingly endless tunnel, each keeping a wary eye out for more traps, but to Breanna's surprise encountered no others. She breathed a sigh of relief when the tunnel finally seemed to be coming to an end. In sight, ahead of them, stood a big, really big, black carved door.

They stood in front of it and craned their necks to look up at it—talk about giant sized! This thing went beyond the word massive. Even more perplexing, was the thought of how the hell they'd managed to get a door that size down a tunnel that was less than half its height. It made one's brain sore just to think of it.

The bigger issue though was how to open it. No door handle, no keyhole, just one black hole in the middle of it surrounded by writing. Stupid wizardly looking sigils she couldn't make heads or tails of.

"Okay wizard, what does it say?" she said frowning at this impediment to their quest.

"Ye of pure intention, put forth thy limbs in the maw of judgment. Entrance to those of principle, death to those who seek harm."

Breanna hated flowery prose and she made him know it with her crossed arms and tapping foot.

He shrugged and smiled wanly. "In simple terms, stick your hand in."

Breanna looked at the hole. *No way.* Who was to say there weren't all kinds of gross things in there? Or even worse some really hungry monster waiting for a snack.

"You do it," she said shaking her head.

"I don't know if I can," he said. "My thoughts are all a muddle because of the voices. I don't know if my true intentions will come forth. It could kill me."

Kill him, or possibly kill her. But her intentions were pure. She wanted to bring down the boundary and stop the deaths being caused by the decaying spell. And if her hand got eaten? She'd get a wooden one and club Terrence over the head with it!

Taking a deep breath, she edged up to the hole and held her hand hesitantly in front of it.

"It'll be okay," promised Terrence and taking comfort in his words, Breanna closed her eyes and shoved her hand in.

At first nothing happened, other than the sweat rolling down her spine from nerves. *Pretty!* Then an icy chill descended over her hand and with a little shriek she tried to pull her hand out.

Well, that wasn't happening apparently, for no matter how hard she pulled, her hand didn't move from the black hole.

The probing cold travelled the length of her body, making her skin pimple and her teeth chatter.

Then it was done. Breanna stumbled back as her hand suddenly came loose. Hugging it to her chest, she watched as with only a whisper of sound the massive door slid sideways into the wall, revealing another tunnel that glittered in the feeble light.

Breanna turned to Terrence only to take a step back from the crazed look in his eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak and the voice—or should she say voices—that poured out of him let her know Terrence wasn't currently home.

"Foolish woman, you shan't be allowed to destroy the boundary. The Realm will be protected. You will not send us to the underworld. Die mortal bitch. DIE!"

Breanna just gaped at Terrence as his face contorted and his eyes rolled.

"Terrence?" she said hesitantly.

With a groan, she saw him gain control—a hard battle that had the sweat beading on his brow. With gritted teeth, he looked at her with pained eyes. "I can't control the voices much longer. They want me to hurt you and I don't know if I can stop them. Run, my wild rose. RUN!" he screamed as he fell to his knees holding his head.

Breanna hesitated only a second then took off running through the recently opened doorway straight into another hallway, a silver one that sent stabbing pains through her shifter body while mocking her with distorted, grotesque images. *Run*, her mind screamed. *Run if you want to live. Run from the man you love. Run from the death promised by the voices. Run so you can find the key to his salvation.*

~ * ~

The body the spirits had taken over twitched and stumbled as they directed it after the woman. She couldn't be allowed to open the box. She *must* be destroyed. The souls of the spell had long forgotten their lives, their reason. The only thing that remained was the spell, which kept them from leaving this world. The spell that kept them from truly and finally dying. The spell they would kill to protect.

Seventeen

This time there was no door at the end of the tunnel just an archway that Breanna burst through, panting.

And there sat the stupid box on an altar of gold.

No time to admire the view, though for a heavy weight crashed into her back and smashed her down hard onto the floor.

Breanna twisted under Terrence's weight until she lay on her back staring up into a familiar face gone strange with madness.

"Die," whispered the voices from the mouth that had once kissed her so tenderly. *"Die, so that we may live."*

Big, strong hands—hands that had stroked her intimately—clamped themselves around her neck and began squeezing. Breanna scrabbled at those sinewy vises, digging her nails into his flesh in a vain attempt to pull them off.

"No, please Terrence," she begged in choked gasps, struggling for air. "Don't do this. Please Terrence. I love you. Please, don't kill me. I know you're in there somewhere. *Fight!*" she cried.

The maniacal leer above her showed no sign Terrence, or what was left of him, having heard her. A hazy fog began creeping across her vision, as she struggled to draw air into her lungs. A tear rolled from her eye, as she realized that after all they'd been through, she was about to die. Die at the hands of the man she loved, who would have probably killed himself before he'd have ever harmed her.

One tear, a fat, salty and wet tear, rolled down her cheek and splashed onto Terrence's hand.

And then a miracle happened. The hands around her

neck loosed and Terrence rolled off of her.

Gasping she rolled to her side to see him on his knees shaking his head muttering. "No. No. I won't let you kill her. No. No. *No!*" And with the last word, Terrence collapsed on the ground, banging his head hard on the floor, his whole body shaking, gripped in painful convulsions.

Breanna screamed his name, "Terrence!" but his face contorted in a rictus of pain and his eyes fluttered unseeing.

Breanna looked frantically about for something to aid her and found her eyes caught by the box. The all-important box they'd been looking for, sitting on its golden pedestal in the silver lined chamber, taunting her with its very innocuousness. *Bloody magic!* Magic had caused all this mess and hurt Terrence, maybe killed him. *I am so sick of magic and this evil spell that is causing all this. Enough is enough!*

She yanked the chain off from around her neck, grasping the key firmly in her sweaty hand and stalked to the box with firm intent. She felt like a bug caught in molasses. Each step became a sluggish exertion that left her panting. The pressure of the magic pulsing in the room made her ears thrum painfully and the silver made her body ache to the core of her bones. The closer she got, the harder each step became as the twisted magic of the box fought her.

"You will not win," she muttered darkly, pushing even harder to reach the altar that taunted her just out of reach.

Voices whispered in the thick, turbulent air.

"Breanna, you mustn't do this..."

"The Realm must stay hidden..."

"You'll kill us all!" The last ended in a high screech that shot goose bumps up and down her body.

Angry ghosts, or more defensive magic. It didn't matter. Only Terrence gyrating painfully on the floor did.

"We can't hide forever," she shouted back swallowing the knot of fear that clogged her throat. "And if I don't release the magic, it'll kill us all anyways."

Silence greeted her words and she thought she'd won, but no, they had just gathered strength for a new onslaught.

Winds came shearing out from the very walls themselves. Buffeting her body, tearing at her hair and clothing, strong enough that she even staggered back a step.

She turned her head against the tearing in her eyes and glimpsed Terrence's form now prone on the floor.

No, please don't be dead...

Enough of these deadly games. Breanna marshaled the last of her strength and shoved forward, stumbling to her knees before the pedestal, the silver floor burning her knees. Before the magic could attack her again she shoved the key in the lock and turned it.

Instant silence.

Her ears rang in the sudden quiet and she sat back on her haunches and looked at the benign looking chest. *Why isn't it doing anything? What did I do wrong?* She no sooner thought that than suddenly the lines and runes outlining the box lit up with a golden glow. The golden light zipped through the grooves in the box growing brighter and brighter 'til she had to close her eyes against the blinding effect, and even then she could see the glow through her eyelids. *Figures, more magic.*

The air in the cave grew hot and she wrinkled her nose against the sharp smell permeating everything. Magic, lots of it, more than she'd ever felt. She heard a creaking sound—a lid opening on long unused hinges—and a shockwave of pent-up magic hit her like a tidal wave, knocking her flat and rapping her head on the hard surface of the cave.

Wild winds of magic sprang from the box and swirled in a panoply of colors mingling with the stars Breanna saw from the crack on her skull. Then, as they shot out of the cave, Breanna succumbed to the roaring dizziness and let unconsciousness take her.

~ * ~

Somewhere in the heavens where they made their home, the Goddess of Love and her brother Chance watched with bated breath events unfold in their scrying waters.

"They did it!" he crowed before walking over to a tall wardrobe and pulling out some clothes.

"Indeed they did," said his sister following him. "So where do you think you're going?"

"Why, to play of course," he said. "The whole world is now ours again. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"And what of the two mortals you used?" she asked.

"What of them? They did their part admirably."

The Goddess of Love—formerly known as Mindy—tapped her foot at her brother and gave him a frown—she had quite a formidable frown. He shrunk a bit under her glare.

"Oh, I wasn't going to let them die," he said sheepishly.

"Really?" she drawled with an arched brow. "Then come back over here this instant and roll the dice in their favor, would you. I want to finish my work with these two. I haven't brought them this far to have them die before I'm done."

Chance muttered something about bossy sisters under his breath, but did as he was told. From a pocket somewhere he pulled out a set of glowing, golden dice. Cupping them in his hands, he blew on them for luck. Then with a rattling and a shaking, he threw the dice of Chance.

And of course won.

The two gods returned to peer into the scrying waters. Breanna's chest rose and fell evenly, while Terrence began to stir.

"There, are you happy now?" he said to his sister.

"Quite. I'll be seeing you later in Vegas, once I'm finished with these two. I am quite intrigued by the idea of all night marriage chapels. So many possibilities."

~ * ~

Back in the cave Breanna came to slowly, her mind fuzzy. *Have I died?* Her body sure ached though for a dead person. But then again she must have for she could hear Terrence calling her. Impossible—she'd seen him die before she could release the spell.

"Breanna, come on my wild rose, wake up. Don't you dare die on me!"

Funny, it sounded like Terrence, and now she that she was regaining her senses, it felt like someone had her in his arms. Big, strong comforting arms.

"Come on, Breanna, you're tougher than this. Wake up. If you don't wake up, I'll tell everyone *I* saved the Realm."

Breanna opened her eyes slowly, her lids felt so heavy, but she had to see his face, had to be sure it was him. Maybe he'd found her in the afterlife. No, her body hurt

way too much to be dead.

Trying to focus her gaze, she saw anxious blue eyes peering down at her, four sets of them. Ooh she must have smacked her head good.

"You did nothing but drool on the floor, wizard," she said fuzzily. "I told you I could do it."

"Yes, you did," he said, his voice thick sounding. Nah, her big wizard surely hadn't been crying. But this conversation was making her tired and her eyes fluttered closed.

"Oh thank the Higher Powers you're alive. Come on now, don't close your eyes, my love. Keep them open for me."

Had her ears heard right or was it a brain injury conjuring those words?

"What did you call me?" she questioned shakily, her mouth dry.

"I love you, you stubborn, prickly rose. I love you. And I know you love me, too, so will you marry me?"

"Okay." Why keep fighting what she wanted?

He scooped her up in his arms and kissed her in response. What a kiss! If lips locked could convey words, then this one said, *I love you. I never want to leave you. Be with me forever.* And she felt the same way.

When they finally came up for air, Breanna smiled at him. "I love you, too, even if you do have four eyes."

"Four what?" His puzzled look changed to understanding as he ran his fingers over the painful bump on her head. Closing his eyes, she felt a warm hum on the spot she'd banged her head. Blinking her eyes, she found her vision back to normal and the nagging ache in her head gone.

"Um," she said in a still scraggly voice from her earlier choking. "I don't suppose you can do something about this too," she said touching the bruises on her throat.

"I am so sorry," he said touching her and healing her with his magic. "I—"

She silenced him with a brief kiss. "Hey, it's okay. I know it was the voices making you try to kill me. I'm just glad you stopped in time."

"That makes two of us. Now, I don't suppose you'll let

me teleport us home, so we can tell everyone what's happened."

"No." Breanna had seen enough magic for one day. She so wasn't going to try teleporting now.

But she had little say in the matter as suddenly she and Terrence found themselves in the town library back home, a pudgy figure standing smiling over them.

"I say, job well done."

Breanna, scrambled to her feet. "*You*," To her amusement the God of Chance took a step back.

"Thank you," she said throwing her arms around him, grinning into his shoulder as he flinched.

"Yes, well," said the God of Chance awkwardly patting her on the back. "You're welcome. And thank you right back. You guys pulled it off. I knew I'd chosen the right players." Chance stepped back from Breanna. "Are you happy now?" he shouted up towards the ceiling.

"Quite," answered a familiar feminine voice.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," said the pudgy god rubbing his hands together. "I've got places to go, worshippers to meet."

And in the blink of an eye, the God of Chance disappeared.

~ * ~

Their wedding—two days later—was attended only by close family and friends. A nervous Terrence dressed suavely in a long black coat and white ruffled shirt, breathed a sigh of relief at the white clothed altar when his rose came floating down the aisle on her father's arm. He would have never admitted it, but he'd been a little scared she might bolt. Hence, the quick wedding. The only reason they'd waited two days was because Samantha insisted Breanna had to have a white wedding gown—he'd have married her in a burlap sack or even better nothing. Good thing Sam's wedding gown had fit. His rose looked a vision in frothy white, a dainty princess with a core of steel whom he loved more than he'd ever thought possible. *And I'll have to thank Sam*, he thought mischievously, *because I can't wait to peel her out of that dress. She looks good enough to eat.* A burgeoning hardness below had him reigning in his thoughts on what he planned to do her later. First, he had to get

through the ceremony, and then he'd whisk her away and have his way with her.

His mother beamed at everyone, unabashedly happy that her oldest was finally tying the knot—although all across town a cadre of women were drinking themselves into a stupor at his impending marital status. A tearful Samantha in the front row dabbed at her eyes the entire ceremony—hormones or so she said making her an emotional mess—while Sammuel patted her arm looking quite lost.

What a funny man Breanna's father was. When Terrence had asked him upon their return for Breanna's hand in marriage, Sammuel had chuckled and said, "Oh please, if you can get her to marry you then that's all the permission you need, son. And might I add, good luck. You're going to need it." Terrence, though, had an ace up his sleeve that Samuel didn't—when Breanna's thorns came out he just kissed her silly. He could get her to do just about anything then, even make her forget why she'd been yelling at him in the first place.

Not that she'd been yelling too much. On the contrary, according to her father, she seemed happier than she'd ever been and a lot of it had to do with her family. It seemed while they'd been on their quest, Sam and her estranged father had grown quite close, to the point, he'd elected to stay on the island, although he promised to visit Breanna often, her being unafraid of the teleporting process.

Instead of being annoyed at this, Breanna had been quite happy, joking to Terrence that it would be nice to let someone else be the grown-up for once. And after much cajoling—and neck nibbling—Breanna finally agreed to live with him in his family home—or as she called it "the overly large, snooty castle." He, in return had agreed she could still go for her runs in the forest to burn up her pent up shifter energy. A promise she'd extracted in a most pleasurable way. *My rose sure knows how to get way. Oops, I'd better pay attention now, the priest is almost done.*

Finally their marriage ceremony concluded with the rote passage, "By the Higher Powers invested in me and all who witness, what today has been joined, let no being tear asunder. I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Terrence did so with great gusto and to enthusiastic applause from his family—both old and new.

Intent upon his task, it took a moment for him to realize that sudden silence had overtaken the room, broken only by a gasp from his mother. Coming up for air, he looked around, his arm curved protectively around Breanna's—*my wife's*—waist.

A radiant nimbus had appeared between the newlyweds and their guests. *Great, an uninvited guest.*

Looking ridiculously pretty, the Goddess of Love, with flowing golden sausage curls wearing a modest pastel colored gown, smiled at the couple.

"About time," she chided, shaking a perfectly manicured finger at them. "I just had to come see this. About time you stubborn pair actually went through with it. Which means, I won," she said crowing to the heavens.

"Barely," said the God of Chance dryly, materializing beside her.

Make that two uninvited guests, thought Terrence, shaking his head at the bickering gods. His mother watched with her mouth hanging open—her friends would be just green with envy when they heard her son had been visited not by one, but two gods on his wedding day.

And as the two higher powers continued to argue, Breanna and Terrence smiled at each other. After all they'd played Chance's Game and guess what, they'd both come out winners.

Epilogue

Terrence awoke to a hand crawling up his leg and grinned. Married life had so many perks, waking up naked beside his wild rose being one of them.

"I see you're awake," she whispered blowing into his ear making him shiver all over.

Terrence didn't bother answering—why waste time with words—and just rolled on top of her and let his own personal brand of hard proof show her just how awake he was.

"I'm glad to see I've got your attention," she purred, wiggling her hips under him slightly.

Terrence almost came right then and there. How she could possibly get sexier every day he still didn't understand, but he loved it!

"My undivided attention," he promised fervently before dipping his head to nibble on the soft skin of her neck.

"I was thinking," she said.

Too much, Terrence thought and redoubled his efforts to make her mindless.

"It is going to be nice having babies around here."

Terrence only paused for a second before licking his way down to the tops of her breasts. A man on a mission doesn't let a word like "babies" distract him.

"Of course we'll have to do some remodeling for them."

That stopped him for a second. "Don't you think that's Sam and Sin's jobs, seeing as how it is their babies you're talking about?" he said raising his head to look down at her and repressing a sigh. *Talk about a bucket of cold water.*

"Our nephews?" she said with a naughty twinkle in her eyes and a half smile. "Who said I was talking about them?"

Terrence's poor brain took a moment to process what she was implying—hey his blood was still concentrated elsewhere—but when he finally made the connection, he shot off the bed and looked at her with wild eyes.

"You want a baby? Now?"

"Well, not right this second no, but I'd say in about eight months or so it is a most distinct possibility."

Again, his poor brain took a moment to figure this out. "You're pregnant! We're going to have a baby!" *Oh dear god, actually all the gods.* Him, a father? It was simply too much.

Breanna took a little pity on him and licked a finger which she used to trace a line down her cleavage, hidden by the sheet. *Sexy, saucy wench.* Terrence felt his blood leaving his brain again to plump up other areas. She knew just how to tease and distract him.

And judging by her next tidbit, she'd done so intentionally.

"Not just a baby," she said mischievously, gyrating her hips under the sheet. "Two babies, girls to be exact."

"Twin girls!" he cried. He struggled into his robe and strode to the door.

Breanna sat up in the bed, the sheet falling to her waist displaying her glorious bosom to avail.

"Wait!" she cried. "Where are you going? Aren't you happy?"

Terrence stopped and came back to swoop her up into his arms and kiss her passionately. After kissing her positively breathless, he dropped her back on the bed and headed back for the door saying over his shoulder.

"Of course I'm happy, my wild rose, but there's no time to waste. Twin girls means twice as many boys and troubles. I still remember when Arial's beaux started coming round, what a nightmare. Do you know what teenage wizard boys can do? There's no time to waste. I'll get started on the defense plans immediately. We'll need a moat, one Rapunzel to tower, more guards. And I wonder if Bruce still has the number of that wizard who was renting dragons?" he mused.

"Terrence!"

~ * ~

News Flash: Magic is Real! Is Harry Potter too?

In an amazing turn of events that has even the brightest scientists baffled, something previously known as the 'boundary' has come down and unleashed magic and its denizens upon our world. Yes folks, you read right. Magic.

One new continent and other locations, some hidden in our midst have appeared and declared themselves the new sovereign nation known as the Realm. Political leaders are scrambling to deal with this wholly unexpected arrival of people, some of who push the limits of what we call humanity. Mermaids, ogres, pixies and more fantastical creatures from fairy tales have been spotted in every country. A world-wide summit has been called to deal with this startling turn of events and world leaders are so far declining to comment on how they will deal with this most unexpected event.

Please see pages four through to twenty for more details and pictures.

Chance grinned reading the hundreds of headlines from newspapers across the world. The Realm had arrived with a splash and things would never be the same. What fun!

Adjusting the brightly colored tie that went splendidly with his white leisure suit, portly Chance grinned and materialized outside the boardwalk of one of Vegas's largest casinos. He almost staggered as the energy of thousands poured over him. So many people—so much fun, and they were all praying and chanting his favorite song.

"Please, please let me win."

"This is my chance to make it big."

"Come on lucky seven..."

"Mama needs a new car!"

Ah, sweet music to his ears. With a grin, Chance sauntered forward to enter the grand doorways spanning this most marvelous of golden temples only to stumble when a hand—a beautifully manicured one with bright red nails—grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Excuse me," said a dulcet voice with a thread of iron at its core. "But this casino is already taken. Find your own."

Chance whirled around and stared in stunned silence at the radiant beauty before him. Tall, willowy with cascading, fiery red hair and lush curves that should be

outlawed, feminine perfection stared at him with an arched brow and full, luscious red lips. Va-va-voom!

"Surely, we can share," he said, his immortal heart pounding a mile a minute at the brilliant aura radiating off this supernatural beauty.

"Lady Luck always takes all," she said blowing him a kiss—which he caught and savored—before she sashayed into the casino. A walk made all the sexier by the come hither look she threw over her shoulder.

Lady Luck? Chance grinned. Oh yes, things were definitely looking up and as he strode into the casino after her, he sucked in his rounded paunch, grew a few inches taller and let his real face take over.

Time to play!

About Eve

In her mid thirties, Eve has married 10 years to her very own alpha, who gave her three beautiful children. She and her family currently reside in the historic town of Bowmanville, about an hour or so out of Toronto. She works as a webmistress from home and in her spare time, she types madly to quiet the voices in her head. She writes fantasy the way she likes it—hot with a touch of magic. She enjoys reading and writing stories that push the envelope of what we consider normal and that cross the line into fantasy.

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