

Maven Fairy Godmother Through the Veil

By

Charlotte Henley Babb

A Humorous Fantasy Novel by Charlotte Henley Babb

Broke, busted and despairing over the mess her life has turned out to be, middle-aged Maven Morrigan is offered a job as a fairy godmother, a one-time-only last chance to make something of herself and make the world a better place.

Maven's idea of how to grant her clients' wishes presents more problems than she expects when she learns that the Veil that separates Faery from Mundane is on the verge of collapse, and her new boss isn't giving her the all the facts about magic castles, dragons and trolls. But she has nowhere else to go, not even back to her old life in Mundane, until her friend and co-trainee wishes herself into a damsel in distress.

Not knowing whom to trust: her boss, her slithery familiar, or her own Bump of Direction, she has to rely on herself, her real world failures, and her sense of the absurd to survive in this imaginary garden with real frogs in it to make her clients' happy endings happen.

Maven Fairy Godmother: Through the Veil © 2012
by Charlotte Henley Babb

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Warning: PG-13. No explicit sex or violence portrayed.
Mild language.

To Unc B, for the stories where it all started.

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Chapter One

The Veiled Threat

“Good bye, my friends.” Maven Morrigan held a short stack of CDs, all ancient hippie rockers. She needed gas money and there wasn't anything else left to pawn but these reminders of her misspent youth. The van's CD player had long since conked out.

In her mind, her mother's voice reminded her of the waste of time and money she'd spent on college instead of getting a husband, babies and then, maybe, a real job. The last unemployment check was gone, spent on rent, gas, peanut butter, and crackers. She was even out of instant coffee.

Mom was right, bless her little dead heart. Maven was a complete and utter failure. Wrapping her coat around her, she slid down from the seat.

The loose spring she so carefully wedged with a towel this morning slipped out, grabbed her by the butt, and tore her skirt and undergarments.

“Damn. Story of my life.”

Her last pair of panty hose ruined, and no money to buy more. Finally she worked the wire loose from her skirt, leaving a small hole in the polyester. She slammed the door, catching her coat in it, and then fished out her keys to get it open again. At least she hadn't locked them inside, not this time.

Inside the pawnshop, Maven saw all the stuff displayed like wishes revoked, as the man leaned on the register like an anti-fairy godmother.

He shook his head over the CDs when she handed them over. Maven couldn't meet his eyes. A rubber snake lay curled up beside his cash register. It looked up at her and winked. She gasped and stepped back.

The man laughed. "If it'd been a snake, it would've bit ya." Maven was trembling. She could see it wasn't a real snake, but she was certain it looked at her. The thing wasn't even realistic, now that she saw it clearly. She shuddered. She didn't want to lose her mind along with everything else.

"Lady," the man said. "It's just rubber. It can't hurt you." He picked the thing up and tossed it behind the counter. If he had thrown it at her, she would have wet her pants. She nodded but didn't trust herself to speak. The man sighed. "These ain't worth anything, but I'll give you five bucks. Don't spend it all in one place."

Five bucks wouldn't get gas and coffee. Maven nodded again. "Thanks." The words stuck in her throat. She managed to walk out the door and get in the van, wiggling around the spring. She couldn't go on like this. Something had to happen. Today.

First gas, and then the library, and then what? She wondered if she could panhandle like she used to back in the day, for a concert ticket or just for laughs.

No. The experienced homeless would kick her butt right off the curb. She stared at the interior of the van. "Hi, Honey, I'm home." She would go to social services today, swallow what was left of her pride, and assume the position. Right after the library.

At the gas station, she fed the five into the slot because she could get a whole gallon and a half here, roughly twenty miles, plus the fumes in the tank.

Patience was a virtue, she'd been told all her life, and like abstinence, it provided its own punishment. Gas required a job, and she only knew how to play school. Play the game, keep your head down, your mouth shut, and don't hold your breath waiting for a fairy godmother. All the princes out there were already spoken for, frogs and all.

Even if a job offer came into her email, her last hope, it would only be back to the old grind. She didn't miss being an adjunct—only the paycheck. She cranked the van, glad the heater still worked, and took the shortest route to the library. She could access her email there and hope for a job offer in the inbox.

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The day was still hunkered down in its gray blankets, not a bit warmer at ten a.m. than at six, with the cold wind coming in around the windows and doors of the van. She was so cold, even with the heater going full blast. The hot water she'd drunk with her peanut butter cracker breakfast lacked the caffeine courage she needed to get moving in the morning.

Everyone else was at the library too, the parking lot full for a Tuesday morning. She hustled to the second floor computer lab, but every seat was taken. Some of the users looked like they might be working, typing or writing, but the rest were just surfing around, watching stupid cat videos or playing games.

The librarian who managed the lab came out of her office, jerked her head for Maven to come over. "I told you before, wait elsewhere. You are disturbing the other patrons," the librarian said in a hushed growl. "If you do not leave this area now, I will have you escorted out and banned

from the library.”

“You can't do that,” Maven cried, her voice much louder than she intended. “I'm a taxpayer.”

“Not while you're unemployed, you're not.” The librarian folded her arms and glared over her reading glasses.

Maven left, defeated, simmering in resentment, but with no other choice. She'd sold her computer, and didn't have any other options. The community college would not let her use the computers there, as she wasn't on staff any more, and there weren't enough computers for the students in their library.

System 1. Maven 0. Same Stuff. Different Day. Maven was zero and fifty in the game of Life.

The Book of Wishcraft caught Maven's eye as she meandered through the stacks waiting for her turn at the library computers. She looked away, grunted and tried another aisle. But her Bump of Direction kept nudging her to go back and check it out.

What good would one more self-help book do? And what would she wish for anyway? A personal trainer and a golden SUV? A box of chocolate and an enormous chair? A ticket into the witless protection program?

No wishes and no lies. If wishes were Harleys, she'd still have to put gas in them.

She'd written affirmations, chanted mantras and burned candles. She'd learned to bring on a hot flash with deep breathing. It never made any difference. If she had kept the money she'd spent on the woo-woo Kiss your Kundalini and Bliss your Bank Account workshops she'd gone to last summer when she thought a new life might be in store for her,

maybe she could afford a cup of coffee now.

The Bump nudged her again. She ignored it, but caught her heel in the carpet and nearly fell. She grabbed one of the shelves and the book of Wishcraft all but fell into her hand, opening to a spot marked with a dollar bill. It had to be a fake. She inspected it, checking for advertising, or some other indication it was a fake. It was just a worn dollar bill.

Maven flipped through the rest of the book to see if there was another dollar, and she checked every book on that shelf and on the next two columns. None of the other books caught her Bump's attention the way that one had, but she still checked. Nothing.

Coffee time!

A coffee vending area sat near the front of the library, and Maven scurried there to soothe her serious lack of caffeine, not bothering to try to hide the rip in her skirt. She fed the dollar in, but the machine spit it back out, like a tongue sticking out at her.

She tried three times, scraping the dollar across the corner of the machine to iron out the wrinkles. The third time being the charm, the machine finally sucked it in. She punched the buttons for extra dark and extra sweet, a substitute for lunch. The machine whirled, but no cup dropped to catch the dark flow that spewed from the metal teat. Then the machine was silent, not even giving up her nickel change.

Maven punched the rest of the buttons in increasing frustration. She leaned her forehead against the fluorescent plastic of the machine.

"Please," she whispered. "I just need some coffee. Is that too much to ask?" She sighed, turned around and pulled herself together. Making an effort to look tidy, she patted her hair into place and walked away.

Behind her came a sound of coins falling, and then a cup dropping,

followed by whirring and spewing. When she came back, the cup was there, steaming, looking as innocent as a college kid peddling appointments for vinyl gutters and windows.

She took the cup in both hands, not caring that it was scalding hot. She sipped hot, dark, sweet coffee and felt the magic of it slide into the core of her being.

“Thank you.” She didn't feel weird talking to a machine. She did it all the time—every machine had some personality. This one blinked back at her. She savored the coffee, sipping it until it was cool, luxuriating in its bittersweet heat.

Bump of Direction reminded her about the change. She set the cup on one of the tables and got the money from the coin return—two dollars and forty-five cents. “Thanks again!” She looked at the other vending machines but decided to try for a better return on investment.

She went back to the stacks to get the Wishcraft book, but she couldn't find it. She checked each spine three times on every shelf in that section. She got a bit of a chill down her back and then a flush of heat in her cheeks. Why could she wish for a cup of coffee and not for a job?

She sat where she could see the computer lab, and took out small notebook. She wrote, “I wish...” but she could not make herself write down what she really wanted. She didn't wish for a job but for a life, a sense of purpose, a reason to get out of bed every morning, in addition to coffee.

She watched the other patrons in the library. A young woman with very big hair walked through with a little person dressed as King of the Leprechauns. It was only February, so maybe they were going to story time. Two women sat at another table, quietly planning a wedding. The

bride was probably the older one, as she was the enthusiastic, and the other sad, maybe a daughter who wasn't keen on Mom's nuptials. Maven was a two-time loser at the marriage game. She moved away to think of other things.

Downstairs a kid was having a fit because the leprechaun would not give her a piece of gold. She'd seen it on TV, and she wanted it right now.

Me, too, but I'd bite it hard if he gave it to me.

She saw another woman with that desperate, "please hire me" look. The woman got up and started back toward the computer lab. Maven followed, each of them walking faster and faster to get the one seat that had opened up. The other got there first, nearly sprinting up the aisle, but she did not flash so much as a smirk of triumph. She logged in and gazed at the screen as if it would upload her right through the monitor to that job bank in the cloud.

Somewhere a cell phone rang a bluesy riff. Signs everywhere said to turn them off, but someone hadn't done so. Suddenly the librarian was coming toward her and pointing. Maven realized her pocketbook was vibrating.

"Out," the librarian barked.

Maven dashed to the stairs while digging for her phone. She didn't realize she even had it with her, much less that it was turned on, since her pre-pay had run out two weeks ago. The battery should have been dead by now too. She flipped it open, "Hello? Hello?"

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Fiona Silverthorne, Fairy Godmother Superior, stared deep into the glowing crystal ball on her desk. Each pass of her hand took her further into the future, confirming her worst fears. Her eyes burned from scrying. Each day the other dimensions took more of her territory, twisting the stories and seducing the fairy godmothers who tended them. Fiona propped her elbow on the desk and rested her head in her hand. She could no longer deny it. "I can't hold Faery together any longer. Not alone."

She set her mouth in a hard line. Gripping her crystal as if she could protect Faery with her bare hands, she studied each tale, each variation if she granted this wish, or denied that one. Every story ended at the same place, with a chubby, gray-haired woman from Mundane channeling chaotic magic across the landscape; then darkness. Fiona set the crystal on its pedestal and sank into her chair with hands clenched.

The crockery on the shelves clattered, the fairy dust they contained responding to her agitation. Fiona cast them a baleful glance. She paced in front of her desk to think. No future was etched in stone beyond alteration. One unguarded opening for leverage. Perhaps the woman could be blocked from crossing the Veil, though it grew more tattered each day. However, even the Fairy Godmother Superior could not influence events in Mundane without going there. Dangerous at best.

She stretched her neck. The reflection in the dark crystal ball made her look like a frog, all eyes and mouth. Perhaps she had been looking in the wrong direction. She cast the spell again. Running the story backward, she searched through the Veil to Mundane, and to the woman

herself. The woman stared at the new moon and the first star. Her story was desperate—no money, no hope, no food—the woman didn't even know what to wish for, but she said the charm anyway and stared at the star as she shivered in the cold. An opening indeed.

Chapter Two

The Twilight Lounge

Fiona packed a pouch of fairy dust, a dozen crystals, and her crystal ball into a gossamer sack. Saving her magic, she walked to the Twilight Lounge, the easiest place to cross into Mundane. She'd have to deal with Belle, but at worst Belle would want to come along.

Per the rules of the Twilight Lounge, Fiona transformed herself into a water sprite and flowed to the bar where Belle stood, polishing and listening to the clients.

As Fiona approached, Belle reached under the bar and brought out a stemware glass of water with a water lily, a bit of fern and a goldfish.

“Going somewhere?” Belle nodded at the bag at Fiona's waist.
“Packing?”

“I am going to find my protégé.” Fiona did not touch the drink, but gazed around the room.

“Powerful, trainable, and willing take the job. Pick two.” Belle nodded at the varied personae behind Fiona, all of whom avoided Belle's gaze. “Good crowd tonight. What's wrong with any of them?”

Fiona scanned the crowd. Her mouth set in a thin ripple. “None of them will make the sacrifice of their own wants for Faery,” She tossed her head, spraying water from her liquid hair. Belle dried the bar with her rag. Polishing the mirror shine, she stared through Fiona's reflection into an image in the murk of the marble surface. “Sacrifice their whole lives for what? An old story?” Belle grunted.

“You don't know what it was like, before the Veil.” Fiona glared

back at Belle. "All wild magic and no structure. Keeping Faery separate from the other dimensions is safer all around."

"Maybe so, but the Veil's not working, despite your sacrifices."

Belle stopped scrubbing the bar. "Our sacrifices."

Fiona turned away. "Every new fairy godmother I have trained has disappeared into her own story."

"Or down the troll's gullet." Belle reached under the bar and brought up a cup of ginger tea for herself. "How about Tulip? Being a fairy godmother is all she ever wanted."

"She has never shown any talent, and she is too young."

"Same age as when you took over." Belle cocked her head to peer down at Fiona. "What's so special about this one?"

Fiona picked up the glass and sipped at her water. "She is powerful, but she needs guidance."

Belle snorted. "Meaning control. Work on restoring the Veil, not ripping another hole in it."

"Are you questioning my judgment?" Fiona glared back, her eyes hot and dry, despite the wet persona.

"Stating a fact." Belle continued to rub the bar, her biceps bulging. She didn't look at Fiona. "Stories change faster every day. Make up some new ones. Open up the patterns."

Fiona stiffened, as if the water of her persona had frozen. "The stories can't change. Everything I have defended all my life will be gone."

Belle drained her tea. "Look around. Things change. "

"No. I won't sit and watch while Faery fades away." Fiona stared at the water lily in her glass as if the fish would speak up and agree with

her.

One patron, perched on a ledge in the back corner, shrank into the form of a low-country cockroach. He scuttled through the shadows toward the door. A stifled scream split the air. A muffled crunch ended his quest.

Belle winced. "Better close your eyes then."

Fiona shook her head, which made ripples cascade down her transparent persona. "Do you suggest that I retire, abandon my life's work? Would you leave the Twilight?"

"In a heartbeat." Belle leaned toward Fiona. "Set Tulip up in your job. Come with me. Let's travel through all the dimensions."

Fiona's face lost its glare. She stared with half a smile at Belle as if she had thought of this before. She only had to make Faery safe for them to leave.

A crash sounded from the back of the tavern. A man staggered through the wall of the Twilight like it was a rice curtain. As he struggled to stand erect, his long reddish curls flapped in his face, showing a bald spot on top. He wore a tie-dyed t-shirt, ragged jeans, and leather clogs, unusual attire even for the Twilight Lounge.

Belle nodded in the man's direction. "That's what rips the Veil. Keep that sort out, and you'll be all right." She pointed to the man. "Persona Required!" Her voice carried over the other conversations.

Some mere mortals fainted at her mildest frown, but this man bowed with such Elizabethan flourish it nearly swept him off his own feet.

"As you wish, milady." The stink of sour beer from the man drifted across the lounge.

Belle snapped her fingers. The man flapped like a willow in a

thunderstorm, but his feet stuck to the floor. When he leaned over to break his fall, his arms stretched out and grew gray fur and hooves. He transformed into a mule, long-eared and braying.

Belle sucked at her cheek, drawing up one corner of her mouth, and raising her eyebrow. She muttered to Fiona, "That's what you get from Mundane."

Since Belle seemed to smile, the other patrons began to laugh. The mule went down on one knee, touching his nose to the floor in a bow.

"Nevertheless, Mundane is where the solution lies." Fiona fished her crystal ball from the gossamer bag. She studied it for a moment.

"Think he's trainable?"

"Merely a vehicle." Fiona swallowed her beverage, goldfish, and all. Using his energy for the crossing was a twofold blessing. It would get him out of Faery and conserve her power at the same time.

As Fiona approached the mule, she solidified into a siren, her shape revealed by her costume, long honey hair caressing her hips.

"Going my way?"

The mule's eyes showed white all around, but it indicated agreement with a loud bray and nod. Fiona levitated to sit sidesaddle, stroked the mule's ears, and said, "Let's go to your place."

The mule's tail trembled, but he grinned like he had a mouth full of briars. He took a tentative step, then another, until he reached the wall. He lurched through it.

"It's your ass." Belle muttered.

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As Fiona crossed through the darkness of the Veil, the man regained his human form. Fiona embraced him so he would not get lost between the Dimensions. He wrapped his arms around her, whispering stories, with his greasy hair on her shoulder and his hand on her hip. His energy carried them with no help from her wand or the fairy dust. She focused her intentions to guide them close to Maven.

She risked moving one arm to get her wand. She listened to the man's life story, not the fanciful lies he spewed. She must learn how he crossed over so easily, and what else he knew to help her make a plan.

The man babbled through the dark, calling himself Silicon Jones. He bragged he could fix anything, even broken hearts, unless he had broken them himself. He made machines and wrote spells to make them work. His was a new kind of magic in Mundane, a magic of words and devices. Powerful words in the wrong mouth were dangerous enough—physical manifesting them by the act of writing was irresponsible.

“Tell me more of this wizardry,” she whispered in his ear.

“I'm working on a virtual reality machine.” Some truth lay under the lie. “It's just like being in a fantasy world. You can see, hear, and even touch your own imagination. Like dreaming while you are awake.”

“I might have need of such a machine. Could you build one for me?” She encouraged him to think of this contrivance, which conjured incomprehensible imagery. She turned her thoughts to Maven and how she would lure her to Faery.

They landed with a slight jolt. In the winter darkness, she could make out a low building overgrown with dead vines. Her wand showed

no one had been inside in a long time. It would do for her glamourie.

He was still talking about the parts he needed. "Processors for the graphics and another set for the interface, RAM blocks..."

"This is my office," Fiona said, leading and dragging him to the first door. The lock was iron, making her wand was useless. She rattled the doorknob and gritted her teeth. Magic was hard in Mundane.

"Allow me, my dear." Jones pulled a long hatpin from his jeans and picked the lock. "Thank you," Fiona said. She patted his unshaven cheek. Good dog.

Inside they found a random assemblage of furniture and equipment an inch deep in dust. Fiona sprinkled a bit of fairy dust on Jones to keep him walking upright.

Jones moved something on the wall and lights came on. Not magic. Mundane must have developed a new kind of energy. Fiona scanned the area for a source of the power and found it in a box in the wall. She could use it and save her own energy. It was a good sign. Luck was with her.

"How did you come to have your job?" Fiona asked when Jones paused to take a breath. Beneath his words, Fiona could hear his mind through her wand. He thought he was seducing her with his stories.

The man smiled. He told of going to the place for an interview, but he was late. He needed to make a call, using a device that required coins he didn't have.

He blathered on. Jones often searched for work, and he knew how such a place looked, how the people behaved, and what one did to bring someone there.

His stories provided the needed information. As she listened, sorting

truth from lie, Fiona found a story that would work. Her protégé had been looking for work. She could bring the woman here by making a call on a telephone. Although she did not know how the device worked, she could send the message, or get Jones to do it for her.

Fiona used her glamourie and Jones' inebriation to keep him going long enough to set her plan in motion.

He began to pick out pieces of debris and piled them on one of the desks in the back. She allowed him to use her crystal ball, which he said would be an interface. Half the words he used made no sense to her, but she watched as he wired pieces together. He found a pair of gloves and a bowl, both of which he tied to the pile of junk with wire. Then he put a piece of wire into a hole in the wall, and her crystal ball glowed green.

Fiona gave him a little kiss on the cheek and led him to a chair in a corner, where he passed out in mid-sentence. She sprinkled him with enough fairy dust to mitigate the pain he would feel on awakening—a reward for good service.

More fairy dust transformed the room into an office with a doorway back to Faery, powered by the energy of the room, Jones's machine, and the crystal ball. Fiona must keep the door shut against Mundane until Maven agreed to cross over.

No wonder Mundane bled magic from Faery. All their imagination went for this manufactured energy and wasted sorcery. Written spells littered the room.

She dusted off a chair and shuddered with disgust. The people of Mundane had less imagination than trolls, their once-powerful skills lost. Hands had not made these, yet Jones's machine carried his energy signature. His vibration sang through them like a lark at sunrise. He was

quite talented, and could be a powerful wizard if he sobered up in Faery. She would not let that happen.

Wizard magic damaged the Veil.

Forcing inebriants out of Faery and into the HyperDimension was a good decision, but the Veil must be weakening there too, judging from the ease of her companion's passage.

Belle was right. Jones should be barred from Faery. Fiona recast the spell for the doorway to Faery. It must close and disappear as soon as she brought Maven through, to keep undesirables on this side, and Maven on the other.

Perhaps Belle was right about Tulip as well. A few days of training would show if she was fit to be a fairy godmother.

Now she must cast the spell to contact her new protégé and attract her here.

Chapter Three

The Interview

Maven hustled to the van. The temperature hovered at the freezing mark. With cold hands, she jammed the spring back into the seat. She hopped in and cranked up the van. She looked herself square in the eye, and said, “This is going to be my day!” She checked her hair and applied some lipstick, blotting it carefully so it wouldn’t smear. Maven slid the van into drive and pulled out onto the empty two-lane blacktop. She smiled, just for practice, but her cheeks felt strange, distorted. She needed to smile more often. She’d gone to many interviews, but got no offers. The thought darkened her expression.

She shook her head. “Ain’t having that. Not today.”

She grinned, stretching her smile muscles. Fantasy was great for escape, but she liked living indoors and eating regularly. The well-meaning adults of her youth promised her a good job if she went to college and was a good girl. They lied.

Maven lifted her head to sit tall for a new day, carefully not to release the broken spring. She turned on the heater, which poured lukewarm air on her feet. She slipped off her shoes to warm her feet. She liked driving barefoot, in touch with the motor as it vibrated through her toes.

She passed an abandoned strip mall, one built too far out in the country in anticipation of a boom gone bust. Maven peered at mailboxes and house numbers. Her intuition—she called it Bump of Direction, or the Bump for short—told her she’d come too far. Maven had learned the

hard way not to ignore it. At the next intersection, she turned around and headed back. Her car coughed twice and cut off. Out of gas. In the middle of nowhere. Again.

“Keep rolling,” Maven said. “Just keep rolling.” She willed the van to roll on, though it went slower and slower until she pulled off the road into the strip mall parking lot.

Silence surrounded her. Six storefronts, most boarded up and with peeling paint, faced the parking lot. Even the homeless avoided this place—too remote for walking, no dumpster for diving, no passersby for panhandling, no local owner who might pay for a torch job. Kudzu vine embraced the building like a tattered grey shawl, waiting to take it home to its red clay roots. An abandoned car rusted just outside the kudzu's reach.

Bump of Direction itched again. Maven jumped as if someone tapped her shoulder. Urban legends about stranded women crept across her memory. She should just sit still, put on her flashers, and hope the cops came by before the battery went dead. She had no gas can, no cell phone, no way to contact anyone.

Maven warmed up to berate herself completely until she noticed a sign on one storefront. It was small, lavender, and lettered in silver script—FGM, Inc. She dug in her pocketbook to retrieve her notes. If Fate had brought her an interview in this derelict parking lot, it certainly possessed a wicked sense of humor.

The agency looked wrong, like an expensive skinny boutique or maybe a greasy thong bar. She hesitated, looking for signs of life before she faced the cold. No lights shone inside the building, but the temperature dropped in the van as the wind slithered between worn doors

and windows.

Might as well meet trouble head on. She patted her hair and licked her lips, but skipped the mirror check, once a day being once too often. She chanted the mantra of her youth. “I think I can.” She slid her feet back into her low heel pumps and carefully stepped from the van, avoiding the broken spring. Smoothing her skirt over her hips, she pretended her shark-gray suit made her look professional and a bit slimmer.

A sudden gust swirled paint flakes and dried leaves around her. Even the weeds poking through the cracked pavement shivered, their dried stalks golden against the gray asphalt. Maven shuddered. Then she gritted her teeth, imagined she was six feet tall and bulletproof, and strode toward the door.

She stared at the sign, her hand on the doorknob. Below the logo was the inscription. “We make wishes come true.”

Yeah. Right.

A real job, her own home, her own place in the world instead of scrounging under the banquet table of life waiting for the scraps to fall—it hurt her pride to think of such a wish. She swallowed hard to clear her throat. “No wishes. No dreams. No lies.”

At least it'd be warm inside, and they'd have a phone. She opened the door.

Chapter Four

The Test

As the door closed behind her, Maven felt light-headed, half-a-bubble off plumb. The coffee was wearing off. Bump of Direction was on alert too.

Decorated in soft greens, the office was quiet and spacious. Live plants flowered in specially lighted nooks—orchids, daffodils, and a trillium in a terrarium. The air smelled more than fresh. No smoke, no dust, and no nervous sweat from unemployed masses yearning to be paid. They might check her credit report—not good. She sucked up her fortitude and approached the desk.

“Good Morning,” Maven croaked. She cleared her throat and waited for a response, but the perky blonde receptionist didn't even look up. She was busily studying something Maven couldn't see, maybe some new phone app. The agency might pay well enough for the employees to have fancy phones, or maybe they were too cheap to buy real computers. The desk had no clipboard with pencil attached for the application. Nothing was as she expected.

A man hunched over a table, almost as if he were sleeping. The car outside might not be abandoned. He must have the clipboard, and he seemed to be having a hard time filling out the application. It didn't look promising for him.

Maven sat down to wait. Another agency, another application, and maybe another step closer to an actual paycheck. How many frogs would she have to kiss to get a job? She was ready. Pass the lipstick and line

them up.

Maven stared at the floor, clearing her mind and projecting employability. The Bump was alert, but holding its cards close to the vest. She hated these intimidation games. She stared at the patterns in the carpet, watching them shift, remembering the chance for a new day. She had an interview. She couldn't blow it. Finally, the receptionist stood to greet Maven.

“Good morning. I am Fiona.” Fiona was thin, blonde and ageless—somewhere over forty and under ninety, but older than she first appeared. She took Maven's hand with a warm handclasp, not a stiff pump or damp, three-finger press. “I feel certain we can find an assignment to exercise your talents.”

“Thank you for calling me.” Maven handed Fiona her last resume package. Fiona glanced at each page for perhaps a second then set the folder aside with no flicker of interest. But she scrutinized Maven like a horse trader. She half-expected Fiona to check her teeth.

“You trained to be a teacher, yet you taught for only half the time since you graduated from college. How do you explain this?” Fiona's voice was soft, modulated, non-threatening, but her eyes made Maven feel naked. Maven made her arms stay by her side, when all they wanted to do block Fiona's stare.

Her practiced answers vanished. She groped for the words. “I do like teaching...it's just...with the economy, the jobs...”

“Like spinning straw into gold?” Fiona sounded sympathetic.

Maven clamped her lips shut, nodded. Shut up. Don't blow it before you get to talk to her.

“Resourcefulness is one of the skills we require.” Fiona stood and

gestured gracefully toward a hallway. “We have a test to learn if you are suited for our needs. Follow me.”

The small testing room was dim and musty smelling after the fresh office. In the center was a heap of electronic equipment with lots of glowing green lights to one side of a leather chair with wires draped across the back. Some kind of prototype?

“This is our simulator.” Fiona pointed at the chair. “Sit here and pretend whatever you see is actually happening and respond intuitively. Your responses will tell us if you are the one we are seeking.”

Maven was skeptical of the whole setup, but allowed Fiona to stick sensors to the inside of her left elbow, to her right temple, and to her neck just above her collarbone. The sensors were not uncomfortable, but Maven wondered what they would reveal about her. Was this some kind of uber-lie-detector, a prototype brain washer, or maybe a new kind of marketing response gizmo? What did it have to do with making wishes? Would it tell you what to wish for?

Fiona offered no explanation. “In a moment, your test will begin. Do whatever you think is appropriate.” She placed a visor over Maven's eyes and ears, making her all but deaf and blind. Clumsy gloves swallowed her hands. Maven felt a bit of vibration, a subliminal hum.

Weirdest job interview ever.

At least the dark was comfortable until her chair was jerked out from under her. Disoriented and weightless, she landed on her feet with a spine-jarring thump.

The visor revealed a dark room smelling of ashes and cabbage. She tried to adjust the visor, and nearly poked herself in the eye with the stick in her hand. Her clothing was transformed into sparkling robes, glowing

mauve. A slight twitch between her shoulder blades might be the rustling of wings.

No kind of virtual reality was this good. The Bump didn't respond at all. She had to be dreaming—sudden change of scene, no clear narrative, yet strong imagery—especially the smell of cabbage, slightly scorched. What did it mean if she knew she was dreaming?

Someone was crying. As Maven's eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw a girl sobbing on her knees into the ashes of the large stone fireplace.

“What am I going to do now? I wish...I wish...” The girl wailed and swayed, clutching her head in her hands.

Welcome to my world.

She patted the girl's shoulder. “There, there.” Why didn't anyone ever say, 'Here, here' or

'Yonder, yonder?'

The girl just rocked, still bawling. “My step-sisters caused this, those mean and ugly so-and- sos. I never get to go anywhere.”

“Who are you, and where do you want to go?” Maven said, a little louder.

The girl stopped bawling. Neither surprised nor afraid, she said, “I'm Ashleigh. Are you my fairy godmother?”

Maven looked down at herself, the wand, the clothes, everything except a mouse chorus line. Fiona did tell her to play along.

“Why not?” Maven spun around on her heel with her wand leaving a bit of sparkle like tracers in her wake. “Have Wand—Will Travel.”

“It's about time something went right around here!” The girl jumped up and grabbed Maven's arms, rattling Maven's brain with each sentence. “I have to go to Prince Elbert's ball. I need a dress. I need a carriage. And

some horses with white feathers on their heads. And I need them now!! The ball started an hour ago, so there's just time for me to make a grand entrance.”

Maven waved her wand, even though she was positive this was a hallucination. A sparkling image of a castle appeared. “You want to go to the ball and make a play for Prince Whozit?”

The girl stretched out her arms, fluttering and bowing as if meeting the prince. “Oh, yes, I want...” She hesitated and drooped into a slump. “My stepmother said...”

Maven thought of the princesses of her day, and how unhappily they lived and died. How many women ruined their lives waiting for a wish to come true?

“Be careful what you ask for,” Maven said, “You just might get it.”

The girl stared at Maven for a moment. She held up her fingers and started counting. “I just want to have, 1—the fabulous, romantic evening with 2—the beautiful clothes and 3—the lovely music and 4—the elegant food I didn't have to cook.” Wistful hope shone on her face even behind the calculations of exactly what kinds of fun girls just want to have. She stuck out her thumb and added, “I was very careful.”

“You asked for it.” Maven wondered how a fairy godmother cast her spell. She hoped the wand would work, but in a dream, what could go wrong? “I will provide the clothes and the coach and the whole kit, cat and caboodle. If you like what you see, then go for the prince and make yourself happy. If not, then come back home and decide what you want. You have until midnight before it all goes away. At the twelfth bong—busted.”

“I'm ready.” The girl closed her eyes, held her breath, and stood very

still.

How to grant a wish? The Bump suggested bopping the girl over the head, preferably with a broom handle. Maven swished the wand, but nothing happened. There was a song in the movie, but she couldn't remember how it went. "Boopbetty Boopbetty Do!"

The girl opened her eyes again. "What? Do you need something for the magic...mice? A pumpkin?"

"Bring them on." The girl ought to wash her face, too. But if Maven had magic for horses and coaches, a bath should be no sweat. Maven never cast a spell before, but she'd written affirmations, meditations, and invocations. She'd soaked her head and sunk her bankbook in all flavors of Manifest your Mojo workshops trying to make some sense of her life. Maybe they'd work if she did them for someone else.

"I don't have a pumpkin, and there aren't any mice in the trap," Ashleigh wailed.

"Quit wailing," Maven said. "What do you have?"

Ashleigh's eyes got wider, and her lip trembled. More tears made clean tracks down her face.

Maven thought back to all the stories she had read—the wish-maker was never insightful, nor intelligent, just a hardworking, obedient, sweet, wasp-waisted, big-boobed soprano. A heroine might be under all that soot for all she could see.

"Just get something big for a carriage, something to pull it, and something to drive." Maven held her wand on one hip and scratched her head. "You're running out of time."

While the girl went scrounging, Maven visualized a castle, grand courtiers, music, food, dancing, and flowers. Hollywood prom night on

steroids.

The girl came back carrying a cabbage and something wiggling around in a sack, which they took outside. Maven waved the wand, drawing circles of sparkles around the cabbage. She invoked all the major credit cards, those being the most magical words she knew. With a flash of sparkles like fourth of July fireworks, the cabbage swelled to the size of an SUV and sprouted platinum wheels, a tailgate, a coachman's seat and a candle-lit lantern, all done up in shades of silver and celadon.

Maven swirled more sparkles around the sack, which opened to reveal two lizards. They stretched and twisted into two handsome footmen, each gorgeous enough to pose on the cover of any bodice ripper, dressed in green and white satin.

Maven grinned. If the job was this easy, she'd be all over it like stink on a hog.

"What about my horses? The carriage can't pull itself," Ashleigh cried. "What else can we use?" More welling, trembling and quivering.

Maven noticed the kitchen was not as clean as the storybooks always implied. "Let's go back into the kitchen. Open a cabinet door, or pick up something off the floor."

Obedient to the end, the Ashleigh gingerly lifted the edge of a rug. Out ran a couple of cockroaches. Maven zapped them, transforming them into ponies. She whistled, and the lizard coachmen came to get the ponies and hitch them up.

A couple of cabinets, a broom closet and a pantry later, four black ponies, like an ebony mule team complete with white ostrich plumes above their forelocks, were hitched to the cabbage.

Maven took another deep breath and flicked her wand over the girl,

showering her with sparks. The ragged clothes disappeared just before they began to smolder—then the dirt vanished. Like the girl on the half-shell, Ashleigh stood there shivering and trying to cover herself while the former lizards leered and grinned.

“You must be new at this,” Ashleigh cried. “Concentrate! I’ve got to get to the ball!” Maven flicked and swirled, shouted the magic words again. Nothing.

An image of a sneer from her fourth grade teacher appeared in Maven’s brain, her personal icon of falling short. Maven gritted her teeth, worked her jaw side to side, and invoked her redneck heritage with all the powers of Chaos. “Y’all watch this.”

She twirled her wand above her head and snapped it like a whip toward the girl, stomping the ground in follow through. From a mist of sparkles and smoke, a goddess emerged, floating in a landscape of shimmering silk, sprinkled with diamonds like sesame seeds on a bun. Her hair twined around her head like kudzu with fragrant flower clusters sprouting over one ear. Diamond earrings dripped from her earlobes. She tottered in four-inch glass stilettos.

Ashleigh turned once each way to see the flow of the skirt. She wobbled a bit in the shoes, but tiptoed to Maven. “This is more like it!”

One of the former lizards bowed to his lady and helped her into the carriage. Then he leapt to the silver tailgate. The other scurried up to the coachman’s seat without so much as a smirk.

Maven waved as the cabbage drove away. “Have fun, now, and remember what I said.” Maven raised her voice. “If you don’t care for Prince Elbert, there are always other options.” As the cabbage disappeared down the street, she grinned.

Fairy godmothering. Who'd have thought to wish for that?

But if this was an interview, what was the job? Brain washer crash test dummy? Hallucinogen tester? Had she been abducted by aliens at last? All the girl needed was a few props and grooming anyway—another cliché from the wisdom of her childhood—“Do your housework, shut your mouth, hang your head, wait long enough, wish hard enough, and the prince will come.” As usual, the wisdom of the Old Guard applied to someone else. Maven hoped Ashleigh would return home before midnight. Not bloody likely. Why didn't everyone have a fairy godmother, even ugly stepsisters? The Bump made a note to think about that tomorrow.

No story ever said what the fairy godmother did after she granted a wish. Maven always wanted to go to the ball too. She swirled the wand around, bonked her head, and said, “Take me to the ball.”

* * * *

The castle ballroom held a glittering crowd. Maven overlooked the main floor from the gallery above the great hall. Candles sparkled across gems and satin as people moved in glacial motion—Disco on Quaaludes. Her study of historical clothing styles had been cursory at best, but this was at some time before bathing became a regular part of the toilette. The growing stench of dirty hair and sour cologne made Maven nauseous.

No one knew who Ashleigh was, to what kingdom she belonged, nor what fortune she might bestow. They remarked on her gorgeous dress and immediately dismissed her from their minds.

Maven tried to start a few rumors about her, but no one could see her or hear her.

Maybe it was whom one knew, after all. The Old Guard might have included that minor detail. She wandered about the ball, spreading a bit of sparkle any way she could, especially on the wallflowers, and anyone who looked bored or wistful. Suddenly she felt very tired.

For his part, Prince Elbert was eyeing one of the pages. When urged by his advisor, he chose a dancing partner, a tall, butch one. He even let her lead. About eleven thirty, Ashleigh kicked off the stilettos and left with one of the caterers.

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Again, for a few seconds, Maven lost all sensory information, suspended in dizzy darkness. Her ears popped, and she plopped back in the chair in the test room.

Fiona removed the sensors, visor, and gloves without a word and turned back to the machine, which now looked like a pile of computer parts duct-taped to a crystal ball.

Maven stretched her neck and arms. “Quite a setup you have there. Is that the product?” She stared, disoriented. She felt like she had run ten miles over wet sand.

Fiona didn't answer, but moved slightly to keep Maven from seeing what she was doing. Tricks of the light made Fiona's hair pearly pink.

“How does it work—biofeedback?” Maven wondered about street price of this rig. Did they need sales reps or beta-testers? Bump of Direction just sat there, drinking it all in, but not spitting any of it back.

At least this interview had been fun. When Fiona turned around, her expression was one of controlled professionalism winning out over some other emotion, just covered at the last with a smile. The Bump did notice, but wasn't showing any cards yet. Raise and call.

Fiona clasped Maven's hand and patted it. "You did very well for your first time with no training. Come into my office and let us discuss your duties. Can you start immediately?"

Maven slowly took her hand back. "Yes, I'm available. What's the job?" "Fairy godmother, of course." Fiona smiled. "We make wishes come true."

Chapter Five

Dragon Wings

The hair on the back of Maven's neck stood at attention. The Bump hit red alert. She crossed her arms and set her feet flat on the floor, braced apart and unmovable. Finally, her adrenaline got through to her language center.

“Do what? Fairy godmother? Are you for real?”

Fiona's expression froze for a second, her smile drooping as it thawed out. “We do not use the word real in polite company, but as you use the word, yes, I am a real fairy godmother.”

In the grip of adrenaline clarity, Maven noticed Fiona's clothing had softened from her suit to a flowing dress, though her precision movements did not change. Maven aimed The Bump to hear what Fiona was not saying, but The Bump wasn't hearing it either.

Forcing her shoulders to relax and her diaphragm to expand, Maven whispered, “You are a fairy?” The Bump sat like a lump of lard in a cold frying pan. “A fairy godmother?”

“I live in the domain of Faery.” Fiona paused. “Haven't you always wanted to make the world a better place?” Fiona said, moving her hand as if she was showing the contents of door number two. “This is your chance.”

Something was wrong with this story, but it was a way out of the battle between the bank and the end of the month. A way, way too far out.

Maven reminded herself to remember the details of the dream and to

write them down as soon as she woke up. Except she remembered putting the notebook and the pen in her pocketbook at the library when she wrote down the address.

“You aren't overstaffed, then?”

Fiona's eyes glittered. “There is plenty of work to be done, and we need to start right away.” “Then what's the catch? What's the pay? Hours? Benefits?” Maven was operating on only one cup of instant coffee, and she was hungry and cold. Did hunger cause hallucinations? She stared at Fiona, her mouth a bit open and her hands dangling by her sides.

Fiona held up her hand as if offering a gift. “You can make wishes come true.”

The inside of Maven's head spun in the opposite direction from the room. She peered at Fiona. “You're offering me an escape from my crazy life to live in a fairy tale, have magical powers, and flit about granting wishes, creating my own little anomalies in the space-time continuum.”

“Well said. You do understand.” Fiona relaxed ever so slightly.

“Have we reached an agreement then?”

“Why me?”

“You answered the call.” Fiona smiled like a used karma salesman, with a glint on her teeth.

The call? A phone call on a dead line? Now Maven knew she was dreaming.

“Okay, I'll bite.” Maven propped her knuckles on her hip. “Who is the evil overlord of the west who must not be named that you want me to kill?”

Fiona frowned. “This is not one simple story. We maintain all of the

stories, teaching stories to keep Mundane functioning properly.”

If Fiona thought Faery was keeping Mundane functioning, she needed a wakeup call with a venti cappuccino and a couple extra espresso shots.

“If I don't like Faery, can I go home?”

“If you leave now, this place will disappear before you return to your vehicle.”

“And the part about my coming back home? Click my heels three times? Walk through a mirror? Wish on a star?” Maven's rational mind, if she had such, said, “Run like hell.” But Bump of Direction wanted to know more.

“If you join us in Faery, you can never return.” Fiona crossed her arms. “I'm going to disappear?” Maven snapped her fingers. “Just like that?”

Fiona shrugged. “Entering Faery is not easy, but coming back here is more difficult.” Yet Fiona managed to cross over and clearly planned to go back with Maven in tow.

“Let me check my van. It's like a big pocketbook.” Maven said, wavering, wanting a breath of not-so-fresh air to feel grounded, awake, and real.

“You would not be able to use anything from here in Faery,” Fiona said, “and you won't need anything you can't provide for yourself. You can forget about your former life and build a new one. A better, more meaningful one.”

Maven shook her head, not in a negative way, but in wonder at the details. She had studied how to take control of a dream, but she hadn't meditated on anything like this, and she certainly wasn't in control.

Yet something did not smell right, neither the techno mustiness nor the flower freshness.

“This is just too weird.” Maven held out her hand to Fiona, who did not take it. Maven picked up her pocketbook and turned toward the door.

“When you come to a fork in the path, you must decide which way to go,” Fiona's tone suggested Maven picked the wrong fork. Again.

Maven paused, her hand on the doorknob. It was cold, freezing her fingers. What would she leave behind? A few acquaintances from her last job whose first names she could barely remember, a run-down apartment the cockroaches complained about, and an out-of-gas minivan with more miles on it than a cross-country bus. If she walked out that door, she didn't even have a way to get to the food stamp office.

All she had to lose was the constant job hunting, starting all over again every semester with no get out of jail free card and no two hundred dollars. The alarm clock was bound to go off any minute now. Maven didn't want to wake up. She turned around, trying to think of another question to ask.

The Bump presented an image—leathery wings suspending a shining, scaly body, a fanged mouth filling the air with fire.

“Just one more thing,” Maven asked, “Are there dragons?”

Fiona lowered her voice to a confidential whisper, which carried across the room. “I am intimately acquainted with dragons. You may also meet ogres and princes and trolls.”

“Oh, my!”

What would a Dragon wish for?

The Bump clicked like tumblers falling in place.

“I'm in.” Maven walked over to shake hands with Fiona.

“Your training begins now.” Fiona guided Maven by her elbow into another room. Behind them, the door closed, silently, with no echoing clang of finality. Yet the Maven's whole world seemed to shift in some barely perceptible way, as if the background music had stopped.

Chapter Six

Gossamer and Tulip

Once in Fiona's office, Maven marveled at the arrangement of magical clutter—pentacles, crystals, candles, labeled ceramic pots—all perched on the shelves around the walls. Fiona reached over to pull a bell rope behind the large scriptorium desk.

“Sit, please.” Fiona gestured toward a large toadstool. It didn't look substantial, and Maven lowered herself gingerly in case the stool collapsed. It adjusted itself to her, becoming very comfortable.

A teenage girl entered, with flowers braided in her hair and a short, flowing dress that followed her movements, revealing nothing and accentuating her young figure. In comparison, Maven felt like a dump truck pulling a wide load.

“Ah, Tulip,” Fiona said. “Get a pod ready for Maven, who will begin her training today. Send Azaha of the Gorgeous Gorge a flier, asking her to join us for tea this afternoon at the Twilight Lounge.”

“As you wish.” Giving Maven a sidewise look, wistful rather than curious, Tulip left.

Through the open door, the temp agency had disappeared—no gadgets, no darkness, just an empty room as far as Maven could tell. “I'm definitely not in Kansas anymore,” she muttered.

“Kansas?” Fiona looked up from the large ledger spread across her desk. She held a quill pen above the yellowed paper.

“Dorothy? Oz?” Maven said. Whose stories did Fiona teach?

Fiona's back straightened beyond ramrod to some stiffer arc. “Oz is

quite a long way from here, in the domain of Fiction.” Her tone said Not Our Kind of People. “This is a favorite story of yours, then?”

“No, just one I am familiar with. A modern fairy tale.”

“Quite.” Fiona continued writing in her ledger.

Modern fairy tales were apparently the poor-white-trash, red-headed, bastard step-children of the miscreants of Fiction.

“One reason you are here,” Fiona said, “is to strengthen the true stories. People learn from stories, what to wish for, and what to avoid.”

The Bump reminded her of the star. What did she wish for on that star last night? Nothing. She never made a wish.

Fiona peered into a crystal ball. “Once a person decides to grant her own wishes, she can no longer serve others. She loses perspective.”

Maven was patient. No sense in waking up before she had to. “So you think I can maintain my perspective?”

“Yes, with the advantage of your personal experience.” Fiona picked up Maven's folder from the desk, where Maven was sure it not had been before. Fiona glanced at the papers. “You appreciate helping people, and you do not insist on being in their stories.”

The Bump nudged Maven again, concern coloring her curiosity. “Don't the stories change as the culture changes?”

The room temperature seemed to drop. Fiona's face softened to the kind, tolerant expression used by people who are talking down to small children. “Human nature does not change even though situations do. These so-called Modern Times are just a short aberration in the larger picture of the Universe.” Fiona smiled encouragingly. “You shall soon learn to hear how the true story flows, and you will direct the flow in appropriate directions.”

Maven said nothing. The dream wasn't over. She thought true stories didn't need direction, and the others needed to flow differently. But she was listening.

Fiona moved her hand across a crystal ball Maven had not noticed before—definitely a dream since things just appeared and disappeared. The same girl entered the office again. “Take Maven to her quarters and help her get settled.”

Tulip looked human enough, without pointed ears or chin, no unusual slant to her eyes, pretty without ethereal beauty, but perhaps a bit sad.

What did fairies wish for?

“Once you are settled in, I will take you to make your wand,” Fiona said.

“Thank you.” Maven followed Tulip out, again feeling a tingle of energy as she passed through the door. She kept waiting to hear the sound of one shoe dropping.

Strolling down a path lined with every possible color of primroses, Tulip walked in silence. She had a child's innocence and matter-of-fact acceptance of her world, except for her eyes. Whatever she had wished for, she hadn't got it. They stopped at the edge of a large spider web, which was anchored to the ground at their feet and stretched up to various plants in the garden.

“This is a magic bridge.” Tulip sounded like a tour guide giving her spiel as she pointed to some strands of spider silk as thick as Maven's wrist. “It makes you small, so you can fit into your pod. When you want to get big again, you walk down this way.” Her expression was very neutral, as if she kept a tight rein on her curiosity as well as her tongue.

She must've seen a lot of trainees come and go. "After you get your wand and your wings, of course, then you can change size when you want to, but until then, use the bridge."

"Okay," Maven said, testing the web with one foot to see how bouncy it was. The last ropes course she traversed was back when she was in college, when she still knew everything.

Tulip stepped up on the bridge. "Watch for the sticky parts." Her expression faded from blank to something else, but she put on a cheery smile to cover up. "The web's very strong. Don't worry." She skipped up the web a few steps, bouncing it for emphasis.

Maven noticed Tulip did not, in fact, carry a wand or wear wings. Neither did Fiona, which Maven hadn't noticed before, as she hadn't been expecting them. Maven grabbed a thread, and took a few tentative steps following Tulip up the bridge.

"How do you get wings? Prevent a suicide by showing an alternate time line?"

"That's one way, I guess. It's not like we were..." Her voice dropped to a whisper, "on the Other Side." She paused for a second, looking out over the garden. They didn't look any smaller, but the garden appeared much larger. Tulip led the way, traipsing along the narrow strands without even reaching for the hand thread.

"Tell me about the Other...?" Maven noted the fairy's look of alarm.

Tulip skipped up to a milkweed pod connected to the bridge, making the web bounce more than Maven liked. "Here's your pod. You'll be cozy in here."

Maven held on tight, remembering she survived the ropes course. The pod held little more than a hammock of spider silk strung across two

pegs, hardly room for both of them to stand on the bit of floor. On another peg hung a piece of cloth, maybe as long as her arm and half as wide.

Tulip handed the cloth to Maven. "Here are your gossamers. Take off those other things you are wearing and put this on."

The cloth was very transparent and of uncertain color, like a cobweb without the dust. Maven could hardly tell it was in her hand. She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Haven't you ever seen gossamer before?" Tulip giggled. "It grows to fit you." Maven had her doubts.

Tulip watched, fascinated as Maven skinned out of her dress, slip, and panty hose. Had Tulip never seen a fat, middle-aged woman before?

"One size never fits all," Maven muttered. She held the gossamers up in front of her, but Tulip was still staring at her other clothes.

"Where did you come from?" Tulip asked. She pointed to the pile of clothes on the hammock. "Does everybody have to dress like that?"

Fiona said not to reveal herself, so Maven said, "It's a village, er, near Fiction." True enough, as even the folk who lived there told themselves stories about their historical significance. "It's last year's style."

"Even the peasants are more comfortable than that." Tulip's gossamer was much less transparent and much larger than the piece Maven had.

Maven attempted to wrap the cloth around her, stretching it easily. Soon she had a sarong down to her knees. It was comfortable enough, but certainly not a fashion statement. She wondered if it could make her invisible, as she had been at the ball. But the ball wasn't real...wasn't a

true experience...was it?

Tulip's gossamers draped and flowed with every movement.

"Please help me with this, Tulip." Maven felt so helpless, not being able to dress herself.

"It took me a while to figure it out. I'm not good with magic." Tulip pulled the frill off her shoulder and took her arm out of it so the tunic flowed from just one side. "Just stretch it where you want it go." She stretched the gossamer from her other shoulder down to the end of her arm where it became a pointed, flowing sleeve. She wrapped the sleeve around her wrist, and it fitted itself to her slender arm. "It helps to think about how you want to look, like what color and how thick it needs to be. You'll figure it out."

Maven extended the gossamer up to her shoulder and then down to her elbow. She thought velvet purple, and the part she held changed. She thought of Tulip's tunic, only much longer, and much less transparent, with some sleeves. In a few minutes, she wore a simple frock of violet georgette, which covered everything without binding or gapping and leaving most of Maven's form to the imagination.

"Now this is cool," Maven said. And it was. Too cool. Shivering slightly, Maven changed it back to velvet—much warmer. She made a few pockets by sticking her hand into the gossamer. She took some things from her pocketbook to carry along just in case she needed them—a notepad, a pencil, a Swiss army knife, and a green cats-eye marble for luck. She always carried it, just for pretty.

Fiona appeared in the tiny doorway, this time with both wand and shimmering butterfly wings. "If you are quite finished making yourself presentable, you can come with me to make your wand."

“Oh, yes, thank you very much.” Maven's few doubts about her new career choice vanished. Being able to dress comfortably at work was definitely a wish come true.

Almost as an afterthought, Fiona nodded to Tulip. “You come, too.”

Tulip opened her mouth as if to screech in delight, but no sound came out. She wrapped her arms around herself, quivering with excitement, clamped her teeth together in a big grin, and nodded enthusiastically.

Wasn't Tulip a fairy already? The Bump took a few more notes.

Fiona swizzled her wand around the three of them and transported them to a grove of trees—oak and pine, hazel and hickory, apple and pear, willow and dogwood, ginkgo and eucalyptus, and any other kind she could think of.

This place felt different too, as if they travelled a long way in a few seconds. Was this the Garden of Eden?

Fiona presented her wand for Maven and Tulip to see. “Choose a tree that feels right to you. Ask if the tree is willing to give you one of its branches. Wait for an answer. Do not take without giving. Offer a few strands of your hair, preferably plucked out so you feel a bit of pain in sympathy with the tree.” She laid the wand in her palm with its tip on her middle finger and its butt on the crease of her elbow. “Break a branch the length of your arm and bring it back here. You must align your power with its energy so it will help you focus.” Fiona smiled and nodded. “You too, Tulip.”

Tulip stood like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming semi. “Me?” she finally managed, as she was able to breathe. “A wand for me?”

Fiona nodded, as if to a very small child. With a little cry of excitement, Tulip dashed off through the trees.

Maven began walking slowly, trying to feel the energy from each tree. She'd never had any luck with seeing auras or any of that other woo-woo stuff. But as she neared one tree, she did feel something—a prickle at the back of her neck from being watched. When she turned, she saw a face on a level with her eyes, hanging from the branch above her head. A reptilian face, triangle shaped and covered with scales.

“Welcome to the jungle,” it said, its forked tongue flickering.

Maven froze, speechless at the sight, but her The Bump did not respond—not even a yellow alert. Maybe its weirdness circuit was blown. She looked at the iridescent scaly face, as big as her own, with its huge body draped through the willow.

“I've always wondered how a serpent is different from a garden variety snake,” she said finally. Staring was rude, but she was afraid to look away.

“We are much more articulate, not to mention perspicacious-s-s, inquisitive and s-s- substantial.” The Serpent's mouth widened in what could have been a smile except for the fangs. “We are first cousins to the dragons you want to meet, but are much better natured, though no less-s-s deadly.”

It made no move to strike, however, so Maven calmed herself and looked it in the eye. She expected it to begin a mesmerizing motion, but soon the Serpent looked away.

What would a Serpent wish for?

It spoke again. “You don't want this tree. It's white willow which traditional witches-s-s prefer, but you need s-s-something from your own

past, from your own..." It paused for a hissing chuckle, "home land." With one flicker of its tongue, it slid from the willow and to the ground. In the middle, its body was as big around as Maven's hips, and it slithered along with its head shoulder high. Maven followed it to a distant section of the grove, past hibiscus and crepe myrtle, hollyhock and magnolia, even palmetto and cypress. It paused, coiled, waiting for Maven to catch up. It raised its head to her eye level. "Which tree do you remember?"

Maven thought of several—a maple where her dad had made her a swing, the pine seeping yellow rosin like a sticky gem, and the peach tree. Her legs stung in her memory. When Maven disobeyed, her mother would make her cut a new branch from the peach tree in the back yard and switch her with it.

"Yes," the Serpent said, "that one." It slid along a bit further to a large peach tree hung with ripe fruit, yellow and red among the leaves. The Serpent slid up into the tree, looping itself around the widespread, low branches. "As-s-sk this-s-s one, if you dare."

Maven wondered how to address a tree. "O Tree, please let me cut a branch from thee," did not seem appropriate.

"Hold out your hand," the Serpent said.

When she did, a ripe peach dropped into it, the velvet skin nearly bursting with the soft impact. "Thank you very much," she said, "but what I would like to ask for is a branch to make a magic wand." She yanked a few hairs from the back of her head and laid them under the tree. She could not give the peach back, so she bit into it. Luscious juice ran down both sides of her mouth. She had forgotten how luscious a truly ripe peach was. She sucked on the pulp and then pulled the velvet skin

away with her teeth. She liked its bitter texture. As she savored the fruit, she heard a low, slow voice speaking in her mind. "Plant the seed. Plant the seed."

Maven wiped her mouth. "Where? Here?" She listened again, took another bite. The Serpent was still, as if it too were listening to the voice.

"Plant the seed where it will grow and multiply." The leaves of the tree rustled, although Maven could feel no wind.

"I will," Maven promised. From above her head, a branch fell to the grass at her feet, cut clean at its base, and exactly the length of her arm and finger. "Thank you." Impulsively she patted the tree and laid her head against a branch. A tear slid down her cheek and into the bark of the tree.

"All is forgiven," the tree said in her mind.

Maven felt for a moment the pain of branches broken, and then thrown away, fruit not harvested, rotting at its roots. "Yes, all."

She wrapped the wet seed in a piece of paper from her pocket, thought of the anger with which the branches had been broken from her mother's peach tree. She would plant the seed with love. She reminded The Bump to look for a likely site. She gazed back up into the tree's branches, but the Serpent had vanished except for a faint fanged smile hanging in the air.

When Maven returned, Tulip waited beside Fiona, glowing with excitement. She had broken a thick piece of wild rose, full of thorns. Her hair floated like a halo, full of static, and her cheeks were nearly as pink as the large rose at the end of her wand. Her hands oozed blood from scratches as the rose had demanded payment in blood for the wand.

Maven and Tulip held out their wands for Fiona to see.

“Excellent choices,” Fiona said, inspecting each one without touching it. “Now you will prepare them to be charged. Peel the bark.”

Tulip stared at Fiona, confused.

Maven handed Tulip the knife she had brought, blade open, handle first. “Say thank you,” Maven prompted, when Tulip did not reach for it.

Fiona stretched her hand between Tulip and the knife. “She must find her own tools.” Fiona took care not to touch the knife.

Tulip picked up a rock from the ground, one with an edge. She broke off the rose and put it in her hair. Then she started scraping the thorns with the edge of the rock. One of the cuts on her arm still oozed a bit, and the blood fell on the bare stick. Tulip rubbed it in.

Maven made long sweeps with her knife. In only a minute, the branch was bare and white. Maven folded the knife and put it back in her pocket.

“Maven, as you have steel and can use it, prick your finger and put a bit of your own blood on your wand,” Fiona said. “Blood makes it easier to channel your own energy through it.”

Maven did as she was told. Was this a contract signed in blood, and was it with Faery, or just the peach tree?

Fiona nodded at both her charges. “Hold your wands between your palms, against your chest, at your heart level. Breathe deeply, and feel energy from the earth coming up through your body and out the top of your head.” She demonstrated. Her wand seemed to vibrate between her hands. “The more you use the wand, the more it attunes to your personal energy.”

Tulip began charging immediately. Maven could see a spiral rainbow spinning around like a barber pole, red from her feet to her hips,

through all the colors to violet swirls above her head.

Maven held her wand between her ample breasts with her palms. She could feel her hands tingling as if electricity flowed through them into herself. In a moment, Maven too, was inside a swirling spectrum of colors, a shimmering column of mist. She imagined being a tree, with its roots in the earth bringing up water and minerals while the sunlight above made her food. She felt her branches spread out, flower, fruit, and then fade into winter sleep. As Maven watched the rainbow spin around her, she heard a whispery, hissing chuckle behind her.

She felt the Serpent twine itself into her imaginary branches, looping its heavy coils to rest comfortably as it waited for its prey. She felt safe as a tree, but wondered what its prey would be. She hoped The Bump was paying attention and getting to know the Serpent. It would be nice to get a little advance warning before the airless voice whispered into her ear. But she didn't.

“And so you are safe, as a tree,” the Serpent whispered, “but as a human, there are many dangers-s-s for you here, including spending too much time unaware of your surroundings-s-s. Faery is not a child's garden, or rather it is, but with live toads and dragons-s-s.”

Chapter Seven

Making Magic

As Fiona poofed them back to her office, Maven thought about the Serpent. Her face was still sticky from the peach juice. That much she hadn't imagined, nor the seed wrapped in paper in her pocket. Should she have listened? Did she have any other choice?

Fiona tapped her wand on her desk. "When you grant a wish, you are a catalyst. You use your wand to focus, not your own personal energy, but the energy from the environment around you."

Tulip gazed at her wand, holding it across her open palm, as if she expected it to slither up her arm. Maven held hers upright by the thicker end, like a sword in salute. Tulip looked at Maven, imitating her. Then Tulip took the initiative and flicked her wand slightly, spraying sparkles all around herself. She danced in the glow of it, not noticing the tiny burn marks they made on her skin or the sudden transparency of her gossamer.

"Control yourself! What are you thinking?" Fiona glared. "I will tell you when and where and what kind of magic to make, if you are to be allowed to learn at all."

Tulip froze in mid-pirouette. She melted into a chastened pose, humbled and small. The sparkles evaporated, while her toadstool nudged behind her knees urging her to sit.

Fiona tapped her wand against her palm. "Any questions?" Fiona stared at Tulip, waiting for a question to present itself. Even the crockery seemed to wait in hushed anticipation.

“So we just use any energy? It doesn't matter?” Tulip hugged herself, shivering. She was pale as death, her eyes the only color in her face.

Fiona nodded. “It matters if you use your own, as you can feel.” Maven stared at Tulip. “What happens if we use our own energy?”

“If you use enough of it, you will die.” Fiona paused to catch each student's eye. “Hence we don't grant our own wishes. Our own emotional investment can be too much. When you are part of the story, it is difficult to gauge where the story is going.”

Maven wondered who was in a story, and who wasn't. But Fiona continued before she could ask.

“There is energy everywhere. It is up to you to direct it.” Fiona moved her wand above their heads, making the room bright. “Some places, like this one, have much more potential energy. Be aware and conservative in its use. We will begin with a small task.”

Fiona scribed a circle with her wand over her left palm. A cup of green tea appeared in a delicate bone china cup on a saucer with a sprig of mint on the side. Fiona nodded at Tulip. “Do not use your energy. Pull it from around you.”

Tulip gazed at the cup, closed her eyes, and frowned. She made a swizzling motion, and a cup appeared. Her magic did not hold, however, and the cup evaporated, spilling hot tea on Tulip's hand. “Ouch.” she cried, shaking her hand, but the tea vanished before it hit the floor.

“Maven.”

Maven took a deep breath to bring energy to her. She held out her hand, palm up, and then turned it sideways. She swirled her wand above her hand and a glass appeared, full of tea with ice. But the glass slipped

out of Maven's hand and bounced flat on the floor, spraying sticky, sweet tea all over Fiona and Maven before shattering.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" Maven stood there, dripping, finally grabbing her skirt to pull off a piece of gossamer to help Fiona dry off.

"Stop." Fiona's voice could freeze a bucket of water on a hot tin roof. She swirled her wand around them both, cleaning up the mess.

"What exactly were you trying to do?"

Maven spread her hands in a gesture of shame. "I don't like hot tea. So I made sweet tea. I didn't think it would matter."

"I did not intend for you to drink it. Do you think it does not matter whether you follow my example?"

Maven did not answer.

Fiona shook her wand, not pointing it directly at Maven, but even so, Maven felt threatened. "Do not assume. Ask me before you injure yourself, or your client."

Maven nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Pay attention." Fiona snapped. Both Maven and Tulip jumped. Fiona held out her cup for Maven to inspect. "Try again."

Maven closed her eyes and took another deep breath. She stared at Fiona's cup for a moment, and then waved her wand to produce a perfect teacup on her outstretched palm. It rattled a bit as Maven's hand shook.

"That will do," Fiona said. "Now Tulip, again, please."

Tulip managed her cup as well, including the sprig of mint. She sighed, obviously relieved. Fiona took a sip of her tea then made it disappear with her wand. Tulip's cup also disappeared, but not Maven's. Fiona took it from her and set it on the desk.

"The times when you will do magic for yourself include arranging

your gossamers and getting yourself from place to place. Know where you want to go, and describe a cone of energy around yourself.” She stood up and modeled waving her wand around herself. “Visualize the energy, and then you will poof. For practice, poof back to your pod. Remember to imagine yourself small as well.”

Tulip jumped up, swizzled her wand, and disappeared. In a few seconds, she popped back in. She could barely keep from skipping around the room. Across her nose and cheeks were glittering sparkles, but her gossamer was opaque and full.

Maven held her wand above her head and swung it in a circle. She imagined a helix of colored sparkles swirling up from her feet to her head. With one poof, she appeared in her pod sprinkled with sparkles—ankle deep in them, stinging like mosquitoes. She tried swirling the sparkles into a small dust devil and then out the door, creating more sparkles.

“I need a broom,” she said to herself, but she spoke the words aloud. The sparkles became very agitated, blowing around like angry bees. Her wand heated up and singed her hand. She dropped it into the sea of sparkles. Her gossamers shrank to their original size, leaving her bare, buck-naked. A great thump shook her pod, throwing her to the floor. She covered her head with her hands. After a moment, the sparkles stopped stinging.

Maven got up gingerly, checking for broken bones and bruises. She stretched her gossamer back into a shape she could wear outside, and peeked out her door. A huge log of wood leaned against the stems where the FGM pods grew. It had broken the web bridge to her pod, and very nearly the plant itself.

Far below she could see straw tied to the other end of it—a broom, as requested. All Fiona's warnings about not granting her own wishes came back, all too clearly.

Maven opened her mouth to speak her thoughts, and then snapped her jaw shut. She sighed. The Bump quoted a long forgotten twelve-step proverb. “You can have what you say.” Her mother always said Maven didn't know when to shut up. She felt as stupid as a box of hammers. Fiona was waiting for her. Maven couldn't get to the path to walk down and become normal size again. If she left the broom standing there, it might fall and do more damage.

She reached for her wand, testing for heat before she picked it up. It was cool, but her hand was still hot and tender. Again visualizing energy, but no sparkles this time, she took a deep breath to feel the magical energy come through her center with the air she inhaled. She wrapped the gossamer around herself, easily this time. She visualized herself again, large and in charge, and then poofed.

The broom was handmade and rustic, only an inch or so shorter than herself. She had a momentary urge to straddle it and ride away, but The Bump emitted a razz-berry buzz...No. The Bump would have to learn to warn about wishes. She wasn't a witch after all. Holding the broom close to make it small, too, she poofed back into the pod. She swept the sparkles out into the air.

“I hope they are biodegradable.” She said the words aloud before she thought. It was clear to Maven she had been spending too much time alone, talking to herself. She straightened her gossamer again, put the broom under her hammock. With as much dignity as she could muster, she poofed.

Fiona had almost regained her composure by the time Maven reappeared. She looked as serious as always, but there were visible crinkles around her eyes, and her color was high. There might have been a tear or two brightening her eyes as well. Maven decided not to notice. Tulip was gasping for breath where she was rolling on the floor in laughter.

Fiona's comment was not unkind. "Yes, energy is biodegradable."

"Neither created nor destroyed," Maven said, quoting a long-dead science teacher. But those changes in form could be difficult to manage. What would she do with a magic broom? Would it disappear at midnight?

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After a long session of poofing and study, Fiona knew her students were tired, as was she. "Tulip," Fiona said. "You have done very well today. As a treat, would you like to have tea with Azaha the Dragon?"

"No. Thank you. Ma'am!" Tulip backed away from Fiona, bumping into the office wall and dislodging a shelf of ceramic pots, which crashed to the floor, spilling their contents in a shimmer of iridescent dust. She scrambled to clean up the mess, trying to scoop up the spilled contents before they collected themselves back into their jars. She finally gave up, stood trembling a little, and curtsied. "Thank you very much, but no." Meanwhile the glitter found its way back into the jars, and the whole shelf levitated back in place.

“Very well, then. You may go.” Fiona nodded.

Without a word, Tulip poofed from the office. The crockery crashed back to the floor.

“I think we’ll walk.” Fiona stepped around the broken pots. “It’s not necessary to poof everywhere.” The pots were already reassembling themselves and sorting the fairy dust.

Chapter Eight

Here be Dragon

Outside Fiona's office was a vestibule with two chairs and a door leading to the village green, which was paved with jade and moss agates, surrounded by many plants. Cobbled lanes threaded between heavy-beamed buildings and incongruous brownstones. Something was missing, even in the anachronistic setting. A few cats lounged. A horse or two waited patiently, a dog slept in the path, and some people in peasant dress walked purposefully in the street.

What did she expect? Goblins, trolls, golems? It was still daylight. Then again, when she looked behind, the places they just passed seemed to have moved—some were closer, some farther away, and some not even present. The landscape itself possessed an innocent look, the kind the usual suspects take on when the cop walks the beat. Still, the Bump wasn't flashing. She wasn't Mundane anymore, but maybe more real than ever.

Their destination was a tavern with a painted wooden sign showing a red sunset fading to deep blue with a crescent moon at the top. The sign read “The Twilight Lounge” in glowing purple neon like letters. Magic?

Fiona stepped down two steps into a low doorway, which led into a dark pass-through. A cartoon on the wall portrayed a humanoid, a cloudy explosion and a sketchy reptile.

“In the Twilight Lounge, one wears a persona. Part of the ambience.” Fiona took her wand out of a pocket. “I prefer to do my own persona rather than risk Belle's sense of humor. Allow me to choose your

favorite story.” She touched Maven's head gently with her wand and then her own.

Maven shrank, both in width and height. Her gossamer turned blue with checks, and she wore sparkly red shoes. Her hair grew and braided itself into brown pigtails. Fiona stretched up, dressed in black with a pointed hat and a green face.

“Oh my goodness!” Maven piped in a child's shrill voice.

“Goodness had nothing to do with it!” Fiona snapped. She tapped each of them again, this time the transformations wavered as if they were not vibrating at the right frequency.

“On second thought, let us be more traditional.” Fiona changed into a very large, brown bear with mobcap and apron, while Maven became a little girl with long, yellow ringlets, wearing a blue frock and white pinafore.

“You'll find it amusing once you get used to it,” Fiona growled. “A certain contrast to one's own appearance is appropriate. It disappears at midnight, or you can change when you leave.”

Maven decided never again to risk Fiona's sense of humor. Fiona waddled in. Maven's shiny patent leather Mary Janes clicked and her pinafore flounced over a scratchy crinoline. In the tavern, various creatures lounged, drinking, eating, and chatting. An ogre sprawled across a rocky incline against one wall, while her date, a salamander, basked in cheery flames. Darkness hid much of the activity at the tables and booths, but to Maven it was Faery's equivalent of a bargain waffle house.

The bar, a sinister slab of marble as dark as swamp water, stretched along one wall. Cobwebs and Spanish moss draped the living trees,

which supported the slab. Several patrons sat or stood there—a Sphinx perched on a rock, lapping some golden liquid from a bowl; a unicorn on his hind legs held a glass in his cloven hoof, leaning on a foreleg as his leonine tail twitched toward a young woman on his left. She was dressed in rich fabric with a peaked hat and veil, and perched on a tiny stone tower, sipping from a long-stemmed lily. Maven wondered if either of them were virgins.

What do unicorns wish for? She knew what virgins wished for.

Behind the bar stood a dark, brawny woman. Her impossibly red hair was piled in a beehive above her massive neck. She had green eyes, green mascara, and green eye shadow out to her temples. She wore a bright-flowered red and green sarong, which only restrained her ample figure through some magic of its own—must be gossamer on steroids. Maven wondered who was behind that persona.

Fiona introduced her. “Belle, this is my new protégé, Maven.”

Maven felt herself curtsy, something she hadn't known she knew how to do. “How do you do, Miss Belle?” she chirped.

Belle stared speechless for a second, then guffawed. Her laugh chased every other sound from the place. Only as Belle began to gasp for breath did the sounds sneak back in with a few furtive looks.

“Do all right, Little Miss Maven. Just plain Belle will do.” She wiped her eyes. Fairy makeup stayed put—not a bit of it smeared onto Belle's hand. “Don't know your own strength, Fiona.” She calmed herself. From behind the bar she handed each of them a bowl of porridge.

“How goes it, Goldilocks? Get your wand yet?”

“Yes, ma'am.” Maven took the wand out of her pocket, fighting the

urge to curtsy again. She dropped her voice, but could not avoid the little-girl chirp. “Tulip did too. We’ve been learning to poof this afternoon.”

Belle's face lost its smile, and she arched her eyebrows at Fiona. “I’m sure Fiona knows what she is doing.” She didn't sound sure.

Fiona's teeth appeared in what could have been a smile. “Both my trainees are doing well. They complement each other, and will balance each other’s strengths.” Fiona licked a bit of porridge from her bowl. “You might inspect your vestibule. We had unexpected results with our personae.”

Belle jerked her thumb toward the darkness past the end of the bar. “Back there. Dragonfly.” In the murk beyond the bar, a pool of water shimmered, just the size of a kiddie pool, illuminated by one sunny beam of light from nowhere. The pool contained cattails, water lilies, and a shining blue dragonfly about six inches long. As Fiona the Bear and Maven-locks approached, two rocking chairs materialized from the floor, one large and soft, one just right.

Fiona did not sit. With a slight bow, she waved her massive paw toward Maven. “Azaha, I present my protégé, Maven.”

Again Maven performed the curtsy, this time without speaking. The dragonfly turned slightly as if to inspect her, buzzed around her one time, and then lit on a cattail frond at her eye level.

The dragonfly's voice was surprisingly deep and resonant. “You have met your match this time, Fiona.” She chuckled. “Now, little Miss Maven, tell me, how do you know this is not a dream?” Azaha spoke kindly, but in the tone of the principal who decides whether one is promoted.

Maven never learned how to be cute. But the question was pertinent.

"I don't," Maven said, the persona taking over with child-like candor. "My dreams are dark and visual. Here is color, sound, touch, smell..." Click went The Bump. Smell. This whole place did not smell right—too clean, too fresh. No sewage in the streets, no garbage, no...bathrooms? How long had she been in Faery, and when was the last time she had to pee? The Bump nudged her again to finish her sentence. "Everything here is more r..." Maven groped for another word, trying to remember what Fiona said about Mundane. "...more sensory than what I dream about."

The dragonfly made no indication of her acceptance or rejection of her answer. "Are you prepared to believe six impossible things before breakfast?"

Fiona had no expression—she could have been panting or grinning behind all those teeth. Her persona was decidedly not cuddly.

Maven could do tests. "I'm here," Maven counted on her fingers. "She's a bear, you're here, and we're here." She nodded toward the other patrons. "I'm blonde and five years old, and this is evidently just right." She held up her porridge bowl as evidence.

"Then you will have no trouble believing I am a dragon." The fly landed on a cattail, nearly invisible when motionless.

"I thought you'd be bigger."

"Don't take too much on faith." Azaha began to change shape, stretching out from inches of insect to yards of reptile. The Twilight Lounge stretched as well, with a few pops and crackles. Maven could have used one of Azaha's claws for a chair.

The pond disappeared, but the chairs stayed in place. The dragon

smiled from her height. She held Maven's stare through the entire transformation. Lowering her head, which was the size of an eighteen-wheeler tractor, Azaha puffed out a bit of smoke and cinders. "Want breakfast warmed up?"

"N-no thanks. I expect it's just right." Maven took a bite, not even sure what porridge might be, or how 'just right' would taste. It was just oatmeal with no salt, butter or sugar.

The dragon was as beautiful as she imagined, the iridescence of its dark scales blending to make an overall shade of navy like her grandmother's carnival glass. She wondered if this too was a persona, as the dragonfly was, and if there was a third, more substantial, dragon somewhere between.

"Be careful of having expectations. They will bite you when you least expect it." Azaha snapped her jaws loudly, and then smiled at her own joke. Her fangs were as long as Maven's hand and sharp as heartbreak. "You, too, Fiona, pay attention. The First Rule applies to you as much as anyone else."

Fiona hadn't mentioned rules, but there had to be some—like not granting one's own wish. Fiona held her bowl out to one side of her chair where a small table appeared from the floor to accept it. "The Code of Wish-Granting. You will begin learning it tomorrow. The first Rule is to be careful what you wish for."

"Because you might get it?" Maven said. She set the bowl of porridge on the floor for lack of a better place, and it sank right in. What, if anything, had she just eaten, and what did she have to do to get the Lounge to make things appear?

Azaha took a moment to shrink to the size of a ton and a half

pickup. She turned toward Fiona. “You may wish for things to stay as they are which only brings a different kind of change.”

Fiona merely picked up her porridge and licked at it without comment.

Azaha chuckled, bringing up more smoke and sparks. “Let's see what she can do, then.” The Dragon grinned at the Bear who didn't grin back. “Get out your wand, Maven, and make me a present, whatever you think might be appropriate.”

“Maven has only just made her wand,” Fiona said, growling a little.

“Certainly time to start training her, then.” Azaha clearly did not take orders from Fiona. “Maven, think very clearly about an object, how it looks, how it feels, smells, everything about the object, and then imagine it in your hand.”

Fiona growled, or she could have been clearing her throat after a particularly thick bit of porridge.

Azaha took no notice. “Remember, mass is only energy moving very slowly.”

What did Dragons wish for?

Maven pondered while legends of hoards of jewels and gold appeared in her mind—would Azaha like a cat's-eye marble? Fireplace tools? Toothpicks and tongs? Something that might disappear or melt in her claws? The Bump blinked green.

Maven gestured, flicking her wand, her wrist snapping. Fiona flinched, and a junior barmaid carrying a tray back to the bar ducked. A few sprinkles came from the wand and shot across the tea table, sizzling into the back wall of the Twilight Lounge.

“Let me try again.” Maven concentrated on texture, smell, and taste,

feeling hungry for the food of love. She waved her wand gently over her hand, whispered to herself three times, then three times three—chocolate, chocolate, chocolate.

She imagined the energy from the Lounge, from the air, from the earth flowing into her, into her wand. She felt the tingle in her hand, and a slight heaviness, just as if the muscles were tired. But then she could feel it, feel a box, with lots of cunningly shaped pieces of candy, sweet, dark, nutty—an assortment of goodies with sensuous, bittersweet taste and smell. She opened her eyes, struck her palm with the wand, and a box of candy appeared. She was glad the box was closed, as her hand was pretty warm, and the chocolate inside no doubt slightly melted. Still, it appeared. She was pleased.

She stood up and held the box into the air for Azaha. “I’m not sure how to address a dragon, but such as it is, here it is. Thank you for your instruction.”

Azaha took the box delicately in her claws. “One addresses a dragon by the dragon’s name, if one knows it. Otherwise, “O Great Dragon” will suffice.”

“O Great Dragon Azaha.” Maven curtsied again. She was beginning to feel jerked around. She was ready to take on a new persona, as the curtseying stuck in her craw. Five had not been such a good age, partly because she’d had to wear these same damned crinolines, and because her elders always seemed to talk around her as if she couldn’t understand what they were saying.

“She knows how to respect her elders,” Azaha said to Fiona, offering a foil wrapped candy held precisely between two claws. Azaha chuckled again. “Now, young Maven, if you wish to grow to be an old

Maven, listen well to what Fiona will teach you. And listen to yourself.” Azaha sat back on her haunches. “When you find yourself in the Gorgeous Gorge, come for a visit. Remind me who you are and that I invited you. You, too, Fiona.”

Azaha flexed her wings and disappeared as the Twilight Lounge closed in on itself.

Maven sat and squirmed gingerly, hoping her chair would not disappear from under her. A cobra-hooded, wicker chair appeared. Belle joined them.

“Hate it when she pops in.” Belle scowled at Fiona. “Just as well she doesn't unless someone invites her.” Belle plopped into the chair, as heavy as her expression. She turned to Maven. “What do you think of dragons? Worth the trip?”

Maven twisted her pinafore, winding it up like a piece of rope. She looked at her hands and grabbed one hand to make the other let go of her dress. She spread them on her knees to keep them still. “Are all dragons like her?”

Belle shook her head. “Most of 'em would rather eat you. No traipsing off to see her. Might decide not to remember the invitation, though dragons never forget anything they want to remember.”

Fiona nodded. “She and I have an understanding, a special kind of relationship, but she has her own agenda.” Fiona handed her porridge bowl to Belle. “Could we have some tea?”

Belle patted the chair again, and said to no one in particular, “High tea for three.”

A table materialized where the pool had been, complete with tablecloth, a teapot, three cups, spoons, crumpets, sugar, and cream.

Belle poured. Neither Belle nor Fiona seemed inclined to expound on their dealings with Azaha, so they sat in silence for a few minutes. Belle munched on a crumpet, then swallowed it with a swig from her teacup. “How’s the training coming?”

Maven crunched her crumpet then reached for another. She set her cup down just a little too hard on the saucer. The handle broke away from the cup, leaving the handle in her hand. Then as she tried to decide what to do, the cup stuck itself back together. The tea service would be dancing and singing next.

Fiona leaned away from Belle, her voice taking on a growl.” Maven told you she and Tulip made their wands today.”

Belle frowned and shook her head.

“It was your idea, after all.” Fiona smiled, displaying her persona’s sharp teeth. “They complement each other.” She took another dainty sip of tea, not easy to do with inch long fangs and no lips.

Belle grunted. “That’s your story. Will you stick to it?” Finishing her tea, she glanced at Maven, pursing her lips like a dark, red wound across her broad face.

“The benefits of my plan will soon be apparent.” For a large brown bear, Fiona was quite delicate and precise, balancing her saucer on her great, furry knee, and holding the teacup with one claw extended.

“Have it your own way. You always do.” Belle cleared her throat. “Remember whose story this one is.” She made a slight gesture, and the noises of the Twilight stilled around Maven and Fiona. The Twilight closed in, cozy and private as Belle moved to the bar, and greeted a goblin who had sauntered in wearing pirate gear. The front of the tavern got louder as more patrons arrived, but the space in the back remained

hushed.

Maven set down her teacup carefully so as not to break it again. She glanced around at the shadowy forms behind them—play time for Industrial Light and Magic. But how was it different from the world she knew, other than being overrun with people who managed to play out their fantasies?

Fiona leaned back in her rocker. “Take out your wand again.”

Maven offered the peach switch handle first for inspection. Fiona first reached for, and then drew back her paws, as if she wanted to take the wand, but was afraid of it. “Never give your wand to another adept, nor attempt to handle hers, especially one more experienced.” She lay her paws in her lap, restlessly, and then took another sip of tea. “As the wand becomes attuned to your energy, no one else will be able to handle it while you are alive, without the energy impacting both of you.”

“Yes, ma'am. I'll be more careful” Maven started to put the wand back in its pocket.

“No, keep it out.” Fiona held a claw up to her ear. “Hold it to your ear and listen again. What are the stories of the patrons here in the Twilight?”

Maven held her wand to her ear. She heard scraps of conversation. As she scanned the crowd, she could see through some of personae, sometimes seeing the underlying being very clearly, and sometimes not able to penetrate the personae at all. The princess on her tower at the bar was actually an ogre. The unicorn beside her was an elvish prince who had given up and was now hitting on a troll, who might have been a princess under its long, stony body.

She heard a bit of each story—who was there to escape the daily

grind, who was looking for companionship, who was lying, and who was listening. It was disorienting, like 3-D cable surfing, like hearing twenty different cell phone conversations at once. Fiona, however, did not make the slightest blip—just as if she were not present.

“How do I sort through all this?”

“You focus on one person and ignore the rest. Get her story.” Fiona nodded her furry snout at the princess-ogre at the bar.

Under her princess persona, the ogre, slope-browed and massively muscular, gargled a thick sludge, gulped, and let out a burp like a rockslide. Dragging a club, she trudged to a booth. Her date had stood her up. Maven shook her head to clear it.

Fiona nodded. “The Lounge is a wish-free zone. Hence the persona. The Lounge provides a safe release for emotional and magical energy.”

As Maven watched, a gryphon, which might have been a wizard, joined the ogre. After a couple of rounds of rock, paper, scissors, they began to arm wrestle. Maven had no desire to continue listening, foreplay not being a spectator sport.

Fiona made a graceful motion with her massive paw and smiled. “To grant a wish, you must know what kind of story the client has, not just what she tells you, but what she is not telling. Try listening to Tulip's story, and yes, she will be listening to yours.”

Maven closed her eyes and thought of Tulip, unconsciously turning the wand toward her.

Like a remembered children's story, she saw scenes of Tulip as a child, running and playing with imaginary children, walking deep in forests looking for Brownies or Pixies. She was always asking questions about Mundane, and once got slapped for saying “real.”

For a moment, she saw Tulip in the present, waving at her, breaking her concentration. “So I am an obvious choice to answer Tulip's questions.” She took a sip of her tea, still waiting for her mind to come completely back to here and now. “She shows me Faery, and I show her about my side.”

Fiona sipped the last of her tea. “Please try to discourage her interest in it.”

“Discouraging a young person from doing something, in my experience, makes her even more determined to do it.” Maven had gone away to school against the advice and wishes of everyone in her family. “If Tulip listens to my story, she'll get an earful of how not to do things.”

Fiona smiled again, toothily. “Precisely my intent.”

Maven smiled too, without benefit of humor. What was Fiona's story and what wasn't Fiona telling her? Why didn't Belle want Tulip to get a wand? Belle clearly didn't like it at all.

Fiona was explaining. “It's important to listen to the story when you answer a call. Who is the client? Does she know who she is? What does she want? What will be the result if she gets her wish? What if she doesn't get it?”

Maven's head threatened to split from information overload. “How long do I have to get all this straight before I can grant the wish?”

“A few minutes. It will be time enough.” Fiona stood up and stretched her large paws on the floor, her furry backside in the air—bearish, and unladylike. Persona did inflict its own rules, even on Fiona. “Let's go. This fur is hot.”

Maven stood up too, brushing off her pinafore. “Do I need to carry the wand with me all the time?”

Fiona growled. “Don't leave the pod without it.”

Chapter Nine

Sharing Secrets

Maven settled on her hammock to sort out the whole long day and get some sleep. Someone scratched at her pod.

What now? They don't eat, they don't pee, and they don't sleep? Maybe she had joined a cult of some kind.

"Come in," she said, swinging her feet down from the hammock to sit. She was so tired. Tulip peeked in. "I fixed the bridge to the pod." She grinned, waving her wand to make small sparkles.

"Thanks. I'm still not too sure about this poofing," Maven said, not glad for company but hoping for some information. "How is your wand doing? I was listening to you today for practice. I hope you don't mind."

"Didn't you see me wave?" Tulip giggled. "Lots of people have listened to me. They have to practice on somebody." If she grinned any wider, her head would split in two. "But I've never had a wand before. It's so exciting."

"I'd offer you a seat, but..."

"I'll just sit here." Tulip sat cross-legged on the floor.

"So tell me about listening. You knew about it already? Or did you hear Fiona while we were at the Twilight?"

Tulip nodded. She put her finger to her lips, listened outside first with her ears, and then with her wand. "You are from...the Other Side, aren't you?" Tulip whispered. "I saw all kinds of things when I was listening to your story." She stared, both fascinated and repulsed. "How did you escape?"

Tell her straight or try to scare her? The Bump had no advice. “Fiona offered me a job, and she brought me here.” Both true and uninformative.

“I thought they couldn't do magic?” Tulip's shoulders drooped into the same curve as her mouth. “How can you be so good at it?”

“I thought you just had to believe in magic. Doesn't everyone here believe?” Maven hoped she could change the topic.

“Not everyone is good at doing it. I'm not.” Tulip's face fell. “If I could grant one wish, I could be a fairy godmother, but I can only grant wishes if I am a fairy godmother.”

“You did enough magic to get fussed at this afternoon.” Maven patted Tulip's shoulder. “Things aren't so different on this side. Can't get a job without experience, can't get experience without a job.”

“Yes, I did poof and make tea!” Tulip's smile stretched across her face. “I think Miss Fiona has only let me stay because of Aunt Belle.”

The Bump took notice—did Tulip call everyone “aunt” or “miss”?

“But now I have a wand. I have my chance.” Her face brightened, but then sagged again. “I don't think I could live as a peasant, and if I can't be a fairy godmother, I don't want to work for Miss Fiona. Maybe I could go back to work in the Twilight Lounge.”

“None of that!” Maven needed a pep talk herself, and maybe more information later. “Think positive. You did better than me this afternoon, so you must be pretty good.”

“I was going to practice on you.” Tulip rested her head on her hand, and her elbow on her knee. “But you haven't ever wished for anything. Why haven't you ever made a wish?”

“I made lots of wishes but they didn't come true. So there isn't much

point in wishing.” Maven stared at the wall.

“You were going to wish once, though,” Tulip said, “You were a little girl, and you blew all the seeds from a flower, but then you didn't wish. Why not?”

Maven remembered the dandelion, scattering the seeds in the breeze. She had closed her eyes to wish, and could think of nothing she dared ask for. She'd thrown the bare stem of the flower on the ground and stomped it.

“Do I look like someone who deserves to have a wish granted?”

“What is wrong with how you look?” Tulip closed her eyes and pointed her wand at Maven, listening.

Maven had been told she was too fat, too plain, too big, too loud, too smart—or maybe too dumb to see the obvious. If she had a wish, it was to be a fairy godmother. “I don't know,” Maven said. “Maybe I'm here so you can figure out how to grant a wish I don't know how to make. Or maybe you are a teacher. They say 'those who can, do. Those who can't do, teach.'”

Tulip giggled. “Silly. How can you teach something you can't do?”

“I never said it made sense.” Maven lay back on her hammock. “I was a teacher, and I knew people who couldn't teach what they knew how to do. A lot about the other side doesn't make sense.”

“You mean like the big metal beasts you ride in, and the huge buildings, and those weird clothes. And the spells!” Tulip jumped to her feet, waving her arms so Maven thought she might shake the whole pod loose from the plant. “Magic everywhere. Don't all those spells crash into each other day after day?”

“Spells?” Maven sat up. She'd never seen any spells.

“Writing on the walls and lighted up boxes and...” Tulip didn't know the words to describe what she saw in Maven's story. Her hands made the shapes of boxes, each one larger than the last, until, cowed by what she had seen, her shoulders drooped and her hands fell limp.

“Words everywhere. Does everyone make spells?” She folded her legs under herself, sitting again on the floor.

“Most people can read and write, but they don't make up spells.” Maven thought of all the signs, all the billboards, televisions, and computers with the words flooding through her old life—many badly spelled with worse grammar. “Could be why things are in such a mess.” She had kept journals, and written affirmations, and scribbled reams of therapeutic writing, to no avail. “Fairy people can't write?”

Tulip's eyes opened in horror. “Most people can do a little magic, but only the greatest Mages and strongest Adepts dare to write. What is written...is.”

“Let's try it.” Maven took a stubby pencil out of a pocket and a small notepad. “I can write

‘Tulip is a powerful fairy godmother.’ Fix you right up.”

“No.” Tulip screamed. Her face paled past white to green, and her chest heaved as she panted in fear. She jumped to her feet, wavered between trying to grab Maven's pencil and dashing out of the pod. Tears welled in her eyes. “You don't know what else might happen. It might get...” Tulip dropped her voice and mouthed, “Real.”

“Okay, Okay. I promise I won't do it.” Maven put the pencil and pad away, held her empty hands up. “See? No writing. Calm down.” Maven wanted to touch her, but she was afraid Tulip would freak completely.

She softened her voice. “Sit down. Breathe, honey. Breathe deep.” She took a deep breath herself and blew it out to show Tulip what to do.

Tulip sank back to the floor and breathed along with Maven. By the time Maven endured another hot flash, Tulip began to relax again.

“Now tell me more, so I won't do anything stupid.”

Tulip leaned back against the wall, limp after her panic attack. She took out her wand again. “I picked the rose because it was beautiful, and it smelled so good. But now I know it has thorns even when they have been cut off.” She seemed very sad. Her eyes shone with tears, and her mouth curved away from her usual smile.

“How so?”

“I listened to your story, the past, and some into the future. I didn't understand all the stuff about the Other Side, once I figured out where you were. But the future things didn't make sense either. It looks like you are going to rip down the Veil completely instead of making it stronger. And you might not live through it.”

“The Veil?”

Tulip jumped to her feet. “I should be going. It's late, and...”

“You sit right there, young lady, and tell me,” Maven said, all her authority booming out. She stopped and dropped her voice to a whisper, “and I'll tell you anything you want to know about the Other Side.”

Tulip listened again, with both her ears and her wand. She scooted closer to the hammock. “The Veil separates Faery from The Other Side, and it's breaking down. A lot of the other FGMs have disappeared into their own stories, granted their own wishes, or just disappeared. Some of them are on R&R, but you and I and Miss Fiona are the only ones working now.”

Maven nodded. "I knew there was something she didn't tell me."

Tulip shivered. "If we can keep the stories strong, The Veil will stay up, but from what I saw, it will break down entirely. Faery will be gone."

"We have to assume Fiona has a plan." Maven hoped Fiona wasn't the evil witch or stepmother character.

"I think her plan is for you to take over as FGM Superior so she can retire." Tulip looked away. "I've only had my wand one day, but I have been paying attention for a long time." She sighed. "Have you tried to listen to Miss Fiona's story?"

Maven shook her head. "I tried, but there was too much going on."

"I can't hear anything about her. Or Aunt Belle." She pulled her wand out again and pointed it at Maven. "Maybe I was doing it wrong, but I can hear you."

"There would have to be some way to hide from the magic. I thought we'd learn that first."

Maven sighed. She wondered what else she didn't know that she didn't know. "Show me some more about...the Other Side," Tulip said.

Maven thought about trying to scare her. But she remembered sitting at a bar in her youth with a girlfriend, drinking a black Russian and eyeing the guys who were betting and hooting over a five hundred dollar football pool. She sipped the sweet liquor and swapped snide comments about the team and the bettors. By the end of the drink, she was just buzzed enough to go home and fantasize herself to sleep.

Walking to her car, a teenage boy approached her. She expected him to try to score some beer, but he just bumped into her, called her a cow, and then threw up on her shoes. If she'd had a wand then, he would have been one sick frog.

Tulip stood up and patted Maven's arm. "When you decide what you want to wish for, you'd better call me."

"Don't worry, Tulip." Maven got off the hammock. "Things will look better in the morning." When Tulip stood up, Maven gave her a big hug. At first, Tulip was stiff, but then she relaxed into it, and then she hugged back hard. When they released each other, Tulip again blinked back tears.

"Good night, dear," Maven said. "Get some sleep."

Tulip slipped out of the pod, and Maven lay back down on her hammock. Just as she was dropping into sleep, she wondered what she needed to know. She began to mutter to herself, "I w..."

"No, you don't." said a sibilant voice from a fanged smile hovering above her face. "You aren't ready for the big picture, even if s-s-she could s-s-show it to you, and it truly is-s-s more fun if you are s-s-surprised." The smile faded from sight.

Got to get my Bump of Direction realigned.

Chapter Ten

Coffee

Honey-colored sunshine warmed Maven's pod, and insect songs awakened her. Her wand beeped like a school bus stuck in reverse. She pulled it out from under her pillow and listened.

"Come to my office for training. Now." Fiona was an early riser, but not a cheerful one. Mornings were not Maven's time of day, and after a day without coffee, her head threatened to erupt. It was already shooting stars through her brain and blowing acrid smoke across her eyes.

"Coming," she said. She started to poof, and then decided to try a little personal magic. She thought of a cup of coffee, dark and strong, imagined the smell, and then touched her left hand with her wand. A heavy ceramic mug appeared. It smelled good. She sipped first, and then drank it down. It was decaf—no buzz. She sighed heavily and poofed to Fiona's office.

Fiona looked like she hadn't had her coffee either. Tulip poofed in next, stifling a yawn. "When I tell you to rest, I don't mean for you to sit up half the night chattering." Fiona glared at each of them, and then swizzled up a teapot and three cups. She handed each of them a cup. "You have your wands. Now we can discuss the Code."

"Who gets a wish granted?" Maven sipped her tea, hoping it had some caffeine or magic in it. "Surely some women over eighteen make wishes, even old women, even men and trolls and dragons. Who gets lucky?"

"To some extent, you decide. After all, you grant the wish."

“But most of the stories I know are for young women who at most want to be married well. Don't they ever wish for anything else?”

“The young are very emotional and often extremely single-minded about what they want.” Fiona sipped her tea, her face brightening.

“Those wishes are easier to grant. Older people find it difficult to focus emotional energy.” Fiona paused significantly. “Action is much more dependable than magic for the everyday things. Would you truly have wanted the brownies to keep your house clean?” Her gaze touched Maven with an almost physical intensity.

Maven startled, nearly spilling her tea. How many times she had said that very thing. “I don't know. What do they charge?”

“Excellent question.” Fiona nodded. “Often the price is too high, or the work is not satisfactory. Magic is best for the one-time opening of the door, not an on-going routine.” Fiona held her hand over the crystal ball for a moment. “Listen to your wands.”

Maven held the wand upright and closed her eyes. After a moment, she saw a serving woman named Dolores, a few years older than Ashleigh, and better dressed. Dolores was having a tantrum. She was covered with small bruises, not so much because she bumped into things, but she slammed doors, which bounced back into her face, or threw things, breaking them and leaving shards that she stepped on.

“Why is she so angry?” Maven asked. “She's a whole list of accidents waiting to happen.”

“She hasn't done any work,” Fiona said, frowning. “She simply complains and avoids it.” “She just doesn't like it. What's so bad about that?” Tulip said.

“I hate housework too.” One benefit of Maven's new job was she

had no housework to do. If she could just get the hang of pleasing Fiona, and not doing anything to make it all collapse, things would be perfect. The Bump thought that was too easy.

“She hates any kind of work that makes her think or sort things out.”

Fiona considered each of her apprentices in turn. “Dolores hates herself, she hates the house, so the house hates her, and both of them are taking it out on her body. Anything she wishes for will hurt her—perhaps immobilize her so she can't do housework—for you can hear her wish not to do housework.”

Maven nodded. “But there has to be more to the story, some reason why she is in so much pain.” Of all the ways fluttering through Maven's consciousness for the woman to escape her housework, most of them would also make her unable to do anything else. The woman felt trapped. Maven felt sorry for her—she'd been there. She was still there.

“Can't we help her see what she is doing? Show her how to stop?”

Tulip slumped on her toadstool, her eyes shining with tears. “Do I have to grant a wish if I know it will make things worse?”

Fiona smiled, nodding at Tulip. “Rule One says, 'Be careful what you wish for.' Someone might grant you exactly what you ask. Yes, it is up to you how you grant a wish, so it is very important you listen carefully and evaluate the story. You can choose to reward or punish.”

Maven considered this for a second or two. “So this is who gets the dark side of what she wishes for—toads and snakes as it were, dropping from her mouth with every word.”

Fiona smiled. “Excellent example. Now she knows the problem comes from within.”

“No, she doesn't.” Maven's teacup rattled on its saucer as she

gestured in frustration. "She thinks it's the world doing it to her again. Why not show her a different path? Let her know she could do something else."

Fiona stared at Maven. "You must get her attention first, which generally requires pain." Tulip hunched on her toadstool, her arms around her knees and her head bowed.

"She's in pain now, but she doesn't seem to be learning much."

"Shhh." Fiona hissed. "She's wishing."

Dolores threw down her frying pan, which bounced off her big toe. She collapsed, sobbing on the kitchen floor. "I wish...I wish..."

Fiona sighed. "Until she learns how to separate out what she is doing to herself from what is happening around her, she will be stuck"

From the story came the wailing cry, "I wish I never had to do housework again." Fiona waved her hand toward Maven. "How would you grant her wish?"

Maven struggled to grasp a solution. "I'd promote her to supervisor. She will make sure it gets done right," Maven said, listening both to the wand and The Bump. Her sympathy for Dolores made the decision hard.

"No," Tulip said. "If she won't do this job, she won't do that one."

"What is she wishing for?" Fiona tapped her wand on her palm. "She would have to go behind her charges to do it over, and she still has not learned sorting. She could just make life miserable for others..." Fiona paused, considering, "which could be a type of teaching story in itself."

"Wouldn't it be better to just change her attitude? Make her like housework?" Tulip said. She relaxed enough to put her feet back on the floor.

Fiona's frown deepened. "We can make changes in circumstances, but only the individual can change her own mind. You can't make one person fall in love with another, for example, not true love."

"But it's all right to just nudge them together, then? A fine line of distinction." Maven took a big swallow of tea. "So, fire her. Let her be unemployed for a while. Always gives me an attitude adjustment."

Fiona said, "I will follow Maven's suggestion and dismiss her. Perhaps she will begin to sort out her thoughts and find a chance to redeem herself. Wait here." With barely a sparkle, Fiona swizzled and poofed.

While she was gone, Maven continued to listen. The mistress of the house stormed into the kitchen and dismissed Dolores, allowing her only a few minutes to collect her few belongings and carry them out the back door. As the kitchen door slammed behind her, the woman sank to her knees in tears in the alley. Maven tried to look further down the road into the future, but it was too blurry. Perhaps Dolores didn't have any future.

Fiona reappeared, standing in front of her desk.

Maven stood up, almost in Fiona's face. "Help me understand. Fairy godmothers just keep the story on track, make sure the good guys win, give the people on my side something to believe in. Faery is for making the stories. So what is the right answer for Dolores? What's the lesson?"

"That remains to be seen. Can she learn humility? Will she learn to ask for help or accept it when it is offered?" Fiona poured herself more tea, offered Maven a refill.

Maven declined.

"Will she offer to help when someone comes to her with a need?" She waited patiently for an answer. "You didn't have a problem your first

time. How did you know what to do?"

Maven shrugged. "It was just a test. I knew the story. I figured I wouldn't get the job anyway, so, I just went with my gut. A no-brainer."

Fiona tilted her head. "No brainer? Ah, not using the brain. Using the heart is one key as long as balance between heart and mind is maintained." Then she frowned, leaning back to sit on her desk. "But you did use your brain to add an unnecessary twist to the story—letting her see all the people as they were. She did not marry the prince after all."

"She didn't wish to marry the prince." Maven squirmed and sighed, dropping her shoulders so she could relax. "Ashleigh just wished to go to the ball and have the horses and things. She got them."

"Why did you go as well?"

"I always wanted to go to a ball, like any other girl." Maven struggled against a sudden rush of emotion. "I wanted to see if it was all it was cracked up to be, but it was pretty much what I expected."

"Ah, yes, but what if you had expected something wonderful? Would you have been disappointed? Or would it have been wonderful if you had been surprised?"

If Fiona expected to surprise Maven, she was not disappointed. Maven sat perfectly still but leaned slightly to the left, half-a-bubble off plumb.

Pangs of recognition shot through The Bump, making her mind spin counterclockwise. It made her dizzy. "You mean I see what I expect to see? And how about my...my wishers? Do they see what they expect or what I expect?"

Fiona's nodded. "You said you knew the story, and you had always

wanted to do it differently. Why?"

"It was all magic. She just did what she was told," Maven said. "Be good, do everything everyone tells you, and let people run over you, and then poof, you're a princess. Some of us are not born beautiful or good." She thought the evidence in her own case was enough to convict.

Fiona leaned back on her desk. "Magic could only get her to the ball, and in your case, let her see the people there as you saw them. The rest was up to her. At least in the traditional version, the prince had to find her. You let her make her own decision, which brings a change of power to the entire kingdom."

Maven felt a shock run down her back. Fiona let her fool around with someone else's actual life? With no warning? No coaching? A concept from quantum physics crossed Maven's mind— what you see depends on how you set up the experiment. The fairy godmother is part of the story. What had Fiona said about not going into her own story?

What did Fiona wish for?

"You did not know how to listen to the story to see how it would come out" Fiona said. "Stories teach. Stories tell us how to understand the world."

"But what about Ashleigh?" Maven hung her head, slumped. Failed again. "I didn't mean to ruin her life."

"Nothing will ever make Ashleigh happy. You twisted the story, but you did not change her outcome significantly." Fiona waved her hand, dismissing the question. In any case, the prince is married to her stepsister. The story is turning out well, better than with Ashleigh."

Just a slightly fractured fairy tale—and a break in Fiona's story. She'd lied about the simulator. Maven asked The Bump what else Fiona

might not have told her, but as usual, The Bump didn't answer. "Who learns from the story?"

"You do." Fiona straightened up, towering over Maven sitting on the toadstool. "Your client does. Anyone who tells the story learns from it, as does anyone who hears it. So it is important to keep the story strong."

Maven reached back to lift her hair off the back of her neck where she felt sweaty. "So what is the right answer? What's the lesson?"

"Can Ashleigh learn to be happy? Will Dolores learn how to sort?" Fiona offered her students more tea.

Maven set her teacup down again. "Plato, then, was right—but are we the shadows or the ones making the shadows?"

Fiona stared at Maven, her expression haggard and worn for a brief second as if she'd pulled a few too many all-nighters. "Light is defined by shadows," she said after a few long seconds. "You cannot see if there is only light."

Maven thought on this, recognizing the answer was true but incomplete. "You didn't answer my other question. Who gets to make wishes? Only the beautiful and obedient? Why not ugly stepsisters, older brothers, and old women? What did Ashleigh's stepsister wish for?"

"In most cases, they do not ask. There are few stories about elders making wishes, and they all turn out badly." Fiona turned to Tulip, dismissing Maven's question and changing the subject. "What are the other Rules of Wish Granting?"

Tulip sat up, smiling. "Wishes have to be spoken out loud. A wish should only change space and time locally. FGMs do not grant their own wishes, and only some people can grant wishes."

“Well-spoken.” Fiona did not smile. “You have been eavesdropping, then.” Tulip slouched on her toadstool.

“You will each have your chance to become fairy godmothers. If you do not show your understanding of the rules, then you may find yourselves working as peasants or worse.”

Tulip's eyes widened in horror.

“Yes, ma'am.” Maven and Tulip chimed. Fiona clapped her hands twice. “Map.”

Maven nearly jumped out of her skin as a large paper airplane of unusual design swooped through the air beside her ear and landed on a niche in the wall behind Fiona's head. It unfolded itself and spread out flat, erasing the fold lines, and suspending itself at a convenient height. It appeared to be made of vellum in an irregular shape, but what Maven noticed was the changing shapes and boundaries of each kingdom and duchy, which blended into each other, and sometimes off the map itself. Even as she watched, the map itself changed shape and shrank.

Some of the areas were clearly marked and stable. Others shifted, dark and brooding. A few areas looked back at Maven and smiled, but perhaps not in a friendly way. The Twilight Lounge was near the center of the map as was FGM HQ, but while their positions relative to each other did not change, their geographic positions did. Poofing suddenly seemed safer than going around the long way.

“Now you have your wands, you can poof, and you can listen to stories.” Fiona waved her hand across the map, which responded with brighter, deeper colors. “Now you will learn what you are here to do.”

Fiona pointed to one of the darker areas, which expanded as they watched one kingdom enclose the next like watercolor bleeding into a

wet area. “Maven, listen to the kingdom of Prince H.R., here on the map.”

Maven pointed her wand toward H.R.'s country. The nation's darkness was expanding due to a border war with Pantopia, held by the guardians of the Princess Vivienne. The courts negotiated a marriage between the two royal families to end the war. Vivienne was required to wed Prince H.R. Maven heard many conflicts, but not much of a story—no narrative structure or character development.

Fiona pointed to a small blue area far from Maven's section. “Tulip, listen in the west to Lady Waderfell's duchy.”

“There's a whole bunch of water sprites splashing all over,” Tulip said. As Tulip focused her wand on the map to listen closely, a dull white spot glowed on the map at her location. Tulip looked up expectantly. “Do I go now?”

“Not yet.” Fiona held her hands out, palms up, as if weighing something between them. “You must decide if you will grant the wish. Whom does it affect? What happens if she gets what she wants? If she does not?” Fiona turned to caress her crystal ball for a second. “Tell me what will happen if we do nothing.”

Tulip smiled. “The sprites will go away as soon as things dry up. So what she needs is some help drying things up.” She grabbed her wand and got ready to poof.

“Now,” Fiona asked, slowly with a significant arch to her eyebrow, “does water, in your experience, evaporate if nothing is done about it?”

“Yes, but the whole duchy is soaked. Some people can't get into their houses. The sprites are making things worse by the minute. I could just...”

“Why is everything wet?” Fiona's gaze became positively piercing. Tulip shrank back as far as she could without falling off the toadstool.

Tulip listened again to her wand. “The Lady used a lot of magic to make it rain.”

“While it is not prohibited in the Code,” Fiona said, “one adept cannot undo another's magic.” Fiona leaned back on her desk.

Tulip put her wand away. Her shoulders sagged. “Maven, how does Rule One apply here?”

“She got what she asked for.” Maven listened to the Lady, whose skirts were soaked to her knees. It would be funny story except to the main character. Comedy was like that.

“You can grant a wish, knowing the person will be harmed by it, if your assessment of the situation is the best outcome. Such as in Dolores's case.” She smiled at Maven.

Maven felt guilty. “We have power over their lives?” Maven thought harder for a solution to Dolores's problem. It hit a little too close to home.

Fiona nodded. “You live with the consequences of the wish, just as your clients do. Tulip, repeat Rule Three.”

“FGMs do not grant their own wishes.” Tulip spoke softly and did not look up.

“We do not have enough perspective to direct our own stories. If we did grant our own wishes, then we could not get help from someone else because no one else can undo our magic. So Tulip, what can you do about Lady Waderfell's dilemma?”

“Nothing?” Tulip said. “I can't change the magic, but couldn't I help dry things up?”

“What do you think, Maven?” Fiona pointed a finger at Maven, casually, but precisely, as if she might send a bolt of magic through her at any moment.

“She asked for it. She got it,” Maven said.

“Yes. Rule One.” Fiona nodded to Maven. “What is the story of H.R.'s kingdom?”

“H.R. is taking over the other kingdom, and he wants to marry the princess to make his claim more legitimate. Her guardians agree, but she doesn't like it. Nobody made a definite wish yet.” Maven pointed her wand at the map again, listening very hard. “So, I have no jurisdiction.”

Fiona paused, focusing on each of her students in turn. “You can listen to each person in the story for a clearer perspective, allowing yourself to foresee possible consequences and guide events in the direction you think best.”

Fiona walked first around Maven perched on her toadstool. “Maven, you have more life experience.” Then she walked around Tulip, who folded her arms and tried to be very small. “But Tulip has more experience with the magic of stories.” Fiona leaned against her desk.

Tulip sat up and risked a small smile at Maven, who winked.

Fiona shrugged. “Listen to the story and follow the code. You may decide to give the client what she wants, or to put another obstacle in her way to teach her a lesson.”

Fiona paused, waiting for questions. “If I discover you intentionally or persistently acting against the Code of Wishing, then I will assign you elsewhere—referred to locally as R&R. Restraint and Re-Education. Your assignment then will be based on my experience as I listen to your story.”

Maven heard the threat behind the word. Her own story was up for public view. How could she block Fiona's listening? How would she go about listening to Fiona's story? "Where I come from there is a saying. 'Those whom the gods want to destroy, they merely grant their wishes.'"

Fiona smiled without warmth or sympathy. "True enough, however, I do not put stock in gods. They are just wizards who wear their robes too short."

Maven's eyes twinkled as she glanced at Tulip. There might be a crack in Fiona's armor yet. Fiona stepped between them. "You have responsibility," she said. "You can curse by granting a wish. You are responsible for what you do, and the client is responsible for what she does."

Maven noted Fiona did not mention a male possibility. Were men responsible for what they did? Or didn't a man get a chance to wish?

What do men wish for? Besides that?

Tulip spoke up. "When we listen to the stories, do we see what could happen, or what will happen?"

Tulip got the 'good student' smile from Fiona. "There are no certainties, although some outcomes are more likely than others."

Fiona sat behind her desk. "Remember, your client has chosen the path she walks."

The Bump sent Maven an image of a myth she had read of ancient priestesses leaping to their death in the sea to avoid capture and rape by invaders—their freedom to choose death. "What happens if I grant a wish and my client gets killed? What if they wish to kill someone else?" asked Maven.

"FGMs do not kill. If your client wishes for death or murder, don't

respond.” Fiona leaned over and opened up a drawer on the lower side of her desk. A few insects flew out—a moth or two and a swarm of some things too small to see clearly except for the iridescence of their wings.

She shook some sparkly dust from the objects in the drawer and then handed them to Maven and Tulip.

“Here are your wings. They are your insignia as official fairy godmothers. Keep them with you at all times. They will eventually be replaced with corporeal wings when you have mastered enough magic to handle them, but for now, put these on.”

The wings looked like giant dragonfly wings, two long ovals of veined lace on each side, connected by a round piece in the middle from which hung two slings of gossamer. The gossamer stretched and shrank to fit, as usual, so once in place, the wings were comfortable. And even if they could not fly, they could flutter. Maven was self-conscious, but she felt she at least looked the part. Tulip was ecstatic. She pirouetted, fluttered, and spun around, knocking dust and magical accoutrements off the crowded shelves.

“Stop.” Fiona cried. “Now.”

Tulip dropped to the floor in a heap of sparkles, dust, and shame. Fiona glared. “If you are going to keep those wings, I suggest you use them outside my office. Go to Lady Waderfell's duchy and listen. Do not grant anything, just listen. Do not be seen. I will call you in an hour.”

Tulip disappeared.

Maven was studying the map again. A small pink spot was glowing. It represented a milkmaid, Daisy, who expressed a very heartfelt desire. Fiona listened for a moment.

“Maven, your first client awaits you.” Fiona said. “It is a very

simple wish. Grant it, and then return for more training.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Maven said, saluting with her wand.

Chapter Eleven

Daisy's Wish

Maven made herself tiny and invisible as she poofed to Daisy's side. As Fiona said, getting a lot of information in a short time was easy. She listened to Daisy's whole life story in the time it took to transport to her location.

On a country lane, hardly wide enough for three people to pass between the fields of the Lord Rapine, in the kingdom of Prince H.R., Maven followed Daisy the milkmaid to her tiny hut. The day was sunny and bright, cool, yet bursting with late spring flowers and new growth. Daisy had finished the morning milking chores and was cleaning up outside her hut to eat her lunch. She already put her day's allotment of milk to cool for the next cheese she had in mind—a soft cheese flavored with dill. Along the way to the dairy, she picked cherries to eat with a loaf of bread her sister had baked. At least there was plenty to eat, unlike some of her friends who supported their children, or their parents or their husbands, or all of the above. Again, she wished, imagining herself beside the prince as the Lady Bountiful.

Maven swirled her wand around herself to appear in the lane where the client Daisy was wishing very hard. Daisy wasn't thinking of a routine assignment for practice. Her wish was the turning point of her life.

This girl didn't look much like a Cinderella. Daisy was a big girl, strong and tanned, with dark brown hair braided down her back. She could probably wrestle a cow to the ground with one hand and not spill a drop of cream from a pitcher in the other. But she had eyes a cow would

cry for in a beautiful oval face, and everything else was equally well placed. Maven appeared in front of Daisy, startling her out of her daydream.

“Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true,” Maven said, only just restraining from singing. “I’m your fairy godmother. What can I do for you?”

Daisy wasted no time being startled or shy. She checked Maven out, noting requisite gossamer, wings, wand, and silver hair. “Oh, Fairy Godmother, I want to have tiny, tiny feet so the prince will fall in love with me and marry me.”

The Bump thumped Maven's head. Daisy stated her wish, but it was not what Daisy really wanted. What did The Bump think Maven could do about it?

“So what you actually want is the prince.” Maven chose her words carefully. “How do you propose to meet him?”

Daisy's intense fantasy left the detail vague. She twisted a loose strand of her hair. “What? Maybe he will have a ball. Or maybe he will ride through the fields and see me.”

“I might be able to help, but you have another problem. This particular prince has just sacked the kingdom next door and demanded the princess as the price of peace. She is on her way to marry him as we speak.” Maven scratched her head and considered. They talked about granting the wish, but the wisher had to ask for it. She didn't want Daisy to waste her one big chance on a silly wish. How to get her on another track? “Now I might be able to set you up as his mistress—lots of pretty clothes, a great house, servants, a generous allowance, and no actual work except when he has the night off.”

Daisy considered this. She had never seen the prince up close enough even to be able to recognize him without his crown and uniform. His mistress could do almost anything she wanted. But she had been fighting her way out of a roll in the hay for a long time now. What the prince had in that department wasn't likely any more than any other man.

"I am not that kind of girl." Daisy's eyes burned under her eyebrows, their fiery expression reassuring Maven she was on the right track.

Okay, one down. "You want to be the princess, then, lots of state occasions, living in the castle doing needlework, traveling to local bazaars and trade fairs to kiss babies and talk the local squires' wives into keeping shorter leashes on their husbands?"

"What else do princesses do? I do enough of that as a dairy maid with my girlfriends." Daisy frowned, shaking her head. It was time to plant new seeds, or to rake back the mulch to see what was coming up on its own.

"So what is it you truly want? What does your ideal life look like?" Maven waved her arm in a sweep across the countryside. "The whole world is open to you—you have a fairy godmother. Only be careful what you ask for."

The girl stared past Maven into the distance and cupped her hands as if she was forming a ball of dough. "I would like to help all my friends. I would give them money, or a place to stay, so they would not have to put up with husbands being mean or working themselves to death. Women could make a good life, raise their children, and keep the money for what they do rather than handing it their husbands or fathers."

This was why Maven wanted to be a fairy godmother. "Okay, what do you need to start?" Daisy was still far away, building her shiny new

world. "I would create my own dairy where

I could make the cheese the right way. My sister could do her fine sewing and not just patch rags together. Where..."

While she spoke, Maven raised her wand and opened up her consciousness to scan the area. Across the fields, a bedraggled carriage lumbered along the main road. Inside the horse-drawn vehicle, a pale and weary princess complained again to her companion. She was tired, hungry and anxious about the upcoming nuptials. The woman spoke to the driver, and with a nudge from Maven, he turned down the dairy lane.

"Daisy," Maven spoke sharply to get her attention. "Don't you have some fresh water? And don't you have some of your famous cheese? Gather them quickly and whatever else you can find. Put the meal on a plate. Bring a cup and a napkin. Now, Daisy."

The dairymaid's head jerked up. "I didn't know fairy godmothers got hungry." No time to explain. "Yes, we do. Now hop to it, lively."

Daisy ran into the hut and brought out a cloth with a small cheese, the cherries she picked in the morning, and a small loaf of bread—her own dinner. "It isn't much, Fairy Godmother, but you can have..."

Maven had disappeared, though she hovered nearby, listening with both her own senses and her wand. She needed to get everyone's story.

The carriage rumbled up almost to Daisy's feet, dust and mud nearly hiding the gilding on the frame and the red paint on the sides. But even a worn, dirty carriage was a very impressive sight, and unusual in the extreme. Daisy backed up and looked at the ground, observing from the corners of her eyes. She knew better than to look directly at gentlefolk.

The footman hopped down from the back and stood between her and the carriage. Peeking up through her eyelashes, Daisy caught her breath.

The footman was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on.

The footman was well trained, too, opening the door and pretending to look elsewhere as he spoke.

“You, there, wench. Where can we find an inn with delicate food for my lady princess?” “There is none such in our village, sir.” She took a deep breath and made bold. “I have fine cheese here, sir. I have made it myself, and fresh cherries. If your lady can eat plain bread, I have some of that as well.”

From inside the carriage came a soft voice, almost like a child. “Oh, yes, just some plain food before I die of hunger.”

Another voice made an unpleasant murmur from the shaded darkness.

Daisy handed the cheese to the footman, along with the cherries in their bowl and the loaf. “If she can wait for a moment, I will fetch a bit of wine from my sister.” She cursed herself for forgetting the cup and clear water the strange woman instructed her to fetch just before the carriage showed up.

A soft voice came out from the dark inside the carriage. “Just some good, clear water. Tell her, Henry. And give her some money.”

Daisy dashed into the hut to get some water in a cup. The water had been drawn early, so it had settled clear as morning. She dipped a cup full, and picked up a small towel. She brought them to the footman, Henry, the soft disembodied voice had named him. She was ashamed of the chipped cup and the frayed towel. Her cheeks burned, she knew they were flushed red. She saw that Henry noticed.

There was some discussion in the darkness of the coach. The soft voice argued with a colder, deeper one.

The soft voice became harder. “She looks healthy enough. I can eat what a healthy girl eats.” More murmuring.

Maven aimed her wand at the footman to get his take on things.

Henry watched the dairymaid with the edges of his eyes, listened to the usual arguments within the coach. He kept his face stern, but allowed a hope to enter his consciousness. His hopes were granted by the soft voice.

“Ask her name and who her master is. I will want more of this cheese.”

Glad to have occasion, Henry took a good look at the girl, her beautiful eyes, and her strong arms brown in the sun, her loose peasant blouse above her tightly cinched vest, her...

He cleared his throat and barked, afraid his voice would betray him. “Your name, wench? And your master's?”

“My name is Daisy of the house of Lord Rapine on the River.” She held her head up and looked Henry straight in the face. “I work for Lord Rapine, but this cheese is of my own work, not of his stores.”

Henry did not move a muscle but his eyes widened as they connected with Daisy's. His heart nearly stopped. He labored to breathe.

A small, gloved hand held out a very small purse to the footman. “Tell her to come to Prince H.R.'s castle kitchen tomorrow. I will speak with her master. Let us go.”

“Come to the castle tomorrow, wench...Daisy.” Henry closed the carriage door, and stepped back to his perch and looked back at Daisy. The carriage rumbled toward the castle.

She smiled and waved.

Henry's heart grew tight in his chest—as did other parts of his

anatomy in their appointed garments. He smiled back.

Maven smiled, and put her focus back on Daisy.

A whole new vista of possibilities opened before Daisy. Having a princess as a sponsor instead of a prince had many advantages to consider. She would get someone to cover for her at the dairy and go to the castle kitchen, as the princess commanded. Inside the purse were several coins, more than she had ever seen at one time.

Maven heard her thoughts clearly.

If this was the going rate for cheese, she could have been making money for herself for years. Why hadn't she thought of it before?

Maven grinned. What a great job! A new business prospect and a budding love interest with almost no effort at all. If this was routine, she could handle six wishes in the morning while drinking her coffee. Maven returned to Fiona's office ready to take on all the wishes of Faery.

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"You did what?" Fiona flew around her desk, dislodging several cobwebs. Apparently, Fiona didn't like surprises.

Maven was too taken aback to move. "I gave her what she wanted. I granted her wish." Fiona's face reddened and her jaw set. Maven felt like she was in the principal's office, getting a lecture for teaching instead of doing crowd control. She knew the routine. Stand stolidly, say nothing, and when it was over, resolve never to get caught again. When would she learn? Do what you did, get what you got. Another story from Faery

where things stayed the same the more they changed.

Fiona retrieved the Rules of Wishing and held them out, like a gauntlet, a challenge to Maven.

“Read Section 3-A,” Fiona said, “You do read? Aloud.” With visible effort, Fiona restrained her wand-wielding hand.

“Wishes must be consciously stated verbally or in writing, preferably in triplicate. Unconscious desires may be acted upon by the Wisher, but may not be granted by Granter unless stated as above.

“NOTE. Any such action may result in loss of granting powers, and possibly the reassignment of Granter. Prompting Wishers to make such wishes will result in expulsion to the dimension of Minimalist Fiction. Prompting Wishers in any fashion will be disciplined on a case-by-case basis by Granter's superiors.”

Disciplined did not sound like a happy-making activity. What could Fiona do to her? Maven wasn't afraid of Minimalist Fiction—she had lived there most of her sleeping life.

In carefully modulated tones, Fiona said, “You did not grant her a wish.” She held up her hand to forestall any protest. “You disrupted the space-time continuum and set a series of events in motion, but she never asked for that. She never made that wish. And you did not grant the one she did make.”

“I granted her wish. I gave her what she wanted,” Maven protested.

Fiona leaned forward in an intimidating manner. “Yesterday you suggested taking a client's livelihood away from her to teach her a lesson. Today you involved a peasant in a story between two royals. What could possibly have prompted you to do such a thing?”

“The story,” Maven said. “Daisy wanted to marry the prince to help

her friends. She didn't want to be a princess. She wasn't in love. I listened to the story and asked what she wanted." Maven held up her hands. "I heard the carriage coming, and I knew if she met up with the princess, she would have a chance."

Fiona crossed her arms. Obviously that was the wrong answer.

Maven felt the weight of failure dragging her heart into her gut. "She said what she wanted, and the time was right, almost too late." Maven's voice slid to a higher pitch, almost pleading. "The princess did not show up there by accident."

"I am aware of that, but the milkmaid is not." Fiona's voice was cold and crisp, like dead leaves underfoot. "She did not see any magic, and she doesn't feel transformed. She thinks she was just lucky. Our clients must know they have been served."

Maven sank down to sit on the toadstool. "We have public relations problems?"

Fiona's finger slid up the bridge of her nose and circled the middle of her forehead, listening to Maven on a different level. "Yes. We must maintain our relationship to our clients. Faery depends on us."

Maven shrugged. "I thought being lucky would, in itself, indicate a fairy godmother had been around."

"When was the last time you got lucky?" Fiona glared at Maven, her eyebrow raised and her lips pressed thin.

"Exactly my point." Maven stared back.

Fiona didn't blink.

Maven shook her head, slumping as Fiona towered over her. "Her fairy godmother shows up, tells her to go get some food, and disappears when her princess shows up. Sounds like magic to me."

Fiona sighed. “No sparkle, no flash, and no transformation. Happenstance.” Fiona leaned back on her desk. “At least you did ask her for something. But Daisy gave the food to the princess, not to you, so she doesn't understand.”

Maven slumped farther, resting her elbows on her knees. She felt like a large, lavender toad. “Do I have to turn her into a frog before she gets it?”

“I have been known to transform even trainees.” Fiona's expression focused significantly on Maven, “Which tends to give them a grounded perspective. Now what are you going to do about it?” Fiona waited for an answer. Dust motes crashed together in a beam of sunlight.

Maven finally spoke though her mind was blank. “What are my options? I can't just show up this afternoon and say, ‘Okay, here's another chance? I screwed up, and you get another wish.’ If we are worried about our image, that won't do.”

Fiona relaxed two and a half degrees. “Such a scenario does not sound professional?”

“Hardly. But if she thinks I didn't grant her a wish, it's worse.”

“I will have to set a closer watch on her, more than the usual background scan we maintain all the time.” Fiona held her palm over the large crystal ball on her desk and made several circles. She appeared to be talking, but Maven could not hear her or see inside the crystal. How much did it see, and where and when? Big Sister was watching. But who watches Big Sister?

What did Fiona wish for?

Fiona dropped any expression from her face. Her gaze was direct and her mouth set in a stiff line. “You should not appear until she makes

a wish. She believes it is all coincidence.”

Maven sat, projecting an image of contrition. She made a valiant effort not to be turned into a frog.

“Now, we are going to try again.” Fiona walked around Maven, her precise movements as deadly as a cobra. She made it clear that we meant Maven. “I want you to understand clearly what the difficulty is you created this morning. Remember the exercise in listening to the story?” Fiona paused, waited for a nod. “Daisy's is a teaching story—what comes from reaching above one's place. Her wish was unfocused and ill conceived. She had no plan, and no reason to think what she asked for would get her what she wanted, if she even knew what it was.”

“But I...”

“Yes, you.” Fiona glared “You decided to do a little teaching of your own. Now there are three stories involved, all of them skewed, and you still have not granted your first wish.” Fiona paused to give Maven time to think and to worry.

Maven ground her teeth.

Fiona continued. “The youngest daughter of a woodcutter over in the Western Deep Forest is making a foolish wish. When you grant her wish, give her exactly, to the letter, what she asks for. Nothing else. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Maven resisted the urge to salute and click her heels together. She had to remember where she was. Faery would only be fun if she were a fairy godmother.

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She poofed to the Western Deep Forest, where it was late afternoon, dark with unsettling noises under the trees.

Little Nell, her client, was pale and stringy as cold spaghetti. The child sat weeping on a stump outside a hut that could have passed for badly-stacked kindling. Her shift was patched, frayed, and dirty—very unlike any story Maven had read.

Maven appeared with a bit of flash and rainbow sparkles. Little Nell didn't notice. She was busy wiping her nose with the ragged edge of her shift.

“Little Nell, why all the tears?”

Nell didn't even look up. “I hate living in the Forest. I hate being poor. I hate being bored. I want to have some fun.” She snuffled.

“Is having fun what you truly wish for?” She was not going to prompt, but she was going to have the child make her own wish.

“Yes, I wish I could have some fun around here,” Little Nell whined. “But there's nothing to do, no one to play with, and no money and no...”

Maven couldn't resist bonking the child over the head with her wand, making a flash of light and a spray of sparkles. “OK, from now on, if you aren't having fun, it's your own damn fault.”

Dazed, Nell stared at Maven. She may have hit the child a bit too hard, but she got Nell's attention.

A voice yelled from inside the hut. “Little Nell. Get in here and sweep this house.” A frown crossed Little Nell's face, followed by

confusion, and then by a grin of delight.

“Yes, Mamma!” She jumped up and ran into the house. In seconds, a cloud of dust floated out the door. Maven made herself invisible.

“Slow down, silly girl, you'll knock the house down.” The voice said. The hut did look like it was in danger of being swept away.

“But Mamma, it's fun.” In seconds, Little Nell swept the tiny hut, the yard, the chicken coop, and she headed down the path toward the village.

“Little Nell. Come back here. Nell.” Her mother came to the door, thin, pale, and tired. She sagged against the doorway, tired from the effort of yelling.

Maven hoped Nell's mother would make a wish, but she was too exhausted. Maven had her orders, so she did nothing. Maybe now Nell would be some help to her mother.

Merrily, Little Nell swept herself back to the hut. Her mother jerked the broom from her with a suspicious look. “We need water. Get two bucketsful.”

“Yay,” Little Nell shouted. “Down to the stream.” She grabbed a bucket nearly as big as she was, and started running.

Mission accomplished, Maven thought. She poofed back to FGM Central to await her next assignment, certain Fiona would be pleased.

“Fun? You granted the brat's wish to have fun?” Fiona's face was red, and her elbows jutted out like buckled steel girders.

Maven shifted her weight, centering herself on her feet. With each phrase, she shifted her head back and forth like a snake. “Girls just want to have fun. I didn't prompt her. I did ask her specifically. She did make her own wish.” Maven glared back at Fiona, setting her jaw and

clenching her fists by her sides. “I just let her see that things could be fun—a change in perspective. What is the problem now?”

Fiona spoke sharply, clipping each word, “You used too much magic. You have opened her up to all kinds of influences—she happily does whatever anyone asks her to do.” Fiona focused her own energy into the message, aiming it directly at Maven's gut. “Can't you see the possibility of exploitation there? Didn't you learn anything when you were Mundane?”

The message struck Maven, doubling her over. She sank down on her toadstool, shaking her head, to get her breath.

Even so, Maven defended herself, her words struggling through her choked throat. “I learned a lot by being exploited in my life. If this is a teaching story, then we will all learn from it.” Maven sucked in air. “And she has an out—all she has to do is change her mind. She is not dancing to my tune.”

Fiona opened her mouth to argue, paused to consider.

Maven straightened her back. Her voice grew strong. “I did grant, to the letter, exactly what she wished for, per your orders. You said from the beginning to work from my instinct and my experience. Which rule of wishing have I broken?”

Silence crowded into the office as if all Faery were listening.

Tulip poofed into the office breaking the tense stillness. Her gossamer sparkling, and her face glowing. She stood very still so as not to knock anything over, but her wings quivered excitedly. Their vibration was picked up by the items she had scattered the day before, so even though she stood perfectly still, each second seemed likely to bring on a crash of esoterica.

“That will be quite enough,” Fiona said to the crockery. She turned toward Tulip. “Sit down.”

The furnishings froze in mid-rattle and slunk back to their accustomed places as Tulip wilted onto the toadstool.

Fiona sighed. “Maven, consider the stories you know and how they proceed. I want an example of this kind of story as a precedent.”

Maven searched her mind. Most stories she knew were about milkmaids who were princesses, fairy godmothers—nothing but Cinderella Syndrome. There weren’t any stories about bored children, only ones about escaping evil parents or being devoured by wild animals and Nell’s mom was exhausted, not evil. But bears? Wolves? Maybe Nell was in danger, and it was her fault. No answers. She hung her head.

Fiona turned her attention to Tulip. “Did you grant any wishes while you were on your trip?”

“N-no.” Tulip kept her face down, examining some speck on the floor.

“Stand up, girl. Tell me exactly what you saw, and what you did in Lady Waderfell’s duchy.”

Tulip stood up slowly. “I flew around and watched, like you said.” “Go on. Is the damage extensive?”

“No, just mud about knee high, all black and sticky. But it seems to wash off pretty well, and the water sprites like splashing up against things, so they do some of the cleaning.” Tulip smiled, animated by telling her story. “Lady Waderfell was mucking out her dining hall and slipped, and fell. She got mud all over her petticoats and was horrified to think someone would see her dirty underwear.” Tulip giggled.

“Did you push her?” Fiona’s left eyebrow raised an eighth of an

inch.

“No...” Tulip clamped her lips shut, then started again. “I...I just flew around, and watched and then came back here.”

“You didn't grant a wish?” Fiona's tone dropped a third

“No Ma'am.”

“You didn't do any magic at all?” Fiona tilted her head to peer more intensely into Tulip's face.

Tulip didn't answer. Fiona went to her crystal ball. She waved her hand over it, blocking both Maven and Tulip from seeing inside.

Tulip bit her lip, twisted her hands, and screwed up her face. “All right. I nudged one young man a little. It wasn't magic. Just a tiny jostle and he fell at her feet. It let him speak to her, and she spoke back.”

“Would he have spoken without your nudge?” Fiona glanced up to see Tulip grow pale. Tulip's wings drooped and her voice grew soft. “He was too shy. And she might not have noticed him at all.”

Fiona was not smiling. “And the flowers?”

Tulip stood on one leg, wrapped her other foot behind her ankle. At length, she said, “It was just an old cottage. It looked lonesome. Nobody was there. I just helped them open up a little. They were pretty against the old, dried up....” Tulip clapped her lips shut.

The crystal became cloudy. Fiona waved her hand several times over it and peered more intently. “What about the man and the runaway wagon?”

In frustration, Tulip threw out her hands. “I was just fluttering around, and the horse saw me. He bolted, and I could not stop him. The old man was right in the street where the horse would knock him down. I just confused him a little, so he would stop and try to remember where

he was going, and then the horse would go by before he got there.” She spoke so fast they all took a breath when she finished. Tulip looked at Maven for support, and Maven nodded.

Maven spoke up, “She didn't do anything to hurt anyone. And you did allow her to have a wand so she could learn to be an FGM.”

Fiona's glower reminded Maven she was not in a position to defend anyone.

“A decision I may not only regret, but rescind.” Fiona said finally, her brows still furrowed as she studied the ball. “No irreparable harm done.” She sat behind her desk, relaxing her usual rigid posture another two degrees. “Both of you come here.”

Maven glanced at Tulip, and they stood up.

“Tulip,” Fiona said, pulling out a large, dusty ledger from some hidden opening beside her desk. “You have proven you are capable of magic.” Fiona wrote in the ledger in some tiny, cramped scribble Maven could not read. “At this time we have a shortage of FGMs, so I have decided to train you. But you will follow my instructions exactly until I have determined the end of your probationary period.”

Tulip began to quiver again for a second until the impact of “probationary” stilled her. “Yes, ma'am.”

Fiona nodded. “Go back to Waderfell and listen to each story of each person you contacted today. You may grant one wish—one only—if you hear one.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss Fiona.” Tulip squealed with delight. Her wings fluttered, levitating her an inch above the floor. The esoterica watched carefully for their chance to leap from the shelf.

“Probationary.” Fiona said, clearly and softly.

“Yes, ma'am.” Tulip disappeared so quickly the jars on the shelves did not get even a chance to quiver.

“You, on the other hand, will go to the Twilight Lounge,” Fiona said to Maven, her voice cold and controlled, “where you will be safe from your own wishes, and everyone else will be safe from your wand. Listen. When the opportunity to grant the dairymaid a suitable wish happens, you must be ready to respond.” Fiona glared, waving her finger at Maven. “Do not grant anything else. Do not do anything else. Do not go anywhere else. Just listen.”

Maven nodded. She whipped out her wand and poofed without a single sparkle.

Chapter Twelve

Curiosity and a Cheshire Cat

When Maven appeared in the entry of the Twilight Lounge, she couldn't think of anyone her own age in any story. "Off with her head" floated through her mind, so Maven swizzled herself into the Red Queen. She found a small booth against the back wall where she couldn't see the rest of the Lounge, although few patrons were present. She propped up her feet and just let her thoughts go.

Should she have given Daisy size four feet, like some bound Chinese lady? No, she had done the right thing. She could not hear Belle, who polished the bar and stared into its depths as deeply entranced if she were watching the soaps. Maven moved to sit at the bar.

Belle offered her tea and cakes—but no jam today. Maven shared her enthusiasm for her new job, telling about Daisy and Henry.

Belle listened before commenting. "How'd Fiona like it?"

"She didn't." Maven ate another dainty cake—at least no one here seemed to think she needed to be on a diet. "What can you tell me about the stories? I don't see what I did wrong."

"Every story is the same, and each is different." Belle reached under the bar for a mug of something steaming. "Want something, go after it. Get it, or don't. Try again or give up. Don't hold stock in stories like Fiona does." She took several swallows of her brew that smelled like bitter herbs on fire. "She manages the magic for this dimension, so she has to keep things in balance." Belle gave the bar another wipe and cocked an eyebrow at Maven. "You need to learn balance."

Maven envisioned a tightrope walker with no net.

“Thanks,” Maven said, although Belle had moved to the far end of the bar to talk to a troll. Maven went back to the booth to listen to Daisy.

Beside her, something materialized. It started with a smile, followed by vertical slit eyes, pointed ears, and fur—a large, taffy-striped cat. It grinned at her, and then flicked out a forked tongue between sharp fangs.

“So, do you appear to everyone, or are you just visible to me?” Maven asked, noting her wand did not pick up the least quiver about the serpent-cat, even when she pointed it rudely in the cat's face.

“I am real enough, if that is-z-z what you want to know,” the cat said, flicking its tail. “Not a furry halluc-s-sination.” Now fully apparent, it curled its front paws on the pillow where it perched opposite. “I never quite know how to manage limbs-s-s.”

“Personas have a mind of their own.” She peered at the cat. “I've had the urge to behead someone since I came in.”

“You might find a better way to s-s-spend your time than s-s-sitting.”

She leaned back, her arms lying on the top of the bench. “I'm open to suggestions. Got etchings to show me? Make me a connection with a caterpillar?”

Only a cat can express elegant disgust. “I would mention the library. Not so thr-r-rilling as- z-z the Twilight Lounge.

“How do I get there?”

“It's eas-z-zy.” the cat purred.

Maven began to disappear, feeling each minute more blurry and insubstantial.

As she vanished, she heard the cat purr to itself. “Getting out is-z-z

much mor-r-re inter-r- res-s-sting.”

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When all of Maven's parts reappeared, she was in a windowless room filled with books. She wandered through the stacks, looking for some kind of order to the information. Finally she got her wand out and used it like a dowsing rod to find a book about using wands. *Parvarti's Practical Procedures for Performance* turned out to be a source of much information, unlike *Wands for the Witless* or *Rods, Staves, Wands and Sticks*. Maven's technique for finding the book was the first suggestion Parvarti made, “Will ye wand to show ye wot ye wish to wit.”

She held the wand out and followed its lead to other books on wand wielding. Finding the book made her feel more competent, as the books were shelved by color and size not subject. The book was written in a cramped hand, which wavered as if the author struggled against the pen.

Wands were in fact, very intuitive to operate. Listening to a wand held to the ear was like plugging a radio into an antenna. If the listener concentrated on the person, she could hear the story. Holding the tip of the wand to the forehead helped the person to visualize clearly.

Visualizing what you wanted was one of the things Maven learned in therapy, although even then she had trouble deciding what she wanted.

The wand could even be used to focus one's own intent, always with the caution the user was not to grant wishes for herself. The warning was ominous but vague. “Self-granting is the dark path wherein no one returns.”

She swizzled up a cup of coffee and a comfortable chair. Maven considered carefully how her solution to Daisy's problem was her own

wish, but even with the wand's help, Maven's intent was clear. She was not part of that story, but she wanted Daisy to be able to help her friends. She did not benefit at all, except the story changed so that it might have a happy ending. Working class women didn't get happy endings?

Maven put the wand to her forehead and thought of Daisy. She remembered more about the sunshine, the dairy smells, and the poofing in and out than about Daisy as a person. She said the name aloud, "Daisy."

A picture formed of Daisy was washing her clothes, humming softly. A few of Daisy's thoughts came through—incongruous images of cows and the footman, the castle and cheese. She wasn't wishing yet. Daisy thought she was lucky and might not ever make a wish.

Another whisper came through the wand. "I wish." It wasn't Daisy, but someone close by. "Show me the wisher." Maven told the wand. She saw Princess Vivienne in her carriage with her lady companion on the final leg of her journey to meet Prince H.R.

Maven tuned into Vivienne's story to wait for the rest of the wish.

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Though still trapped in her hot, dusty carriage, Princess Vivienne felt better after her light lunch. Even plain water was refreshing. Her chaperone, Lady Dee refused any nourishment, other than to taste each thing.

"I must get the peasant woman to make cheese for me," Vivienne

said, wiping the crumbs from the last bite of bread from her face with her handkerchief. "It was delicious."

"No doubt due to your hunger, Your Highness. I found it vile." Lady Dee adjusted her position ever so slightly, her erect carriage implying she held the balance of good and evil in modern society.

Nothing was of good quality to Lady Dee unless presented by a person of higher rank and possible beneficence. Then it was fine and rare, indeed.

Vivienne suppressed a sigh. After the wedding, she would be the Lady of the castle and in charge of it. Lady Dee would not need to be at her side every moment.

Vivienne endured the ride to her new home, her new life, and her new husband. She hoped he was either someone she could talk to, or one who liked hunting and gaming and would spend his time elsewhere. She was used to being alone in the crowd, and played the role well. She peered out the slits of the shaded windows to see the country she would rule, at least in name. It seemed fertile, but unkempt, probably like the prince.

The carriage stopped at the Castle gate. Her person was a sorry sight, but she had no choice in the matter, nor did he. The prince would have to take her as she was. She had sewn her jewelry in her clothing against bandits. Perhaps they were too busy ravaging her country to bother her passage.

"I wish," she said softly, unaware of speaking.

"Be careful what you wish for, Highness." Lady Dee straightened herself from a slight wilt. "You never know who is listening."

Vivienne brushed some of the dust off and projected her princess

persona. Lady Dee merely starched her backbone and her upper lip.

* * * *

Maven sighed too. Rank and position just brought different problems. How could she help the princess? She expanded the range of her listening to get a better idea of Vivienne's story. This princess was necessary to Daisy's well-being, and she was ready to make a wish. The Bump warned Fiona might not approve.

The wand lost connection. Maven tried again, several times, to continue listening with no luck. She decided to poof back to the Twilight Lounge, just in case Fiona was watching, but when she swizzled, nothing happened. There was energy enough in the room, and her attempts to poof seemed to ramp it up, but she was stuck. Not only were there no windows, but there were no doors, no ventilation shafts, or any other opening, only shelves and shelves of books.

Fiona would not be pleased. Would she believe the serpent turned cat had sent her here?

How could Maven have disobeyed so quickly? She thought she knew better than to trust a snake...even if it did look like a cat.

With a sigh, she dowsed for more books, holding out her wand and letting it guide her. Maven studied as if for finals. At least she could offer she had spent her time out wisely, learning all she could. She didn't want to squat in some swamp until someone could be swindled into smooching her. Fat chance of anyone kissing a frog anyway.

She'd survived Mundane—been there, done that, and had the keychain, t-shirt, ball cap, and frequent flier miles to prove it. The key chain, at least, was in her pocketbook back in the pod, for all the good it did her now. What would unlock the library?

Maven wandered between the books. She centered herself and the wand again, scanning with for a book about stories, with no result. It was a subject too secret or too well-known to write about.

She began to pick up books randomly from the shelf. After she skimmed the first one, she went back to the stacks and another fell off the shelf. She barely managed to catch it. It was about casting glamourie, a fun topic.

Maven practiced changing personas for the next time she went to the Twilight Lounge, assuming she escaped the library. She could be a lusty Amazon, although that persona conjured up thoughts she hadn't had in a long while and would do better without. She liked the feeling of being a cat, a butterfly, even a lizard, but she didn't try for snake, afraid she couldn't wave her wand. She didn't try any male personae either, as the personae brought their own ideas and behavior. But she shrank into a dwarf, and then stretched into a troll. Trolls were always hungry. Maven transformed back into herself, tired and ready for other entertainment.

She memorized the spell for seeing through glamour. She might not be able to remove another's spell, but being able to see through it would be handy.

The third time she worked the spell, she found she was deep in a cavern lit by one torch. It was much drier than the caves she had visited in Mundane, probably due to magic, and it was not smoky, indicating air flow. The stacks were carved into the rock, and chains attached some of the books to the shelves. There was still no door. She learned once she saw through glamour, there was no putting it back up.

She walked through the stacks again. The History of Trolls leaped into Maven's hand. She went back to sit on the nearest rock, doubling up

her gossamer as a pillow. Surely, Fiona could find her if she couldn't find her way out.

She began to read, fascinated, about Troll mating habits—dangerous both to innocent passersby and to the participants. Trolls were solitary by nature, but when their instincts called, their bulk and relative lack of socialization made their rituals into grappling matches of near giants. Something like wrestling without a ring, using trees for folding chairs. Sometimes they forgot about mating, so they ate each other. Or rather, to the victor went the victuals. It was not clear from the text whether fairy godmothers served that population. Trolls lacked imagination, according to the text, not having enough to make a wish.

What would a troll wish for if a troll had imagination?

Maven hoped she would not have occasion to learn. She read for hours, walking through the stacks when she finished one book and waiting the next to fall into her hand. She hadn't made connection with Daisy or the Princess again. Nor had she found a door to get out.

Chapter Thirteen

Tulip's First Wish

Tulip flitted over Waderfell listening intently for the slightest sigh of a wish. The populace was either very contented or possessed no imagination at all. Finally, she heard some little girls talking as they played tea party. One of them wished she could see a fairy.

Tulip poofed right into their tea settings, upsetting the sugar bowl full of sand and the teapot of water.

“Look what you did,” the short, blonde one screeched. She jumped up and shook the water out of her pinafore.

“But it is a fairy,” the taller, redheaded one cried. “See her wings? And she has a magic wand, too.”

Tulip swizzled herself big to talk to the girls. “Why did you want to see a fairy?”

Their eyes first opened wide, but then scrunched into a frown. Their mouths dropped open, and then closed with their bottom lips poked out. The smaller one said, “You're NOT a fairy. You're too big. And you don't have pointed ears. Or slanty eyes. Or pink hair.”

How often Tulip had been taunted by other fairies about just those things. She knew she was different, but why did it matter so much how she looked? She had a wand and could poof and grant wishes. What did it take to be a fairy anyway?

The taller one jutted her chin out and pointed her finger. “My sister said there weren't any fairies anymore. I just wanted to see. Are you truly a fairy, cross your heart and hope to spit? And not just an elf or a troll or

something?”

“I am a fairy godmother,” Tulip said, trying to look cheerful, and wondering if Maven's clients didn't believe in her. “Your wish has been granted. I am here.”

The girls stared at each other and protested together, squealing. “Oh, that wasn't a wish.” They began to argue about who made the wish and if such a young fairy as Tulip could be a fairy godmother.

“Please be quiet.” Her feelings bruised, Tulip suggested a compromise. “Decide what you want and make a wish. When I grant it, you will know I am a fairy godmother.” Only as she closed her mouth, and the girls began to talk, did Tulip realize what she offered.

Another conference of intense chatter ensued. “More wishes!”

“Can't do that!” “Ride a unicorn.” “Fly.”

“Gold.”

The two girls stopped, grinned and agreed. “We want to go to the Twilight Lounge. A true fairy place.”

Tulip didn't need her wand to see the end of that story, but she didn't see any way out of granting it either. “All right,” she said. “You will be transformed into another shape because that is one of the rules, and we will only go there for a short time. You may not speak to anyone or touch anything.”

“Or what?” the short one said, her less than innocent face betraying her clever cunning.

“Or else.” Tulip glared. She swirled rainbow sparkles around the two, turning them into two canaries in a cage. She checked the lock on the cage very carefully and tied a bit of magic around it for safekeeping.

“Not fair,” the girl-birds chirped. The red bird fluttered her wings

and fell off her perch on the cage. She bobbed on the floor of the cage. “I didn't want to be a bird.”

The yellow canary held tight to the swing perch and fluttered without falling. “You didn't say not to be a bird either. Shut up.”

While the birds in their cage disagreed, Tulip poofed them all to the Twilight. She changed herself into a large gray tabby. She was afraid to go into Twilight with her two clients, but a wish was a wish. How could she be careful about what someone else wished for? How could she explain to Aunt Belle why she was here? She put her wand into her gossamer-turned-fur and pushed open the door.

Only a few patrons were in the Twilight, most of them in private conversations in shadowy nooks far away from the bar. The whole atmosphere was like a cave, with soft sounds of water dripping and nearly subliminal echoes. Tulip carried the cage in her claws and set it on the bar, where Owl presided.

Owl merely turned her large eyes toward Tulip and her caged clients. The two little birds shivered together in the bottom, trying to hide from that golden glare. Tulip mewed, “Milk, please. Seeds for my friends here.”

Managing with one foot, while she stood on the other, Owl made a bowl of milk and a shot glass of seeds appear and slide down the bar.

“Thank you,” Tulip purred. She lapped at the milk then sprinkled the seeds into the cage, where the birds pecked briefly, then went back to their bird's eye view. They stood peering out with first one eye and then another to glimpse. The red one tried fluttering again, and managed to get back up on the perch.

“We can't see a thing,” the yellow bird chirped. “Carry us around.

This isn't fun at all.” “No,” the reddish one said. “Let us out to fly around.”

Tulip turned her attention back to Owl. “Where is Aunt Belle?”

“One does not ask,” Owl hooted mournfully. “One does not tell.”

Owl stared at the cage where the two birds were attacking the cage door with their beaks.

“Stop.” Tulip spat, her yowl more menacing than any sound she had ever dared make. The birds saw her sharp teeth and her yawning mouth. Being unused to their personas, unable to fly or defend themselves, they simply fainted. Tulip swung her ears back around to listen to them, nosed the cage, and stared with her large eyes dilated to observe any slight movement they might make.

“Planning to eat them here or take them with you?” The commanding voice booming behind Tulip made her fur stand on end and her tail triple in diameter. She laid her ears back and extended her claws, spinning around to face Aunt Belle. She backed up a whole step, switched her tail to release her fear, and knocked the cage to the floor where it sprang open, spilling its feathery contents.

“When the canary dies,” Belle added, her tone dark, “get out of the mine shaft.”

Tulip wavered between trying to scoop up the birds and their cage, and just poofing the whole mess back to the Eastern Kingdom. She set the cage aright, and picked up the red bird to put it carefully back inside. It was so limp; she thought it might be dead. The yellow one, however, began to stir. Tulip made a swipe at it, popping it in her mouth before she could stop herself. Her cat persona and her mind struggled, while Belle thumped the back of her head. Tulip spat the bird out. The bird

persona took over the child's mind and flew away from Tulip into the heights of the Twilight darkness.

First, it headed for a dim light behind a waterfall, but it took flight again when it was drenched, and then waved away by the warty ogre who was romancing a lovely pookah in their niche. Then it flapped madly around the whole space like a deranged yellow bat, looking for somewhere to land.

“Birds don't like to fly into the dark,” Belle said, making the bar much brighter. She held out her finger and whistled a warbling note. In a few seconds, the yellow bird flew from the dark into the lighted space around the bar, circling it a few times. With much fuss and flutter, it finally perched on Belle's finger, panting and chirping loudly.

Belle whispered to the bird, stroked it carefully with her other hand, and then held her finger for the bird to hop into the cage. She locked the cage. “Get your wand out and drop your persona,” she told Tulip. “Then poof them back immediately. I'll deal with you later.”

Tulip dropped her cat persona, hoping to lose all her feline instincts in the process, and then carried the birdcage out to the entrance of the Twilight Lounge. She poofed her clients back to their woodland tea party. Carefully she lifted the limp, red bird out of the cage and laid it on the grass. The yellow one escaped and flew to the top of a lilac bush.

“Come down here.” Tulip cried. She started to chase the bird, but remembered it was not a bird. With a flick of the wand, the bird became a girl and crashed through the bush to the ground.

She started howling in rage. Tulip let her howl and transformed the other girl back into herself.

Then Tulip swizzled herself tiny. She fluttered herself up high

enough to spot an adult to come after the girls. She did not want to leave them. She located one girl's mother nearby and whispered that the girls were very quiet.

In a few moments, the mother called for her daughter. When the child didn't answer, she started searching. Tulip lured her in the right direction, first just trying to whisper to her then finally twinkling a little ahead of her, leading her into the edge of the forest where the girls were.

Finally, the mother found the girls, and woke them up, shaking them. "Bianca. Wake up, you lazy thing. I've been calling you for half-an-hour. You too, Rosa." The mother was mostly relieved to find them, but the touch of fear that they might be hurt made her shake them even harder.

The girls sat rubbing their eyes and stretching. Bianca's mother's leaned over them, her elbows piercing the air, as she yelled. "What do you mean, going off this close to the forest? A wolf could have snapped you up, and I would never have found you. Well, I'll find enough for you to do so you won't have time to take a nap in the middle of the day."

"I'm sorry, Mama," Bianca said. She jumped up and dusted off her pinafore. Her arms were sore. Rosa stood up too, and stretched. She sneaked a wink to Bianca when she thought her mother wasn't looking.

"Now, what was that, Miss I've-Something-In-My-Eye?" Mother shook her finger at Rosa. "What have you been up to? You'll tell me you've been on the Other Side next, and in to all kind of mischief, no doubt."

"Lie," Tulip whispered in Bianca's ear, and then she poofed silently away.

She had bigger problems to face. Aunt Belle and then Miss Fiona.

She needed to talk to Maven. She perched on a branch to listen, but couldn't find Maven anywhere. She had to find a way to convince Miss Fiona to let her be a fairy godmother.

Chapter Fourteen

Hidden in the Stacks

Maven's chin dropped to her chest as her book dropped to the floor, waking her up with a start. How long had she been in the Library? In Faery? Hours? Days? Weeks?

She began to breathe deeply again, listening to her wand, and yet feeling solidly grounded in her body, aware of her breathing, of her weight on the rock which so conveniently fit her. She thought she heard a hissing chuckle from the other side of the stacks.

“Come out; come out, wherever you are. All-y, all-y, in free.” A book fell to the floor with a bang behind her. Maven yelped and spun around. The Serpent's head stuck out between the books in a bookcase carved deeply in the wall.

“Jumpy, are we?” the Serpent chuckled again. It licked its lips with its forked tongue. “Are you a Fairy God Serpent? Do I get a wish?”

“Ahh, it has-s-s been s-s-so long.” The Serpent shook its head and sighed. “It's-s-s no wonder the Veil rots-s-s. Humans-s-s have forgotten all the old s-s-stories-s-s.”

“I know the one about Eve.”

“What did Eve want from the Tree, then, if you know that one s-s-so well?”

“Knowledge of Good and Evil.”

“Did s-s-she do Evil with the Knowledge?”

“No. Unless you count giving the apple to Adam.”

“No, that was-z-z her cherry.” As it chuckled, the Serpent slithered

the rest of its long body into the library, crowding Maven into a corner. “The Nature of Evil, the ultimate ques-s-stion. Is knowledge, then, evil?”

Maven arched her back, put her fists on her hips, and stuck out her chin. “What is this, Philosophy 101? No, I’d say Ignorance is Evil. And I’m feeling more Evil by the second. Do you ever do answers?”

The Serpent met her challenge nose to nose. “Only as riddles-s-s. What do you want to know?”

As the questions ran through her head, she could not settle on one. At last, she said, “What should I wish for?”

The Serpent grinned as it began to fade. Just as its fangs vanished, it whispered, “What is-z- z the s-s-sound of one S-S-Serpent clapping?”

Her wand began to buzz, and a door appeared in the wall. She tried to poof to Fiona’s office, but nothing happened. She pointed her wand at the door and followed it back along the serpentine path. Both the library and the Serpent had been singularly silent on how to block magic, or how to poof from the library.

At least she could ask about Vivienne’s wish, to show she had been listening. Then she found herself, not in Fiona’s office, but the vestibule of the Twilight Lounge. The Serpent had not given her up to Fiona after all.

Maven transformed into Biker Trash leather, complete with a tattoo on her shoulder

—“Trolls need love too.” The handle of her wand peeked out of the calf of her right boot.

At the bar, Maven straddled a black fatboy Harley that rose to the occasion. She didn’t question how the Twilight Lounge knew what a motorcycle was.

Belle handed Maven a mug of some golden, frothy liquid without comment on her persona. “What I wouldn't do for a beer,” Maven sighed after knocking back the mug's contents. She hoped it wasn't hemlock. Belle did not seem pleased to see her. “What good is it to work in a place where you grant wishes for a living, but you can't get a beer when the job is done?”

“This is Faery, not Heaven,” Belle said, slapping the bar with her polishing rag.

“There's no beer in Heaven either, to hear my preacher tell it.” Maven peered into her glass again, emptied it and made a face.

Belle held a mug and concentrated on it, transforming its contents to something dark and frothy. She tasted it, turned and spit. She poured it out and got another mug from under the bar.

“Sorry.” Belle handed it over. “Might as well try to crank your barstool. Ain't no beer in Faery.”

Maven tasted the drink and shuddered. “This isn't even root beer.” She pulled her peach switch from her boot and stirred the mug's contents, making them clear and non-effervescent. She sampled it and shuddered again. Water.

Belle hadn't asked about the motorcycle, or about what beer was. She hadn't shown any surprise at anything. In fact, she paid Maven the least amount of attention possible.

“Have you always been in Faery?” Maven asked.

Belle just polished the bar. “Came here a long time ago. Different now.” Belle lumbered away.

Maven opened her mind and her ears. Conversations flowed around her— village business, sweet nothings, philosophical discussions and a

goodly number of lies. Maven listened to what stories she could tap into in the lounge. At one table, a tin man listened as a golden android recited poetry. They shared an oil can and wiped their faces with an oily rag.

She realized she was staring. How did characters from fiction—and film—get in here? She thought about Oz and a galaxy far, far away. Same story, different costumes. Fiona didn't like modern fairy tales, but did she know how many of them there were, along with action figures, t-shirts and video games.

The Bump provided an insight—fairy tale people would be sucked into Fiction when the Veil collapsed. How many variations could a story have? Did stories ever just run out of steam, like entropy? How many times could a story be twisted?

Belle was gone, and an Owl stood on the bar. Maven decided to wait for a more opportune time to start conversation. The owl's expression was the same as her own the morning of her interview. That face needed more than a wish or a new job.

What do Owls wish for?

Maven leaned back on her buddy bar and propped her boots on the gas tank. She fished her wand from her boot and held it to her ear. The Owl did not show up either. Maven dared not risk the glamourie spell in the Twilight Lounge. Maybe she'd stay until midnight and see who was who. In the meantime, she listened to Daisy, but everything was dark around her as if she were sleeping. Maven focused in on finding Vivienne. She wanted the princess well established in the Castle to help Daisy. She found the princess's carriage outside the gate of castle, where she'd left her.

Henry jumped down from the back of the carriage, and approached the guard.

“Wot would you be wanting here, Boy?” growled an animated pile of rocks in green and gold livery.

“This is the Princess Vivienne of Pantopia come to greet Prince H.R.” Henry presented a scroll sealed with both the sign of the prince and of the princess.

The guard looked it over, handed it back. “Ain't heard of no princess coming here. Most likely vagabonds and thieves. Lots of them since the war. Off with you.”

“I must insist,” Henry said. “Your prince has sent for my princess. He shall be annoyed if she is delayed.”

“Oh, then, I guess it's all right then. The Prince sent for her.” He winked at the other guard. They broke into sniggering.

Maven felt a twinge of envy for Daisy, having a man like Henry to be in love with her. If it lasted...if it got started...

Henry began feeling the pent-up emotions of leaving his home, enduring travel to a place he had not wanted to come, and then having to leave the most beautiful woman he had ever seen to bring his Lady to these louts. He grew hot with frustration, and struggled to keep his composure.

“Look here. At least ask within. We are expected, I tell you.” His posture was rigid. After all, he could not fight his way inside. The guards probably killed two men apiece before breakfast, judging from their scars. Still Henry was ready to try to take them on if they would get his princess safely inside the walls.

“Awright, then, Stoner, go ask Cook if she has an extra plate around.” The guards shared nasty laughter and expectorated. “Can't have anyone say we ain't hospitable here.”

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Once inside the castle, the princess experienced her own problems. She argued with the Cook, a formidable woman capable of handling the two guards without putting a wrinkle in her apron.

“What will it take for you to believe I am a princess?”

“Where are your jewels?” Cook said, arms folded, and head cocked. “Princesses always have jewels. And gold.”

“Look at my ring.” Vivienne held out her hand to display a smallish oval topaz.

Cook seemed somewhat mollified. “But see here now, you might be in league with bandits and highway men, there being that sort about here. How'm I to know you're a true princess?”

Vivienne didn't care to spend the night on twenty mattresses to settle the argument. “Pinch me,” she said, which Cook did, mightily.

Lady Dee gasped, and Vivienne winced, but said nothing. Even if she hadn't bruised easily, she would have carried Cook's fingerprints for a month. “Satisfied?”

Cook set her jaw, leaned back and reappraised Vivienne. “Neither Rocky nor Stoner can stand my pinches. You didn't let out a peep. I like you.” Her whole expression changed, and she glanced at the princess's

arm. “With your permission, your Highness?” She took the princess's arm gently and examined the marks. “I'll put some cold bean paste on it, your Highness, won't be a mark at all by the evening.”

“Thank you,” Vivienne said. “Could we have a bath now, and prepare ourselves to meet the prince?”

“Yes, your Highness.” Cook leaned out her half-door and yelled, “Log. Bog. Gob. Get yourselves in here before I count to three or ...” They were well named, if they appeared in order, Log being very tall and thin, actually more of a stick, Bog of average size but dark and wet, her face and clothes damp, and Gob was round and no taller than he was wide. Cook gave orders for water to be heated, the prince's tub to be cleaned and filled, for the horses to be stabled, and the man shown the servants' quarters to clean up.

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“Is this seat taken?” A Handsome Prince stood beside Maven. He smiled, sure of himself from his raven coiffure to his velvet-clad tush.

Maven looked up at him, a bit disoriented. “No. Take it.” She pulled herself back together, remembered where she was and how she looked. Whoever or whatever it was taking her away from Vivienne and Daisy, it was not a prince. “Take it somewhere else.” She sat up and swung her leg over the bike facing away from him. She held the wand to focus back on Vivienne, but now the picture was unclear. The impostor prince blocked the signal.

“You must not be from around here,” The Prince said. “I have never seen anyone like you before.” He sat on a gilded throne.

“Just imaginative,” Maven said. Next time she'd be a harpy or a warthog. She didn't know how close it was to midnight. She didn't have lot of experience being hit on in bars in Mundane, especially not by enchanted un-Princes.

“I am just learning how to turn people into frogs.” Maven smiled, but not sweetly. She aimed her wand pointedly. “Would you like to be my first attempt?”

The Prince transformed himself into a large slimy Frog with golden eyes, perched on a lily pad. “So, you like amphibians?”

“I'm all out of wart repellent.” Maven slid off the Harley and strode out of the Twilight Lounge, not stopping to change her garb. Maybe the short walk would let her think in peace.

Faery was much less cute after dark. The buildings seemed to huddle together, and shadows hovered over them, waiting to pounce.

The Bump tapped on the inside of her head to get her attention. Maven scanned the immediate area for danger and opportunity. Just ahead on the path, a woman in dirty clothes begged, much the worse for wear.

Maven put her hand on her wand, and listened. The woman was Dolores, fired from her housekeeping job, now hungry in the chill of evening. Her bowl was empty except for the coppers she put in herself.

Bump of Direction parried a stab of guilt aimed at Maven's heart. Fiona granted Dolores's wish, though Maven made the suggestion. The Bump suggested asking for food or shelter to allow Dolores to think of someone besides herself. Dolores might see the opportunity for a boon

from a mysterious old woman. If not, then she hadn't sorted things out enough.

Maven put on an old woman persona and shuffled nearer, leaning heavily on her wand turned cane.

“Have you a bite of bread?” Maven quavered. She too felt the chill in the evening shadows. Dolores risked a glance at her. She sighed. “No, Granny, but I can share what I have. It's not much, though.” She handed over one of the coppers.

“You are very kind,” Maven said, closing her hands over Dolores's to send some energy. Her hands became heavy. “Oh, this is much too much.”

Gold coins fell out of Dolores's palm. Maven picked one up from the dirt. “Are you looking for work?”

“Not tonight! Food and a warm bed for me!” Dolores grabbed up the rest of the coins and ran away.

Maven shuffled on home. She figured the coin would disappear by midnight anyway.

Chapter Fifteen

Fiona Monitors

When Maven stomped out, the Frog waved the Owl over. “Tell Belle I am here.”

The Owl flew into the mirror behind the bar, and Belle appeared a few seconds later. She kissed the Frog right between its eyes, changing the Frog Prince into Fiona.

Fiona said, “What's your take on my protégé now? She passed that test.”

“Been listening as hard as she could, trying to do what you tell her.” Belle reached back and rubbed her neck. “Too distracted to bite the Prince bait. You sure she's straight?” Belle held Fiona's hand.

“I am sure.” Fiona did not withdraw her hand. “She must not succumb to the first attentions someone pays her and disappear into her own story. Not now, and especially not after she is trained. She has the knack, gets to the point very quickly, and doesn't hesitate. But her distorted ideas warp the stories.”

“You keep forgetting where she comes from, and that they do some truly twisted things over there.” Belle yawned. “Let's go home. Owl can handle the transformation tonight.”

Chapter Sixteen

Vivienne meets H.R.

Once in her pod, Maven found she could listen to Vivienne easily. The images were much clearer; either better reception or she was in the same time frame. Maven began listening to a tale as though she remembered it. A girl unfortunate enough to be born princess in a poor kingdom, orphaned and then swapped by her guardian for a treaty. Annexed—Maven wouldn't call that arrangement a marriage—to a man she had never met, one who cared nothing for her.

What would Vivienne wish for?

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Vivienne was elegant in a plain white gown, her dark hair drawn back from her face with a simple silver comb. Lady Dee surveyed her handiwork with a critical eye.

Maven wondered what part Lady Dee might play in the story. Even a minor character might have the influence to make things happen. There was the Cook to consider as well, both older women, and neither evil as far as Maven could tell. It was harder to listen to a person who hadn't made a wish, if a wisher were nearby.

“It's not as though you need to impress him,” Lady Dee said, straightening here, patting there. “Don't show him your true resources until you need something from him. He is not used to the best, and would likely not know the difference.”

“True enough,” said Cook as she brought in a tray of tea and

sandwiches. “But we manage to get by.”

Lady Dee frowned. “We usually knock before entering Her Highness's rooms.”

“Well, you might, but we generally don't.” Cook's respect obviously did not extend to the Princess's companion. Her tone changed as she addressed Vivienne. “I thought your Highness might wish some refreshment before the banquet tonight. They'll likely eat late, and you may find the food coarse and not to your liking.”

“Thank you, Cook. I am hungry.”

Lady Dee frowned, and Cook beamed.

The princess took a bite of a dainty sandwich of brown bread and cheese, careful not to drop crumbs on her dress. “Do take a bite,” she said to Lady Dee. “It won't kill you. You haven't made any enemies yet.”

“You are too trusting, Vivienne,” Lady Dee replied. “But you are right. At worst we could die immediately.”

Cook cleared her throat as she poured the tea. “If I might speak my mind, your Highness?” Vivienne nodded. “Prince H.R. is not a bad sort, but he doesn't know much about women. I could put a spot of sleeping potion in his drink tonight. It might give you a bit more time to...get to know him.”

“You mean I might actually get married before I get 'consummated'?” Vivienne was not quite as innocent as she was young. Trained from birth that her virginity was her main asset for protecting her kingdom from ravage, she knew it had limited warranty—one use, valid only with marriage.

Cook nodded. "I will bring you some rose tea, and you drink only that." She turned to face Lady Dee. "We'll bring you some too. We don't want to carry you out in a wheelbarrow." Vivienne moved between the women, reaching for Lady Dee's hand and Cook's hand. She needed both of them as her allies if she were to have any kind of life at all here. "We are women together in a man's land. Let us be friends and help each other."

Lady Dee and Cook eyed each other, each finding the other wanting. Vivienne took a deep breath, stood more erectly, and spoke, this time as the Princess.

"Lady Dee, this is Cook. She will give you all the information you need to be my assistant. Cook, this is Lady Dee. She is my friend as well as my companion. Treat her as you would treat me. Tomorrow we will learn from Cook how things are done here, and we will make our new life together."

"Yes, your Highness," they said in unison, exchanging knife-blade looks. Vivienne hoped the prince was not as strong as they were.

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Maven liked the princess, and both her companions. Maven hadn't seen any older women in any story, except for Cook and Lady Dee, who probably younger than Maven. Maybe women didn't live long enough in Faery to get old, or like Fiona, they were much older than they appeared.

Or maybe, as in Mundane, older women just disappeared from sight

and mind unless they became powerful enough to be evil. She tuned back into Vivienne's story.

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Vivienne waited in an alcove with Lady Dee to be admitted into H.R.'s presence. She was not nervous, just a bit edgy in case her true feelings might show. Lady Dee merely stood. She was capable of standing all day at court, appearing to be awake when asleep, and always listening. Vivienne sighed briefly.

Lady Dee spoke quietly, "Don't go to him. Let him come to you." "Why? What if he doesn't come?"

"He will. He has to establish his ownership of you. Wait for him."

The great doors opened onto a long, stonework hall with a rough wooden table in the center. The benches to either side held men, some as rough as Rocky and Stoner, others quite polished. None of their manners were exemplary, they all talked at once, loudly disputing points of no-doubt-subtle philosophy with fists banging tables and the occasional knife for exclamation point. Stoner blatted a ram's horn.

Rocky announced them. "The Princess Vivienne and Lady Dee of Pantopia."

Vivienne stepped forward and stopped, surveying her new realm. A hush fell across the mob.

The prince stood, smiled, held out his hand to her. "Welcome, Princess."

Vivienne made a slight nod with only her head. She studied the prince. He stood for a second, before he walked toward her. He held out his arm and led her to a seat by his side. Lady Dee stood beside Vivienne, behind the men on the benches at H.R.'s right. Log immediately brought out a tray with tea and tiny sandwiches and cakes.

“Ahhh, see what a fine lady I am to have,” The Prince crowed. He seemed very pleased to have annexed so lovely a kingdom to his own. Vivienne bowed slightly to the men with a simple smile. The hush was broken by hoots and roars of approval, with sly winks and bawdy comments.

“A toast,” cried one burly man. “To the Princess.”

The prince praised the beauty of his princess, remarking on her modesty. She only drank the rose tea and ate from the small tray brought to her. The princess saw the shrewd calculating look on his face. Good, let him think she was a biddable innocent without a thought in her head.

“Now, my lovely princess, I will grant you a wish unto the half of my kingdom for an engagement present. What shall it be? A fine pony for you to ride. A garden? New dresses?”

Vivienne's practice at keeping her face separate from her feelings came in handy now. Half of his kingdom indeed. Her kingdom was more than half of his, but it was not the time for a political deal. “I want the services of a girl in the village, one Daisy of the house of Lord Rapine.”

“No more than that? Done.” H.R. flipped a golden coin to the Lord who sat only a few seats down on the left of the table. The lord caught the coin in midair, but he did not look pleased to give up the girl. Lord Rapine bowed, however slightly.

The prince took Vivienne's hand and kissed it. "Another toast to our new Lady. To her health and long life." Again, the pitchers were brought out, and the men quaffed and stained the tablecloths, an act they believed made permanent the sentiments of the toast. In the moment of silence as they swallowed and allowed the brew to soak in, each one closed his eyes and sagged into a heap of greasy face and dirty laundry. The servants brought wheelbarrows to transport the rapidly succumbing men to sleeping quarters. Cook came for Vivienne and Lady Dee herself, and led them to chambers in the corner of the Castle overlooking a cliff, far from the prince and his men.

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A full moon shone in the open window, a fire flickered in the hearth, and Bog stood waiting to help the ladies undress for bed. As rough as everything else seemed to be, Bog was well trained and swift. In minutes, Lady Dee was asleep, and Vivienne sat sleepless on her bed, too keyed up after meeting the vandal she was to marry.

She gazed out the window at the kingdom and down to the ground. She thought of jumping, but she'd trained too long to waste her life foolishly. Besides, she might not die, but only be gravely injured and unable either to rule the kingdom or manage the simplest details of life. She stared into the full moon, looking for the beautiful lady or the magical rabbit from the stories her peasant subjects told.

"How I do wish I could rule this kingdom," she said, hardly aware

she had spoken aloud, “or at least myself.”

Maven heard her cue, and poofed.

Chapter Seventeen

Vivienne's Wish

Before Vivienne finished musing, Maven appeared with twinkles.

“You are always in charge of yourself, my dear Vivienne,” Maven said.

“Now you shall be in charge of the kingdom.”

Vivienne glared at Maven. “You can do that? Just like that?”

Vivienne wasted no time on assessing Maven. Her long day had shortened her temper. “Why didn't you grant my wish not to go through with this? Where have you been?”

Taken aback, Maven said, “I heard you wishing, and here I am. You helped a girl who made a wish earlier today, and now you are getting your wish.” Maven swung back to wave her wand when Cook came into the room.

“What do you think you are doing here?” Cook jumped between Maven and Vivienne. “Don't you feel the magic here? Haven't you listened to this story at all?”

Maven stepped back, pointed the wand at Cook. Cook pulled a knife from behind her apron. Vivienne brought out her command voice.

“Cook, it's all right. She was just...”

Cook didn't take her eyes off Maven. “She's got no idea what she's doing!”

Maven took another step back and lowered her wand. She kept her eyes on Cook, but gave her some room. “What are you talking about?”

Cook backed up a step as well, lowering the knife. “Green wand, eh? Why does she set you trainer-wings loose before you get half a

notion?" She put the knife back in her apron. "Listen to the castle. Listen to the story, not just to the girl here. Listen."

Vivienne stepped up between them. "Do I get my wish or not? Listen to what?"

"Shush," hissed Maven and Cook. Like whispers at first, then like the wind through trees, and finally like morning birds waking up the sun, Maven heard the rest of the story. The spell placed on the castle, on Cook, on the men who had been driven out of other places to come here, to either learn to get along or to be killed by others of their kind.

Vivienne was the bait, the test to see if they were ready to be released—more a sacrifice than a savior. But the story offered no clue how to break the spell.

"Do you understand that you can't undo magic done by others? You can change the effects, sometimes, you can add to it. Or you can bounce your magic off what is already here and wreak all kinds of havoc. Do you want to rip down the Veil all by yourself?"

"What are you talking about?" Maven said. The Bump woke up alert and scanning.

Cook covered her face with her hand. "You don't know. She didn't tell you." She sighed, scratched behind her ear. "You must be the one from...by the Great Goose's Egg, how did I get mixed up in this one?"

"What about my wish?" Vivienne cried. "What is happening here? I am still the princess, and I demand to know."

"My lady?" Lady Dee, groggy from sleep and exhaustion, staggered in.

"Let's get everyone on board." Cook took Lady Dee by the arm and

led her to her the alcove. “Now, milady, Princess Vivienne was just going back to bed, nothing to be concerned about.” Maven put her finger to her mouth to shush Vivienne.

“You will get your wish, Princess, but I will have to work out some details,” Maven reassured her. “Just remember...some things that look like luck are not; things happen for a reason. Let me talk to Cook here for a few minutes. Hop back in your bed, now, okay?”

Vivienne let herself be tucked in, but like a child, lay there stubbornly awake. Maven considered a sleep spell, but The Bump hit red alert when she thought about it... She didn't want the princess to sleep for a hundred years.

Maven and Cook went out in the passage.

“So, you are a fairy godmother, too? Who is your client?” Maven asked. “They haven't told you about R&R either, I guess?”

Maven shrugged. “I thought it was about being turned into a frog.”

“If you truly do something real,” Cook said, “then you may be put on R&R. You lose your powers, and you do some other kind of work until you get some perspective. My job is to play Cook here at the Castle and try to keep enough order so that these lost boys can live long enough to grow up.”

“Is that better or worse than being a frog?” Maven felt herself getting deeper into this mess, and she wasn't even sure what the mess was.

“No comparison. But I suspect you will find out soon enough. You are in way over your head.”

“What about Vivienne's wish? Why couldn't she begin to take over,

a little at a time, and get things organized, work around the men?"

Maven still had Daisy to think about, and if the Princess were able to make decisions, then Daisy would be that much closer to some kind of autonomy. "Isn't this the kind of story where you have to go through the dark places to learn what you need to do when the time comes?"

Cook snorted. "Aren't they all?" She patted Maven's shoulder. "Your heart's in the right place, even if your head ain't. But you don't understand what you think you know. Let's see if Vivienne is asleep yet, and then go have a cuppa."

Vivienne, like many stubborn children, slumbered in her bed in the moonlight.

They went back to the kitchen. Cook spoke to the kettle in the fireplace, and it brewed up tea. Various processes carried on without benefit of servants—brushes scrubbed pots, dirt rolled itself to the back door, and wood hopped onto the fire.

Cook sat in a large rocking chair facing the fire.

Maven sat on a chair at the other side of the fireplace. Her magic couldn't be undone by anyone else, either. No wonder Fiona didn't want any creative thinking. "You aren't doing all this, then?" She glanced around the kitchen.

Cook shook her head. "You can't do anything here. The Castle itself absorbs all the magic and it does as it pleases, if you ask nicely. It may protect the princess, or not."

"And then, she needs a plan, a goal to accomplish, and I think Daisy will provide that—with a bit of help."

Cook gave Maven a long, steady look. "You must be from the Other

Side if you believe all that.”

“Six impossible things before breakfast is what the dragon told me.”

Maven smiled. “When you have worked for the state, like I have, then it's a snap.”

Cook slopped some of her tea into her saucer to cool. “Like I said, you can't do magic here. There's already too much of it—all of it Fiona's.”

Maven sipped the tea, hoping it would not keep her awake. “Thanks for your help. I wish I knew what else to ask.”

“Probably couldn't tell you anyway.”

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Back in her pod, Maven dropped her wings and wand on the floor and sat on her hammock. She needed information, but nobody would give her a straight answer. She reached for her wand to listen to Tulip, but before she could get her mind focused, someone scratched at her door. Tulip stuck her head in.

“It is too late to talk? Are you asleep?”

Maven waved her in. “How's it going, Tulip? Grant any wishes today?” She was glad Tulip sat on the floor, so she didn't have to move.

“Yes, but it's probably the last one I'll ever get to grant. Just listen to my story. I can't bear to tell it.”

As she listened, Maven felt sorry for Tulip, so young and so discouraged. Tulip was probably right. Fiona would go ballistic. The Bump agreed, and warned against just trying to do an end run around Fiona by granting Tulip's wish.

“You've seen more of the kingdoms than I have,” Maven said, hoping to get Tulip thinking in another direction, and to make some

sense of what was going on. "What do you see out there about Magic? Can you see the Veil? What's going on?"

Tulip didn't look up. "No one is making any wishes." She sighed. "Not even love wishes. Nobody believes in magic any more. They are too afraid or they think they can't get what they want." Tulip gazed into Maven's eyes, tears brimming. "Just like you. They don't know what to wish for, and they are afraid of what they might get."

"Have you ever heard of stories about old women, or about young women who wanted something other than marriage?"

Tulip shook her head. "No. Old women are usually fairies in disguise. The fairies don't need wishes, and most of the other fairy godmothers gave up their wands to get married. What else would young women want?"

"Some of them want to be fairy godmothers." Maven tried to smile, but Tulip was too sad, and with reason. If Fiona was as angry as Maven thought she might be, Tulip had just lost her wand, though there was hope in that Fiona hadn't summoned her immediately. "Why not ask your Aunt Belle for her advice? She might put in a good word for you."

"I'm really more afraid of Aunt Belle than Miss Fiona. After today, she might not let me come back to the Twilight Lounge."

The Bump made a suggestion, which Maven passed along. "Pick out some kind of animal, not a pretty one, for a persona that shows how you feel. Belle might be more apt to listen."

"It's probably my last chance. Thanks." Tulip poofed out.

Maven transformed her gossamer into a thick, soft quilt, and curled up in the hammock. Her mind would not simmer down. Perhaps Cook's

tea was more of a stimulant than it appeared. She only wanted to sleep. But sleep evaded her as images of Faery melting from disbelief, from cynicism, from pure lack of imagination, flashed through her mind. If Faery disappeared entirely, could she go back to Mundane, or would she disappear too?

She listened to Tulip's story, hoping Belle would help her sort herself out, which might help Maven with her own sorting.

Chapter Eighteen

Tulip Faces Belle

Tulip slithered into the Twilight Lounge as a large, yellow python. A branch of the tree at the bar lowered itself for her. As she looped herself around it, it rose, bringing Tulip up to the Owl's eye level.

The Owl blinked, and flapped off to hide in its mirror.

Tulip waited. She knew Aunt Belle would come, and she wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. If Aunt Belle was on her side, maybe she could convince Miss Fiona to keep her in training. Without Aunt Belle, Tulip knew there was no hope of ever being a fairy godmother.

Aunt Belle stomped into the space behind the bar. "Planning to put the squeeze on somebody?"

Tulip flicked her tongue and hung her head. She wished she knew the snake trick of hypnotizing people, but Aunt Belle already knew that one anyway.

Belle held up a cage. "Mouse or bird?"

"No, no thanks-s-s." Tulip's head drooped lower, her chin nearly resting on the bar.

Belle put the cage back under the bar. "If you think I am going to waste my time lecturing you, then you might as well slither on back home." She began to polish the bar, always a signal of the end of the conversation.

Tulip's head jerked back, and she pulled herself into a striking coil.

Before she could say anything, Belle continued. "You have a wand and a chance. Do your job. Now get out of here." Belle pulled a tray of

drinks from under the bar and carried them to a table where a group of harpies screeched and clattered. She did not return.

With a flick of her forked tongue, Tulip disappeared.

She landed in her hammock in her pod, still in python personae. She re-played this afternoon's scene, grabbing up the girl-bird and popping her into her feline mouth. She did have magic, but she had let it control her.

At least Maven helped her clients, even if it made Fiona angry. She didn't try to eat them. She coiled herself up on her hammock. Miss Fiona would probably end her probation in the morning, and she would go back to being an errand runner, or worse, she might be demoted to peasant. Aunt Belle might not even let her work in the Twilight Lounge.

Tulip could understand how fairy godmothers might want to hide in their own stories. Maybe the serpent personae would give her some wisdom, and things would look better in the morning light after she shed her reptile skin.

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Belle poured herself the nearest thing to an intoxicant she served—hot bitter chocolate with habanera. An itch in the back of her mind wouldn't stay still long enough for her to think about it. She was waiting to sneak up on it, looking at it from the corner of her eye to see it at all. Fiona was missing some detail somewhere, a detail that might bite both of them in the end.

She busied herself with collecting the crockery before the midnight transformation. The Twilight never closed, but almost no one stayed after the personas disappeared, so it saved time cleaning up. The Lounge could do it all, but her barmaid persona needed mundane work to free her mind. If Belle got her points lined up, then their discussion would be a lot more worthwhile. She didn't want to get in another fight over Tulip and Maven.

Tulip was showing signs of growing up, of being her own woman. Would Fiona ruin Tulip to keep her as an assistant? Could Fiona let go of her own power and allow someone else to take over? And what would that do to Faery? Or to Mundane?

Nobody knew why the Veil was breaking down. It had been strong enough for centuries though all sorts of beings crossed in both directions. Perhaps a few too many threads had broken to keep the rest together. Maybe Fiona was right about the archetypes, but there seemed to be plenty of heroes, villains, damsels in distress and spear carriers, more than enough for any kind of story on both sides of the wall, and in the various realms of Fiction as well. Yet people were able to cross over without the help of a magic, folks who didn't need to be in Faery. Fiona ought to...

Someone crashed into Belle, upsetting the tray she carried, spreading crockery all around. Belle stumbled, nearly falling across the body that hit her.

The Twilight became deadly silent. Belle never missed a step or dropped anything. Most folk never got that close to her. The Twilight itself always made plenty of room for her between the most crowded of

tables.

Belle gripped the floor with her toes, never changing expression. She set her tray on a nearby table, and then reached down for a handful of whatever interrupted her thoughts. She caught a fistful of long hair and a scrawny neck attached to one inebriated human. She set him on his feet without letting him go. He didn't resist, but leaned on her hand for support. She loosened her grip on his throat. She'd seen him before and didn't want to see him again.

When he could breathe, he grinned at her. "I always did like redheads. Fire and spit like a big bite of poblano." Though he could barely stand, he tried to bow, swinging his arms aimlessly, his voice charming and lascivious. "Silicon Jones, ma'am, at your service."

Someone snickered. Everyone else ducked. Belle drew back to hit Jones, thought better of it and shoved his head back through the wall.

But it didn't go. His head bounced off like a basketball and spun Belle around. By this time, the crowd rushed the door or just poofed out.

Belle transformed Jones into a basketball. She dribbled him across the floor and made a three pointer through the hoop the Twilight Lounge provided over the now empty door. Jones douched—nothing but net—and rolled into the vestibule. Belle put him back in human form and dragged him by one foot into the street and toward Fiona's office.

Jones tried to roll his arms around his head to keep it from bouncing on the cobblestones. "I'm sorry," he cried. "Oh. Lemme go. I won't do it again."

"Got that right." Belle stopped at the door of FGM Headquarters, conveniently nearby on this occasion. She hammered on the door with

her unoccupied fist, but no one came to open it. Belle growled. She dropped Jones's foot to get to the bag of fairy dust in her pocket.

He writhed in pain, slowly inching away from her until he could get to his knees and crawl. Just when he pulled himself together enough to find his elbows and knees, Belle grabbed him around his waist, jerked him up on her hip and poofed. She took him to Neauwae, where the Veil had been breached by Mundane.

They landed within yards of the shimmering gray mist in the darkness. Belle turned around three times and on the third turn, flung Jones into the mist like a rag doll.

She poofed to her pod where she hoped Fiona waited. Fiona was about to receive a large piece of Belle's mind and a reality check she couldn't cash.

Chapter Nineteen

Strict Instructions

Maven's eyes had barely shut when an insistent beeping woke her. She pulled her gossamers together and poofed to Fiona's office, sans coffee.

"Thank you for appearing so promptly to my summons," Fiona said, sarcastically. "Are you quite ready to begin training again, or do you know it all?"

"Please, let's get started again." Maven hoped to improve Fiona's opinion of her.

No warmth radiated from Fiona. Her pink complexion was as clear and hard as rose quartz. Tulip materialized without rousing the jars on the shelves or the dust motes in the golden sunshine, still in persona as a python, holding her wand in her mouth.

"You wove a very strong persona to last beyond midnight," Fiona said, waving her wand provide more energy for Tulip to use.

"Impressive."

"I can't change back," Tulip mumbled with the wand in her teeth. She stared at her tail.

As Fiona moved closer, Tulip slumped in a heap of coils. "The Serpent is an ancient symbol of wisdom. What have you learned?"

"To use magic lightly," Tulip whispered.

"Excellent!" Fiona leaned over to raise Tulip's chin with one finger.

"We always stand up and face what is ahead of us, especially if we conjured it. Are you ready for your next training session?"

Tulip's eyes widened, staring at Fiona for several seconds. "You mean..."

"While you have learned a great deal," Fiona said dryly, "you certainly cannot think your training is finished."

"Oh, No, ma'am, I mean, Yes, ma'am!" Tulip's energy flowed again, a shimmer of delight brightening her aura. With a swish of her wand, she transformed back to her human self. Pink, fresh, and ready to grant all the wishes of the Faery world.

The crockery perked up. Fiona stilled them with a dark glare, which she turned on Maven. She called up the Map and studied it. "Tulip, monitor the Eastern kingdom of Neauwae. Remember what you learned yesterday."

"Yes, ma'am!" Tulip grinned and poofed out with hardly a sparkle, too quickly for the jars to jump. They slid back to the wall and sulked.

Fiona pointed to the map where a star glowed and several sparkles seemed bent on becoming stars. "Go to H.R.'s realm. Daisy must believe her wish is granted, but do not give her too much. She has to put in her own effort."

Maven nodded, still groggy.

"Princess Vivienne is exactly where she is needed." Fiona pointed to the map where H.R.'s lands and Vivienne's had already merged. "Her presence is having the desired effect. Consider Daisy a factor in the larger story."

"Yes, ma'am," Maven tried to sound enthusiastic.

"You may confer with H.R.'s cook, as you did last night. You will not be able to do any magic within the Castle itself, so make certain

when Daisy does wish, you are both outside.”

“And she needs special effects to see the magic,” Maven said, hoping Daisy would ask for something practical.

“Yes. As soon as Daisy has made her wish, come back here. No more wishes. Do you understand?” Fiona folded her arms.

“Yes, ma'am.” Maven poofed out. She needed some coffee, and Cook might make some for her before she found Daisy.

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Cook rocked in her chair by the kitchen hearth and sipped thoughtfully as if she hadn't seen Maven poof in.

Maven poured herself a cup and at the table nearby.

Cook said, as if to herself, “...if he fell in love with her. Love does strange things to a man.” She gazed into the cup, swirling it. Her brows squeezed furrows into her forehead, and her lips folded over her teeth to keep her from saying more.

“It doesn't generally change who they are, though.” Maven looked into her teacup, swirled it, spilling some of the contents on her gossamer. She saw nothing, even when she stirred the tea with her wand. Maybe reading tea leaves was covered later.

“You had no idea, I'm sure,” Cook said, this time to Maven, although her gaze did not waver from her teacup. “Daisy might have been able to subdue H.R. if he had fallen for her. Or he would have eaten her alive. Or nothing would have happened except she would learn great

beauty is not the answer to all problems.”

“Not even in fairy tales.” Maven set her cup down. “What’s the key to the spell anyway? Does someone just have to fall in love with the prince, which doesn’t seem so hard? Is he such a bad guy?”

“Nobody knows what the spell requires. He has built this kingdom from the more remote corners of several other kingdoms with enough ruffians to keep it together.” Cook shrugged. “He’s been here as long as anyone remembers, never aging, never leaving the grounds for more than a day at a time.”

“What of Vivienne? Can’t we teach her? Can we send the guys off on some quest to hunt dragons or something?” Maven figured Azaha could barbecue a regiment and make hash from the leftovers.

“I don’t have my wings or my wand.” Cook poured herself another cup. “I can’t help you.” Maven shook her head. None of what she learned made any sense.

“There’s not a lot I can do in this persona,” Cook said. “You can’t change the spell which keeps me here. Fiona cast it.” She stared off again into the hearth.

“I take it getting Fiona’s attention is a Bad Thing.” Maven said.

Cook nodded. She swirled the tea leaves in her cup and peered at them. “Is it cool to ask how you came to be here?”

“Cool?”

“Sorry. Appropriate? Er...polite?”

“No.” Cook offered Maven a biscuit and butter.

Maven took one and bit into it. It was just like one of her grandmother’s, hard as flint. How had Cook become the cook? Fiona had

a wicked sense of humor.

Maven sawed the biscuit in half. A crock of butter appeared on the table. Cook did not so much as glance at it. Maven buttered the biscuit and crunched into it.

Cook swirled her tea leaves again, gazing silently. She nodded to herself. "Do you know the story of the long-haired girl in the tower?"

"I remember."

"I encouraged one to cut her hair and escape." Cook turned back toward the fire.

Maven always wondered why the girl hadn't thought of that herself. She said nothing while she palmed her wand to listen to Cook's story.

Cook didn't elaborate. But Maven heard how the girl just disappeared into the forest, never to be found either alive or dead. Cook still felt guilty. Maven reached out just to pat her shoulder.

Cook waved the back of her hand toward Maven, a signal to go away. A tear made a bright streak down Cook's red cheek.

Maven went out the back door, where a path led to the outbuildings, a pleasant walk for listening and thinking, whether the thoughts were pleasant or not. She listened as Daisy inspected her new domain. The woman was appalled. The dairy was dirty; the cows were few and poorly fed, and the building itself was not in the best repair. Maven felt the tears well up in Daisy's eyes.

"If only I could make a wish now," Daisy said.

Maven poofed in on cue, with minor fireworks and colored smoke. Daisy jumped back, properly startled and impressed.

"Be careful what you ask for," Maven gestured with the wand to the

dairy and the Castle grounds. "I have brought you to the Castle on your word. You have one chance, so think carefully what it is you want."

Daisy had spent time thinking about a wish. She liked getting money for her work, and having the princess on her side would help her help her friends, even if Daisy had to pay them herself. "I wish for a place for me and my friends to work and make money to be able to take care of ourselves. And even the other women in the village if they want to."

"You understand this will take hard work, and it will not happen immediately?" Maven said. "This place is full of old magic, and this new magic will have to work its way through. But if this is your wish, you shall have it." Maven swirled the wand so sparkles covered Daisy, repairing her clothes and renewing the things she brought along.

"Now as for cleaning the place up," Maven said, nodding toward the castle, "you might express your wish to young Henry there, to see if he is worthy of your esteem."

Young Henry stood at a Castle window overlooking the shed and fields.

"Judge a man by the breadth of his back," Maven said, "and by when and where he will bend it." Maven was surprised at this last bit; she'd certainly never known how to judge a man at all.

"Thank you!" Daisy got to work cleaning up in the dairy.

Maven walked back up the path to speak to Cook. Lady Dee dashed out the door, her skirts held above her knees, and her face streaked with tears. She nearly knocked Maven down.

"You are the fairy godmother, from last night," she said, gasping for breath, yet trying to compose herself. "Can you, will you grant me a

wish too, even though I am old and useless?” Lady Dee appeared to be about thirty-five, certainly not disabled, nor deficient in any capacity except the first bloom of youth. How she knew Maven was a fairy godmother was a puzzle

Fiona had said plainly, “No wishes.” But the code of wishing said each FGM had to make the call. The Bump prodded Maven toward Lady Dee.

“Be careful what you ask for,” Maven said. “You might get it.” Lady Dee's story as the poor relation justifying her existence was more interesting than her sincere desire to have a home of her own, a man who loved her, and her own life away from obligation to others. But her thread was braided tightly with Vivienne's and now Daisy's. Maven waited to hear her wish. The specter of R&R loomed close, but Maven could not refuse her.

“I wish,” Lady Dee's voice dropped to a dry whisper “I wish...I wish to be useful, a valued member of the household, not just a companion or servant or poor relation who must be fed for honor's sake.” Her bitter tears fell, streaming down her face, and unto her dark dress. She did not change expression, however, which nearly broke Maven's heart. What could she grant that would not create more chaos? How to give someone self-esteem, how to fill the emptiness? How to work around strict orders? She opened her mouth and trusted The Bump, the Serpent, or her own instinct to answer.

“Vivienne will need your guidance and expertise until she has experience of her own. There is too much for Her Highness, Cook, and Daisy to do here. Kneel please.” Lady Dee sank to her knees. Maven

tapped her on each shoulder. “I hereby dub thee Executive Administratrix of Domestic Engineering. You will find each will ask your advice. See to it your advice is good. Rise, Madam Administratrix.” No sparkles, only a tiny bit of magic to get the tear stains out of her dress, nothing but a suggestion. Surely, Fiona could not object to granting what Lady Dee would do in any case.

Lady Dee stood up straight, her face dry and fresh, her color returned. Her clothing was already impeccable, her carriage erect and her confidence full. “Thank you, Fairy Godmother. If I may do you a service, please do not hesitate to call on me.”

“You're welcome, and I may take you up on that.” Maven's wand buzzed. She winced— caught again. She decided to go into the kitchen to check with Cook before going back to FGM HQ. She needed more information to make sense of what she knew, and she needed some justification to present to Fiona.

Cook was not there, but the teapot was. Maven poured herself another cup, listening to the Castle rumble to itself as she sipped her tea. She took another biscuit, dipping it into the tea to soften it up, ruining both the tea and the biscuit. She set down the cup and used her wand to make herself a cup of coffee.

Nothing happened. She tried again, and felt a change in the energy around her. She drew on that energy and tried the third time. Her hand remained empty, but a pot of coffee appeared on the hearth. Maven tossed the biscuit and the tea into a slops bucket beside the back door. She poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Not bad. Thanks.” Maven understood a little more now about the

castle's magic, and while the coffee was a bit weak, it had just enough magical caffeine substitutes to give her an edge. "Will you tell me how to break the spell?"

A wind blew cool through the kitchen, whispering, "No." Maven quaffed the rest of the coffee and poofed back to Fiona.

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Fiona was waiting with crossed arms and a crosser frown. The crockery vibrated as if they had feet to tap. "Don't stop for a cuppa when I summon you. Come here straight away."

"Okay," Maven sighed, dropping her shoulders to make them relax. "I will from now on. I was just trying to understand what I heard listening to the story."

Fiona's glare made her shoulders rise in tension again. "I believe I gave you strict instructions not to grant another wish in this story."

"Technically, I didn't." Maven used the only gambit she could think of. "I let Lady Dee think she made a wish, but she didn't. I used only enough magic to clean up her face and her clothes."

Fiona glared. Maven did not back down, but met her eye for eye.

"Cook is one of my people now on R&R for taking too much liberty on a story. She has been at the Castle for quite a long time, and will continue until the story culminates. Do you wish to join her staff?"

Maven shook her head, her neck stiff and painful. "No, thank you."

Fiona's face showed a bit of relief, though her voice was still hard.

“Perhaps you are bored with the old fashioned stories, and prefer to return to your home?”

Maven felt the blood drain from her face—she could not go back to Mundane. She shook her head again, speechless.

Fiona smiled like a snake ready to strike. “Can you learn that some folk deserve to get exactly what they ask for? Can you forget your modern ideas?”

Maven didn't trust herself to speak. She nodded. What would happen to Daisy, Lady Dee, and Vivienne if Fiona were in charge of them?

Fiona turned her attention to back to Maven, refocusing her crystal ball to review. “How did you appear to Lady Dee?”

“As a fairy godmother, I guess wings, gossamer, wand, and all. Maybe a few sparkles since I had just spoken to Daisy.” Maven spoke softly, her fit of temper washed away in her concern for her clients. “What should I have done? I don't know any stories about that.”

Fiona pointed her wand at Maven. “Think of the stories you do know.”

“Red Riding Hood didn't make a wish. Dorothy wished to go home. Goldilocks didn't make a wish, and the bears ate her.” Maven swallowed, as she remembered the trip to the Twilight Lounge. “Gretel killed the witch and helped her brother escape. Velvet...no, that was a movie.” Various images fluttered through Maven's mind, but most of them weren't fairy tales in any sense, except for having happy endings. She didn't know any stories about dairymaids or older women, only starlets and nymphets. Maven began to feel some feedback from Fiona's wand.

Fiona kept her wand focused on Maven. “Tell me about the old

women in the stories you know. How do they look? What do they do?"

Maven frowned. The images from her mind showed predatory women, thin and sharp, or fat and bumbling. "They are either evil, witches, mostly or ..." Maven avoided saying bad fairies. "Or weak and helpless, like the grandmother in Red Riding Hood. There just aren't any stories about old women. Where are the stories for old women? How do we know how to grow old?"

Fiona put her wand down. "What is old to you, Maven? Thirty-five? Forty-five? Fifty-five?"

"Forty used to seem old until I turned forty, but now I think seventy or eighty."

"How many women do you think live to be so ancient?" Fiona crossed her arms, peering down her nose.

The Bump clicked again. What was life expectancy for her grandmother? Maven didn't know. "I know some women over seventy. My mom died, but some of her friends, and even one or two of her aunts are alive."

"Yet, you know no stories for them. I am sending you to the Spinsters for more training. Your education has been sorely lacking. They will fill in some of the gaps. Listen to what they say, do whatever they tell you, and don't ask any questions."

Fiona waved her wand, and the office disappeared.

Chapter Twenty

Spinning Yarns

When Fiona's sparkles cleared, Maven stood in a corner of a cottage.

Three ancient women sat spinning in the gloom. A beam of late afternoon sun stabbed across the floor. As her eyes adjusted, she could see a basket to the left of the group. There were many balls of thread piled up on the right; around her were baskets full of thread holding up the ceiling, which was ready to tumble down on their heads.

Each woman sat on a stool, muttering to herself, creaking like a machine with worn out bearings. One was older than dirt, her gaunt body with knobby joints like pipefittings, her skin stretched over her bones. Her head was slick bald with cobwebs of pale hair drifting across her scalp. Her blind eyes were white, the long nose drooped toward her chin, and her ears hung nearly to her shoulders with some kind of white stone in each one. She spun the thread, her claws pulling up bits of stuff finer than silk and adding them to a thread spun from a rough spindle at her feet.

Her younger sister, merely elderly, was more robust, her body still round if sagging. Her hair was braided in a white rope around her head; her eyes twinkled from deep within her wrinkled face, emphasized by her wide, thick-lipped grin. Her hands were thick, but deft at winding up the thread from another spindle into a ball. Maven could see the muscles in her arms and the sinews of her fingers. This one saw Maven and jerked her head, inviting Maven closer.

The last, the youngest, appeared to be only a few decades older than

Maven, her hair gray and white, thick and flowing down her back. Her eyes were dark with deep bags. Her mouth drooped at the corners in a sour expression from which her teeth protruded. As her elder sister wound the thread into balls, she would reach across every little while, grab the ball of thread, and bite the thread to break it. Her mutterings sounded more like hissing than words.

“Don't just gawp there, Child,” the middle sister said, with a bit of a cackle. “Gather up the gloss and put it in Sister's basket.”

As Maven approached, she saw each of them dribbling as they muttered, especially the youngest. The spray from their mouths dried as it fell, making wispy bits of stuff that piled around their feet like hair under a barber's chair after a brand new set of jarheads. The colorless fluff was visible in the half-light only because there was so much of it.

Swallowing hard, Maven bent over beside the youngest sister and scraped up a double handful. It almost floated out of Maven's hands as she carried it to the basket of the eldest. She grabbed another handful from beside the eldest, and then some from the middle sister. The more of the gloss she gathered, the more the mutterings made sense. The women were telling stories, old stories. Maven had never heard of them, unless they'd been embroidered in literature, upholstered in poetry, quilted in symbolism, and worn threadbare with analysis and deconstruction.

Maven heard the story of a little girl whose evil stepmother sent her to ask for fire from the local witch, who granted her request after the girl did some chores. The witch was neither good nor bad, from what Maven could tell, only true to her own character.

So that's how she could have handled Ashleigh—getting her to do something. And that's what Dolores needed to do, sort things out. Maven could keep an eye on her and maybe give her a better wish later on.

Another story told of an old woman who rescued two women from their husbands' beatings while waiting for her bread to rise. There were magical washerwomen with yard long breasts who would answer three questions, if one were brave enough grab a breast and suckle. Maven was spellbound. She couldn't imagine such stories, or who would have told them.

Fairies took men through the Veil, missing years of their lives in one night, or were themselves kidnapped by men on the human side. An old woman did a strip tease to bring back Spring. Maven laughed aloud, and so did the middle Spinster.

Maven kept gathering up the gloss as she listened, careful to say nothing to interrupt. She felt like a child eavesdropping as her grandmother and her neighbors gossiped. But her kinfolk had only hinted with innuendo and euphemism, winks and pursed lips, sentences suddenly broken off when they remembered Maven was there. The spinners' stories left in all the details.

Old women didn't make wishes, they granted them or they tricked people. The only old wives were the ones witchy enough to survive.

When finally, all the gloss was gathered, and the sun had set, leaving them in darkness, the middle crone spoke. "Come here, child."

Maven stood before the crone with the twinkling eyes. Deep silence surrounded the three. They stared at her, even the ancient blind one.

The middle one asked. "Have you a question to ask of us?"

Maven shook her head. Her mind spun like the spindle, twisting up all her words into a complete knot. “F-Fiona,” she stammered. “Fiona sent me.”

“Ahh, young Fiona, the new Mother Superior.” She smiled her teeth pale in the darkness. Her sisters, or mother and daughter laughed, the ancient cackling and the younger hissing.

“Has she learned when to spin fine and when to spin slubs?” “I don’t understand.”

At this, they laughed again.

“Thee an honeth child,” the youngest one lisped. She felt in her basket of yarn balls, grasped one, and handed it to Maven. “Feel the yarn.”

Maven unwound a bit of it. The yarn had thick, soft places between the tightly spun bits, making hard twists and soft lumps—slubs. She wrapped it back up and handed it to the young one.

“Do you give up your life so easily?” the middle one asked. All of them laughed again. “Is there nothing you want to know?”

Questions swirled in Maven’s mind like a swarm of gnats on a summer afternoon, too small and fast moving to pick one out. “Fiona told me not to ask.”

Again, they cackled. The old one unwound a length of thread from her spindle, the middle one measured it out to the length of her arm, and the young one bit it off. They measured off two more bits, and the youngest braided the yards together. The middle one tied knots in each end. “Hold out your hand, child. Here is a talisman, a bit of a story, a bit of a life for when you have need.”

When Maven held out her hand, the spinster knotted the braid around her wrist.

“Thank you,” Maven said. She was sure it was a magical gift, but she had no idea what good it might be.

“Be ye gone now, back to Fiona. Tell her the strongest yarn will snap if pulled too tightly.”

“I will,” Maven said. She took a step toward the door, by the time her foot reached the ground she was in her own pod. She was weary from the work of bending and gathering the gloss for hours. She reached out to find her hammock, shrugged out of her wings and wriggled into a deep sleep.

She dreamed she was being swallowed by a large snake, squeezed tighter and tighter, but then as her head was enclosed in the snake's jaws, she was released, weightless, floating against a dark background of stars spinning slowly, each in its own pathway.

She heard a soft voice, whispering from all around her. “Des-s-tiny is where the will meets- s-s the future.” She reached out to get a sense of the space. She saw her hand, a silhouette blocking the starlight. Just then, she felt in control, not drifting in space, but flying, moving at will. She pirouetted, cut somersaults, and flew loop-de-loops. When she joyously attempted a back flip with a double-twist, she landed hard, the breath knocked out of her.

When she opened her eyes, she was on the floor, swathed in gossamer, which also looped across the hammock above her head. The sun shone through the pod wall, and her wand was buzzing, loudly insistent. She climbed up, rearranged her gossamer, wriggled into her

wings, and stretched, hoping a cup of coffee—even decaf—could be worked in later.

Chapter Twenty-One

Another Day, Another Story

Fiona looked like she too had been thrown up by a large snake, despite her perfect coif and gossamer. Her slightly greenish face showed usually invisible lines, and her eyes were pinkish and slightly unfocused.

“Where were you last night?” Fiona's stare was as piercing as a forty-penny spike.

Maven hadn't heard that question in that tone of voice in a very long time. She wasn't in the mood for it before coffee after waking up on the floor with her mind full of dryer lint, “In my pod, in my hammock, at least until I woke up this morning.”

“And where were you then?” Fiona's tone rose, accusing.

“On the floor of my pod, tangled up in gossamer.” Maven said as her neck tightened and her jaw set. “Want to feel the goose egg where I landed?” She rolled her head slowly to stretch out the kinks in her neck. Her neck popped like someone doing flamenco on bubble wrap. She swizzled up two cups of coffee and handed one to Fiona. “I need this, and it looks like you do, too.”

Fiona frowned. “What is it?”

“It passes for coffee.” Maven stirred hers with her wand, hoping for something like a bit of magical caffeine. “Light and sweet, or black?”

“It looks black to me.” Fiona peered into the mug as if she expected something to crawl out of it. In Mundane, that would have been a definite possibility. Maven's coffee would slap your momma. Maven stirred Fiona's coffee with her wand, whipping it into a latte.

Maven sipped her own brew black. "I was in my pod all night, officer. But I don't have any witnesses." She felt the warmth radiating out from her stomach even if it was just magic, it felt like coffee. The warmth melted some of the defensiveness from her neck and jaw. Now if it would just oil the gears between her ears, and bring the noise down to a full roar.

Gingerly Fiona sipped. "Thank you. This is good." She smiled briefly. "Did you stay with the Spinsters? You disappeared last night. I could not hear you."

"You are Mother Superior, then," Maven said, smiling back. For once, she felt she was on Fiona's level, not like some errant child. "The Spinsters sent me back to my pod. I had a dream about being swallowed by a snake, and then flying. I woke up when I fell out of the hammock. I didn't know I could fall out of a hammock."

Fiona frowned again, taking a longer swallow. "Were you wearing your wings?" "No, I didn't figure they would be good to sleep in."

"You may not have been in Faery, then, if you were dreaming." Coffee seemed to agree with Fiona. She was looking pinker and more herself with every swallow. "Be sure to wear your wings and carry your wand at all times, so I can find you if necessary. I don't want you to disappear after I've trained you."

Now Maven knew why she had her wings. The Bump agreed, and Maven made a note to take her wings off anytime she needed some privacy. "Where else could I have been? I wasn't on...the Other Side."

"I did not say Faery was the only other dimension." Fiona took a long drink of the coffee, draining the cup. She held it out for more.

Maven swizzled, making it stronger this time.

“Thank you.” Fiona peered into the cup, and then took another long sip. She didn't mention R&R or going back to Mundane. Yet.

“The Spinners sent you a message.” Maven drank the last of her coffee. “Yes?”

“They said even a thick thread would break if you pulled it too hard.” Maven tapped her coffee cup with her wand to make it disappear. “They asked something about whether you could spin both fine thread and slubs.”

Fiona drained her coffee, staring at something far away. Fiona set her empty cup on her desk and it evaporated, cup and all, to reappear on the shelves with Fiona's other crockery. The other things moved away.

Maybe that last cup had been a bit too strong.

“What is that on your arm?” Fiona pointed. “Is it someone's life?”

Maven studied the colorless yard knotted around her wrist. She'd forgotten it. “Mine, I think. They didn't say for sure, and you said not to ask.”

Fiona leaned forward, reaching out as if to touch the yarn, but Maven put her wrist behind her back.

Fiona snapped back to her usual straight posture. “Certainly. You did exactly as I asked.”

She did not sound pleased. “What did you learn?”

“They were telling stories I never heard before.” Maven shook her head. “All of them were about old women.”

“Faery is the dimension which holds the Stories.” Fiona crossed her arms. “Without those stories, without the stories, humans would become

animals again.”

“Maybe the trouble with the Veil is we don't have stories for old women on the Other Side, except for evil witches and feeble grandmothers. People live longer now. We have a lot of new ways to tell stories.”

Fiona's eyes widened, and her mouth narrowed. “What did you learn about the Veil? What did the Spinsters say?”

“Nothing.”

Fiona turned again to her crystal ball. She waved her hands over it several times, and then picked it up and stared into its depths. She frowned and muttered. “The Spinsters have disappeared.” She stared at Maven, her face sharpening into a scowl. “What did you do to them?”

Maven jumped to her feet, backing into the herb shelf. The jars backed up too.

“Me? I didn't do anything.” Maven spread her hands, grasping for an answer. “I could hardly answer their questions.”

She felt Fiona's magic pierce her mind and search for answers. She grabbed her temples where her veins throbbed. Maven pushed the pain out of her head, visualizing a thick wall between her and Fiona. The pain stopped, and Maven's head began to clear.

Fiona's face slowly moved into its professional mask, but spots of color glowed on her cheekbones.

Maven knew she should just be quiet, but her mouth opened by itself, and Bump of Direction spoke for her.

“They called you Young Fiona. But now I guess you are the oldest of them all.” Maven dared not move a muscle. She watching with horror

as Fiona transformed into a figure somewhere between Miss Haversham and the Crypt Keeper.

Fiona's face turned white as sour milk. Her skin sagged from her skull, wrinkling beside her sharp nose, flapping on either side of and below her chin. Stooped over, she pointed a skeletal finger from under tattered wisps of gossamer and croaked, "Keep that in mind when you go changing stories."

Maven fully expected green fire to spark from that fingertip and dispel all her atoms into powder stored in one of the jars on the shelf. She could see why the other FGMs wanted to escape into their own stories. Which was the real Fiona?

Fiona returned to her usual persona and got her wand. "Your next assignment is to play the part of one of them. The Old Woman of the Forest."

"I don't know that story," Maven said. "That's something I wanted to ask you about. What happened to the old stories about old women?"

Fiona ignored the question. "Then you will have no preconceived attitudes of how the story should progress. Your abilities and scope of action will be limited, until I feel you have a better grasp of how to read your clients and help them appropriately."

Maven's face grew pale and she swallowed. "You're not going to put me in a candy house to capture and eat children?"

Fiona's official smile twisted the corners of her mouth another three degrees. "If you will recall, that old woman was broiled in her own oven. If you would prefer..."

Maven shook her head. She remained silent, her stomach churning

to think of killing children or being killed by them.

“Yes, you can choose to do things you now find unthinkable.” She laughed at Maven's startled reaction. “I do not need my crystal to perceive your thought. Each person believes she would resist, she could change the story, but the stories come through the person who finds herself in their way. If there were no evil, how could the virtuous overcome it?”

“Indeed.” Maven's voice came out dry and whispery. “Give me your wings.”

Maven shrugged out of them. How Fiona would keep track of her? Why she hadn't taken her wand?

Fiona transformed Maven and her gossamer into a crone, stooped, dressed in well-mended rags of rusty black. Maven's wand became a cane, which she had to lean on to remain standing.

“While you dwell in the wood,” Fiona said, “You will have at least one client, perhaps as many as three, who will need your aid. Feed them, let them stay or move on as they wish. The house will provide for you as well. Do not attempt to grant any wishes. You may give them some advice or perhaps a talisman, but no poofing, no sparkles, and no...what would the word be...no editing.”

“Anything else?” Maven croaked. In reply, Fiona flicked her wand.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tulip in Neauwae

From the top of the forest of Neauwae, Tulip listened to the heartbeat of the kingdom, a place sorely lacking in imagination. Tulip listened very hard for those little words. “I wish...”

In the meadows, the shepherds and shepherdesses contented themselves with their sheep and each other. In the towns, the maidens and lads flirted into courtship and then marriage with few sighs and fewer fantasies.

She didn't even hear “I wish I hadn't....” Tulip flew closer to the castle, where the elevation of the highborn might create some ambition in those of the countryside below, but the industrious populace focused on their goals and achieving their aims. The Happily Ever After Kingdom of all the stories was boring and gray.

No need for a fairy godmother where no wishes lived. Clearly, Miss Fiona never intended for Tulip to be a fairy godmother, or Aunt Belle had talked her out of it.

Tulip would show them all she could do magic.

As she flitted, the mist at the edge of the kingdom crept ever nearer, though not an edge, which implies a sharp line between what Is and what Is Not, but a fading off, the way shadows lengthen at the end of day, merging into the twilight.

And through the mist, Tulip could see glimpses of the dirty, manufactured places of Maven's story, the serrated edges of Mundane. She felt very alone, wondering if she could learn her trade before it

disappeared into that steel and stone place of spells gone wrong.

Yet Mundane called to her, a place that needed hope. She drifted toward the shadows, listening like a child to the whispered tales of the Other Side. Maven came from there, little-girl- Maven who still didn't know what to wish for.

Tulip spun around in the air, turning resolutely away from the Veil. Maven needed help to deal with Miss Fiona, and Aunt Belle would never forgive her for running away. If she could go to Mundane, she couldn't get back. She would have to give up her magic to do it.

And she did have magic—the girls proved it. Even her stubborn snake persona proved it. Tulip flew high above the forest looking for any spot of color in the gray. One spot glowed green at the edge of the forest.

As Bianca and Rosa weeded the garden, they chattered about the Twilight, their story ever more fantastic, yet less frightening. As they talked, their enthusiasm spread over the space around them, brightening the local colors.

“So that's what it takes to wash away the gray,” Tulip said, attracting the attention of a bird that swooped toward her with lunch on its mind. She soared with dizzying speed away from the bird, swooping higher and then diving, the bird steadily gaining. It had much more flying experience, wider wingspan, and more mass. She barely outmaneuvered as she plummeted toward the ground.

Nearly panicked, she dived and poofed full sized again, landing in a fountain of sparkles. The bird plunged at her, pecking her head and shoulders. She swatted at it with her wand, but it eluded her. Finally, Tulip waited for the dive bomb attack and bonked the bird.

If frogs had wings, they wouldn't bump their butts. The former bird croaked, struggling to get away in long, low hops, trying to spread its webs for a little lift.

Tulip never wanted to hear again that she wasn't Fae. She poofed to the highest tower of the castle, where the whole kingdom became a faded quilt of fields and villages.

Tulip listened to each person she saw, goose girls and apprentices, shopkeepers and farmers, ladies of the court and stable boys. The only thing that anyone consciously knew was that they wanted things to go back to the way they used to be, solid, bright, and cheerful. Tulip could hear some denied dreams of being the best farmer in the valley, of rising from scullery maid to cook, of discovery of a true identity that took them far away from their commonplace, rigid life. But they put the thoughts out of their minds, like ignoring a headache, with a white-knuckled grip on their thoughts that might slip loose at any moment. She had to be ready.

Down in a bakery to the east of the castle, the cook bit her lip and did not let the words "I wish" escape. She did, however, place a small saucer of cream by the back door of the kitchen in her herb garden. Never mind the neighborhood cats would get it, she never had problems with bread rising and meat burning when she used to feed the fairies.

Tulip poofed herself to the kitchen, spoke to the yeast in the bread, and to the fire in the hearth, telling them to be their exuberant selves, full of energy and chaos. She made the teacups rattle to let the cook know she was there. One of the delivery boys winked at a bakery maid, and she smiled back. The cook began to hum a little tune, and a cat with a

creamy chin hopped up into a window to snooze in the slightly less leaden sunshine.

Tulip poofed back to the castle tower. Small vibrations glowed in brighter hues around the bakery. People who came in to buy bread came out smiling. Was it merely magic that kept Mundane at bay?

Why didn't Fiona know that?

If magic was all that was keeping the Veil together, and if she could make the Veil strong again, she might take over one day as Fairy Godmother Superior, not Maven. That idea forced the nightmare fascination of Mundane from her thoughts.

Tulip sent a sparkle eastward to the dissolving edge. It merely disappeared into the mist, losing all light and color. Did the mist reach out to suck in the magic?

She went closer to see for sure. Tulip flew again to the edge, a bit afraid of poofing so close. Making herself big again, she stood firmly, as if her feet were rooted to the ground. She felt the energy of the soil of Faery, pulled the air, water, and sunshine to her as well, and visualized a wall of rocks between her and the edge, moving slowly away from her toward the fog. She waved her wand; the wall appeared. As it approached the mist, tendrils of gray wrapped around the wall, stopping it, and dissolving it, bringing the mist that much closer. Then the mist reached out along the lines of energy to Tulip, pulling at her will, towing her toward the mist.

She broke the spell with a yell, and her will, driving the end of her wand into the dirt at her feet to ground the energy. She jerked the wand back and ran away like a terrified peasant, hoping her magic would not

pull the mist after her.

She ran across the barren field and into a wood that was dark but beautiful, green and brown with dapples of yellow sunshine. Ferns and bright flowering vines slowed her down. A fallen tree covered with orange fungus and green moss blocked her way. Tulip perched on it to get her breath and think.

Any minute now Miss Fiona would call her back. Why had she been sent here where no one wished? She held her wand against her ear to listen to the kingdom itself. It was very quiet, breathing shallowly like it was asleep.

She was distracted by noises and movement around her. When she opened her eyes, she saw a woggle of wood sprites, insect-like with hard, shiny, reddish-brown skin, some wearing green leaves for clothing. Their voices buzzed and hummed around her.

“What is it? Too big for fairy!”

“Wand and wings, doing magic.”

“Smells human.”

Irritation began to overcome surprise and fear.

“I am a fairy godmother,” she exclaimed fiercely. The sprites scattered, but they giggled from a safe distance.

“Oooohhh!”

“Wishes for us!”

“Gold!”

“Dancing!”

“Love!”

One sprite lifted the leaf mold to expose a pile of gold shining too

brightly in the shady twilight. Two others appeared in the finest pastel formal wear and did a minuet in the between the trees, while two more swooned into each other's mandibles. Others began to pelt Tulip with acorns and twigs.

"Stop it," she cried. "I'm not hurting you!"

"Noo-ooo. Stupid human makes mist chase her. Even wizards not try that." They threw more debris at her and drew closer as if they would fly at her and bite.

Tulip pulled her gossamer over her head and shielded her face with her arm. "What wizards? Where are they? What did they do?"

The sprites laughed louder. "Under many rocks!"

"You not find!"

They began to throw larger sticks and even small rocks, growling and spitting. Tulip hid her face in her arms, but the sprites' aim was too good, and they drew closer to her, clicking their mandibles and sawing their wings.

Tulip poofed back to King Elroy's highest tower.

She listened for Maven. She needed to talk to someone, but she couldn't hear Maven at all. In desperation, she listened to the castle to get some answers before she was called back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Hut in the Forest

In the dark forest, an old hut appeared with a groan, complete with a weedy garden and one disgruntled fairy godmother. Maven's head hurt, her heart burned, and her gut grumbled.

The one-room hut held a plank table and a bench, an oaken bucket, and a shelf with earthenware. Over the fire in the hearth hung a steaming kettle of water. Beside it sat a rocking chair. A bed filled the far corner with its straw-stuffed tick and a lumpy quilt. A couple of pegs held a nightgown and a cloak. Maven didn't look forward to sleeping here.

She opened the door, noting the latch on the inside with no string attached to the outside. Being locked out of her prison was only amusing if she had somewhere else to go. She thought of propping it open with her cane, but then she couldn't use whatever power it might still have. She dragged the bench across the threshold. Even if the wind should push the door shut, the bench would keep it from latching.

Once outside, she listened to her cane. The trees muttered to themselves. Animals in the forest did what they do to survive—mating, birthing, killing, eating, and dying in their turns. Nary a single likely suspect was within her range, but Fiona said her powers would be limited. For something to do, she began to pull the weeds. She didn't recognize many of the plants: a few strawberries past fruiting, some greens, maybe rampion looked like that. She didn't have any bacon drippings for frying them or next-door neighbors to steal them. No cholesterol in Faery. No wonder Fiona was so old.

She chuckled. She reached for a stick lying in the row, but it dodged away from her, coiling up and raising its head to take a better look.

“Careful,” the Snake whispered. “Are you s-s-certain which ones-s-s are the weeds-s-s?” Involuntarily jerking her hand away, Maven looked at the pile of plants she had pulled, withering on top of the ground. They looked like weeds to her. They had been growing between the rows, overshadowing the plants she recognized, and the other ones that made up the rows. She only pulled the strays.

The Snake slithered into the weed pile. It ran its tongue over some of them, sorting through the pile. “Good instincts-s-s. But in a witch's-s-s garden, so what might be thought a weed, could be very us-s-seful indeed.”

“Are you going to tell me what these are good for, or just offer riddles?”

“You have your own patterns-s-s. Make up your own riddles-s-s.” The Snake pushed a couple of plants off the pile, separating them with its head. “Chickweed, plantain, mint, all valuable to the person who knows how to use them. Will you s-s-sort your clients-s-s, pulling up the ones-s-s who grow outs-s-side the rows-z-z?” It coiled again, flicked its tongue, and disappeared. The garden became neat and tidy, and the yard went from lush weeds to raked bare dirt.

“Lighten up.” Maven said to the space around her. “I was just trying to do something productive.”

“Don't just do something,” the hut answered. “Sit.” The bench slid itself back into the house, and Maven could hear the squeak of the rocking chair, rocking all alone.

She said nothing, but walked resolutely away from the house toward the woods. With each hobbling step, she leaned more heavily on her cane. No path led away from her place, through the impenetrable tangle of briars and vines growing between the trees. She could not push her way through, and each time she tried, the wind whistled through the trees, which slapped and scratched her. Through her cane, she could hear the forest whisper and mutter, although she could not understand what it said. She took her knife from her pocket to cut a piece of the bramble. The knife slipped, cutting her finger.

“So much for finding the edges,” she said to the wind and the trees. She let a drop or two of blood fall on her cane, and then onto the ground. She closed the knife and wrapped her finger in the edge of her skirt.

The whispering wind stopped as soon as she moved toward the house. As she crossed the threshold to the hut, the bench slid to its place, and the door latched itself. Maven didn't even try to stop it. It would open when it was time to let someone in.

Maven sat in the rocking chair. She tugged on her gossamer-turned-rags and tore a piece to make her a shawl. She made tea, as a box of tea leaves appeared conspicuously on the hearth. She looked around for something to eat, but nothing appeared.

She decided to wait to see what happened before she asked. Were there any buildings without sentience in Faery?

What would a Hut wish for?

The Snake's comments troubled her. None of her clients were “silver bells and cockle shells all lined up in a row.” If anything, they were weeds, and she thought that was why Fiona sent her here. She was not

supposed to keep them from being pulled up. She didn't think she was being contrary for rebellion's sake, but maybe she'd been trying to swim upstream so long it seemed the thing to do. She would likely have time enough to think about it.

Having been a weed most of her life, Maven felt some guilt at pulling them up, a waste of energy. If she had learned anything from therapy, it was that maybe she wasn't the only crazy one in her world.

As she had in the library, she held her cane to her head to listen for Daisy, Vivienne, or Lady Dee. Not a peep from any direction—Fiona cast a mean spell.

Fiona might actually send her back to Mundane. Anything would be better than that, even working for Cook.

Images of her former life manifested in her mind, she viewed them with not one homesick note or drop of regret. Faery felt like home, as uncanny as it might be. Maven resolved to learn her lesson and stay here, even if she had to live in the Forest a long time.

Setting her cane down, she sipped lukewarm tea. Sipping was the only way to keep the leaves out of her mouth. Old forest crones didn't use tea strainers. As she started to toss the contents of her cup into the fire, Maven thought of Cook swirling her tealeaves.

Her therapists always said to breathe and clear her mind, so she took a deep breath, pursed her lips, and blew across the half-full, half-empty cup, making ripples across the top and stirring up the bottom. She peered into the cup, her eyes half-focused. She saw blurry patterns of black specks in brown liquid.

She unfocused her eyes further and waited for the clouds in her

mind to clear. Little by little, she began to think of Daisy, like making up a story, or remembering one someone told long ago.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kitchen Queendom

Daisy was whitewashing the barn. Henry struggled to keep up with her.

“That's right,” Daisy said. “Make sure every bit is covered. A clean dairy makes better milk.” She gave him a peck on the cheek, getting whitewash on her nose as he tried to meet her mouth and caught her with the whitewash brush instead. He gasped, but she just laughed. “Now use your head, my darlin' man. Keep the whitewash for the wall.”

Daisy wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and watched her man work. Henry learned quickly, and he was willing. Her fairy godmother had been right about his back. He was willing to bend it for her. She wanted very much to drag him into the hayloft, but until her dairy produced the quality milk and cheese she needed to secure her income and provide for herself, she would not chance losing it, or having to manage with a baby on her back. Time enough for that. The bucket of whitewash ran out at the end of the last milking stall. Daisy was lucky that way.

Gob waddled in, moving quickly despite his short legs. “Cook wants yer,” he said, and pointing to Henry, he added, “And him too, the Lady said.” He surveyed the barn, nodded, and waddled out again, as quickly as he appeared.

“Fill the buckets with water, and put the brushes in. We'll clean them later.” Daisy splashed her face with water from the trough and dried off with the back of her apron. Henry dutifully followed her instructions and

stood patiently while she scrubbed his face and hands.

She reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes. He reached his arm around her waist and lifted her off the ground. Instead of squealing or insisting, he put her down, she wrapped her strong arms around his neck and kissed him within an inch of his life. Still embraced, he set her upon her feet and slid his hands over her. She felt his warmth, the dampness of his honest sweat, the musky, man smell of him.

“Cook would be wanting you directly,” Gob said, having reappeared. “She hain't got a lot of patience.” Henry blushed, turned Daisy loose, and stepped back.

Gob grinned.

“We'll be along shortly,” Daisy said with no loss of composure.

Gob winked, but waited for them.

In the kitchen, Cook held court. Rocky and Stoner guarded the hearth as they munched biscuits, Log counted on his fingers as he memorized what shopping he was to do, Bog hummed as she washed dishes, and Gob bustled in, herding the lovers ahead of him.

Lady Dee stood by the back stairs, showing no emotion, impatience, or irritation.

Cook sat in her chair, a sign that court was in session. “Our lady princess is to be married soon, although the exact details have not been worked out. Nevertheless, it is time to begin making arrangements.” She caught the eye of each member present. “Lady Dee will begin with the princess's requirements.”

Lady Dee inclined her head slightly. “Her Highness has decided that the annexation of her kingdom should be celebrated by all the royalty of

Faery, to make public the circumstances of her connection with the prince.”

Only a glance between her and Cook showed that they agreed on one point.

“Therefore, we shall combine our resources to contrive a memorable occasion that may lead to fortunate alliances on many levels. Cook has many contacts, as do we all, in our various specialties. Now that we are present, Henry, escort Her Highness here.”

Henry dashed up the back stairs. Cook nodded to Rocky and Stoner, who lumbered out to get a sitting room chair for Princess Vivienne, who arrived just as they set the chair by the hearth. All of them bowed as she walked in.

“My loyal supporters,” she said, smiling. “I was promised I might one day rule, and if this is my kitchen kingdom, then I am well pleased to have Cook as Prime Minister and Lady Dee as Chief Advisor. The Prince has agreed to postpone our marriage until Midsummer's Day, which gives us six weeks to prepare.”

The staff exchanged looks of horror. A year and a day were none too long for preparation of a peasant wedding, much less the joining of two kingdoms. Still, the Prince had been dissuaded from merely bedding the Princess only by what limited magic Cook could perform in the kitchen. The royal coffers were limited, so the expenses would be drained from Vivienne's lands. But the grand celebration might be the thing to establish Vivienne as queen.

Princess Vivienne continued, “I ask that each of you think how to impress the guests, to house them and feed them well, easily and

inexpensively.”

Cook added, “Magic cannot be used. It will be up to us to carry out whatever we come up with.”

Daisy saw her lucky chance. She stepped forward and curtsayed. “Your Highness, I have many friends with excellent skills who would surely help.”

“Thank you, Daisy, but there is little enough money to pay them,” the Princess said. “You have seen the state of the grounds; much remains to be done.”

“If I may speak my mind, your Highness?” Daisy stood straight, looking at each person one at a time, almost as she assessed cows.

Vivienne beckoned her to come forward. “Please make your suggestions.”

“If we could get the Prince and his vassals out of the Castle for a couple of weeks, it could be cleaned up and aired out. I believe my friends would help now for a chance to be in the Princess's favor in the future. A sort of barter, if the highborn are willing to trade, as we commoners do.” Daisy gazed boldly at the Princess. “Your Highness could command us to do it anyway.”

Vivienne glanced at Cook and Lady Dee, opposite each other at her left and right. Each of them nodded ever so slightly. “Daisy will speak to her friends about making their talents available in return for promised future favor. Now what shall we ask them to do, and does anyone have a suggestion for getting the Prince from underfoot?”

Rocky scraped his staff on the floor and shifted his weight.

“Yes, er...,” Vivienne looked at Cook for a name. “Step forward.”

“Rocky, your Highness,” Cook said.

Rocky shuffled forward, more in fear of Cook than in shyness of the Princess. “Prince H.R. ain't been a-huntin' in the longest, Mum, er, yer Highness.” He cleared his throat and looked at the floor. “He could go after the Boar of the Forest for the feast. That would impress the other royals right enough, and would take a while to find. 'Specially with me and Stoner leading him.”

Daisy thought Rocky and Stoner also wanted to escape being handy for the heavy work. Princess Vivienne nodded and smiled. “Is there truly a Great Boar of the Forest?”

“Oh, yes m-m-yer Highness.” Rocky nodded so vigorously he nearly lost his helmet. “And he don't run on your side of the kingdom, neither.”

Stoner nodded too, shaking crumbs loose from his scraggly beard.

“Thank you both, Rocky and Stoner.” Princess made a very slight bow, and Rocky went back to his place by the hearth. “What other suggestions can be made?”

Log stepped forward next, first checking with Cook. He kept his head down, hunched himself as if he didn't want to tower over the Princess. “Your Highness is very kind to let us make our suggestions, but how can you rule against the Prince? Begging your pardon, but he won't be different when he gets back, if he goes, and there's lords enough to take his place if there was a—a mishap in the Great Forest.”

“You are a wise man, Log,” Vivienne said. “I am hoping by demanding a grand wedding as a bride, and in bringing visiting royalty here, our Prince will have pride enough to continue letting me do things around the kingdom. Things that will improve his image as well as

restraining the damage as much as possible.” She straightened up even more regally in her chair, catching the eye of each person. “There are to be no arranged 'mishaps.' If the Prince is injured, the petty lords will scrabble among themselves, as Log suggests.”

A general sigh followed various glances.

Vivienne smiled again. “All right, Daisy, tell me of your sisters and your friends, and their craftwork.”

Daisy was glad her luck was holding... Maybe she did have a fairy godmother.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Maven and the Wolf

A scratching noise caught Maven's attention. The door rattled. The latch moved, but not quite far enough to allow the door to open. Maven set her teacup down and pushed herself up out of her chair. She was stiff from sitting for so long.

"All right, all right, don't have a hissy fit," she muttered. "Are you going to let me open the door?" she said to the house. The latch flew up, the door crashed back against the wall, and a wolf leapt into the room. Covered with twigs and leaves, he panted heavily, his sides heaving. His paws left mud and smears of blood on the floor.

"Oh, no!" Wolf gasped. "A Grandmother!" He looked back out the door, where the shouts of the men stamping through the woods sounded clearly.

"Calm down," Maven said. "I'm not going to eat you." Wolf turned to go back out.

"No, wait. Climb into bed." Maven looked at the nightgown and the bonnet on the peg. Fairy tale people were easily fooled, but surely not that easily. She threw the nightgown over his head and tied the bonnet over his ears. "Don't wag your tail." She threw the cloak over him too. Not too bad if they didn't actually see him. "Roll over."

"I'm not a dog." Wolf growled.

"You'll be dog food if they catch you. Shut up. Look sick." Maven turned to face the fireplace. "All right, Hut. Make it dark and musty in here, and make a kettle of whatever kind of bad smelling stuff they use

for medicine around here. I don't want anyone chopped up on my watch.”

“I prefer to be called Cottage.” The walls sounded peevish.

Maven huffed and puffed in frustration. “All right, Cottage, you can be the freaking Taj Mahal. Just please help me.”

A brownish herbal fog began to bubble from the kettle, smelling comfortably acrid. Before she could ask the cottage, the door, having latched itself again, shook with the blows of pounding fists.

Maven leaned heavily on her cane, her voice croaking like a frog. “Who's there? I'm just an old crone. Go away.”

The door rattled with the heavy blows, shaking the latch loose again. Three hulking woodcutters came in, axe handles in hand.

“Where are you, Wolf?”

He confronted Maven where she leaned on her cane. “There he is now.” He grabbed her shawl, which came off, exposing her frazzled white hair.

“My, what small ears you have,” he exclaimed, pulling on one of them.

“Must be why you are shouting,” Maven said. She pushed against him to no avail. She stomped on the instep of his hobnailed boot, but it only hurt her foot. Too bad grandmothers didn't wear stilettos.

“And what small eyes you have,” he said, turning her face side to side between his thumb and forefinger.

“Big enough to see your face and remember it.” Maven's look was dark enough to kill if he had been bright enough to see it.

“And your nose isn't long at all.” His brow wrinkled in puzzlement.

“It's long enough to smell herbs cooking in a sick house.” Maven

shook herself loose. "Now if you don't want to be in the bed at your house, you'd better get on out of here."

"Can't have a wolf running around, eating helpless grandmothers." He stepped to the bed, his axe ready to fall, his cronies right behind him. "It's for your own protection."

"Stop," Maven shouted. She stretched herself up to her full height, drew in a deep breath, and pointed her cane at the woodcutters. She gathered her anger and forced it through the cane so that green sparkles flew out the end. By the time the sparkles settled, three frogs sat on the floor beside their axes, one of which narrowly missed the bed. The bed saw it coming though, and dodged. Maven shooed the frogs out, keeping their axes for future reference. She stacked the axes into a corner where they became a mop, a broom, and a pitchfork.

"Thanks, Cottage." Maven propped on her cane, trembling with the effort of the magic. "Certainly," it replied, less coldly than before. The medicine smell disappeared.

"All right, you. Get up." Maven shook the wolf's shoulder, only to feel it quivering. "The frogs are gone." She untied the bonnet and helped Wolf out of the nightgown. "How did they get on your trail?"

"Humans. It's always the wolf at the door; never mind what they do to us." Wolf growled, slinking away from her toward the door. Yet he was afraid to go out.

Maven thought he looked pitiful, wavering. She dipped water out of the bucket into a bowl and set it on the floor. "Here, at least drink something and rest."

"You aren't afraid that I will eat you?" Wolf's legs shook, on the

verge of collapse.

“You weren't planning to, were you?” She sat back in the rocker and picked up her teacup. She swirled the tealeaves again to listen to the wolf's story.

He slunk over to the bowl and lapped noisily until the bowl was dry “You are obviously a witch. Are you going to turn me into a frog too?” Wolf lay down by the fire. “I'd probably be better at being a frog.” He laid his chin on his paws. “At least people wouldn't be afraid of me.”

What would a wolf wish for?

“Actually, I'm a fairy godmother. On vacation.”

“That explains the brambles around the cottage.” He began to chew at the brambles in his paws. “I thought I would never get through. I don't remember this cottage being here before.”

“That's magic for you.” Maven shrugged. “Now, you rest here tonight. I'd be glad of the company.” She made more tea, and when a plate of meat appeared on the table, she laid it on the floor by the wolf. After he had eaten, he curled up by the hearth and went to sleep.

Maven moved closer to the fire as well, her legs cold and shakier than the persona warranted. She was so tired. She picked up the bit of gossamer that had been her shawl before the woodcutter grabbed it and stretched it around her bare arms.

No wonder she was cold. Her hemline had crept up at least a foot and her sleeves had disappeared. She tugged the rags down, making them slightly less ragged, and much warmer. What happened to it?

A shiver that wasn't from the cold went down her spine. She used her energy, her anger, to transform the frogs. Now she could see why she

needed to be careful. The adrenaline pumping through her wand was hers, not the energy available in the cottage. She turned the rocker toward the fire. She was very tired now, and finally feeling warm again, she drifted off into a nap.

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Images fluttered before her eyes like channel-surfing a hundred TV sets at once. She couldn't look away, and she felt dizzy and nauseous. She put her hands over her eyes to block out all but one box. It wasn't changing channels, but only showing the same story over and over on fast forward—a kitchen, a ballroom, a slipper, a wedding—the clothing or the actors changed, but not the story.

She looked at another flickering image. A different story—not so different—but repeated over and over. This time a witch, a baby, a spinning wheel, a kiss. Always the same. Five hundred channels and nothing else on. That's where the stories were going, sucked into television and beyond.

Maven awoke with a start and a gasp, as if she hadn't been breathing. She stared at the Cottage around her, dark inside, almost murky, though she could see the sunshine in woods outside. She got up with a grunt and hobbled to the door.

The door would not open for her. She pulled at the latch and even tried to pry it loose with her cane. She beat on it, even kicked it, but it did not budge.

She stood back, breathing hard with effort and frustration. “Open, Sesame,” she commanded.

The Cottage sighed, but did not open the door.

A growl behind her told her Wolf was awake, his ears perked up, and his nose testing the air. “It's just me. Not to worry.” Maven dipped a cup of water from the bucket and sipped as she looked out the window, a camera to the world outside. How much of her life she'd spent staring at a TV, not even trying to go outside for light and life! How she envied the beautiful actresses in the stories, and how she pitied them in the tabloids.

The Bump agreed. How many stories were on five hundred TV channels, not to mention in the suspect realms of Fiction? The last hundred years of technological storytelling was only a blip on Fiona's radar, but what if she was wrong about the effects of it on Faery?

Fiction and TV were sucking Faery dry, desertification of the imagination.

Surely, Fiona knew that? Faery might be in more danger than even Fiona thought, but Maven couldn't get to her to talk to her about it, which put Maven in the middle of it anyway.

She had to get out of the Cottage.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Little Nell and the Vagabonds

Little Nell carried a bucket of water, the one her mother sent her to fill when the Vagabonds took her. She brought it to Veda's tent and stepped up on the log to pour it into the cauldron where Veda was making soup. It had been fun to see the wagons and their dark-eyed children. She liked riding in the caravan in the daytime and sleeping underneath it at night.

The bucket was heavy. She spilled some of the water onto the fire.

“Stupid girl.” Veda turned and raised her hand to slap the child. Nell stared at her. Veda looked away, dropping her hand. “Get more water. And don't spill any this time.”

Even if they did get mad at her, it was fun to live with the vagabonds. They played music and danced at night. Some of them knew magic tricks, which they practiced on each other, like how to get a money pouch out of someone's tunic. They taught her a few tricks too. How to swish her skirt and dance, how to look very sad while asking for money, and how to shake someone's hand and take off a ring. These were strange games, but Little Nell was getting better at them, though not nearly as good as the vagabond children were. She wondered if that was why they didn't like her.

The women yelled at her, and the men were always trying to scare or embarrass her. It was funny at first, but now even the children seemed afraid of her. They wouldn't talk to her or play with her. But it wasn't so bad. All she had to do was look at them and smile. Then they would back

off. Little Nell skipped back to the creek for more water.

On her way back, she heard some men arguing. She listened, forgetting the water bucket and Veda.

“She’s cursed.” Veda’s husband, Bale said. “Veda reaches back to slap her, and she shows no fear. What child is taken from their mother and never cries or looks sad? There is evil magic here.”

The circle of men nodded to each other, smoking their pipes and staring into the campfire. “Perhaps her mother was cruel,” said the man whose wagon usually was at the end of the caravan. “Perhaps life is better here for her.”

Another man snorted in disgust. “Perhaps you will tell a different tale when your horse goes lame, or your children get sick. She will put the evil eye on them.”

“She seems cheerful enough. Never causes any problems, even when our children taunt her. What kinds of mischief do you think she is doing?”

“I can’t tell yet,” Bale said. “But Veda laid the cards last night, and this child is connected to many others, by some magic Veda did not know. She saw a powerful sorceress, one from the Dark Side come here. She may be looking for this child. Who knows what will happen to us if she is found here?”

Again, the men stirred their pipes, muttering to themselves with a grunt or a sigh.

“It would be cruel to abandon her in this wild country,” Bale said, “and if such a sorceress came seeking the girl, would she not be doubly angry?”

Just then, Little Nell heard Veda yelling for her, so she jerked up the water bucket and dragged herself away. She didn't want to be left alone in the great forest, and Veda might convince the men abandoning such a lazy girl would be a good idea.

Still, it might be fun.

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Late that night, after the moon had set and all the other children were asleep on the canvas, Little Nell heard Veda whisper to her husband. Nell held her breath and listened very hard.

"She can't stay with us," Veda whispered. "We must get her out of here, maybe tonight."

"No. I have a plan. Your brother spoke to a farmer. The prince of the land will be married soon. We will take the girl to the Castle and sell her. Who knows what else we can get from them, and they may even pay us to perform for them."

"And the Dark Sorceress? What if she comes for the child?"

"The child won't be with us, and we will have helped her. Throw your cards."

Veda shuffled her cards. "The Wheel of Fortune," she said. "We keep moving. Take the child to the castle, for we are bound to her path as she is into ours. "

Nell snuggled back into her blanket and cradled her head on her arm. A prince's wedding and a castle. That would be great fun!

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Belle and Fiona

Belle trudged over to Fiona's office, but it was locked. Angry the man could cross the Veil so easily when it took all the magic she could do for a week to manage it, she paced outside the door. He was dangerous, and Fiona ought to do something about him.

Belle's patience was thin as skin on a hen's teeth. If Fiona didn't let her class out soon, Belle would find another way to get her attention. Just as she got up to go back to the Twilight Lounge to get some tools, the energy field around Fiona's office dissipated.

Belle slammed Fiona's office door against the wall without bothering to knock. The crockery on Fiona's shelves shivered and backed as far away from Belle as possible. Belle stood, solid as granite, hands on hips, towering over Fiona at her desk.

“What about that lowlife scum who keeps falling into the Twilight Lounge?”

Fiona set her crystal in the middle of her desk where Belle could see it. “At the moment he is passed out in the King Elroy's dungeon with a group of wizards who tried to attack the Veil on the eastern border.”

Belle lowered her voice to a deadly softness. “Just let him chat up those overgrown boys with pointy hats and sticks?” The crockery began to shiver noisily, as if in a minor earthquake.

Fiona merely sighed. “Calm yourself. Getting angry will not drive him away, as you have discovered. See for yourself.”

Belle plopped on a convenient toadstool to reach eye level with the

crystal. “How does he get across? Not using magic?”

“Not any that I can discern. He appears to fall through the HyperDimension. “

Belle shook her head. “Bad dealings when HD won't keep their own. What a waste of protoplasm!”

“The Veil on that side is very tall and dense, but that dimension has grown of late, filled with untrained minds and those who don't know the protocols. That is why I must have someone who can help me protect Faery.”

“So how is your protégé doing then?”

“My replacement must keep the balance, avoiding chaos!” Fiona retrieved a small water globe from her crockery. “I have placed Maven in a controlled environment to teach her the Old Woman archetype and to prevent her further interference in the stories she has already started.”

“Time out?” Belle swirled the ball, barely resisting the urge to turn it upside down. A few leaves blew around the hut, but no snow or sparkles. “Meditating on her sins? Don't sound like Maven.”

“I sent her several tasks to accomplish. While her time there will seem to be only a day, she can be kept out of the way indefinitely.”

“On ice in a snow globe.” Belle chuckled without humor, setting the globe on Fiona's desk. “What's got your gossamer in a wad?”

“I sent her to grant a simple wish—a foolish dairymaid wanted to have tiny feet so that the local prince would fall in love with her.”

“So? Doesn't sound difficult.”

“Precisely. Simple as sunshine. But Maven convinced the girl to start a cooperative of all her friends to leave their positions and work for

the new princess, and the foolish girl did not even realize that her wish was granted.”

“Different take on the story, but it sounds good so far.”

“You think so? Maven disrupted everything!”

“I don't get it. So the dairy maid changes jobs. Big deal.”

“More is at stake than a mere foolish girl. Maven has promised the new princess that she will rule the kingdom without having to marry the prince.”

“Again,” Belle said, “I don't see a problem. She lets them stand on their feet. That's what feet are for.”

Fiona went on as if Belle had not spoken.

“Then she granted a child's wish to have fun, and the child has been kidnapped by vagabonds!” Fiona turned and shook her finger in Belle's face, never a good move at any time. “She even granted a wish to a middle aged woman who has no part in the story at all. All without any authorization.”

“Okay. You didn't authorize.” Belle pushed Fiona's finger out of her face. She finally saw the problem. Azaha was right—Fiona was not used to having someone of her own talent and stubbornness to deal with. “You told Maven to work from her heart, and she does. But you don't like it when she doesn't walk in your footprints.”

“She is supposed to be learning, not making things up!” Fiona's tone grew sharper.

“I've always thought your line of work was a bit silly anyway. Making what I want happen works better for me than wishing for it.”

Fiona jumped to her feet, leaning over her desk, now towering over

Belle, quivering like an aspen in a thunderstorm. "How can you say that when you wished for the Twilight Lounge?"

"I did no such thing. And you didn't make it. The gate was already there. You wanted me to be the gatekeeper, so I agreed."

"How soon one forgets. I designed it to be the very tavern where you worked before I brought you here!"

"We both worked on it. The Twilight has just grown into itself over the years, neither my doing nor yours." Belle stood up too. "It's more contrary than a house cat. I can't open doors for it, and I can't close the ones it opens."

"Then perchance you should speak to the Twilight Lounge rather than taking my time."

"Perchance I shall." Belle stormed out the door that opened for her on its own. She did not even bother to slam it shut, which disappointed the crockery quite a bit.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tulip in the Dungeon

Tulip poofed back to King Elroy's castle, and perched like a small sparrow on the peak of the highest tower. She shook the debris out of her gossamer, and combed the mess out of her hair with her fingers. She could not shake the clutter out of her head. Tulip could not help but see that the area around the castle was grayest, and that even to the east, there were more colors than beneath her. No one in the keep possessed even a hint of a dream, or a wish.

She listened for Maven, but there wasn't even a whisper. Of course, she couldn't hear Miss Fiona or Miss Belle either, so Maven must have learned that trick too. Or Fiona had done something with her.

She pressed the end of her wand to the tip of the tower, and held her ear close to the tip. Even a castle has a story, though it may be slow to tell. This one wasn't talking. It snored, rather. The only thoughts she picked up were from far below her, thoughts of anger, boredom, claustrophobia, depression, escape, fear, of going insane, of horror, even a chuckle of amusement. Most of the thoughts she could identify as being from wizards, guards, or even King Elroy himself. One was different, his thoughts scattered nonsense, as if he was from Mundane. Did Maven have a friend? She decided to ask him.

But as difficult as getting out of a dungeon may be, Tulip found getting in was even more so. Not only was the dungeon deep under the castle, behind many layers of stone, it was surrounded by iron, and water running from the moat through various channels to keep any magic from

escaping. If Tulip had known anything of engineering, she would have been greatly impressed.

She poofed to the lowest levels she could reach. At that point, she could only listen to her wand. She could not even make herself large. She could not be invisible either. Her fairy gossamer and wings shone brightly in the murky under-chambers. She did not want to be caught by someone who could imprison wizards!

When she heard footsteps and a squeaking, groaning sound approaching, she made her decision. She stripped, tucking the glowing items into a cobwebby corner in a crack between stones. She hid the wand under her arm.

An ogre carrying a torch pulled a cart with a garlicky bucket of soup and a stack of bowls. Tulip crawled down the rough stones until she was level with the cart, and when it came by, she leaped into it. She huddled between the bowls, where the soup slopped out over her foot. Ogres could see in the dark, so why did he carry a torch?

Their path twisted down through passages and gates opened with much rattling of keys and screeching of hinges. As they passed through another gate, soup splashed her. Her foot went numb. She scraped off the goopy soup, but the feeling did not come back.

She touched her wand to the greasy glob, hoping the ogre would not see the glow. Beneath the grease, garlic and the none-too-clean water was a poison plant for sleeping. She crawled to the other side of the bucket and hoped for the best.

Finally, the ogre and his food wagon stopped at an iron door with a small grate. Used straw and sticks were piled against the door a foot high.

The troll set fire to them, making a dreadful smell and murky smoke. Then he knocked on the door with the torch.

“Dinner is served, m’Lords!” The ogre cackled. He put on gloves to ladle the soup and let the fire die down. When the fire burned itself out, he pushed open the grate, singing the glove. “Here, y’ go. Eat hearty now.”

Tulip stuck herself to the last bowl. She would have to keep her wizard from drinking the soup long enough to talk to him.

Each time a trembling hand reached for a bowl, the ogre would force it against the hot door, bringing a few yelps, mutters of spells and one actual scream. The ogre picked up the last bowl and slopped the last bit of soup into it. One more hand stuck out of the door, but the opening had cooled by this time, and the troll didn’t bother to play his game.

The hand that held her bowl trembled a bit, but its thumb pressed right across her stomach. Tulip poked at it with her wand, sending just a tiny sparkle into the flesh.

“Owww!” The wizard stuck his thumb in his mouth and dropped the bowl. Tulip managed to get free from it just as it struck the iron floor of the cell and shattered. She fell, but landed on the knee of the oddest-looking wizard in Faery. He was not wearing a hat! He was bald on top with reddish curls hanging below his shoulders. He sat cross-legged on the floor, wearing no robe, but trousers of tattered blue cloth. His thick-soled clogs were leather, not the boots or slippers mages preferred. His red tunic had white buttons and large flowers, with short sleeves that showed his arms—not strong like a peasant’s, nor scrawny like a wizard’s, but like a nobleman’s arm. Not that she had seen a nobleman’s

arm up close.

“Finally sober enough to eat,” the wizard muttered, “and I drop it. I am getting too old for this.” He leaned back against the wall and moaned.

Unsure as to how to address a wizard who spoke with neither a “gadzook” nor a “zounds,” Tulip struggled to her feet.

“Sir Wizard!” she said, but he bent his head nearly to his waist and did not hear her through his moaning.

He straightened his back and put his hands on his knees, knocking Tulip to the dungeon floor. He closed his eyes and began to breathe slowly. She climbed up his leg, dragging her still numb foot, and then into his hand. His fingers twitched. His arm was too steep. She sent one more tiny sparkle to his ear, just enough, she hoped to make him scratch it and carry her along, so she could talk to him.

He just sat, breathing.

Some kind of wizard ritual, she supposed. So she took a couple of deep breaths and pulled energy from the cell itself. There was certainly a lot of magic glowing blue around the walls. With that magic and her wand, she poofed to his shoulder and walked up to his ear. Not looking in, she said, “Talk to me, Wizard. Tell me how you were brought to this place? What did you do at the edge of Faery?”

She listened to him through her wand. Though his mind was fuzzy and dark, with only an image of a candle, his story sounded like Maven’s in that he was not from Faery—strange buildings, vehicles, and glowing boxes of spells. She tried again. “Wake up, Wizard.” There was no response—even though she was sure he heard her.

“Hey, you in there,” Tulip shouted into his ear past the hair, yellow

wax and whatever else might be hiding there. That got his attention.

He jerked his head around, his hair pulling out from under Tulip's feet. She grabbed handfuls and held on. He felt the weight of her in his hair, and ran his fingers through to scoop her out, like a bug.

She had to get him to look at her—not squish her. So she tapped him, tickled him, and tried to yell.

He did open his hand to look, and then almost dropped her. “A fairy!” He peered at her with deep-set blue eyes under shaggy brows—very wizardly. “And to think I thought I was sober...what did that little minx dose me with this time?” He looked around at the crumpled wizards. “Where did you come from, my little pretty?” He smiled, and his eyes twinkled.

Tulip blushed in spite of herself. He thought she was the famous the most famous fairy of all. “I am a fairy godmother...” Tulip said, suddenly aware that her gossamer was far away outside the dungeon.

He chuckled. “And I am the big, bad wolf.” Still, other than the way he gazed at her, he didn't hurt her but held her carefully. He was not handsome, but she found herself staring into his eyes.

She frowned, not in the mood for any comments on her lack of attire or less-than-pink hair. “I came here to find out what the wizards did to dissolve the edge of Faery, and to keep you from drinking that soup. It would have killed you.”

They listened for a few seconds, but could not hear anyone else breathing. “Thank you,” he said, breaking the silence. “But why me?”

“You were the last one to eat. I stuck myself to the bowl to get in here. And then you dropped the bowl when I sparked you with my wand.

You're not a wizard, are you?"

"Where I come from, I am." He puffed himself up, a bit defensively. "I can fix any anything! Even broken hearts."

Her wand could not tell how much of what he said was true, but at least some of it was—and some wasn't. "How did you get here?"

He shrugged. "I was just wandering around in the woods, enjoying the view, when these ogres snatched me and smacked me upside my head." He rubbed a spot on his skull.

"And then what?" Tulip sat in his palm, trying to cover herself as much as possible.

"For awhile all the wizards fired magic at each other and tried to get out. Then I passed out." Tulip said, "How will you get back?"

"Don't you think we ought to get out of here first?" The wizard stood up in a fluid movement, still carefully holding out his hand. He stepped over several inert wizards bodies to get to the door, held his other hand out to check it for temperature. "Can you spring the lock with magic?"

"I don't think so. My wand just barely works." "Show me your wand. Maybe I can pick the lock."

"I don't think you can touch it." Tulip held it out for him to take, like a toothpick, but it sparkled when he touched it, and he dropped it immediately. Tulip grabbed it before it landed in his palm, so he wouldn't drop her. "Maybe I can do it. Tell me what to do."

"I use a piece of metal and just feel around and push the tumblers away then the lock opens."

"Think about what you do, and maybe I can listen."

Tulip put her wand to her head and listened to him. She crawled into

the keyhole. A piece of metal stuck out from the side. She pulled it down as hard as she could, but it did not move. She stood under it and pushed up. It gave way.

She called out, "I moved something. Now what do I do?" She listened again, more to his thoughts than to his words. He was hiding something he suspected she could hear.

"Look at the other side and move something the other way." His mind's images were of poking around with a metal wand, and of poking around. With her! Tulip nearly threw down her wand in disgust. But then he thought she was the fairy who had given her life for a boy, a lost boy who fell into Faery, swapped for a changeling.

Girls were almost never swapped...Tulip dropped her wand and stood dumfounded inside the lock. Somehow, she knew why she didn't have pink hair, delicate hands, or pointed ears. She belonged in Mundane. She was human even if she could do magic. The fog was going to dissolve Faery unless someone could stop it, and Miss Fiona knew. That might be why she sent Tulip there, why she wouldn't let Tulip grant any wishes, because Tulip was human, a changeling!

Maven did magic, and she had always been in Mundane. That was where Tulip belonged, and she had always known it. This wizard could get her back there, if she could do enough magic to get them out of the dungeon.

Time to unlock the door. She chose another piece of metal and pulled down on it mightily. The lock clicked.

"Good job," the wizard said. "Can you pull the handle on the other side?"

“Yes, but put your tunic through the door first.”

“Tunic? My shirt?”

“Yes.” She crawled out the other side of the keyhole and waited. In a moment, the garish cloth fell through the slot. Tulip pulled energy from the magic still trapped inside the cell to make herself large again. She put on the tunic, fumbling with the buttons. Then she found the handle and opened the door. It made a phenomenal shriek as the spell on it protested, but magic does not make much impression on iron.

The wizard jumped out, but stopped at the sight of Tulip. “Wow!” Blushing, Tulip began to run, but she could not remember the way. He followed, staggering a bit from hunger and hangover.

“Hold still,” she said, when they ran into the third dead end. She breathed deep three times, each time pulling more energy into her wand, most of it from him. She swizzled it around both of them together until they were merely thumb high.

“Put your arms around my waist and hold on.”

He grinned and embraced her waist, firmly, but not too tight. He put his chin on her shoulder and said, “Mmmm. This is nice.”

He could move energy too. “Breathe with me,” she said, “like you did before I woke you up, when you were thinking about the candle.” She cleared her mind of the thought that magic might not be all she wanted out of her life. “Breathe!” she said.

While they took their third breath, she thought of her gossamer and wings hidden in the wall. As they exhaled together, she poofed them to that spot, right to the ledge in the rock. But her things were gone.

Behind them, a voice spoke softly. “Looking for these?” King Elroy

held her wings and gossamer in the palm of his hand. He nodded to a huge ogre by his side. "Get her." The ogre threw a fine net over the stone, held in place by a copper wire that sparkled with magic.

She could think of nothing to do but swizzle out her wand and poof away from the castle. When they materialized in the woods, back to their full size, she collapsed, with only the wizard's arms to keep her from falling.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Maven and Dolores

Timid knocking woke Maven from her nap. The early afternoon sun made deep shadows in the forest. Cottage didn't open the latch, so Maven pushed herself from the chair and stretched, dizzy from sitting. When she opened the door, a thin woman with a "deer in the headlights" look about her, cringed at the door, with her eyes darting anywhere but Maven's face. Her clothing was ragged, but she had no scratches or stains, so the Forest had allowed her in, she must be one of Fiona's people.

"What do you want?" Maven was surprised at her gruffness as the persona took over. "I'm looking for work, Mum," the woman said, wringing her hands.

"Don't have any." Maven barked. She struggled with the door to keep it from slamming. The woman looked familiar. "Why should I help you?"

The woman began to turn away, but stopped. "Because I asked?"

That must have been the right answer because the door stopped trying to slam itself. "Come in, then," Maven said, "Make yourself useful." The basket moved to the table, full of unstrung beans. The water bucket was empty, and the firewood had disappeared. The whole interior seemed to have collected a layer of dust and grime.

Maven listened to her cane as she leaned on it. This was Dolores, the woman who hated housework, and this was a sort-the-beans-before-I-get-back story. She couldn't remember the story, but she knew what to do.

"What's your name?" Maven asked. She felt responsible for the

woman being in this situation.

“Dolores, mum.”

“I have to go out,” Maven said. “If you want supper, you will have to make it. There's beans, a bucket for water, and onions by the window.” She looked around at the Cottage again--no reason not to ask for what she wanted. “There might be some fatback in the cupboard.”

She whistled to the Wolf. It stretched, shook itself, adding hair to the surrounding dirt, and sniffed in Dolores' direction.

Dolores shivered visibly, but said nothing. She held out her hand. Wolf sniffed and then snuffled to blow her scent from its nose. Wolf and Maven exchanged looks and went out the door. It closed tight behind them.

“Now what?” Maven asked the Forest. A path appeared leading away from the Cottage. Maven did not have to fight the forces of Nature to walk on it, but she could not step across its edge, despite the openness of the forest to either side.

“Do you always try to cross the line?” asked the Wolf.

“How else can I know where it is?” Maven stretched again, working the kinks out. “Where I come from there is a saying, 'Think outside the box.’”

“What about Destiny?”

“Destiny is what happens while you are keeping your skin in one piece and having a little fun on the side.” Even trapped in the Fiona's forest, Maven felt younger and more confident than she had for years. After all, she was chatting in a forest with a Wolf, and someone else was doing her housework.

The Bump had an itch.

“So, Wolf, what's your experience with Destiny?”

“Our elders have said that I am cursed.” Wolf stopped and scanned the area, sniffing and listening. “I was banished from the pack as a cub, and I have lived alone since. The legend says that I will join with a human and another on a quest, but that it will not lead where we want to go.”

“Heavy trip for a cub. It's a wonder you survived.”

“Destiny.” Wolf sniffed near the ground, but could not step off the path. “Keeps you alive when you might prefer to be dead.”

Maven listened again to her cane, the images making more sense this time. “I'm not your human, nor is Dolores back at the cottage. Maybe the elders didn't understand what they saw. Maybe they were wrong.”

“Maybe.” Wolf's ear drooped and its skin hung gaunt from its haunches.

Maven could see old scars in its pelt. She wanted to comfort it, but did not want to hurt its pride. “May I touch you?”

“I am not a dog to be petted.” Wolf drew back and bared its teeth. Maven snatched back her hand. “Sorry.”

Wolf sniffed again, testing the air. “Your supper is ready. The Cottage will be just around the next bend. We are both still inside your box.”

“Come on then, and let's see if your human does show up.” Maven gazed at the sky through the tree limbs. She fancied she saw the curvature of the sky and a face-like cloud in the distance. “Things happen in threes. Maybe the next one will have the key for both of us to get out.”

Wolf snuffed, but whether in agreement or scorn, Maven couldn't tell.

As she expected, despite the short time she and Wolf had been chatting, the beans were cooked and onions fried. The cottage was swept, the bed fluffed, and the quilt folded. A rug lay near the hearth for Wolf, and his water bowl was full. Even the nightgown looked clean on its peg. Flowers filled a bowl on the mantle. Cottage looked smug as if it had no idea how all this could have happened so quickly.

Dolores had set one place and prepared to serve Maven.

"I'm not the Queen of Sheba," Maven said. She dipped out a plateful of beans and sat in her rocker to eat. "Eat your own supper. You'll need your strength. I have thought of a place where you might get work, if you want it."

"Oh, yes, mum. Please." Dolores dropped a curtsy.

Maven scowled. "Sit and eat, or I won't tell you." She liked her curmudgeonly growl.

Dolores nearly collapsed onto the bench. Her hand shook from hunger, or fright, so she could hardly get a bite of beans to her mouth. She shivered all over.

Maven took a few bites. The beans were cooked well enough, but had a serious lack of fatback. Cottage hadn't taken the hint. She wondered if she would lose weight in Faery. Did it matter? More thinking inside the box. Was Fiona thinking inside the box too?

After a few minutes, when Dolores had eaten enough beans so her belly swelled out under her ragged dress, she said, "I've et, Mum. Would you tell me now, about the work?"

“There's a princess in the next kingdom who is preparing for a big wedding.” Maven finished up her plate, and Dolores took it from her to wash. “They'll need extra hands,” Maven said, “and you'll find the path outside will take you straight away to H.R.'s Castle. Just ask for the Cook, and tell her Maven sent you.”

“Yes, Mum, I will. Thank you, Mum.” Dolores dropped another curtsy. As soon as she had washed the dishes, she ran outside and down the path.

Maven stared into the fire and wondered what happened to the other fairy godmothers. Were they kidnapped into fiction and fairy stories? Did her meddling in the stories make them weaker?

Would her mistakes destroy Faery?

It might be all very well to be “The One” if one knew which one, one was. She didn't feel like a heroine. But even the villain was supposed to think he was the hero. Every fairy tale had a villain—surely a requirement for a story.

What do villains wish for? And who was the villain of this tale?

Maven made more tea, swirling the leaves around to listen. She could not hear the slightest whisper of Tulip, and she needed to talk to her.

Daisy and Vivienne were busy, so she listened to them, hoping to find a key to unlock the spell on H.R.'s castle.

Chapter Thirty

Vivienne and The Prince

Princess Vivienne considered jumping from the window of her tower. The window was high and the nearest wall was dozens of yards below. But magic castles had a way of springing doorways and ledges it decided were needed in the flicker of an eyelash, all of the same aged stone, mossy and damp.

Lady Dee bustled across the courtyard far below. She was happy with having people to order about, lists, and decisions to be made and checked off. Too bad the Prince would not be satisfied without Vivienne's land and her blue-blooded person to produce an offspring to unite the kingdoms.

Vivienne thought Lady Dee would make an excellent queen. She seemed to have no qualms about the circumstances.

Footsteps echoed from the stairwell to her outer chamber. The Castle always let her know when someone approached, and who it was by voice, or step. She sighed, pulled herself into her most regal posture, and went out to meet with her unintended.

The fairy godmother promised she would rule this kingdom, but she was a prisoner of the Prince, the Cook, her lady-in-waiting, and the Castle itself. She could not leave it, not on foot, nor horseback, not alone and not in the company of her guards. Still, she had not been harmed, and her plans for a gala wedding seemed to feed the Prince's need to impress his court. At least the Castle seemed to protect her from the court as well as from the Prince.

He wasn't bad looking, with shoulder-length blond hair, now clean and neatly trimmed. His eyes changed color by turn, green when he was happy or lustful, gold when thoughtful, and gray when angry or sad. He was not deformed in any visible way, not in any way that she could name, other than he felt he had a right to take her land and her person if he only went through the proper procedures.

And in her case, being possessed was at least 9/10ths of the law.

Her hopes were in the hands of a fairy godmother she could barely remember having seen in a dream. But the man in front of her was tangible enough, if she had the stomach to touch him.

He bowed much more deeply than was required by protocol. "My lady Princess, how lovely you are this morning, much like spring itself."

She curtsied back, the minimum depth for politeness. "Thank you, Sir Prince, for your compliment. Will you sit?" She gestured toward a firmly upholstered, gilded velvet chair, and seated herself in another across from him. Rocky had removed the love seat and couch from her apartments at her request, so that there was no intimate seating available.

"Have you decided on the date of our wedding, my dear, so we may begin the preparations?" H.R. folded his long legs and sat, leaning eagerly toward her. His eyes were at their darkest green, like the shadows of oak leaves in the forest.

She remained erect and polite, hoping her face did not betray any of her thoughts or feelings. "Yes, Midsummer's Day. The preparations are in the capable hands of Lady Dee, Cook, and her staff. The woman, Daisy, has taken charge of organizing the local women to help with providing for the visiting royalties. Your name will be remembered

throughout all Faery.” She smiled, a calculated indication of approval to whet his appetite for the game, to make him give away more than he intended.

He sat back, as straight as she. “You have chosen the shortest night of the year for your wedding. Do you find me so repulsive?”

She lowered her eyes, not in shyness or shame, but to hide any telltale expression. She spoke quietly, but clearly. “I chose the longest day for the celebration. If you would prefer to wait until Yule, for the longest night....”

“No, Midsummer will do.” He stood, bowed low again, but met her eyes as she looked up. The green had disappeared into a stormy gray. “A short night for a first kiss.” He turned on his heel and strode through the door almost before her guard could open it.

Stories enough said the wedding night was the gate to all happiness, but she would reserve judgment. Perhaps it would only take sex to break the Castle spell, but she would insist on the protocol. After all, it was merely six weeks which she asked him to wait, not seven years. Her kingdom was not in flame or in ruins, and her fairy godmother said she would rule. But right now, she felt like a prisoner facing execution.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jones and Tulip meet the Sprites

Brewster Jones laid Tulip down on the forest floor, covering her with leaves. It was chilly among the trees with the darkening clouds over the birds on their evening perches, and the children of the night awakening. He could not leave her here, and he could not protect her from the things he'd seen in the forest.

She wasn't much more than a child, even as a fairy. He couldn't take her home. She was spunky enough, but she wouldn't survive, not by herself. He didn't do that well taking care of himself.

Maybe he was simply dreaming the whole thing, a particularly lucid and coherent dream sequence probably brought on by his girlfriend's herbal concoctions. He looked at his hands, as a teacher once suggested. He could see them, move them, and even clasp them under his arms as he shivered from the cold. But he couldn't change the dream. He was still freezing, the fairy girl was out cold, and he couldn't wake her up, not even by gently slapping her cheek. He kissed her, in case of enchantment, but that didn't work either. He was not a prince, but it was worth a try. It did warm him up a little. He snuggled up to her, lying beside her and gathering her slight form into his arms, trying to keep them both warm.

In the forest surrounding them, the sounds of the animals of the night sent a shiver down his back. Mice, deer, wolves, goblins, ogres, and trolls. The full moon rose as the sun set, dropping silvery puddles across the forest floor. One puddle landed on Tulip's face, his heart

unexpectedly squeezed in his chest. She was both as beautiful as a goddess and vulnerable as a child.

The rustlings around him became wood sprites, peeking out from every possible bit of cover, insect-like with long mandibles and brown, serrated teeth.

“Fairy girl,” one of them said. “Not. No wings. No goss-mer.”

“Found man. Not fairy for long!” The chittering voices giggled, a sound the wizard once thought peaceful on a summer evening. One sprite came closer, waving its antennae, as if scanning him.

“Jonz. Man is Jonz.”

The chittering stopped as all the sprites crowded him, jostling each other. The closest one spoke again.

“What bees buzz, Jonz?”

“Hi guys,” the wizard said. “I didn’t think you recognized me in the dark.”

“All humans stink, but you stink wizard tonight. Not Other Side stink.”

“Yeah, I was in that little party they had.” The wizard glanced around, getting their attention. “What happened? I wasn’t even planning a visit and the next thing I know, I’m in a dungeon with more wizards than you can shake a maggot at.”

“Girl found you under rocks? Maybe she be fairy.” Much nodding of antenna and clacking showed the consensus.

“She has the magic all right, but you can see, she did too much getting us out—the king had her wings and her, what, glossy?”

“Goss-mer. No speak Faery?”

Again, they all chittered and giggled. "All fairy wear goss-mer. Magic cloth."

"Ahhh, well, I've pretty much gone in for princesses, myself, not fairies." Could this girl be a fairy princess? She was beautiful in a dirty camp shirt with leaves and cobwebs in her hair. So vulnerable...he looked away from her to the sprites.

More chittering.

"Safer with princess. Fairy make you frog...eat our cousins. We not like."

"I'll try to stay on her good side." The wizard turned up the volume on his charm, tried to remember how he kept them from eating him the first time, when it was daylight. Ah, yes, he told them cockroach jokes. "I don't remember seeing any of your cousins in the dungeon. That's strange."

"King bad. Since king come, kingdom fade, winter cold. Empty shell."

"Kill our cousins."

This time the chittering between them was colder, more metallic.

He didn't want to find out firsthand how peaceable they were at night, but there was the fairy girl lying there, pure and helpless. Not that he was much of a gentleman, but he couldn't just abandon her. "So, this king, why did he lock up all the wizards?"

"Throw magic, bring mist close. They magic again. Ogres grab, put under rocks. Not miss wizards."

More chittering.

"Wish king go away, but no fairy come to woods no more."

Jones saw a glimmer in the tunnel between the horns of his dilemma. "This one did. Did you ask her for a wish?"

The chittering stopped. The sprites' heads drooped. Their wings buzzed as they shifted in the dark.

"We chase her. She not fairy, not fairy godmother."

"She is magic, though." He thought of holding her tight, and hoped she would grant that wish. Since he hadn't done her yet, this could not be a dream. His body stirred with desire at the thought. Since he preferred his women conscious, enthusiastically participating, he could not think about that now.

One sprite gingerly touched a foreleg to Tulip's wand, which she still gripped. It sparked, and the sprite jumped back. "Fairy, Yes. Strong magic."

The wizard saw his way out. "I could have left any time, but she can't go with me. She won't be safe here."

He pulled at his goatee, pretending to think of a solution. "It would be bad if something happened to a fairy godmother." He crunched up his eyebrows and frowned. "Very bad, especially when someone wants to make a wish and this is only fairy around, the only one for a long time." He shook his head. "It would be a bad thing, if someone hurt a fairy godmother that was right here and needed help."

He looked at them again, their hard chitin, their sharp mandibles, their black hole eyes.

"Who would protect her? She might be very grateful when she wakes up, if she wakes up." He nearly blushed at the realization he was convincing himself to stay, to hope for her gracious thanks. And he

might at that.

The sprites peered at Tulip, now illuminated in the moonlight, her wand glowing faintly blue. They would easily see from his heat signature that Jones was warming up to the idea of rescuing their fairy godmother, of doing the one thing that would take her magic away. Not too far away was the sound of something large moving through the forest with loud snorts.

The wizard shivered, and not just for effect. He was too scrawny for the half-naked hero look. He had to convince them soon, but it needed to be their idea, so they would agree to it.

He sighed. "She's a fairy. I can't take her back to the Other Side." Yet he found himself thinking, wondering, why not? So much the better for effect. He allowed his desire to build and projected the feeling into his voice. "I can't just leave her here. I will stay and guard her myself." He sat beside her and began to cover himself with the leaves. "We keep her," one sprite chirped at last. "We protect; she grant wish. Work magic together." Wings buzzed and mandibles clattered.

The sprites dragged Jones away from Tulip, clustering around her, their hard-shelled backs toward her and their now quite fierce mandibles and claws facing outwards, toward Jones.

One sprite, more grizzled than the rest, pushed his way to the man from Mundane. "You say truth. You mate with fairy? Fairy lose magic when mate."

The forest took on a silence that made the wizard's ears roar with his heartbeat. He had heard such silence on more than one occasion, but usually the grizzled inquisitor was the subject's father. This time he was

innocent, sadly, longingly, innocent. He hoped the truth would work for projecting emotion as well. “No. I never touched her. You can see her magic wand—it still glows, right? She’s still got it.”

Each sprite turned to look at the wand, brighter now in the shadows.

Jones back stood while the sprites came to a consensus. He did a little zigzag dance step, turned to the left and disappeared.

Tulip stirred, and the sprites closed in around her, a wall of chitin and claw between her and any harm.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Runaway Princess

The gloom deepened in the Cottage. A candle appeared in the window, lighting itself.

“Isn't it time for some action?” Maven spoke to the walls. Her fourth cup of tea began to have a definite hint of muddiness, and there was no food around—not that she was hungry after eating a few bites of the beans Dolores had cooked.

Just what was she eating when she ate? Not for the tenth time, she wondered if her body lay somewhere in Mundane, suspended from tubing and electrodes at the brink of death. She patted a pocket in her garment; it was still there, one thing she had that was purely Mundane. She hadn't lost her marble.

“Patience is a virtue,” the walls replied. The fireplace smirked, raising its mantel in a disapproving way, which made the basket shake.

“You can put it where the sun don't shine,” Maven muttered. She tossed the rest of her tea on the fire, which hissed in turn and smoked the whole room.

“That is a physical impossibility,” the walls sputtered, “especially in a family story. Make some more tea. She is coming.” Maven found herself leaning heavily on her cane as she shuffled around the room, more effects of Fiona's retribution. There would be paybacks.

In a few minutes, a scratching noise came from the door. A disheveled lass lay on the doorstep. Her long blonde hair flowed loose over her shoulders, sprinkled liberally with twigs and spider webs. Her

red satin gown hung in shreds, displaying her ample charms. Maven wondered why she had not chosen something more suitable for the trip.

She cleaned the girl up with a corner of her shawl and gave her a cuppa, along with a slice of cheese and a piece of bread, which appeared on the table almost before the girl's eyes, but no beans to sort or bedspreads to fluff.

After the girl had eaten and gulped two cups of tea, she perked up. "Are you a magical helper? I was told if I got to the woods and found an old woman in a cottage, she would help me." Her blue eyes were open wide, and her bosom heaved with hope and excitement.

Maven's stomach heaved. She grumbled, "I try to help anyone who comes my way. You can stay here the night."

She sank back into her rocker to free up her cane for listening. She touched her teacup with the cane to fill it with coffee and cream, being sure to feel the energy flowing up from the floor and the earth below the floor. Coffee was her magic, not Fiona's. The old women that she knew drank coffee anyway.

"Are you sure you are a magical helper?" The girl stared at Maven. "You don't seem old and poor enough, nor beautiful and wondrous enough."

"Thanks, I'm sure."

The wolf stirred, moaning in his sleep.

The girl hadn't seen him until then. "A Wolf," she screamed, leaping to her feet, pointing to the furry lump on the hearth as she backed into the door.

The scream woke Wolf with a start. He leapt to his paws, lowered

his head and growled, fur bristling and tail tucked.

“Settle down,” Maven said to both of them. “I have a Wolf sleeping on my hearth. Does that make me magical enough for you?”

“You are not just a helper, then,” the princess stammered, “but a witch. Oh dear, what do I do now?” Her back was against the door. She could not get out. Each corner of the room was closer to the wolf.

“For starters, finish your supper.” Maven waved her cane toward the Wolf. “And you calm down. Smell her hand and make friends. Then go back to sleep.”

Obviously shaking, the girl held out her hand. Wolf sniffed it, snuffled, and then licked the back of her hand. “Your Highness.” He backed up a step.

“Your Wolfness.” She bowed slightly. “Perhaps it is not polite to ask, but do you intend to eat me?”

Wolf looked at Maven and sighed. It padded back to the hearth.

Maven said. “We’ll sort this out as we go along.” The Bump itched. “How did you come to be so deep in the forest this evening?”

The princess smirked. “I escaped from the deadly life of a princess.” She twirled a lock of her hair, “Locked up in the tower on top of a glass mountain is not my idea of a life.”

The Bump clicked, although Maven still had no ideas. “First, you accomplished that on your own. What do you need my help for?”

A warning moan that could have been the wind shook the cottage

“I need...things. A horse. A sidekick. A leather bra.”

“It sounds like you are looking for adventure. It may break your nails and get your dress ripped.” Although Maven noted she had already

survived that. “At best, you might rescue yourself and live happily ever after.”

At this point the wind screeched; the house and even the trees shuddering. Wolf tucked his head under his paws.

Taking no notice, the girl imagined the possibilities. “I need a sword, too.”

“Be kind to whoever crosses your path, and pay attention to what they tell you,” Maven's voice softened. “Your head will lie to you, and your heart will lie to you, but you can trust your gut.” Maven's gut rumbled again, perhaps in counterpoint to the weather.

The girl put her hand on her abdomen and listened. Her expression changed from innocence to the kind of curiosity that kills cats. “Do magical helpers live happily ever after?”

“You aren't supposed to ask that question. Are you from Mundane?” Maven was losing her patience. Her persona was tired, and her gut wanted something more substantial to chew on than pretend tea, beans, and magical philosophy.

“Nobody over the age of ten believes in Mundane.” The lass poked out her lower lip, in excellent imitation of a ten-year-old, and tossed her golden hair. It was usually a fetching gesture, calculated to dull the opponent's argument with cuteness. It had the opposite effect on Maven.

“Then I'd better not show you.” Maven hand itched to use her wand.

The girl sucked her cheek, and reluctantly nodded. “How will I get all my stuff, my horse and my armor, and things?” She suddenly seemed to notice her lack of material means. “I didn't bring any money, or anything. I didn't plan.” She frowned, tossed her hair back again. “Nurse

is always telling me to plan.”

“Nurse helped you to escape, then?”

“No, I got away while she was flirting with the stableman.” She giggled. “They’ll be looking for me everywhere. And I had so many hiding places they never even found.” She grasped her knees and rocked back herself in glee. “Now I can have some fun without anyone telling me what I have to do or how to dress or...”

Maven kept waiting for the persona to jump in with its archetypal wisdom. Even the Cottage was silent, as if waiting to see what came next. Maven leaned hard on her cane, listening for any future, any story that might come along. What she saw was a girl in a blue dress and white pinafore tripping through Wonderland behind a white rabbit.

“What’s your name, child?” she asked, interrupting.

The girl straightened up, raised her head as if reciting. “Ane with an X, Princess of Loquat.” “How do you pronounce that?” Maven asked.

“Ane,” Princess Anex said, “the X is silent. But it looks so elegant when I write it.”

“All right, Ane with an X,” Maven held out her cane. “Say three times ‘I Want To Have An Adventure!’”

The princess did as she was told, closed her eyes, and held her breath. Nothing happened. “Breathe,” Maven said. She took the nightgown from the peg. “Now, go to bed, and in the morning you will find three things by your side. Take them with you and use them when the time seems right. And listen to yourself.”

The girl fell asleep in minutes, leaving Wolf and Maven regarding each other. “This feels like the beginning of your Quest,” she said to

Wolf.

Wolf sighed again. "I have been laughed at all my life, for I am not the bravest of the pack. To send me on a Quest would be most foolish and probably would bring dishonor to my family and my species." He sat up and scratched his ear, looking pathetically comical. Maven bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"There is a Snake outside, or was earlier, and it would likely be the third party." Maven sipped her coffee, still hot. "Usually there's some task—a wicked witch or a holy grail to keep you busy until you find out who you are, before you learn how to get home." She set the cup down, pushed herself out of the rocker and toward the door.

She pointed her cane at the door, which unlatched itself and opened. Outside it was dark, no moon, but stars lit the sky, and she didn't need to see far to find her way.

"What all do they need to find themselves?" Maven said aloud to the landscape, to Fiona, even to Faery and the Universe at large. "A fool, an animal nature, and a collective unconscious. So, Snake, isn't this where you come in?"

"At your s-s-service-s-s," Snake whispered. "Are you coming along too?" It wound itself up her cane and onto her arm.

"I know who I am," she replied, "even if I don't know the secret of the ruby slippers." Maven felt the dirt beneath her feet as she had in childhood. "Besides, witches, fairy godmothers, and old forest women are just stops along the way. Guardians. Helpers. Riddles."

"At leas-s-st you are aware that you cannot es-s-scape the journey."

Maven chewed on that. "If you bit me, what would happen? Would I

just disappear like a badly written character, having provided the last bit of exposition?”

Snake made a whispery chuckling sound. “You wouldn’t want to ruin the ending. You’ve never read the las-s-st page firs-s-st in your life.”

“You’re not Fiona, then, are you?” Maven held her arm up to look at Snake.

It merely chuckled again. “Thanks-s-s for the frogs-s-s. They were delicious.”

“So there is death here, just like in Mundane.”

“The ques-s-stion is not about death here, but life in Mundane.”

Snake had no hesitation about saying Mundane.

Maven picked up a rock, a pinecone, and a feather. She waved her cane over them and chanted three times, “Whatever will be, will be. Plan A, Plan B, Plan C.” After placing them on the rough table in the cottage, she sat in the rocker. The Girl, the Wolf, and the Snake would wake up in the morning with those items and a sense of adventure. She didn’t know what came next.

Time to listen to herself. Her gut was very quiet. The fire faded to embers. Even the Cottage snored lightly. She stared at the stars, wondering what would happen if she made a wish.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Lady Dee's Wish

Lady Dee checked off her completed tasks—banners ordered, local cloth dyed and printed with the golden dragon crest. After the wedding, the banners would be sewn into new outfits for the servants at the house, gifts recognized by all.

She and Cook had discussed menus, nearly come to blows, but agreed, finally, that a caterer would be the best answer. One family had gained a reputation as being most inventive and yet practical in the Central Kingdom, so they were engaged to prepare the feast. Rumor claimed the wife was a gentlewoman who scorned a local prince to marry her husband, so enamored was she by his cooking. All accounts balanced, Dee and Cook auditing the other.

Cook proved an amazing resource, knowing folks who provided many goods or services, but she agreed to Lady Dee's direction of the ceremony. Daisy was straightforward about inquiring into Henry's character, and Lady Dee was honest, if not blunt, in what she said. Even Vivienne began to ask about strategies for improving the operations in the kingdom. The Castle was better organized and much cleaner. The odd servants liked her, not snickering behind her back. She was happier than she could ever remember.

The seamstresses sewed. The flower growers promised blossoms a plenty. The invitations were sent, and most recipients had responded. Local would perform folk dances for entertainment, sufficient for Vivienne's taste.

Pausing for a moment, Lady Dee thought of Maven. Vivienne had mumbled that she hardly remembered Maven, and Daisy laughed, saying she was just lucky. But Lady Dee knew it wasn't luck that brought a truce between her and Cook, although her warm praise for Cook's cooking had not hurt anything but the cold, hard truth.

Her wish to be useful had been granted repeatedly. She had never married, but like many bridesmaids, she had a depth of experience, and strong attitudes about what was practical and memorable. Yet it was not enough. Even one wish at her age was a miracle.

Enough nonsense. Vivienne must be ready for the seamstresses to fit her, and instructed in the ways of producing male heirs. Lady Dee had no children of her own, yet she had made study of what old wives knew. She even asked Cook for confirmation of both advice and strategy.

Daisy might need advice on how not to conceive.

Daisy and her women friends were excellent tradeswomen, honest in their appraisals of what they could accomplish, and willing to do more than necessary. They expected to continue to sell their wares to the castle, and the surrounding kingdoms. While the local lords employed most of them, they found time to prepare for the wedding because they liked Vivienne. This kingdom was nearly the equal of Vivienne's, and if Vivienne could somehow influence H.R.'s rule, it could be happy and productive.

With Vivienne present at H.R.'s large dinners, the lords brought their wives or mistresses. Conversation replaced quaffing, though H.R. was still wheel-barrowed to his suite each night, thanks to Cook.

Lady Dee sat at H.R.'s left, and he spoke to her when Vivienne's

answers became too concise. The prince was not such a bad fellow, and Vivienne's passionate spirit might guide him. Vivienne would hear none of it.

At her left at table sat Lord Hollyhock most evenings. He was only a lord by having captured the lands he now held. He was not well polished, but seemed to take note of H.R.'s attempts to please Vivienne, and followed suit. His beard, while long and full, was now also combed and braided, bringing out the streaks of gray. His hair was short and clean, as were his fingernails. He asked Lady Dee about household matters, inviting her to visit his household to speak with his housekeeper.

She was fully aware of her lack of dowry and income, and so dismissed the offer as purely practical, at best. Their conversations were of practical matters, certainly not the banter of flirting. She didn't remember how to flirt, if she ever had known.

Someone knocked at her door. "Come," she called.

Cook was in the hallway with a thin woman in tow. "Yer Ladyship," Cook said. "This one wants to be on the staff here at the castle."

Cook generally took charge of all household issues. The woman was dirty, probably hungry, and much the worse for wear, with some fading bruises and scratches on her arms below her ragged sleeves.

"Do you need help in the kitchen or the dairy?"

Cook nodded. "I could use another hand. She says she has house maid experience." Still there was no sign from Cook as to what she wanted.

Lady Dee walked over to the girl, appraising her tattered clothing

and fading injuries. "Did your last employer beat you?"

The girl hung her head. "No, milady."

"Feed her and let her clean up," Lady Dee said to Cook. "Then give her a week to show what she can do. We can decide then." Cook nodded, still with no expression.

She turned to the girl, "What is your name?" "Dolores, your ladyship."

"Stand up straight, then Dolores. A maid of this household has a right to be proud of her work."

"Come along, then, Dolores," Cook said. She smiled at Lady Dee, an historic first. Lady Dee smiled in return more unsure than ever of what was taking place.

As Cook reached to close the chamber door, she looked back over her shoulder. "She said Maven sent her. I wanted you to be the one to decide."

"I expect she will work out fine then," Lady Dee said. "Once she sorts herself out."

"My thought exactly, Milady."

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In the kitchen below, Cook busily butchered a deer for a bridal shower feast to host some royalty who had showed up early. Her staff knew the princess was unhappy, and they didn't know how to help.

"The Castle geas is laid on Prince H. R. as well the princess." Cook

punctuated her words with the cleaver. “If one of them died, the spell on us would not be broken.” Chop. “And if I remember correctly, several of our predecessors tried that approach...which is why we are here.” Chop. Chop.

Each head nodded in agreement, remembering life before the Castle, wondering if one could go back or start over after such a long time. Log cleared his throat, sounding like a lonesome frog behind the pile of potatoes he was peeling. “Can’t you make them fall in love? Wouldn’t that fix things?”

“Love’s one thing magic can’t conquer,” Cook said, chopping up the deer’s backbone and ribs. “Love can overcome magic, but not the other way around. I can’t do any more magic than you can, Sorcerer. And take a little less potato with the peeling there.”

“But there’s lots of love spells,” Bog protested. “Almost as many as there are for money.” Cook dispatched the forequarters of the deer. “Have you tried doing a spell here lately? If it doesn’t come right back on you, it just soaks into the Castle itself and makes the geas stronger.” “Maven could do it,” Gob said. He munched on an apple. “She could make them just fall all over each other like Daisy and Henry.”

“Did Maven do that?” Bog asked, wiping a tear from her cheek. She enjoyed the young couple’s strenuous courtship, but cried over onions.

“No, it just happened.” Cook finished her butchering and cleaned her cleaver. “It was a side effect—Maven doesn’t understand that a fairy godmother has to focus, to keep a wish small. Not a wish for the whole countryside, but just for one client.”

Cook put a couple of roasts on a spit, wrapped in bacon, and

dropped the scrappy pieces in her stewpot. “Besides, one of them would have to wish for it for her to do anything.” Splash. “And Maven’d have to be here.” Splash. “And Vivienne has already made her wish.”

“Who hasn’t made a wish in the Castle?” Bog asked, dumping in the onions. “H.R.”

Cook began to slice up the rest of the meat and lay it for drying.

“I never heard of a man making a wish before,” Gob said. “Nor of a man getting one granted.” Eyes met around the room as the possibility was considered, then rejected. Wishing was just not manly, and H.R. was nothing if not manly.

Log added his potatoes to the stewpot. “Anyways, Miss Maven ain’t here.” He had kept back a few potatoes to tuck into the ashes in the hearth. “Ain’t likely to be, neither. Can’t find a fairy godmother when you need one.”

Cook cut her eyes sharply toward Log, who ducked behind the potatoes.

Rocky shook his head at the hopelessness of the situation, staring into the stewpot. “Can I ask you something, Cook? Not to be telling you your job, but why are you boiling the deer instead of roasting it for the high muckety-mucketies?”

“We don’t want them to stick around, eating up the entire wedding feast before we get a chance to cook it, do we?”

“No, but then why the small roasts?”

Cook smiled. “They’re for us.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Into the Forest

In the darkness, with the fire barely glowing through the ashes, Maven woke up. Her body cold and stiff from sleeping in her rocker, she stood up to stretch, quietly so as not to wake up the Princess or Wolf. She walked toward the door to go outside, and found she did not need to lean on her cane. The Cottage let her open the door, and the Forest, while dark, was not as sinister as it seemed in the daylight.

Fiona put her here to learn about the story, but at best, all she'd learned was how to talk to a Cottage and a Wolf. She began to suspect the hidden piece of the puzzle was Fiona.

She tried to poof back to Fiona's office, but couldn't gather enough energy. She started walking, pushing through the brambles, going back the way the Wolf and the Princess had come in. This time the woods didn't fight back, and in a few moments, Maven found herself deep in the Forest, completely lost.

No sliver of moonlight penetrated the leaves. She held up her cane like a candle and pushed enough energy through it to make the end glow. The Cottage seemed suddenly safe and warm and much to be desired. She turned to go back, but there was no way back. Not one broken leaf or twig showed the way despite the ones stuck in her gossamer. Noises surrounded her, perhaps innocent enough in themselves, but unrecognizable and impossible to locate. Eyes glowed in the distance, eyes that blinked and silently disappeared: ogres, trolls, or deer?

Between the trees ahead, a pile of brambles and branches rose up in

the shape of a humanoid. Eyes peered through the top of the heap, shining eyes in a face wrinkled like tree bark. Under the eyes, a gap opened, a mouth of broken, root-like teeth, yellow and brown against a red tongue, cackling.

“Are ye lost, Dearie?” The hunched figure waggled a stick-like finger in Maven's face. “Not a good place for a youngster like yourself to be all alone in the dark.”

Maven's definition of lost had more to do with not knowing how to get home than not knowing where she was—both of which applied. “I'm not quite alone,” she said finally. “You're here.”

The creature cackled again. “Yer a sassy'un, fer sure.” It, or maybe she, hobbled around, looking Maven over. Under the twigs seemed to be hair, and the twiggy body wore a rough homespun shift. Root-like feet shuffled through the leaf mold.

Maven listened for whatever story this one might have, expecting nothing. Instead, she heard stories of waylaying lost travelers, of luring them into a false sense of security, and then eating them. Something was holding her back.

“D'ye reckon who might I be?”

“You're the Lady of the Forest,” Maven said. She'd started to say “hag” but The Bump lit up at red alert.

The Hag cackled again. “And yer a fledgling fairy godmother, out much too late fer yer own good.”

Maven put her hand in her pocket, which was suddenly warm. Her knife was giving off heat, not enough to burn her, not yet, but very warm. Fiona had mentioned something about steel. Maven didn't want to

threaten the Hag, even if she could get the knife out and open it in time to defend herself. But she kept her hand on it. She knew suddenly why the steel was a threat. It was her talisman from Mundane, a touchstone. Created by fire, it gave her some power against the denizens of Faery.

“I guess you don't get many fairy godmothers out here, then? Do you have a wish I could grant?” Maven couldn't just shut her mouth. It kept going on its own. “Just professional courtesy, not that you'd need my help.”

The Hag peered into Maven's eyes, grinning, her nose nearly touching Maven's. “Don't you want to know the path out of the forest? Aren't you looking for some magical hint or the key to the magical riddle?”

Maven did want out of the forest, alive, but she knew this wasn't that kind of a test, if for no other reason than the Hag hadn't asked for anything. “I...I asked first.”

The Hag's expression changed, her eyes opened wide and her knowing grin faded. The voice faded from the crackly rustle of something large stomping through leaves to a plaintive whisper like the first sharp breeze that foretells of winter.

“I'm lost.”

Maven stepped back, bumping into a tree trunk. She almost expected it to wrap its branches around her, trapping her at the Hag's mercy. “How can you be lost? You're part of every twig, every rock in the forest, every animal, every moment of the day and the night.”

But the Hag's face did not lose its forlorn expression. She seemed to shrink, to become frail, uncertain, cobwebs like Spanish moss hanging

from the twigs in her hair. "Like you, I don't know how to go home."

"What do you need? Ruby slippers? A yellow brick road? Seven league boots?" The Bump was not happy, for all it had put her in this position. Why was this crone so much more dangerous than a Serpent?

What do Crones wish for?

A deep thirst came over Maven; a desire for water parched her throat and sucked moisture from her, her flesh drying like jerky to her bones, and all the while, the earthy smell of leaf mold came from the Hag's breath.

She used her cane to swirl up a glass of water, but it appeared half-empty, faintly phosphorescent in the darkness. Could she share it? Could she give it all away? Biting her tongue to get enough juice to speak, she said, "This is the best I can do." Though her hand trembled as she offered the water to the Hag, she pushed it forward with all her strength. It took supreme effort to resist the urge to gulp it down herself, or splash it in the Hag's face.

The Hag grabbed it and chugged every drop. "Ahhhh!" she said, licked her lips and burped loudly. Her eyes brightened and twinkled.

Maven expected her to transform into a dryad or a young woman, but she merely shrank. Melting into the forest floor as sap would drain from a tree in winter, her feet rooting into the earth and pulling the rest of her with them.

Just before she disappeared, she said, "Thank you." Shortly, nothing remained but a pile of twigs and a bit of moss, gray and black in the darkness. Even the glass became only a bit of dew on the leaves.

Maven stared until the forest filled with the grey light that proceeds

the dawn. Birds vanquished the silence with warbled announcements of the boundaries of their territories. The sky turned yellow and pink above the leaves that faded from black to shades of green.

Maven heard the splash of running water. A path opened with no brambles. Still thirsty, she scanned the path both with her cane and with Bump of Direction. When she got a yes from each, she scurried to a clearing where a spring bubbled from a pile of rocks to make a small, clear pool, the headwaters of a tiny creek.

Maven stuck the point of her cane into the water, still shaken by the disappearance of the Hag. She wasn't ready to melt into the forest floor. The spring was just clean water. She knelt on the bank and scooped up handfuls liquid until she was full. She wiped her hands on her face, feeling the cold water against her skin—clean, wet, and refreshing.

How long was it since she bathed? What would she do if someone came along while she was cleaning up? A goddess once turned a peeping tom into a deer and his hunting dogs had eaten him. But Maven wasn't a goddess.

The Bump didn't think she should get into the water, so she took her things out of her pockets, skinned out of her gossamer, and dipped it into the water. It shrank immediately back to its original size, but Maven used it to wash off anyway. She cupped her hands again and again to rinse her hair. By the time she finished Maven was shivering, and her teeth chattering. Still, the wonderful feeling of being fresh and renewed was worth it. She shook out her gossamer, dried off with it, and stretched it back into a suitable dress. Her cane shrank back to the peach wand. The pencil and paper caught her eye in a patch of sunlight. She wrote a

simple thank-you note to the spring, putting it under a rock. The note disappeared, but a small plant sprang up, with two bright green leaves, which seemed to wave at her.

“You're welcome,” said a small voice behind Maven.

Maven nearly jumped into the pool. She spun around to find a tiny woman, barely knee high, perched behind her on a rock, wearing a bit of pond scum.

“Follow the creek. You'll find berries or something else to eat further down.” The sprite stood up, stretched and dived into the pool, an impossible leap, but perfectly executed.

“Thanks again,” Maven said, to the spring, to the sprite and to the Forest in general. She walked along beside the creek and tried to figure out what just happened. In a clearing she found blackberries, juicy and sweet among the thorns. Maven picked and ate until her fingers were purple with the sweet juice. She was starved, as if she hadn't eaten for weeks.

She would have thought it was too early for blackberries, but the Forest might have put them there just for her, since she liked them so much—a return gift.

Time didn't exactly flow in Faery, but eddied, swirled and pooled. Little Nell had been traveling with the Vagabonds for some days, maybe weeks—not just an afternoon—if her scrying was accurate. Dolores did not make it to the Castle in an afternoon either, but she arrived just the same. Maven listened for Tulip, but could hear nothing. Something was wrong with that story, and something was wrong with this one. Why were the old stories—and the stories of the old—disappearing like the

Hag and the Spinners?

The Hag said she was lost, but what she wanted was to die, to go back into the Earth. The water, which was magic, not real water, allowed the Hag to make the transition from root-bound tangle to a fresh new sprout. If Maven had drunk the water herself, would it have killed her?

No, the Hag would have, as she had many others. It was a narrow escape but still part of a story, one she didn't know—maybe one that wasn't written down anywhere.

Maven didn't want to die, not even from her life in Mundane. She met the Hag, but she gave the elixir to the Hag, not the other way around. Maven was still playing the Old Woman of the Woods even when she faced the real thing. Tulip said Faery was in trouble, the Veil between Faery and Mundane was disappearing. How bad was it?

What would happen if the Veil disappeared? She imagined a parking lot around the Twilight Lounge, strip malls where the creek ran through the forest, and plastic debris everywhere. What would happen to the stories then? And what happened if all the crones—the Hag, the Spinners, even Fiona herself—disappeared? She needed answers only Fiona could give her. It was time to ask.

She concentrated on Fiona's office with all its paraphernalia. She drew herself up as straight as she could and spread her arms, pulling energy from every side. She swung her wand in a large arc above herself and stomped her foot to poof herself out of the Forest. She knew she would be in trouble again, but she needed to know the score because it looked like they were all in trouble.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Out of the Box

Maven used a lot of energy. Lightning flashed, sparks rained down and rainbows swirled around her. Shaken at the intensity of the shift, like stepping down one more step when there wasn't one, Maven staggered into Fiona's desk.

Fiona wasn't there. Good thing too. All the crockery jumped off the shelves, including Fiona's coffee cup, though it was late enough to call attention to itself. The other jars rattled in amusement, rolling around on the floor.

One piece, however, shattered, splattering water and tiny green bits across the floor. The remnants resembled a water globe, complete with a tiny cottage, one that looked very familiar. Maven picked it up gingerly, so as not to be cut by the shards of glass. The tiny cottage was exactly like the one she just escaped the night before.

A water globe? What about Wolf and Ane with an X? Maven scanned the mess with her wand. They weren't in the debris, and The Bump thought they were all right. How did they get in there, and Dolores? And the Hag? Nothing made any sense! Maven looked for action figures or paper dolls or any other kind of voodoo doll or symbols that might represent them. Nothing.

She listened to her wand, and saw Ane with an X curled up with the wolf on the narrow bed, after the fire died. Then she listened for Dolores, who was at the Castle with Daisy and Nell, both of them scrubbing the dairy at midday, not at night or early the morning. Nell was chattering

about all her adventures, and Dolores was silently hoping to make a good showing to get to go back into the kitchen to work. They'd been there a week at least, not just a day. Was the time shift part of Faery, or was that part of the rift in the Veil?

As Maven poked through the mess and listened to her wand, the other jars sorted themselves and levitated back to their shelves. Maven had to learn that trick, even if the office had to make a mess so it could clean itself up. But if it wasn't good for the brownies to clean up after you, why was it good to have a self-cleaning office? More and more questions--fewer and fewer answers.

In a moment, the globe too reassembled itself and hopped up to its accustomed place on the shelf behind Fiona's desk. Maven went behind the desk to pick it up. She peered into the reconstituted water globe, resisting the urge to swirl the leaves around in it. She saw Ane with an X and Wolf walk out of the Cottage and out of sight. She wasn't sure if the Snake was with them, but Ane with an X seemed to have something around her wrist. Maven sighed with relief. They would be all right, then, and if they weren't, they'd have to take a number and get in line.

She leaned back against the desk, pausing to think for a moment what to do next. Something bumped against her finger—Fiona's crystal ball, which had rolled off its stand. It backed up and bumped her hand again. That was clear enough.

She picked it up, and said, "Where is Fiona?" She looked into the crystal and saw herself holding the ball and then putting it back in the stand. She set it down in the silvery leaves—where it fit too tightly to have fallen out accidentally.

“Show me what you want me to see.” She looked into the crystal, but only saw herself looking back out. She pointed her wand at the crystal, but the entire ball turned black as onyx until she put the wand back in her pocket.

“I don't know how you work,” Maven said, “but if you will show me, I'll pay attention and learn.”

Maven remembered seeing Fiona pass her hand over the ball. She waved her left hand right to left over the ball, and the image of herself inside began to run backward. The explosion of sparkles and magic smoke that accompanied Maven shrunk back into the water globe and everything leapt back to its place. The office was empty for a few seconds, and then Fiona un-poofed and put her wand back in her desk. She made her wings disappear, and sat in her chair behind the desk. Fiona stared into the crystal, running her hands quickly and more quickly as the pictures began to speed up.

“Wait,” Maven said. She put her hands on either side of the ball, not wanting to touch it, but getting dizzy from watching. She moved her right hand away from the ball, but nothing happened. But if she moved her left hand to the right, the pictures moved forward, and if she moved her hand to the left, the pictures ran backward. She experimented for a few seconds, and then moved her hand to the left, quickly, holding it there until the pictures blurred, moving too fast to follow. After a few seconds, she moved her hand toward the right to slow the pictures down and try to figure out where, when, and whom she was watching.

In the crystal, Maven saw Fiona hunched over the desk, her usually perfect coif hanging in damp strands as she played the pictures back and

forth.

“Show me what happens if I don't bring her over,” Fiona in the crystal said, moving her hand forward, across the ball and away from her. She watched for a second, but the pictures were too small and moving too fast for Maven to follow. Abruptly, the image of the ball Fiona stared at went black. Fiona did not move a muscle, except to hang her head, as if she were defeated. Why was she so desperate? Fiona's image said, “I can't hold Faery together much longer.”

The Bump nudged Maven. Suddenly she realized this was why Fiona called her, it had not been random at all. Maven moved her hand slowly to the right, making the pictures move fast forward. She stopped when she saw her job interview begin, but in the crystal, the glamour did not appear. Fiona was building the whole scene with her wand and some fairy dust when Maven came in. The building was dirty, strewn with debris and abandoned office furniture. A man in a camp shirt was passed out in the corner—Maven vaguely remembered a man being in the room when she got there—but this one looked homeless or stone drunk or both.

Everything that happened after that was a complete illusion, except Fiona had really dressed her in gossamer and sent her to grant Ashleigh's wish without even a wand. They had been in Faery the whole time, as soon as Maven walked into the back office. And Fiona, as near as she could tell, had no intention of letting her go back. What would have happened if she had opened the door—the one that had seemed so cold? She might have walked right through a hole in the Veil. What would have happened if she stumbled into the Veil with no one to guide her?

Was that the danger, was it the end of Faery, or was it the end of Mundane?

Maven shivered. She sank down into Fiona's chair. "Show me Tulip," she whispered. "Is she all right?"

The images in the crystal showed her vague images that were blurry and dark, as if Tulip were too far away to see clearly. She was asleep in the dark, surrounded by some kind of guardians. It was too murky to tell where she was, or if she was safe. Maven got the feeling Tulip was trapped, but she could not tell by whom or where.

Suddenly Fiona poofed in, her expression startled at finding Maven behind her desk.

"What are you doing in here? I didn't send for you!" Fiona reached over and snatched the crystal ball. "Get away from my desk!" She came around as if to push Maven away.

Maven scrambled to obey, but once she got on the other side of the desk, she remembered why she came.

"I need to talk to you." Maven planted her feet firmly on the floor, resisting the nudge of the toadstool seat that bumped softly behind her knees. "You haven't told me the whole story of what's going on here. I need answers."

"Now you want to talk! Now you want instructions," Fiona's voice and color rose with each exclamation. "How did you get here?"

"I poofed. The Cottage let me go into the woods."

"How? What about your clients? You just left them?"

Maven put her hands in her pockets and stretched out her fingers to keep from grabbing her wand. She had to stay calm, because Bump of

Direction was freaking out. Suddenly she knew Fiona was more dangerous than the Hag of the Forest. “The story certainly didn't have any ideas. I just let it play out—just as you sent me to do. Remember, you said not to edit.”

Fiona trembled, whether with fatigue or rage, Maven couldn't tell. Her skin was fish-belly white, except for her red face, her hair limp and stringy, even her gossamer was as threadbare and wispy as cobwebs. Pale and haggard, all her responsibilities etched deep lines into Fiona's face. Maybe she was tired enough to listen this time.

Maven propped her hands on her hips. “I don't think you can send me back to the Other Side because you need me here. What do you have in mind for me to do, and what else aren't you telling me?”

Through her wand, Maven felt a vibration. The Bump kicked in with Fiona's story in five- part harmony and sixteen million colors. It was like listening to the whole Hallelujah Chorus in five seconds with 3-D animation on a hundred foot screen. The impact of the information knocked Maven back onto the toadstool and nearly onto her head. The realization that came with it, though, was sobering and dark.

Anxious that her world would disappear, that nothing would be left of imagination but action figures and special effects, Fiona was afraid of dying. She was afraid of losing what she had built, of disappearing into some forgotten tale herself, as so many of her fairy godmothers had done. For they all lived happily ever after, until they died.

And more than that, she was afraid of being old, weak, feeble, powerless, or worse, evil.

Fiona stared at the crystal ball and then at Maven. Her mouth hung

open, and her eyes were round with horror.

Maven started again before Fiona could say anything. “We have to bring the old stories back, the oldest stories. And we have to make new ones. People in Mundane get a lot older now than they did when you took over. Every makes their own reality, just as everyone makes their own hell. And it’s our job to teach them how to do it.”

Fiona's eyes narrowed as she pulled back her teeth in a death grin. She leaned over her desk, scrutinizing at Maven like a vulture waiting for its prey to expire. Her voice quavered. “You think you can do all that with a few silly tweaks to the most ancient story? Everyone wants to be loved. Everyone wants to be secure—even you!” Fiona pointed her finger at Maven. “You wanted to go to the ball, and it was as much your doing as any that Ashleigh is not a princess as it is hers.” Her voice steadied and deepened. “You could hardly run your own life. What made you think you could help someone else? Who told you that you could tell them what they want?”

“You did.” Tired of being lectured and bullied, Maven put both hands on Fiona's desk and leaned forward, so Fiona's finger nearly touched her chest. It was time to call the bet and see who held the cards. “I did what I could, with no wand, no training, no warning.”

Maven heard a whisper in her ear. “Yes-s-s!”

If Fiona turned her into a frog, the Serpent would likely eat her right there, and that would be the end of her story. She grew angry, feeling like a pawn between archetypal forces that didn't care what happened to her, as long as they got to play.

“Why go through the charade when you could have just pulled me

through the Veil and left me on my own?" asked Maven.

Fiona frowned, leaning forward too. They were nearly nose-to-nose. "To keep you from doing what you are bent on doing—destroying my work, and the Veil itself, with your modern ideas and plot twists."

Maven straightened up and pointed to the crystal ball. "Listen in to Ane with an X and the Wolf. Isn't she just about to charm the horn off a unicorn to get a ride to the next castle? And some stable boy is about to take the place of a prince? Then she'll rescue him and he'll fall in love with her? Wolf is probably eating spaghetti with a runaway cocker spaniel. And the Snake—who knows what's got its tail in a knot?"

"That's right. You don't know what its intentions are," Fiona snarled. "But it hasn't gotten good press." She turned to the crystal ball, moving her hand across it. She watched for a moment, and then stood back up to face Maven, her face white, but her cheeks still showing spots of red. "Now that you have all the answers, I suppose you don't need any more training. Get out of my office."

"No, I..." Maven stammered.

Fiona pushed with her right hand spread wide open, as if she would knock Maven down. The energy wave hit Maven full in the chest, and she fell backward, falling, falling, falling...

Chapter Thirty-Six

Flight of the Great Sorceress

Maven grabbed her wand in her pocket and tried to get it out so that she could find a place to land. The wind made her gossamer flap in her face. She willed it to flow tightly around her as she slid the wand out. She could see a light below her as she tumbled through the night sky. Holding the wand in one hand, and all her other effects in the other, she swirled the wand to make herself tiny so she could fly. She managed a few sparkles, but if anything, she fell faster— accelerating at thirty-two feet per second squared. Why did she remember trivia she didn't need to know when she least needed to know it? Fiona had her wings anyway.

She tried to make a parachute, but only sent sparkles into the air like the cinders from a fifty- cent bottle rocket. She really didn't want to die, and the only energy she could find was her own—nothing from the stars, or the air, or the earth below her, only her accelerating body.

Kinetic Energy! She thanked her eighth grade science teacher while she started channeling her own fall. She pointed the wand down and visualized a force field coming from it, like a rocket engine, to slow her descent and keep her feet pointed toward the ground.

After a few seconds, she began to slow down, though still moving much faster than she liked until she landed with a thump, but not a splat, near a campfire in the center of a circle of caravans. Still, the impact knocked the wind out of her, and she fell to the ground.

By the time she checked to see if any bones were broken, and she got her wind back, a circle of faces stared down at her in the dark.

“It's her,” one of the women whispered, “the Great Sorceress!”

Someone pulled that face away from the circle from behind, and the others closed in. “Are you all right?”

“Can you move?”

“I'm fine,” Maven said. “Can I get a hand to get up?”

Not one hand but all of them reached down and picked her up, setting her on her feet and brushing off her clothing, at least until they got a good look at her. Then they backed away, making a ten-foot circle around her, staring at her as if she were likely to grow another head.

Getting her feet under her, Maven held her wand beside her leg. She'd never tried to listen to the story of a whole group of people before, but it was clear they thought she was powerful, and likely evil. The Bump suggested she not seem too vulnerable, but not too threatening either.

The woman broke through the crowd. “We don't have her,” she screamed. “We took her to the Castle. We took care of her when she was lost! Please don't hurt us.” She fell to her knees, sobbing, but her man picked her up roughly by her shoulders and dragged her away.

“Let me reward you then,” Maven said. She lifted her wand, the better to listen with. The crowd took a step back, and sucked in their collective breath. She got a lot of images of Little Nell, who had been taken care of—at least fed, washed up and given to the Cook at Vivienne's Castle—after she'd been abducted. They were afraid of Nell, and they were afraid of her. Great Sorceress indeed! That could be fun.

Bump of Direction went red alert. No!

The circle drew back further. “It...was no trouble,” someone said.

“She's a nice child. Smart. Good attitude.”

“Yes, yes, a sweet girl, always smiling...” the crowd agreed.

From her wand, she could hear some of them begin to wonder why she had fallen out of the sky—not very dignified for a Sorceress—and what kind of reward she might offer for their services, or what she might be forced to do if captured. A glimmer of greed began to evaporate their shivers of fear.

What did Vagabonds wish for?

Time to do something, make something happen. If she tried to walk away, they would follow her, with great expectations. She was suddenly afraid she might not be able to poof away, or even grant a wish. It had been, at the least, one very long day already.

“Nell is such a happy child.” Maven smiled. “Wouldn't you like for all your children to be as happy as she?” She waved her wand just a little and pushed only enough energy through it to make a few trailing sparkles. That had the desired effect. The smell of greed disappeared in a wave of self-protection.

Someone in one of the caravans began casting the spell to put an evil eye on her.

Maven pointed at that one, the woman who first talked about Nell, and made a circle of light around her. She was so frightened she fainted. At that point, the rest of the women ran to the caravans to see to their children and livestock, and the men began to close in on her.

“She is all right, you'll see. Just fainted,” Maven said, calmly and in a cheerful tone. They were within arm's length, but no one wanted to be the first to touch her, especially the ones closest to her wand. But Maven

dared not move in case she upset the balance of energy, which might encourage someone to grab her.

She began to pull the energy to her from them through her wand. She soaked up earth energy through her feet, too tense to take her usual deep breath.

She patted her foot on the ground, and did a little swish and flick for a few more sparkles. She hoped it was enough.

“Look,” the woman cried, now awake. She held up something shiny. Her husband ran to her, and embraced her. She was holding a coin. It was from her husband's pocket, but she didn't know that. That much had taken nearly all the energy Maven could muster, but it was a distraction.

Maven took a deep breath, swizzled her wand, stomped her foot, and managed to poof. She only managed to make it a few dozen yards outside the camp. Thankfully, the darkness hid her.

When they learned they had been tricked, they would blame it on sorcery, and expect no less. They might even count themselves lucky that nothing worse happened.

She was glad she hadn't told them her name, or that she was a fairy godmother. She didn't think she could even grant one wish right now.

She ran as fast as she could in the dark. She didn't dare make a light. She hoped the road wasn't rutted or rocky. Her heart pounded with the exertion she wasn't used to. She panted for air, going slower and slower no matter how hard she tried to pick up her feet.

In a few minutes, the only sound she could hear was the hammering of her heart in her ears between her wheezing gulps of air.

Walking would be quieter.

She didn't dare stop, but slowed down, taking a great, shuddering breath with every step. She couldn't keep this up. Her feet were dragging, leaving long footprints in the dust.

With no moonlight, the open space of the road was hardly less dark than the trees on either side. Yet she might be able to hide if someone came after her—someone with torches and pitchforks.

She was tired. Too many adventures for one day, however many days. She moved to the side of the road, feeling her way slowly in the darkness. She leaned against a tree for support until she caught her breath. It was almost like having a friend to hold her. She so wanted to lie down and sleep, but she wasn't safe yet. She didn't need The Bump warning to keep moving.

She experimented with making her gossamer thicker and more like the clothing the vagabond women wore, darker and less noticeable. If anyone saw her though, there'd be trouble. No would be out alone after dark. Maven pulled all the energy to her that she could manage, and swirled her wand to poof back to her pod.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, even just to move a hundred yards up the road. No good. The energy was there, but she could not poof.

She did swizzle up a mug of coffee. It was dark and hot, and she felt more grounded while drinking it, even though she knew it was only an illusion. She didn't know where she was, or how to get back, or what to do next.

Fiona had made her point. She might need Maven, but Maven needed her too. Bump of Direction nudged her hard. Someone was

coming on horseback.

She scurried into the trees and brush beside the road, setting her coffee cup on the ground, where it vanished. She felt completely vulnerable. Anyone who looked this way would see her.

A horseman rode by, and then turned back, holding a lantern so he could see the road. He must have seen her footprints, which would lead them right to her.

What would they do to her when they found her? She shivered, exhausted, cold, and terrified. Surely they could hear her heart beating.

“S-s-s-s-s-hhhhh,” whispered a slithery voice in her ear.

The bush she squatted under folded itself around her, like an embrace. It was so thick she couldn't see anything.

The vagabond men came close behind the horseman with their pitchforks and torches. They stabbed at each bush and thrust their torches in every dark corner, except Maven's. In a few moments, they erased all trace of her passing with their own footprints.

After a lot of yelling, and threats of mayhem and menace, the men turned back down the road to their families. Someone suggested the Sorceress had lured them away to get to their children.

Maven didn't know the Serpent could talk without the lisp. When the men were gone, the bush released her.

“Thank you,” Maven said. Since it worked last time, she took her pencil and pad from her pocket and wrote another note to put in the leaf mold at the base of the bush. It seemed little enough to do.

“Thank you too,” she said to the Serpent, though she could not see it.

Its smile appeared before her, its eyes and tongue glowing faintly blue in the dark. "You're welcome."

Maven walked on for a little while, staying close to the edge of the road to make as few footprints as possible.

She started sorting out some of Fiona's story—what a long, strange trip that had been. Most of it was a blur, or just blips of images. From what Maven could make out, Fiona had brought order to a piece of the story landscape as a very young fairy—as young as Tulip. She'd cleaned it up like a new sheriff in town, but she had paid a high price. She ended up with no life of her own, except as a fairy godmother; at least until Belle came along.

Things had been stable until the last two hundred years or so. Fiona hadn't been ready for the onslaught of content that started out as tales were collected and written down, and then expanded into novels and plays. Movies, television, and the internet followed...a great hulking mass of stories, still mostly based on fairy tales in one way or another, but completely out of her control.

Without her control, the fairy tales were just silly entertainment for little kids who still believed in magic, and advertising to all the old kids who still wanted to believe in magic. The ancient stories were reduced to a few that kept the light and sweet part, the ones that could be easily licensed and manufactured, or the dark and bloody part, the shadow side of the tale. Fiona had fallen into that same pattern, and she didn't even know it. What was her shadow? Was it Maven herself?

The only person Maven could think of who might be able help her understand was Belle. Maven stopped in the middle of the road, held her

wand in front of her, and worked at deep breathing until her every pore of her was flushed with energy and sweat. Then she swirled her wand to poof, aiming for the Twilight Lounge.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tattle Tales from the Twilight Lounge

Already in peasant dress, Maven did not bother to change persona, but walked up to the bar. The place was empty for once, perhaps long after the midnight transformation, with only the Owl standing on the bar.

When she asked for a drink, the Owl shook its head in refusal.

Maven turned to leave. She was close enough to her pod to walk home, but the door would not open for her. She was stuck. She wondered if Fiona was part of that, or if it was the Twilight Lounge keeping her prisoner.

What did the Twilight Lounge wish for?

Too tired to fight about it, Maven found a seat in a booth, propped up her feet and asked the Lounge nicely for a cup of coffee. It appeared; hot, black, almost as thick as she made it at home. She sipped at it, clearing her mind. The Twilight Lounge had been here almost as long as Belle. It would know a thing or two.

“Tell me a story,” Maven said to the Lounge. She stared into the coffee cup, which became cloudy for a moment. Then she began to see a picture.

Maven listened as Fiona and Belle were arguing about the Veil, the night before the job interview. Fiona was in persona as a watery nymph, Belle in her usual sarong and beehive. Belle said the stories needed to change, but Fiona insisted she would not give up. She said she had found a protégé in Mundane. Belle asked her about Tulip, but Fiona shook her head.

The rest of the story played out as Maven watched in amazement.

* * * *

Maven wondered why the Twilight Lounge thought that story so important. It must surely be trying to tell her something. How many people were coming across, and how? Fiona said he was a vehicle. Did she use his energy to cross? Was he passed out drunk, or was he dead?

Maven said to the Lounge, "What is tearing down the Veil? What can I do to repair it?"

With a cold breath of air, the Lounge became dark, not like the starlit country road, but palpable, see-your-optic-nerve-with-your-eyes-open dark.

"There's-s-s no s-s-story for that one," a voice whispered in her ear, "unless-s-s you take on the telling of it."

In a moment, the icy dark was replaced by a glow from her wand. She stood in her pod, cozy and warm. The exertions of the day and night kicked in like jet lag with a hangover. Maven swayed on her feet, only managing to stay standing from the residual energy of her own anger at being jerked around. But that anger would have to wait.

She tore off a piece of gossamer, transformed it into one of her grandmother's quilts, and tossed it across her hammock. She tucked the wand into her bosom, and smoothed her gossamer, making it soft and silky. She sank back into the hammock and wrapped the quilt around her.

"Don't even think of waking me up before ten o'clock tomorrow morning," she said to the pod, and to anyone else who might be listening.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Sprites' Wish

When the sun shone on her face, Tulip began to stir. She did not disturb some of the sprites who had taken the first watch, and some who had taken the second. Only a few sprites had held firm all night, and these chattered the alarm when she moved.

By the time her eyes were open, there were dozens of beady, black eyes in shrewd faces surrounding her. None of them were wizard blue. He abandoned her to the sprites, which weren't laughing or throwing things. They looked expectant, chittering and buzzing their wings.

Many of their cousins were in attendance as well, insects and forest devas. At her feet, the sprites parted to allow an elder to approach her. "You fairy godmother, yah?"

Tulip sat up, very aware of the limits of her costume, the compensating leaves, and disarray of her toilette. Her wand was still in her hand, though her hand was so stiff she was sure she could not open it.

"Yes, I am. Have you a wish to be granted?" She tried to listen to them, but between the humming of too many minds, and the focus they held on the elder, she could make out nothing.

"We talk, all us, and we all wish. We wish you make King go away." The elder drew himself up to his full height and stared at her.

"You wish he would go away?" Tulip repeated. "Anywhere he goes in Faery will be just the same."

"Not care. Send Other Side. Just away."

Tulip was not used to figuring the angles. If he disappeared, would the magic come back to the Eastern kingdom, or would someone else step in with business as usual? If she could send him to the Other Side, could she go too, and maybe find the wizard? Would Fiona let her stay in Faery if she granted a wish for the sprites? Could Fiona even reach her in Mundane?

The sprites chittered loudly. Tulip figured Fiona would never really let her be a fairy godmother anyway, magic or not. She needed time to think.

“Where is the wizard who came here with me?”

“Jonz come. Jonz go. Like break wind,” the elder said, and someone in the crowd demonstrated. “He gone. Stink stay.” His tone indicated she might be part of that stink. “Now.

Grant Wish. We help.”

Tulip needed to listen to her wand. “I have to have my gossamer back and my wings to grant your wish. It’s a rule.” She was surprised at how easy it was to make up an excuse.

“Go. We help.” The sprites started humming, stomping their third set of legs, buzzing their wings, and clapping their forelegs.

It was just like favorite fairy of the famous lost boy. She knew she had magic, and the kingdom needed it, even without her.

Their energy started flowing around and around her. She stood up, grounded herself and stretched, pointing her wand to the sky. She imagined the castle, the secret stories it had to share when it awoke, and the bits and pieces she already knew. She felt the energy surge, and when it reached a peak, she swizzled herself and poofed, full sized, right

to the King's throne room. She transformed Jones' shirt to look like wings and gossamer, so she made quite a flash of sparkle and smoke. She arrived with her wand pointed at the King; none of his ogres made a move toward her. The wand glowed bright blue, the only color in the room.

"Try it, Fairy, just for my amusement," King Elroy said, smiling. "Your magic is useless here."

"You are making Faery dissolve to The Other Side." Tulip hoped again that she could hear something, anything from the castle, the guards, King Elroy himself. But none of them had any wishes to make, no story to tell.

"No, the magic of the wizards does that—so I imprisoned them all. All but the one you stole from me. Where have you hidden him, my little fairy?" He chuckled. "It's not like you can keep him for a pet. You may give up your wand for him, but he won't give up his magic for you."

"Give me back my things, and I will take you to him," Tulip said.

"No, you are too powerful without them." King Elroy sighed. With a wave of his hand, he looked away. "Seize her."

Tulip anticipated the command. She breathed in all the energy the sprites were still sending. She leaped toward him and landed in the king's lap. "Get Real," she said, and swizzled her wand around them both. At that moment, King Elroy grabbed her wand, and they both disappeared.

Tulip focused on the wizard. She needed to go where he was. Her wand burned in her hand, scorching energy from the sprites, from herself, and from the king's anger. It was all she could feel in the

swirling nothingness. She forced her eyes open and searched with her senses. Nothing. Then nothing went to darkness, and nowhere became a bruising thump on a hard floor with a bony body halfway beneath her. The body began to howl with rage, a high-pitched scream like a particularly articulate cat.

“Guards! Kill Her! Evil Wench of a Fairy! I’ll kill you myself!” He scuttled out from under her legs and punched her. She switched at him with her wand and connected with something else, knocking it over. A moan came from behind her head and a pillow smacked her in the face.

“Damn cats,” the wizard Jones mumbled, “go on...shoo!” He rolled over and groaned softly. Tulip pushed the pillow from her face and stood, trying to get her bearings. Something scratched her leg, and she kicked at it, causing another high-pitched stream of cursing and ranting.

The lights came on. In a doorway to Tulip’s left stood a woman with red hair and pale skin, her face screwed into a mask of rage. At her feet, stood the king, now only knee high, holding his head in his hands. Behind her was a bed where the wizard lay, still wearing only his pants, with his arm across his face.

The woman screamed, “Get out of my house, you lowlife slut and take your little man too!” She grabbed the shirt Tulip wore and jerked her toward the door. She kicked the king again, sending him in the same direction. She hauled the wizard up by the waist of his jeans and dragged him out of the bed.

Tulip was amazed so skinny a woman could be so strong. Real women were amazing. Jones landed painfully on his knees.

The woman slapped him across his head and shoulders. “You two-

timing, no-good, redneck, drunken son-of-a-whore's housecat! How dare you sleep with another woman in my place? And a midget? This is the last straw! Get out!"

The wizard tucked and rolled away from her, obviously not awake or completely aware of what was going on. When he reached the door, Tulip grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. She half-dragged him into the hall just as the woman threw something heavy after them. The object glanced off the door and fell down into the stairwell just outside the door.

Jones was bigger than she remembered, and hardly able to walk. She put his arm over her shoulder and started down the steps. She still held her wand—in fact it seemed melted to her hand. She ignored the pain and concentrated on getting the wizard out of danger. She had never seen such a high set of stairs. Only a castle would be so tall. But it was clear from the acrid smell, the peeling paint, and the general disrepair; they were far from being in a castle.

Another missile followed the first, missing them, but knocking another hole in the wall of the stairway. Nobody was around though the trio passed several doors on each floor. Maybe this whole place belonged to the woman, and maybe the wizard was her husband.

But that would be silly. Mages, wizards and sorcerers didn't get married—they'd lose their power. Nothing was sadder than a disenchanting wizard.

The wizard was beginning to regain consciousness, which made him more combative. "No, you aren't going to throw me out." He mumbled, getting louder and more coherent. "I haven't done anything wrong. It's

your fault. You dosed me, you scheming bitch.”

He twisted away from Tulip, lost his footing on the stairs, and rolled down.

“I hope you’re dead,” the woman screamed from the top of the stairs. She slammed the door. Tulip gathered up the clothing and rushed down to where the wizard lay crumpled on the next landing. She tried to listen to him, to see where he was hurt. Maybe figure out what was going on, but her wand was strangely silent. She crouched beside him. “Wake up. You have to leave here. Are you hurt? Wake up!” She slapped his hand, felt his forehead, and listened to his heart.

The king threw a stained shirt over her back, and then tapped her arm to get her attention. “I am sorry about what I said back there. Can you take us back now you have found your wizard? I promise I won’t try to lock you in the dungeon again.”

If this was as it appeared to be, he did not want her to give up her wand just yet—not that she could at the moment.

She turned to look at him, at last conscious of her lack of attire. Tulip tied the arms of the shirt around her waist. “Do you still have my wings and gossamer?” She held out her hand.

He fumbled through his kingly garb and found a postage-stamp-sized bit of gossamer, and the wings, although they were broken. Tulip pulled on the gossamer but it didn’t stretch at all, only threatened to tear. The wings were tiny, too small even for the king. Tulip put them in the pocket of the red-flowered shirt. “I think we will be staying here, your Majesty. My wand doesn’t work here.”

For a moment, the King began to sag in despair, but he had not been

trained as a king to give up so easily.

“How bad is he hurt?” He ran his hands down the wizard’s arms and legs.

He stood at the wizard’s head and pulled open an eyelid. After a second, the eye swung around and focused on him; the wizard turned away.

The wizard groaned, put his hand up to the railing, and leveraged himself into a seated position. “Man, this is the longest trip I have ever been on. Where does she get this shit?” He bent over and stretched his head toward the floor, groaning again.

By this time Tulip had all of his clothes collected and back in the box. When he risked opening an eye again, she stood before him, the hem of the red shirt at his eye level. He leaned back, looking up at her and grimaced at the pain in his neck. “You’re a fairy. You can’t be here. Go back.”

“No,” she said. “I am a human. This is where I stay.”

A door opened above them. “Not in my apartment you don’t.” The sentiments were punctuated with the wizard’s shoes, as the redhead hurled them one after the other.

The wizard flinched as the clog missed his head by inches. “Thank goodness her aim hasn’t improved.”

He groped for the shoe closest to him and put it on. “Get a pair of my pants, and put them on. We will have to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.” He shook his head at the king. “I don’t suppose you are a hallucination?”

The king shook his head.

Tulip spoke. "My name is Tulip."

Jones pulled himself to his feet, limped over to his other shoe, put it on, and took the box of his clothes from Tulip. "Well, Tulip, welcome to the real world."

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The goons of the court stood motionless and unsure what to do. The castle creaked and moaned like one who is stiff from sleeping too long, and stretches to wake up. The tapestries on the walls fluttered slightly as if in a strong breeze and the rushes on the floor rustled. Saturation seeped back into such colors as there were in stone and dried leaves and old cloth.

In a few moments, confusion took over as each of the king's henchmen realized that no order of succession made contingencies for the sudden disappearance of King Elroy.

One troll spoke to an ogre about their mutual self-interest, "What about the wizards? Should we let them go?"

The ogre smiled back, what teeth he had left sharp and black. "If they are going to stink up the place, let's take them home with us where we can enjoy the show." They began to chuckle.

Their troll and ogre faces split wide with laughter.

They slipped out of the throne room and carried their idea to the lower dungeons, stopping the water flow, and relieving the other guards as they went along. The door to the deepest dungeon was still unlocked,

for no one was concerned with keeping the unconscious wizards at bay. The troll fetched a wheelbarrow. They piled a dozen flaccid wizards onto it and started the long climb up a different passageway.

No one noticed that while the colors of the landscape grew ever brighter, Mundane crept ever closer to the castle.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Henry and H.R.

Henry leaned against his pitchfork, surveying his beloved's handiwork. The barn glowed in the morning sun, and the fat cows grazed in the fields. Daisy was in town checking on the trappings of the wedding. Not one ha'penny of the Princess's money was to be wasted.

Six women embroidered the pieces of Vivienne's wedding gown, four more tied lace, and a youngster of fourteen with a talent for netting, was making a veil almost as fine as gossamer. In fact, some folk whispered the thread she used was gossamer. The girl wouldn't say, working from dawn to past dark, tying the nearly invisible threads. Other women gathered wild herbs for the feast, while huntsmen brought in game, and farmers thinned their herds and flocks. Children learned traditional dances from old folks, nearly forgotten in these modern times.

Though he loved Daisy, Henry felt neglected and used as a beast of burden. Daisy would not yield to him. He proclaimed his love for her, carried water and chopped wood, whitewashed, forked pitch, and did a hundred things that took him daily further from his life in the castle. His hands became rough and dirty in a way that would not wash off. He had given up his fine clothing for the rough peasant wear, and lost in grace what he picked up in strength. He felt clumsy when he accompanied the princess, and feared to embarrass her with his newfound sweat. He never remembered perspiring before while in the court. He felt ungroomed, like a wild pony protecting a pampered Arabian mare, not a gentleman for the company of ladies.

He proposed to Daisy, and she accepted, but put him off until the dairy was productive. She refused to learn the arts of the court, the dancing, the airs, and the way of wearing courtly clothes, even though Lady Dee and the Princess provided a wardrobe for her. She laughed at him, and kissed his cheek and said teaching a cow to dance was even more aggravating to the cow than to the teacher.

One afternoon, Henry paced outside the herb garden while Daisy met with her women, another meeting where they talked a thing to death before they just did what Daisy wanted. How did she always get her way? He began to mutter to himself, walking faster and faster, until at one turn he spun around and nearly ran right into Prince H.R. Only years of training allowed him to back up a step, bow, and choke a reply as his face burned red. “Your Highness, please forgive me.”

For his part, H.R. was just as surprised to find the peasant trampling his garden was his fiancée's footman. “Yes, yes, Henry, isn't it? Walk with me.” H.R. gestured out to the less manicured lawn and woodland beyond the garden proper. “What has so you agitated?” H.R. chuckled. “My Cook and your Daisy will have your head for breaking a leaf of grass.”

“Yes, your Highness, my Daisy.” All Henry could think of was his rough clothing, the earthy smell from his exercise and agitation, and that he almost knocked the prince of the realm down in his own garden. What if the prince sent him away?

“So, have you two set a date? Will there be a double wedding at Midsummer?”

“No, Sire, for she will not marry until the dairy is as productive as

she thinks it should be. She does not understand that I am to provide for her.”

“Peasant women must be practical, my man, practical.” The prince clapped Henry on the back. “So let her put you in a yoke like an ox and work you to death beside her and the children you get on her.”

Again, Henry colored, for he could not speak against the prince, but he must defend his love. “I love her, Sire, so I suppose there is no other hope for me.”

“And Daisy, does she also love you? Does she warm you with her embrace and...” H.R. stopped as Henry stiffened, staring into the distance, avoiding the Prince's gaze, but not deferring to him.

“Sire, I do not wish to be rude, but I do not wish to discuss these things.”

H.R. laughed. “Ah, you are in love then, and she has you where she wants you. Good luck, my man.”

Henry blushed yet again, deeply annoyed he could not control his response.

“I have a favor to ask of you.” Now the prince looked away, walking aimlessly under a large oak. Henry felt a stab of fear, for though it had not been claimed in years, the ruler of a kingdom still had the right of the first night.

H.R. turned and met Henry's face. “No, it is not about your Daisy. She seems to be a very capable dairy keeper. I have my own concerns. Your Lady, the Princess, does she ever speak of me, of what I have done to offend her?”

Relief about one and duty toward the other fought for Henry's

loyalty. "Sire, she does not confide in me, but if I may speak my own thoughts?"

H.R. nodded.

"She has come to you to save her kingdom. That must affect her feelings in some way." Henry felt certain calm in speaking the truth, although he marveled at his courage and stupidity in trusting a prince to hear it.

"I have not ravished her, or her kingdom." The prince stomped to the edge of the shade, turned and threw his hands into the air. "I have been unfailingly polite, letting her have her way about everything. Every woman leaves her home to be married. It is the way of things."

"And when they arrive, they set up their own domains." Henry knew how much Vivienne hated the Prince, not for who, but what he was. What could the prince do to change her feelings? "Sire, she comes from duty to her people, and she is trying to help the people here. If you want her love, you will have to be more than polite."

"I have brought her fine presents, gold and jewels, but she merely acknowledges them. She does not accept them. She won't leave the Castle to go hunting with me. She barely speaks a word while we are at dinner, whether we are in company or not. Her companion is friendlier, and a more prim woman I have never met." The prince sighed with exasperation, and squatted.

Henry squatted too. "Women like to talk. If she is not talking to you, then you are not asking the right questions. Ask her what she has learned about the kingdom, what she thinks will make it more prosperous, more productive."

“I don't need any advice from a woman.”

“No, Sire, but if you ask, and at least pretend to listen, she may warm up to you.”

H.R. chewed on a blade of grass, looking more like a squire in the throes of first love than a prince who carved a kingdom from the remoter portions of three other kingdoms.

“Does Daisy talk to you?”

“Constantly.” Henry grinned. “Not that I listen to all of it, but if she is talking, she is happy, and sometimes she has good ideas.” Henry decided to dare trusting the prince as a man rather than a monarch.

“Unlike your Highness, it's my position in life to be ordered around by women.”

“Yes. Quite.” H.R. seemed far away. “It does not bother you, then.”

“Yes, Sire, it does bother me sometimes, but Daisy's words give me direction as well, so I don't have to decide what to do, only how.”

“Does life appear different from the barn instead of the castle?”

“Yes, Sire, it has changed many things.” Henry thought of his own recent dissatisfaction, yet he could not go back to being the simpering fop he had been before mucking out Daisy's dairy. And for all his desire to see Daisy presented among the ladies as the rare jewel she was, he did not want her to become as delicate and shallow as some of them. He spoke boldly, though with his head bowed and his eyes averted, “Your Highness might consider things from the princess's perspective.”

H.R. abruptly stood, motioning Henry to rise as well. He spent a moment studying Henry, as if weighing his worth as a man. “If I am to listen to my princess's opinions of my kingdom, I shall need to learn

more than she knows. Do you have another set of such clothing, that I might disguise myself and go abroad among my people?"

"I-I am sure I could get some."

"Do so. You will accompany me and show me what I should be aware of."

"Now, Sire?" Henry remembered he had not finished all the chores, but he could certainly not disobey the prince.

"No, it is late," H.R. said, "And I have an evening planned with guests. Tomorrow, early."

"Yes, your Highness. But begging your pardon, Sire, I am late. May I be excused?"

"Certainly, Henry, certainly. Hie you to your barn. May you find the hay sweet and soft."

H.R. still gazed into the distance.

Henry bowed and turned away.

The prince continued to speak aloud, as though he was unaware of speaking. "And so, she will marry me with no more feeling than a frog at the bottom of a wintry bog." H.R. shivered at the thought of the cold draft coming from his bride's bedchamber.

Chapter Forty

Maven Sits and Thinks

Dreaming of a cold draft, a pint of a dark and hearty brew, raised in toast to the newlyweds, Maven awoke thirsty. She nearly fell out of her hammock as she tried to extricate herself from the gossamer twisted all around her. Late afternoon sun baked the pod. Maven peered through gritty eyes to find her wand and poof herself a cuppa.

She stretched, her ankles and knees popping, and rolled away from something stiff against her back. She sat up, carefully lowered her feet to the floor, and stood, stretching again. Her wand fell from the hammock. Maven made a cup of coffee and drank it slowly, willing the warmth into her bones. Fiona would want a debriefing soon enough, but she hadn't buzzed Maven yet. Maven looked at her wand, but decided not to poof. She needed time to think. She walked gingerly down the spider web bridge and across the green quad toward the Twilight Lounge.

Whether solid or not, the earth felt good under her feet, the golden afternoon sun comforting on her back. Faery was beautiful. If Fiona was indeed the linchpin holding it all together for eight hundred years, she'd done a great job.

No wonder she wanted it to stay just like it was. No else wanted her job, except maybe Tulip. Tulip would be perfect. Maven palmed her wand, but she didn't hear Tulip anywhere. Maybe she was on some special assignment too.

In the lobby of the Twilight Lounge, Maven transformed into a fashion doll princess and winced as the trademark was engraved on her

ample behind. She tottered toward the bar in crystal spike heel slides and wondered why anyone would want to be so long and top heavy. The other patrons did look, however, so she knew she had made a noteworthy choice. She hoped she had chosen a model with bendable knees, as she didn't think she could stand in those shoes. At least the dress was still gossamer. No bar stool arose to meet her persona, so she supposed the knees were out. She'd pick a better edition next time.

In her hand appeared a credit card. "Do you take plastic?" she asked Belle.

Belle picked it up, turned it over several times, and bit it. It disappeared. "Sure. Want something with an umbrella in?"

"Will it clear my head and let me think?"

"Thinking, is it? About time someone around here did some thinking." Belle rummaged about below the bar as a teapot and cup appeared. "What would you be thinking about?"

"For one, why did you take the credit card? It disappeared."

"Energy exchange, same as fairy gold. Long as energy keeps moving, it works. You make it?"

"The card came with the persona."

Belle grunted. "So it's your energy either way. Don't give it away so easy. Might need it one day."

"How did you come to the Twilight Lounge? Has it always been here?"

"Full of questions today." Belle inspected Maven's persona. "Why fight the old stories?"

"Famous dolls are a story," Maven said. "But if you don't like her,"

She swizzled her wand and shrank back into the Old Woman, which was much more comfortable. “I can do others. On my side, there is no Old Woman, at least not in the stories I know.”

“Ever wonder about that? Meaty bit of thinking, that is.” She went back to scrubbing the bar.

“Yes, but there's a lot more old women now, but they have no stories—just evil witches and helpless grandmothers.” Maven peered into her cup. “I tried to tell Fiona. Times change. Stories change.” She sipped her tea, making a face at the bitterness of it.

“Yeah. Like it better your way?” Belle offered a bowl of sugar and a teaspoon. “Think sugar- coating will help?”

Maven declined the sugar. “You don't like me.”

Belle held up her left hand, cupped like a satellite dish, scanning Maven. “Got nothing against you personally,” she said after a minute. “But it ain't smart to drill a hole in sinking boat to let the water out.”

“I'm a hole in the Veil, then.” If straight answers came in the form of bitter truth, she'd drink up. “How does separating the story from reality keep things going? Don't stories have to tell the truth?”

“Truth, yes. Facts, no.” Belle turned away and walked into the darkness in the back.

Maven swigged the tea, dark and bitter. While she waited for clarity to kick in, she turned to listen to the patrons.

She whispered, “Chair?” and a rocker appeared under her, scooping her off her feet. She leaned into her cane and settled herself down into the persona. She started scanning the patrons, but they faded as the background of the Twilight came into focus.

She listened then to the Lounge itself, its rhythm less insistent than a train's, but just as driving.

Her senses opened up. She felt the bar around her, the space behind it, and someone moving about, maybe Belle. In front of her, the size and shape of the Twilight shimmered and changed, swelling when many shadowy patrons came inside, shrinking to fit only a few. The Twilight Lounge seemed to regress itself, getting smaller and smaller until it was just the bar. A very young Belle stood behind it with a younger Fiona, toasting each other with elegant glasses raised high. Fiona had created the illusion of the Twilight Lounge, without much substance but the place, the gateway, was here.

Fiona must have a gift for creating sentient buildings.

Maven heard the rhythm of the spell repeating, made stronger every day by the energy of the folk coming in, by the overlay of persona and the absorption of personae at midnight. She remembered where she heard that rhythm before—H.R.'s castle. Fiona set that spell.

Why a gate? Who does the Gatekeeper let in or kept out? Who's been jumping the fence, either way? Maven drank a second cup and scryed the leaves in her cup. They settled into a picture of a rabbit—Peter or B'rer Rabbit? Fence jumpers both. Where was the briar patch? Could she jump into it to avoid getting stuck?

What did Tulip know?

Maven set down her cup to rest both hands on her cane. She listened, searching for Tulip, hoping to find some answers. Tulip's energy signature was all over the Twilight Lounge. She was like a pet to the regulars, a cute puppy who could never quite learn to do the tricks.

Tulip's transformation spells often didn't work at all—at best, she would conjure up a butterfly that crashed heavily to the floor before being absorbed back into the Lounge. Tulip tried working as a barmaid, but the patrons teased her about not being Fae. Fiona took her as an apprentice as much out of pity as anything.

Listening further afield, Maven could not see Tulip, only images of her fluttering in a gray countryside, the dim shadow of a man in the background. Tulip was not wishing, so her story was not clear. The only things Tulip wished for were to be a fairy godmother, or go to Mundane—mutually exclusive.

Too many questions and not enough answers, all of them crooked as a snake on a hot tin roof. Where was the Serpent when she needed it?

What do Serpents wish for?

Chapter Forty-One

The Hard Way

Like a manikin, Fiona stood in her office. Maven had broken through the forest spell, and read her story as if she were any peasant in the realm.

The crockery on her floor began to put itself back. Her coffee cup righted itself, and appeared on the desk, where it filled itself with steaming, sweet coffee. Fiona picked it up and took a sip. The shock of coffee instead of tea knocked her off balance. She staggered back against her desk, rolling the crystal ball into an open desk drawer.

Fiona retrieved the forest globe. She peered into it, watching all the events of Maven's stay there. She was appalled at the death of the woodcutters. Maven had dealt with Dolores appropriately, giving her tasks to do that the Cottage handled, but then she sent Dolores to Vivienne to join the rest of the crew in H.R.'s Castle. And the princess—it was as Maven said — Ane with an X would have adventures, just as she wished. Now there were three more Maven- stories.

Fiona took another swig of the hot coffee, letting it warm her heart and gut while she fumbled for her crystal ball. Could she even consider letting Maven take over? And if not, what could she do about the woman? She savored the last drops of the coffee.

Fiona stared into the coffee cup. It was Maven magic she could not control nor even duplicate! She zapped the cup, poofing it far away, for she could not destroy it.

Fiona had always known she might regret her decision to bring

Maven here. A new plan must be put into action and several alternatives in case Maven produced more surprises.

With Maven, surprises were guaranteed, but Fiona still had an ace up her sleeve. Soon Maven would be gone as well.

Chapter Forty-Two

Lady Dee, Administratrix

A light knock sounded on Lady Dee's door.

"Come." Lady Dee stood and curtseyed when Prince H.R. walked in with Henry.

"Lady Dee," H.R. said, acknowledging her with a nod. He raised his voice and commanded, "Castle, Lady Dee needs a sitting room and two more chairs."

A stone wall, complete with a fine tapestry of flowers, arched stone grates for airflow, and an aged oak door appeared behind Lady Dee's desk, between her and the bed with not so much as a flutter in her hair. Her bedroom now private, she curtseyed again.

The prince bent to sit, and a chair appeared beneath him. Henry's chair struck behind his knees, forcing him to sit. "That will be quite enough, Castle," H.R. said.

"Thank you, your Highness," Lady Dee said, making mental notes and critique. "You and your Castle are most generous. What service may I render you today?"

"I need a woman's perspective. I have been talking with Henry here about Princess Vivienne." H.R. leaned forward, his eyes as piercing as an eagle's. "Now, I will not command you to divulge a confidence, as I suspect you would not tell me anyway."

Lady Dee inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"How shall I get Vivienne to talk to me? What subjects should I introduce? What are her interests? She seems to find my compliments

and gifts unworthy.” The prince threw open his arms in a gesture of annoyance.

Her mind raced, and her heart pounded. This advice might be the most important she could give. Could the prince ever melt Vivienne's heart? Would he love her, or merely command her, as he did the Castle?

“From her birth until her parents died, Vivienne was trained to rule her kingdom. She met the peasants and knew what and who produced the luxuries of the palace. When her parents passed, Lord and Lady Paytrark assumed her guardianship. They taught her the more limited role of Lady Wife, house manager and hostess.”

The Prince nodded, obviously not seeing any problems Vivienne might have adjusting. “She seems to have learned well, although she does not seem happy.”

“Consider, Sire, how with your training and experience, you might respond to being made a butler. Even if your master were very generous and kind, would you then be satisfied?”

“But she is a woman,” H.R. cried. “Does she wish not to be married? Not to be loved and adored? Not to have children?”

Lady Dee decided to cast her pearl anyway, if only to determine whether H.R. was truly a swine. “She wishes to rule her own kingdom, and failing that, this one.” She paused only long enough to allow the prince to hear the words, to have them strike the weak place in his self-importance before she continued. “Consider, your Highness, speaking to her like a sovereign in her own right. Not just as a woman.”

H.R. frowned, staring at Lady Dee as if she had grown a new head. He shook his head over and over, but produced no immediate answer

for this information. His brow furrowed and his eyes faded to yellow. His face became pale, perhaps with the pain and the effort of thinking unfamiliar thoughts. He rose slowly, staring into space.

“Thank you, Lady Dee,” he said quietly. “Henry, walk with me back to my suite. Castle, give Lady Dee whatever else she desires for her office space.”

Lady Dee curtsied again, deeply, murmuring, “Thank you, your Highness.” When the Prince was out of earshot, she added, “Castle, could I please have a window box with some red geraniums?” The flowers appeared with only the faintest sigh of a breeze.

Chapter Forty-Three

Fairy Dust

Maven stood up and stretched. She hoped Belle would talk to her.

“Where's Tulip?”

Belle glared at her. “Got balls to ask me that.” Her look made the tea in Maven's cup boil.

Maven raised her hands and stepped back from the bar. “I don't know what you are talking about.”

Belle shook her towel at Maven. “Gone to The Other Side and taken the king of Neauwae with her.” Belle's voice grew louder with each word.

“You let her go? How did she manage it?” Maven stood still while the other patrons headed for the door or just dematerialized without so much as a crack in their personae. “She'll be eaten alive. Has anyone tried to find her? To bring her back?”

Belle stopped wiping and slapped the counter with her rag. “Been two days, this side, maybe months on her side, maybe years.” A tear leaked out of Belle's eye and sizzled into steam when it hit her cheek. “Looked up to you, she did. All she ever wanted as a kid was to go to Mundane. Granted her own wish, she did.”

“Then it's not my fault she went there. I tried to show her what it is like.” Maven frowned. “Tulip wants to be a fairy godmother.”

Belle glared, pausing in her cleaning. “Must not be all she wants.”

“Fiona said I couldn't get back. But she brought me over.” Maven paused, remembering the disorientation of the job interview. “And she

came over to get me.”

Belle frowned. “Used your energy to get you here.”

“If it was my energy then, I can go get Tulip now. I am used to dealing with the Other Side, and I know so much more than I did about magic.”

Belle stopped her habitual scrubbing. “Sure, Go and good riddance. Won't bring Tulip back.”

“I thought people have been going, crossing over for centuries...”

“Used to be the worlds were only close at certain times, not like now.” Belle sighed, mollified a little with Maven's concern. “Too much of a risk. Someone crosses over, the edges get blurry. Not every makes it through, even one way. She's likely lost between the worlds.” She glared at Maven. “Don't you think I've looked for her?”

“But what will happen to her if she stays on the Other Side?”

“Can't do magic in Mundane. She's never known anything else.” Another tear fell, and this one made it all the way down to Belle's chin before it evaporated. “Too hard. Energy isn't there.” Belle pulled a mug of something dark from under the bar and quaffed it. “Took her wand and wings with her—they're not to be found in Faery. She'll use up her own energy and die, or give up her wand. Then she can't come back.”

“Did she grant any wishes while she was in Neauwae? Wouldn't that prove she could do magic?”

“Granted her own wish. You can't change that.”

“No, she wouldn't do that.” Maven drank the rest of her tea, which had subsided into merely choppy waves. “We all grant our own wishes, every day we have the backbone to do it. That's not magic. That's

reality.”

“Shouldn't have brought you over,” Belle's voice was choked and her eyes were full.

“Then I'll go back and send Tulip in my place. She'll be much better than I am.”

“Won't be able to get her.” Belle started cleaning again. The bar whimpered. A tear fell on it to be washed away. “Go anyway—one less loose cannon.”

“Fiona said my wand would channel the power of two people if someone else handled it. Can you risk that? I'll risk your taking control of me to rescue Tulip.”

Belle considered, staring into the depths of the bar. “Might be another way.” Belle walked into the mirror at the back of the bar, disappearing for a moment, then came back with a tiny gray bag of gossamer. “This is the dust of one Violet Amber Tears, a great grandmother of mine. This is all there is, so use it well. Sparingly. Bring Tulip back if she will come. If you can. And if she is dead, bring back her dust. If you can.” Belle wiped her face with the back of her hand, and snuffled loudly. “And if not, good riddance.”

“I care about her too,” Maven said. “I'll go to Neauwae to start; maybe there's some trace of her still there.”

Maven opened the small bag carefully, and dipped just the very tip of her wand into it. Maven wiped most of the dust off inside the bag, then closed it tightly and hid it in a gossamer pocket. She nodded to Belle, smiled grimly, and raised her wand to the east.

Multicolored lightning flashed through the Twilight Lounge with a

peal of thunder. Splitting the swirling chaos, Fiona leapt in, wand pointed at Maven's chest.

“No. You will go nowhere without my orders and my permission.” Fiona's glance flicked over to Belle. “You stay out of this.”

This was not the frazzled fairy Maven had listened to in her office. This was the Original Fairy Godmother Superior, with a whole hornet's nest in her bonnet and Armageddon in her eyes. “Since you said you needed some rest, I will give you all you can stand. Report posthaste to Grizelda the Troll. Learn for yourself what Restraint and Re-Education entails.” Without so much as a quiver from Fiona, a thunderclap exploded from her wand and the Twilight Lounge vanished.

Chapter Forty-Four

Night of the Living Troll

Maven materialized with an unceremonious bump at one end of a dilapidated wooden bridge that sagged over Creaky Bog, a slow, bump-and-grind of green scum writhing between steep banks. The air elbowed her. The overcast sky was greenish, as if Fiona had ordered ambience. Maven hoped this was not a Troll's Paradise.

What would a Troll wish for?

The Troll shambled toward her from the far side of the bridge. She was over seven feet tall, hairless, bony and mostly the color of wet mud, the slick kind that becomes stoneware when fired. Her eyes were green, almost phosphorescent. She would have been frightening except for the yellow calico frock she wore.

Maven smiled, hoping she looked friendly rather than amused.

The Troll stopped just short of midway, put her hands where her hips should be and pursed her lips. "Name's Grizelda. It works better if you meet me halfway."

"I'm Maven." She walked over to Grizelda, hoping the swaying and groaning of the bridge was for effect rather than cause.

"Welcome to the Dark Side." The Troll climbed down a rickety ladder and into a deep recession in the bank, which led to an iron door, which clanked shut behind them. Grizelda's home under her bridge was quite cozy if dark, with frilly chintz curtains hanging on the walls to disguise the lack of windows. Most of the light came from the hearth with some help from a couple of candles. Trolls see perfectly well in

darkness, but humans need enlightenment.

“Please make yourself at home,” Grizelda said, indicating the golden velvet chair nearest the fire. It had gilded feet that looked as if they once belonged to someone of the Troll persuasion.

“Relax, at least for tonight.”

Grizelda handed her a cup of dark tea and set a plate of cookies on a gilded table beside Maven.

Grizelda leaned back on her matching sofa and crossed her legs. The feet on the sofa definitely matched Grizelda's. A memento from her last lover?

Maven hesitated before taking a sip, but figured Grizelda probably didn't need magic or potions to keep her here. The tea was good if a bit sweet. “I'm new at this. So how does this R&R work?”

Grizelda smiled a grin like the maw of a chipper-shredder. “No one has ever gotten on Fiona's bad side in less than a month.”

“Three days, by my count. I admit I still don't quite know what I did wrong.” Maven drank another sip and ate a cookie.

“Wrong has so many meanings.” Grizelda set her cup down, handling it delicately with her thick fingers. “For example, it is my nature to eat a lot, and a lot of different things, including humans on occasion. Would it be wrong of me to eat a human, like you, for example?”

Maven sensed this was not a rhetorical question. “I would object to it being me. But wrong depends on the rules, I guess.”

“Whose rules? Mine or yours?” She picked up a cookie and popped it in her mouth.

Maven had taken oral exams before, but usually she knew in advance what the subject was. Still, she could only go with her gut. “By mine, you would definitely be wrong. I don’t know about yours.”

The Troll smiled, though not reassuringly. “Ah, there the difficulty lies. You have eaten other animals, right?”

“And plants, too. I don’t live by bread alone.” Maven wished she had listened when Mother tried to teach her how to be a Southern Lady. Someone who could fight a whole war with tea and cake without as much as a stain on a white glove. Most of the ladies Mother knew had razor tongues instead of teeth, but the effect was much the same.

Grizelda had the sugar market cornered. “Good. Under what conditions would you willingly eat another human?”

Maven thought hard—a plane crash in the Alps? A power-taking ritual? The body and the blood broken for me? “I guess there are circumstances where I would eat part of a human. I can’t imagine being in those circumstances.”

“How often have you imagined being in a Troll Hole? Even in your darkest nightmares?” Grizelda took another sip. “Yet here you are. I will not eat you tonight, no matter how hungry I get, because you understand your rules do not always apply. You will live at least until morning.”

“Morning?” The Bump didn’t like what it found sticking to its long nose. “Do I dare ask what I will be doing here?”

“You did dare.” Grizelda chuckled. “What do fairy godmothers do?”

“Grant wishes?”

Grizelda licked her lips, staring at the fire. She looked sad, lonely,

yet hungry. "It's always the same story."

"You sound depressed." Maven knew depression like an errant best friend. Her years on the couch talking to head-shrinks and sham-men ought to provide some insight. "You seem to spend your time productively, yet there is something missing?"

"You judge how I spend my time?" Grizelda's head jerked back ever so slightly.

Maven knew she was on the right track, even on the offensive. If she were not too offensive, she might learn what she needed to know. "My experience is limited as you are the only Troll I have formally met, so this is a stab in the dark, but..."

"In the dark? A stab? Oh that's a good one." Grizelda laughed like a chain saw hitting a nail in a live tree.

Metaphors, be careful about them. The Bump glowed faintly green. "Your dress is quite dainty, as is your tea set. Your hearth is warm and your...home cozy and bright for all that it is underground. Am I wrong in supposing you are unusual for a Troll?"

"Each Troll makes a life. How we decide to live is none of anyone's business," Grizelda said. Her sharp tone told Maven she was pulling the right chain.

Maven visualized tailback as she set up an end run. "Oh, I think you have a lovely place here, but my point is you've done about what you wanted with it, and it just hasn't had the effect you wanted. Is that about right?"

"I have tried to..." Grizelda's expression brightened up, showing surprise at Maven's sympathy. Quickly, it sagged into indifference. "You

can't use your powers here, even if you do have your wand.”

“No magic. Experience. I have been there too,” Maven said, noting her limitations again. “I know a lot about darkness. You can't just be Suzy Sunshine.”

“I would like a bit of sunshine,” Grizelda smiled. “Trolls can't take direct sunlight, but it's almost always cloudy here. Do you like the effect though?”

“I do. It's very sunny.” Maven finished her tea, and Grizelda poured another cup. “But what else do you want to do? What would be fun?”

“Fun? I like to eat. But even that is not as much fun as it used to be. Just forage and eat. I get a lot of exercise.” Grizelda sighed. “I don't want to eat everything around here, of course, not good for the ecology. But that's pretty much it.”

Then she added, with no irony, “Except when Fiona sends me a fairy godmother.” She started to pour another cup for herself, but the pot was empty. She opened up a trap door, pulled a bucket, and poured the contents into a kettle over the fire. She sprinkled in a few more leaves.

As Maven watched, she thought about what she had been drinking. Her skin grew clammy, her stomach hot. She refused to look in her cup, and fought the urge to throw up.

The water boiled. Grizelda filled the teapot, poured in honey, and offered Maven another cookie while the tea steeped.

Maven pushed the plate away while she swallowed again. “A-Anyone I know?”

Grizelda laughed again until she saw how pale Maven was. “What's the matter? Are you feeling well?”

Maven shook her head. "I let one of my expectations bite me." If the tea tasted good, there wasn't likely anything wrong with it, but it squirmed in her middle.

"I didn't know they could do that. Where? Are you bleeding?" The mention of blood made Grizelda expose her many sharp teeth. She shook her head.

Maven told The Bump to remember how literal Trolls were. "No, I mean, well, the water..." This time her stomach won. Maven jerked forward and heaved. Her hand clamped over her mouth as she looked for a place to hurl. Nowhere. It came up anyway, through her hand and all over her lap. The gossamer didn't soak it up as she hoped, but it didn't drip through either. Maven tried to speak, and convulsed again. She tried to contain it by holding the edges of the gossamer skirt, struggling with her stomach and her embarrassment. The gossamer held, but her stomach didn't.

Grizelda was fascinated with the idea of regurgitation. Apparently, it was a totally new concept for her. She watched to see what Maven would do.

The second wave passed and Maven whispered, "Please help me. I'm sorry to make such a mess."

Nodding, Grizelda stood, picked Maven up, and carried her outside to a platform where she set her on her feet. The Troll pulled a rope, which dumped a barrel of water on Maven, rinsing her clean, gossamer and all.

The thought of the tea water hit Maven again, and she vomited over the edge. The fresh air, a cool breeze and sweet-smelling grasses on the

bank helped settle her stomach, as the new moon set through a break in the clouds at sunset.

“Neatly done. No mess.” Grizelda put her arm around the Maven to steady her.

Maven hugged back, leaning her wet hair on Grizelda's bony hip. “I'm sorry,” she said again. “Just the idea of the water from the creek...” Her stomach heaved again, but it was empty. “It wasn't hard to swallow, just couldn't digest it, I guess.”

“From the creek?” Grizelda squeezed Maven tightly. “Silly human. I don't drink slime. I have a cistern under the house fed by a spring.” She laughed again, so loud and long Maven finally had to join her out of relief, although a few tears fell down her face too.

“No human has ever hugged me,” Grizelda said. “You are quite cuddly—like a cat almost. No human has ever asked me for help either. Are you sure you are human? Is everyone from Mundane like you?”

Maven took a deep breath of the evening breeze. “Today I am not sure what my name is, much less whether I am human, or if there is a place called Mundane.” She put her other arm around Grizelda, holding her tightly for a moment, feeling some warmth flow between them. “If you are a typical Troll, then Trolls are a huggable bunch. And if not, then I am glad I am here with you.”

They stood still for a few moments as Maven's gossamer dried out. Grizelda took her back inside. “Do you want to try the tea again?”

Maven sagged into the chair. She shook her head. “Let me wait a bit. I think that's the first non-magical food I have eaten since I got here.” She gazed onto the fire, letting it warm her face. “So, my job is to grant

you a wish. What do you wish for?"

Grizelda stared at the floor. "I like you, Maven. I hate what I am going to have to do to you." She stopped, took a deep breath, and then recited, "I wish to have a flower garden, to feel the sun on my skin as I work with the flowers, in the bright colors, smelling the fragrance. This is my true wish, and no one yet has been able to grant it."

"Let me get all the details, then," Maven said, "since I can't listen to your story with my wand." She heard Grizelda say the words of the wish, but she didn't believe that was what Grizelda really wanted. The Bump listened harder.

"You turn into stone if you are exposed to sunlight for any length of time, yes?"

"You do seem to know about Trolls. Yes. But it has always been my dream, a truly mystical experience to join the earth, the sun-fire, the air, and the water, all in myself."

When you do the impossible, The Bump warned, they add it to your job description. "Are you making up a spell?" Grizelda asked. "Some of them have tried."

"Just talking to myself," Maven said. "Can you go out in the rain during the day, or does any sunlight do it?"

Grizelda looked sheepish. "I get slippery when wet. I don't go out in the rain, just sometimes when it's very cloudy. Let me get you tea."

Nothing like making a hearty night for the condemned meal. The word "mystical" flashed through Maven's brain again. She had found her own mystical experiences had been, coincidentally, near-death experiences, such as the one she was having now. Usually she didn't get

the significance of an event until after, when she was sure exactly how near death she had been, and that she hadn't, in fact, died.

She thought of her mother's friends again, belles of the oldest school, hats, gloves, and dresses not so different from the one Grizelda wore. While the Troll fussed with the tea things, Maven pulled at her gossamer to see how much magic was in it. Her feet stood firmly on the dirt that served as Grizelda's floor and pulled the energy up. The gossamer came off in her hand, and she could stretch it and shape it a bit, but not nearly enough. Still, she pushed up her sleeves, though the cave was cool, slicked her hair back, and took her wand out of its pocket.

"It won't work here," Grizelda warned. "I know it's impossible, but you have to grant my wish without using magic. Why don't we just sit and have a nice chat while you wait for your last sunrise? I never have visitors worth conversation."

"Never more than once," Maven muttered to herself. Facing death by dining gave her courage and drive. Any more adrenaline in her system might make her shake too hard to concentrate at all. "I have only tonight to transform you into a true Southern Belle, one who can face any adversity, including sunlight, without even sweating."

"Southern Belle? But Belle is already in the South, in the Twilight Lounge."

"Just trust me." Maven hoped Grizelda didn't hear the darker layers of meaning. "Now, we need a few props for a truly mystical experience."

"Why? What do you want?" Grizelda's head tilted in puzzlement, like a rock starting a landslide.

Maven hoped it would be a landslide victory. "Even a Cinderella

needs a few mice, a couple of lizards, and a pumpkin.”

Surprised by Maven's businesslike approach, Grizelda looked around. “I don't know about a pumpkin...there are likely mice and lizards. Would a salamander do?”

Maven searched her old teacher faces for the one she wanted, the ‘I'm-disappointed-that- you-don't-know-the-answer-but-I'll-wait-for-you-to-redeem-yourself’ look, and aimed it toward Grizelda.

Grizelda had not attended public school. “Why do you need a pumpkin anyway?”

“I didn't say I needed a pumpkin—unless you wanted to go to the ball and needed a carriage. You didn't wish for that.”

“You mean I could go to a ball?”

Only if you promise not to eat the handsome prince. When is the next ball? A ray of hope slicked through Maven's dark plan. “That will take longer.”

The same light zipped through Grizelda's brain. Her face looked crafty as she tried to process what was happening. “You're trying to trick me. Trolls don't have balls.”

Maven nodded in sympathy. “I guess that's why there's so few of you left. It would take a male with a big set to approach a Troll as lovely and well-appointed as you.” Maven gestured, waving her wand across the room until it crossed Grizelda.

Grizelda was becoming more confused by the minute. “Me? Lovely? I thought Trolls were considered ugly, especially by humans.” She didn't handle double-entendre well.

“Some people think a flat-chested, skinny girl with green hair,

multicolored tattoos, and a chain pierced through her nose and her ear is beautiful.”

“I thought only ogres went in for that sort of thing. Humans too?”

“Some of them.” According to Maven's wand, it did still have some power, maybe because of Belle's fairy dust, but probably not enough to keep Grizelda from turning to stone. Maven hadn't decided if she was going to go that far. She was beginning to like Grizelda, who after all, hadn't eaten her immediately.

“You didn't answer my question.” Grizelda shook her finger. “This is a trick to get me out into the sun.”

“Think on two things. One, if I were trying to trick you, would that be against the rules? And two, if I answered your question, would I tell you the truth?”

Two thoughts of equal depth were too much for Grizelda to process; she needed time to consider how to fight a battle of wits. “You have known a lot of Trolls?”

Maven remembered former students, school administrators, and parents she had met on school conference nights. “I've known quite a few Trolls, and you are by far the most beautiful I have ever seen.” Nobody by any standard could call that a lie, either. “Not only that, but you are straightforward, honest and fair—that alone would scare the living hell out of most of the males I know—as fierce as male Trolls may be.”

“They aren't that fierce. I've eaten several.”

Balls and all. Her mind raced with images and of what she could use for props. What the Troll wanted was sun on her skin. What could she

use for sunscreen?

“Yes.” Grizelda licked her lips. “My last lover was delicious, and he actually managed to live long enough to be a lover. That was why I kept his feet for the sofa.”

The gleam of appetite in Grizelda's eyes gave Maven's creativity another adrenaline boost. The gossamer in her hand grew more substantial as Maven grounded herself again with a deep breath and a visualization of her roots going into the Earth for energy and life. Her hands were shaking from the hormone overload. The dancing light from the hearth skipped through her brain hatching out a beautiful thought.

“Strip off your clothes. You're going to take a sun bath, just like a Southern Belle.”

“I can't. The sun isn't even out. The moon isn't even out.”

“Then I am not trying to trick you because there isn't any sun to hurt you. Now, you can leave your underwear on if you wear any, or you can wear a bathing suit.”

“Bathing suit? Underwear?”

“Never mind. We need some kind of oil, olive, corn, baby...”

Maven wracked her brain to think of what her grandmother used for sunscreen, but all she could think of was vinegar, for after being sunburned. Some kind of white, greasy stuff? It didn't have to be effective.

The large, naked Troll handed her an earthenware jar of oil, and then Maven asked for some vinegar and a small bowl.

“Now while I am mixing this up, you find a towel or something to lie down on by the fire.”

Grizelda found a piece of cloth and lay down on it while Maven mixed a splash of oil and vinegar with a tiny pinch of fairy dust. “You can't burn me with that little bit of oil.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Maven said, while filing away the idea. “The beach is the best place to feel the sun on your skin. You are going to experience being a fine lady lying on the beach, with her suntan oil and her sunglasses.”

“Trolls don't have much imagination,” Grizelda said.

“That's all right; I have enough for both of us.” Maven transformed the bit of gossamer into a pair of dark shades, somewhat limp, but enough for her purposes—mainly to keep Grizelda's eyes closed. “Wear these to protect your eyes and keep you from getting wrinkles”

“Wrinkles? Protect my eyes from what?”

“Trust me, okay? These are props to help your imagination. I will put your sunscreen on. Even humans have to wear sunscreen or we burn.” Maven slathered oil and vinegar on Grizelda's cool, muddy skin. It was a unique smell, and the Troll sparkled like mica-flecked clay in a sunny creek bank when Maven finished.

“Now relax, and wait for the experience. Sunbathing is boring, and people generally go to sleep, but they do it for relaxation, as well as a tan.”

“You don't have enough acid in that bath to tan my skin...of course, I don't think anyone ever tried to make Troll skin leather.”

Literal minded. No metaphors. Maven threw another log onto the fire. A thought fluttered through her mind, and she placed her marble on the hearth as a focal point, not that it would function as a lens, but The

Bump liked the concept and the visual accompanying it. Maven thanked her lucky stars for being a visual learner.

Maven stood beside Grizelda. "At first, the beach is cool, even a bit chilly on the damp sand, early in the morning. A breeze almost makes you shiver." Maven waved a pillow from the sofa over Grizelda to make a breeze. "But as the sun rises, you get warm, relaxed, and you feel like you are very heavy on the sand."

"I do feel heavy."

"Hush. You don't talk while you are sunbathing."

"Sorry."

Maven pulled more energy from the fire until she began to sweat. "The sun gets hot, baking your skin, and you soak up the rays, knowing your skin will glow."

Now for the opportune moment. She waved her wand over the Troll, and sent all the mental imagery she had of being in the sun. Running warm and happy as a child, limp from the heat as a teen on vacation sleeping off a too-late night with too much beer, listening to her heartbeat, and feeling the sweat drip from her face. Something was missing...the waves, the sounds of four radios on different stations competing with the din from the Myrtle Beach Pavilion, cries of gulls, and motors racing. But mostly, the waves.

"Listen to yourself breathing," Maven said. "Breathe deep, hold the air for a second, and then release it with a sigh." She demonstrated.

Grizelda breathed.

"Again."

Sigh.

“Again.”

Once Grizelda was breathing deeply, Maven went on describing the beach, and the heat from the sun, pulling more heat with each sentence. When she saw steam begin to rise from Grizelda's body, she knew it was working. “Now, roll over, to get some sun on your back. This is the deep, mystical part.”

Grizelda rolled over, continuing to breathe deeply. She was beginning to sound like ocean waves.

“I'm going to put more oil on your back so you won't burn.” Maven rubbed the oil between her hands like she had seen a sensei do in a movie. She rubbed Grizelda's back. The oil and vinegar made the Troll slippery, but Maven smeared it all over her, down her legs, and even on her feet. By this time, the fairy dust was glowing; Maven was sweating, and Grizelda was snoring.

Maven thought of escape, but suspected the door would not open for her, and doubted she could climb the bank beside the back porch. She continued talking to Grizelda, hoping she was able to hear. Maven talked about walking on the beach: picking up shells, feeling the wind in her hair, the warm sand taking the imprint of her feet, the blood-temperature surf washing around her ankles. She talked about tourists and t-shirts, motorcycles and flying plastic discs, young women in string bikinis and old women in tent dresses. The unrelenting sun, glowering in the sky, glinting from the water, gleaming in the foot-burning sand above the high tide line. Maven considered she had never liked the beach for most of the reasons she was describing, but now she wished she were there even with wet sand in her bathing suit, her feet raw from shagging on the

beach, and her hair dripping with lemon juice for highlighting in the salt water.

Grizelda was steaming and glowing. Maven woke her up. “Let’s get another cup of tea, and cool off, okay?”

Maven touched Grizelda’s shoulder. The Troll winced. Her skin was burned.

Maven got some more water from the cistern and mixed some vinegar in it. She remembered her grandmother patting vinegar water on her skin. It smelled awful but it made her feel so much better afterward. She ripped another rag of gossamer from her dress, dipped it in the vinegar, and patted it on the Troll. She didn’t get her very wet, for fear of mud, but dabbed on as much as she dared. Sunburn was another reason the beach was not Maven’s favorite playground. Grizelda was even a bit gritty, but that might have been because her skin resembled clay normally.

When Maven finished, Grizelda got up and stretched, her face contorting a little with the pain of her sunburned back. But when she opened her eyes and took off the sunglasses, her pink glow of health disappeared. She put her dress back on silently, poured herself a cup of tea, and sat gazing into the fire. She had no expression, not even one of pain, though the skin of her back glowed through her dress like dying embers.

Maven stood there, waiting for some reaction. As Grizelda stared, a drop of mud leaked from her eye and dripped from her jaw, leaving a trail of a lighter shade and a small bump before it spotted her dress.

“Are you okay?” Maven finally asked. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.” It

might not have been true from the beginning, but now Grizelda was a client, and Maven found she did care. She wanted Grizelda to have what she wished for, even if it was a silly, impossible wish. The gossamer fell from Grizelda's claw. Maven picked it up, smoothing it back into her clothing where it took up as it left off. The fire was dying down.

Grizelda hadn't planned for her to be here this long, as she didn't bother to cook what she ate. Still the Troll stared into the fire. Her lips began to move seconds before she spoke. "I guess it is nearly dawn, and you'll be going. And I'll be gone. It was beautiful."

"Why will you be gone?" Maven asked quietly, as Grizelda seemed far away, preoccupied with some deep vision.

"Going out into the sun and turning into a rock never appealed to me. It's certain slow death, one that keeps the spirit in one place for a long time. But you have made me long for it. You have granted my one true wish."

"Which was?"

"To be able to dream, to imagine." Slowly the Troll's head turned to face her fairy godmother. "I saw every bird, felt every grain of sand, heard every wave, smelled the fish and the food, suntan oil and gas fumes. I don't know what those things are, but I was there. How did you do that?"

"I just told you what I knew. You did the rest."

"No one can do magic in a Troll lair." Grizelda turned her claws over, searching her large palms for some sign she did not find. "Trolls don't have power like that, strength, staying power, calm, yes. But you did magic. Here."

“No, Grizelda, you did. You imagined and made the magic work. All I did was move a little energy across your body. You made the sunburn. You believed me.”

“I am ready to face the sun now. It should be sunrise soon.” Her voice was calm, but she did not sound happy.

“There is no reason for you to go through with this if it won't make you happy. If it wasn't your idea to start with, then why do it at all?” Despite her concern, Maven stifled a yawn, tired from her exertions and the long night. “Let's sleep on it today, and think about it more tomorrow.”

“But you granted my wish. I have to do it.”

“You told me you wanted to have a mystical experience. Did you?”

“Oh, Yes.” Grizelda finally smiled.

“Wish granted. Over. Done with. Gone.” Maven slapped her hands together as if washing them of the whole thing. She got out her Recess-Is-Over voice. “Go to bed.”

“I'll open the door, so you can leave. I never had any one stay the day. I don't know where you can sleep. I don't have a bed, just a rock. You can sleep there if you like.”

“How about I sleep on your sofa? My gossamer will keep me warm.” “I guess that will be all right.”

“I will have to leave tomorrow, but not right now. We need to talk more, and think up another wish for you to make.” Maven reached out to hug her. Grizelda put her arms around Maven's shoulders, careful not to squeeze too hard. Maven rested her head on Grizelda's chest and reached around her, careful not to touch her back.

“You tricked me,” Grizelda said. They watched the last colors of the sunset fade from the sky.

“I never said I didn't.” Maven covered up her gossamers with one of the Troll's dresses she had spent most of the day altering, gossamer not being magical in Mundane. “The first thing I learned as a teacher was you have to blow the students' minds before you can teach them anything. Once you broke the mindset that magic couldn't be done, you did it. I just hope it will work in Mundane. That I'm not too late.”

“I hope you know what you are doing.”

“Me too.” Maven gave Grizelda a last hug. “Having eaten all those fairy godmothers, you ought to be the most magical Troll in Faery.”

“Never thought about it.” Grizelda's brow wrinkled in the effort to think. “So that's why the night soil sparkles. Fairy dust.”

Maven's stomach didn't like the sound of that. “Are you going to start on your garden tonight?”

“Yes. This is silly to ask, but would you bring me back some seeds? Flowers?”

Maven dug in her gossamers. She handed Grizelda the peach seed the tree in the Garden had given her. “I don't know much about growing peaches, but I expect it will like being in your garden just fine. And if I can, I will bring you some seeds, zinnias, marigolds, maybe sunflowers.”

They both turned to look at the moon, a silver crescent above the indigo horizon. Maven turned away, facing east to poof to where the Eastern kingdom faded into the mist.

Chapter Forty-Five

Beer

The mist hovered a few yards from where Maven arrived. Just walking into the grey vapor felt too much like walking into the ocean to drown. Even in the darkness, the forest seemed much more alive than the surrounding countryside.

Maven found a log to sit on and began to listen to her wand. As she concentrated, she became aware that someone or something was watching her.

She finally spoke to it, "All right, come on out now, that's right, and let's have a little chat. In the darkness, many pairs of eyes blinked at her.

"Not scared?" one voice piped up, "Got wand. All humans magic now? There goes neighborhood. Who needs fairy at all?"

"At least she not wizard." Another voice answered, and the eyes moved toward it.

"We fix wizards." This one was further away and darker. "Not wear gossamer. Not fairy?" Maven waved her wand only slightly to allow her to see. What might have been cute sprites in daylight seemed sinister predators in the shadows. Many predators, even if they were small, like army ants.

"Thank you for your hospitality, here, woodland nymphs, and sprites." Maven bowed her head slightly. "Your magic is very strong, as I can see from the Forest here."

Murmurs of slight approval came from the insectoid faces. They liked being acknowledged. "We know magic. Not like silly wizards."

“There have been some other human fairies here too, though. What about them?”

“You fairy godmother? We got fairy godmother.” The pride in the voice was unmistakable. “More like godsister.” The first voice spoke again, possibly older than the rest.

Maven's wand was not too clear on the individuals.

“Too young.”

“Granted wish!”

“Tell me about your fairy godmother,” Maven said, in as grandmotherly a fashion as she could muster. “Was she pink-haired like most fairies, and dainty?”

“No, no.”

“Yellow hair.”

“Big.”

“Like human.”

A chorus of voices named her traits, as if these very things had been under discussion for some time.

“Goss-mer like violets.”

“Wand smell like rose.”

“Young, not old like you.”

“Followed Jonz back to Other Side.”

“Took old bad king too.”

“Magic back. Wishes back.”

“Who is this Jonz?” Maven asked. Had Tulip really decided to give up her magic for a man? “How does he go back to...The Other Side?”

“Him?” The older voice considered. “Jonz come. He go. Not use

magic.”

Maven found by trying to listen to all of them at the same time, she could get images of Tulip, a king, and a man obviously from Mundane, right down to his scuffed leather clogs—like the one she'd seen at her job interview.

“Tell me more,” she said. “Think very hard.”

Images crowded into her mind, and then—nothing. They were gone. But something large and hungry was headed straight for her, sneaking through the night. Only her wand heard it, as she had no woods sense, especially at night. Her adrenaline flowed again, and she focused on finding Tulip.

She poofed just as the large, meaty hands of an ogre grabbed for her head. The sparkles of the wand with its extra fairy dust blinded the ogre, but she could still hear the giggles of the sprites in their hiding places.

The time between places in fairy was at most a second or two, subjective time, but as she reached out for her image of Tulip, the swirling darkness closed in on Maven's mind. She fought the memories of the dreams where the snake had swallowed her, sensing if she lost the image of Tulip she would lose both her goal, and herself. She reminded herself to tell Tulip when they started back.

When they started back.

When she got there...where Tulip was. Tulip!

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Maven materialized in front of “Tiny” Black, who didn't even try to walk around her. Maybe he was used to seeing imaginary creatures appear out of nowhere. When she bumped into him, stomped his foot and shoved something sharp into his ribs, he backed up.

“M...sorry, ma'am,” he mumbled, stumbling back. “Didn't see ya.”

“Just watch yourself, young man,” she snapped. Maven knew for sure then she was back in Mundane. From the neon lights, the twangy jukebox, and the tang of rented beer, she had landed in a blue-collar, white sock, redneck watering hole.

She couldn't even tell if it was day or night.

She stood still to get her bearings. If Tulip was here, what would she say, and if not, what was Plan B? A little person dressed as a leprechaun on acid did a few card tricks while standing on a table in front of the bar, with the world's worst fake accent.

The girl at the bar was very pale and heavily made up with too-blonde big hair and a padded bra under a tight T-shirt. She looked tired, but was too young to be so worn out—unless she was a single mom with four kids, or an ex-fairy godmother with a king to support.

Maven clutched her wand under her arm and listened as best she could.

But here was the one thing she missed about Faery, and she wanted a cold one.

The barmaid glanced up from the midget's entertainment. “What can I get for...Maven?” Tulip ran around the end of the bar and grabbed Maven in a bear hug. She didn't speak a word, but her silent sobs shook her bony body. .

Maven hugged back. "It's all right, Baby. I'm here now."

After a minute or two, Tulip pulled herself together. "I'm so glad to see you. Are you all right? Did Fiona kick you out? "

"I'm all right." Maven smiled. "I came here to get you, and take you back, if you will go." Hope, fear, sadness and joy chased each other across Tulip's face leaving her with no expression at all.

"C'n I git another, Tulip, honey?" A slurry voice from the other end of the establishment brought back Tulip's barmaid persona in a flutter of a false eyelash.

"Sure." She got a can from her cooler, opened it, and handed it to the man propped on a stool. He fished a couple bills from his pocket and pushed them toward her.

"Don't you want to go home with me tonight, Tulip darlin'?"

"No, Sonny," Tulip said, as if he was four years old. "I'd have to drive you home and then pour you in the bed. I'll call you a cab when you get ready, just like always." She smiled, and he tried to laugh but started coughing instead. She picked up the phone and speed-dialed, reading the directions glibly to the cab dispatcher. She served a few more customers and came back to Maven.

"You act like you've been here all your life," Maven said, beginning to lose hope of bringing Tulip back, wondering if she had lost her only chance at Faery herself. "It's only been a day or two." She watched Tulip draw a mug of draft and set it in front of her.

"You might as well enjoy your first night back. It won't be the last." Tulip sighed. "We can't go back. It's been months since we got here. I can't make the magic work. I have tried and tried." A tear escaped and

made a black mascara track down Tulip's cheek. "It's hopeless. Fiona was right. If you grant your own wish, nobody can help you. You can't escape."

Maven took a sip of her beer. It tasted just as she remembered—cold, bitter, and wonderful. Was it worth losing magic? No. "Listen, if you could go back, would you?"

"Hell, yes." Tulip wiped her tears, smearing her eyeliner into her hair. "I hate it here. But this is what I always wanted. Be careful what you wish for, right? Well, I wish I could go back tonight. Even if I could never be a fairy godmother, I'd go back in a heartbeat."

"How about your wizard friend? The sprites said..."

"He's just a drunk, lovable, sweet, but a drunk. Lots of potential when he's sober, but...." She dabbed at her face with a napkin. "I kept my wings, and my wand, just to remember that Faery is real." Tulip nodded at the leprechaun. "I think the king likes it pretty well here, though he bitched at lot at first."

"Do you have your wings and wand here with you?" Maven drank deeply. It had been so long since she'd had a beer she could already feel the buzz.

Tulip's wings were pinned to her T-shirt. "The wand's in the office. I carry it with me." She showed Maven the scar on her palm where the wand burned her. "I channeled all the energy of the sprites to get here. There isn't any to go back."

"Belle was very upset Fiona let you go so near to the edge. She gave me some fairy dust to help get you back."

Tulip's eyes brimmed, and she worked her jaw to overpower them.

“Look, you can't go back. You can stay with me, and we'll try to find you a job tomorrow. It'll be all right, really. You already know Mundane.”

The Bump prodded her hard—time to go now. “I do know Mundane, and that's why we are not staying,” Maven said, taking out her wand and the bag of fairy dust. “I can get you back, if we leave right now, if we all pull it together. Is your wizard here?”

“No. He wouldn't go anyway—he thinks it is all his hallucinations.” She looked away. “I'm not...well, I guess you could say I gave up my wand. I've been sleeping with him.”

“Child, do you think I am a virgin? That's one myth the fairy tales got wrong for sure. Now are you ready to believe you can go back? Do you want to go back, truly, or stay here and support your local wizard?”

Tulip waved the king over to her.

Wearing a glow-in-the-dark neon green derby, green and white saddle oxfords, and a child's green polyester suit with a squirting flower, the king walked along the bar over to Maven.

“Maven thinks we can go back to Faery. You want to?”

The king's jaunty manner fell from his face, and he looked almost gray in the darkness. “It won't work. Don't tease me.”

Maven put her hand on Tulip's shoulder. “We have to go right now, this minute. Is there a place where we can disappear without making too much commotion?”

“There's the office.” Tulip nodded to a door at the other end of the bar. “Let me call someone to come in.”

“No time,” Maven said. The Bump was kicking her harder every second...just as if it were her actual survival at stake. The time was right,

right now. "Call 911."

Tulip unlocked the office door, revealing a former broom closet with a small desk and phone. Tulip dialed 911 and gave directions while the King climbed up on the desk. Maven sprinkled a line of fairy dust all around them.

In the trashcan, Maven saw the Sunday comics. The Bump nudged her to pick them up. Maybe Fiona would believe what she saw there. Maven stuck the comics under her arm and completed the circle. She put her arms around Tulip and King Elroy.

"I am a fairy godmother. The way this works is, you make a wish, and I grant it. If you want to go back to Faery, you both have to wish for it, and wish hard."

"I wish I could go back to Faery," Tulip said woodenly. Her throat tightened and she whispered, "I really, truly wish I could go back to Faery."

Maven stared at the king. He started to protest, shook his head, and said, "I wish I could go back." He didn't sound hopeful.

"This is Mundane. We have to raise our own energy here," Maven said. "Clap your hands and repeat, 'There's no place like Faery.' It won't hurt to click your heels together three times, too."

"There's no place like Faery. There's no place like Faery. There's no place like Faery." Tulip and the king chanted, clapping their hands, each time getting louder and stronger. Tulip clicked her heels while Maven swung her wand around them in a great arc. She visualized the Twilight Lounge, so much the same and so different from where they were.

"Think about the Twilight Lounge," she told them over their chanting,

“and don't be afraid of the dark. We'll make it all right. Yeeeee—
Haaawwwwww!”

As the fairy dust swirled around them, and the sparkles dazzled their eyes, the office door was yanked open by a very surprised firefighter.

Maven held the king and Tulip against her in the mists between Faery and Mundane. “Keep thinking of the Twilight,” she said, “and hold on tight.” She hoped time flowed slower in Faery, like in the stories. She suddenly thought of Vivienne and Daisy, and needed to know they were all right. But she had to get Tulip back first. Then she would deal with Belle and Fiona, and then, well, and then she would see. Focus! Twilight Lounge!

It wasn't even Friday yet.

Chapter Forty-Six

The Vagabonds Meet Cook

Nell had never been so clean in all her life. Veda scrubbed her all over and then rinsed her off with some flower tea, so she would smell good. Her hair was even braided and tied with a ribbon. From the caravan, Nell watched as the vagabonds rumbled up to the castle. The spires of the huge fortress rose above the forest. It sat like a magical mountain in the middle of a giant's garden. They stopped right beside the tall stone wall.

Bale led her to the servants' gate near the barns. "Come along, and keep silent," Bale said. "Look at the ground and be polite."

Nell looked at the ground. "Yes, Bale." She peeked up at the castle, the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and was thrilled to think she might be able to live there, just like a princess. She paused to gaze at the towers overhead, but Bale jerked her along behind him.

"Bite your tongue, and nod along with whatever I say. Get it?" He scowled.

Nell nodded. She would not miss any of the vagabonds when she came to live here. Quickly she looked back at the ground. If she didn't do what Bale said, he might not sell her at the castle. Bale knocked on the door to the kitchen. He took off his hat and stood waiting.

When the door opened, a short, rotund man stood there, his round face quickly taking on a frown. "What might yer be wanting here?"

"My people found this child in the forest," Bale said, nudging Nell forward. "We thought your people would want her back."

The little man squatted to look at Nell, although he was not much taller than she was. "Did you run away?" he asked. "Did they take you away?"

Bale tightened his grip on Nell's hand. Nell shook her head, careful not to look at the little man. The vagabonds didn't like her eyes.

"Wait here," the little man said. He shut the door tight.

"Good. Say nothing," Bale warned. "If they think you are a good child, they may let you work here. Would you like that?"

Nell nodded, still staring at the ground. Bale seemed very twitchy. She wanted to get away from him, but he grasped her hand very tightly.

A big, heavy-set woman opened the door. "Where did you find this child?" she demanded. She gazed at the vagabond with a suspicious expression.

"In the forest, Madam," Bale said. She was lost and could not tell us where her mother was." She took a finger and raised Nell's chin to look in her eyes. Nell tried to look down. "Let her go," the woman demanded.

Bale dropped Nell's hand.

"I am Cook," the woman said to Nell, squatting down to see her better. "What's your name?" Nell wasn't sure whether she should answer. She stared at the rocks in the wall. She could smell something cooking inside, and her stomach growled. "Tell her," Bale said. He pushed her shoulder.

"Nell," she said, holding with her new dress. It was still scratchy and not familiar, like her old shift that had come apart when Veda washed it.

"Look at me, Nell," Cook said.

Nell looked at Cook. Cook smiled, and Nell smiled back. Cook

looked like a woman who could be fun with her red cheeks and her big, full apron.

"I suppose you'll be wanting some reward for returning her?" Cook asked Bale.

Bale opened his mouth, but then shut it. He shook his head. He stepped back from Cook's stern gaze.

"Nell," Cook said, "do these vagabonds play music and dance? Can you dance?" "Yes, ma'am," Nell showed Cook how she could swirl her skirt around.

"Do you want to stay here in the Castle and work for me?" Nell nodded and grinned. "I think it would be fun."

"Do you have a name, Vagabond?" Cook said. "Bale, madam."

"Bale, can you and your caravan be here in three weeks to make music for my prince's wedding?"

"Madam?" Bale stepped back again, tilted his head as if he hadn't heard clearly. "Yes, madam, of course."

"We may have to pay you in food, but if you are interested in performing, we could use your services."

Bale looked very confused. He turned his hat around and around in his hands.

"You can camp out in the field there below the castle," Cook said. She pointed with her chin out to the south. "There is a stream at the lower end."

"Thank you, madam."

"Just one thing, Bale. This Castle is enchanted. Don't try to steal anything from it or from the grounds. It is unpredictable. Do you

understand?"

This time Bale smiled. He put his cap back on. "Yes, madam. I understand." He turned on his heel and strode away, disappearing around the bend in less than a minute.

Cook patted Nell on the shoulder. "You have a fairy godmother, don't you?" "How did you know?"

"A lot of people here have a fairy godmother." "Are you the great Sorceress from the Dark Side?"

Cooked laughed. "No, but I'm sure she'll be along any day now. Seems like everybody else is here."

From the lane, they could hear the shouts of men and squeals of horses running in terror. Cook laughed again. "I tried to tell him. Come on inside then. Are you hungry?"

Nell nodded. This was going to be the best fun of all.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Return to the Twilight Lounge

After an impenetrable dark of sensory deprivation, Maven landed in the Twilight Lounge, hugging Tulip and a full-sized King Elroy in the dark. The edges of the shapes around them were outlined in blue, like an afterimage of neon. Fiona and Belle sat at the bar, which had shrunk to a tiny fraction of itself, hardly larger than the office they'd poofed from—not enough room to swing a cat.

Dizzy with the effort of crossing the Veil twice, Maven fell on her backside, jarring her brain in her skull, and knocking the wind out of her.

The floor in the Twilight rippled like a pond. Along with the ripples came light, enough for everyone to see. Then the Lounge dumped Belle and Fiona on the floor. For a second, they just sat, not even nursing their bruised dignity. Maven looked at Tulip sternly, warning her not to laugh.

Tulip clapped her hand over her mouth to stop her giggles, but it was no use. She burst out laughing. Tulip gave in, clutched her own belly, and sank down onto the floor, tears of relief flowing down her face, making emo streaks in her Mundane makeup.

Maven struggled to breathe, which immediately came out as guffaws.

King Elroy, still standing and back to his full size, green shoes and all, graciously offered his hand to assist Fiona, but she jerked him down on the floor as well. Belle's laughs started a new round. When they were all gasping for breath, holding their sides, and wiping the tears from their faces, The Twilight Lounge raised them into chairs and drinks appeared

beside them.

“Now that is truly a drink on the house,” Maven said. She reached for her mug only to find herself still clutching her wand, the tip of which was scorched. Somewhat painfully, she opened her hand and put the wand in a convenient pocket where she had hidden the last bit of fairy dust. She slurped down whatever the drink was, but remembered with a moment's regret the last sip of beer. For all its beauty, Faery lacked the jagged edges of The Other Side.

The Bump thought that was important.

The king stood to address them, obviously impatient to leave. “Dear Ladies,” he paused, searching for the right words. “I am so pleased to be returned to Faery, safe and in one piece. I would like very much to return to my kingdom now to begin to assess what has happened in my long absence and begin to...”

“No,” Tulip cried. She leapt to her feet. “You can't go back. You were causing the fog to come in. You and your no-magic spells! All the colors were fading away.” She put her hands to her head as if to pull her hair out, but stopped when she encountered the stiff hairspray. Her voice dropped into a lower register, and she gave him the look she used on disorderly drunks. “If you go back, Mundane will come here and eat us all alive. I am not going to let that happen.”

She grabbed her wand from her apron and aimed it precisely at the King's head. “I'll send you to deal with the forest sprites and let you explain why you killed all their cousins. You'll wish you could go back and tell leprechaun jokes for tips.”

Energy crackled around Tulip, a bluish aura leaving no doubt she

could make her promise good.

Belle and Fiona exchanged a glance. The look wasn't lost on Maven, and The Bump noted it with satisfaction, both for Tulip's sake and Maven's.

Maven slid off her chair and stood between the king and the door, just in case he made a break for it.

"Why not just take a load off, and let's talk this out," Maven said, taking a step in his direction. Involuntarily he stepped back, falling into his chair. "Tulip, he's not going anywhere. What about the colors? I thought it looked pretty strange up there too. Except in the forest."

"When the people can't make wishes," Tulip said, not relaxing her aim at the king, "they are afraid. Everything turns gray. They don't wish anymore, they don't believe in magic. Then the fog comes. When you send it magic, it just soaks it up because the people on the Other Side want it so badly."

Maven nodded slowly. "No wishes make Faery look like the Other Side. Makes sense."

"But the king is right," Fiona said. "Chaos has broken out in the Eastern Kingdom without its ruler. We must return him to his throne. The magic can be dealt with then."

"You need him to undo the spell?" Maven asked. The Bump had a new tingle, but she didn't know what it meant.

Fiona met Maven's glance with one of her own, and they took measure of each other for a second or two. "Yes. One cannot undo another's magic, even if one can circumvent it."

Maven nodded in acknowledgement, not agreement. "So, just what

is the key to releasing the spell on H.R.'s castle?"

Fiona smiled, not pleasantly. "You are the bright one. Figure it out. Tulip, stay with your Aunt Belle tonight. We'll see about reinstating you when I return." She stood, held her hand out to King Elroy, and when he took it, they both vanished without the slightest pop or sparkle.

The Twilight Lounge began to brighten as if near daybreak, although there were no windows to let in the light.

Belle clapped her hands on the top of her thighs, and stood. "Come on, Tulip." She put her arm around Tulip's shoulder and led her toward the bar. "See ya in the morning, Maven."

Belle and Tulip disappeared behind the bar where Owl had come to roost. Owl gave Maven a long, doleful look.

"You're welcome," Maven said. "It was nothing. I was glad to do it." She went outside to scratch The Bump's itch and figure her next move, if she had one. Twice dismissed, Maven was not pleased, but she had come too far and seen too much to give in to her feelings now.

What did Fiona wish for?

Chapter Forty-Eight

Jones Lifts the Veil

Jones rolled over and threw out his arm. Tulip's side of the bed was cold and empty. Again. She had been gone over a month, taking the midget with her. He couldn't get used to her being gone. He drank too much, dreaming of her beside him, until he reached out to find her gone.

He was awake, his head pounding, his stomach churning in double-time. It built to such a crescendo he dragged himself to the bathroom to release it.

As he cleaned himself up, he thought of Red. She was forgiving. She was passionate. And she had been by the computer lab to see him once or twice since Tulip disappeared. It wasn't the first time a woman left him, nor the first time Red had taken him back, but he couldn't get Tulip out of his dreams.

He kept drinking, trying to get back over to the Other Side that Tulip said was real. He sat on the bed and lit a cigarette, the desire for the nicotine overriding the pain the smoking would cause. He sucked the smoke into his lungs and blew it out, where it brightened in the glare of the streetlight. For a moment, he thought the smoke looked like a door in a cave, and the trails from the cigarette came through and separated like a curtain in a faint breeze.

"Open Sesame!" he said softly, took another drag, and stepped into the smoke. Flying colors, rumbles of strange sounds, and a disconcerting wave of vertigo dazzled him. He looked at the butt in his hand. "I don't remember doping these. I sure wish I could remember what I put in

them.”

The funny thing was he didn't feel high. His head still hurt, and he could smell his vomit, but he wasn't in his room any more, and a huge, noisy beast was hurtling his way at top speed.

He leaped forward, rolled when he hit ground and tried to protect his head and soft parts as much as possible. Whatever it was galloped by with too many feet to be a horse. Jones scouted the dark for some cover and crawled away from the path of the beast.

He found a tree by bumping into it, but wriggled behind it. Here he felt safe enough to peek at what was going on. Jones hoped he was in Faery, and not in a battle between the Northern Lights and his over-stimulated optical cortex.

Colors blasted through the darkness and shattered on impact. If he were in Faery, then it was magic, not electricity.

A short distance away he heard someone chanting in what sounded like Latin, but he never paid enough attention in Latin class to pick up the words, much less the meaning. The chant grew louder and faster until it became a scream. Jones ducked, flattening himself behind the tree.

A glowing creature with insect legs, antennae, and eyes on stalks appeared from the direction of the scream. With a sweep of its razor tongue, it toppled the tree beside Jones. Another shriek from the opposite direction raised up a huge unicorn to do battle with the thing. The ground shook with their stamping and thrusting toward each other. Jones scuttled quietly away, looking for a refuge. Was Tulip here? Had she escaped this wizard war?

At least he knew he could get here; be here at will. And he had

never had a problem getting back. Now to work up a plan to find her, fix the magic problem, and stay here long enough get her to admit she loved him.

Chapter Forty-Nine

All That Glitters

Maven couldn't even poof home. She trudged along the cobbled street toward her pod. She saw a bench where none had been before, so she sat, breathing slowly to let her shakes drain off into the earth.

How unreal Faery was in the morning sunlight. She'd only been here five days, according to her reckoning, but some of the stories had been going on for weeks, or in Tulip's case, months. How could anyone keep up with that? No wonder Fiona was frazzled.

"Too many questions...not enough answers," she said aloud, shifting her weight to the front of the bench, almost too tired to stand. She dropped the newspaper comics she had forgotten were under her arm, and reached down to get them.

"Asking wrong questions-s-s?" whispered a voice in her ear. She felt a faint tickle as well, as the serpent's tongue touched her ear lobe.

Maven jumped up.

The Serpent slid around her shoulders like a heavily jeweled stole.

"Do I have to die to become a fairy godmother, or do I get a choice?"

The Serpent chuckled, not showing its fangs. "There are many paths-s-s, but always a choice. If you prefer to die, I am ready. If you merely want a vision, I am ready."

"Actually, what I want is some straight answers. Can you, if you'll excuse the expression, handle that?"

The Serpent's chuckle became a belly laugh that squeezed the

daylights out of her.

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When she came to, she shivered in absolute darkness and silence as unyielding as the clammy stone beneath her. Her breath and her heartbeat filled her consciousness. The sulphur smell reassured she was not dead, only freezing.

She pulled at her gossamer under the dress she'd borrowed from Grizelda. But it did not respond. She huddled in a semi-lotus position and breathed deeply, hoping for a hot flash to warm her.

She closed her eyes against the darkness to open up some awareness from the middle of her forehead. As the test patterns of her optic nerves faded, she saw nothing until one of the shapes moved—a dragon.

Her heart raced in fear which brought the heat rising. Maven could not fight a dragon, but like a dream, she couldn't flee either. Waiting for the next move, she touched her wand, hoping to listen.

What do Dragons wish for?

Maven heard nothing, but felt the air move and smelled brimstone, maybe something worse. She opened her eyes to stare into the face of a dragon glowing slightly green in the darkness.

The dragon snorted a bit of smoke. “I thought I smelled something. Fear, sweat, and green tea from the Twilight Lounge. Now, tell me why you are in my lair before I eat you.”

A flash of anger warmed Maven. “Since you are so polite to ask

first, O Great Dragon, I would like a few answers, dragons being the wisest of the wise here in Faery.”

She clambered painfully to her feet to meet her death face on, not as a shivering crumb. “What is shredding the Veil between Mundane and Faery, and what am I supposed to do about it?” Her fists jumped to her hips, her elbows jutted out, and her head moved side to side with each word. “You tell me why I am here.”

The Bump made its peace, looking forward to the next life—with someone else.

“Maven?” The dragon Azaha chuckled. “Close your eyes and we’ll have some enlightenment.”

When Maven opened her eyes, she saw a candle taller than herself, glowing warm and outlining Azaha, who was dwarfed by heaps of glitter. Crowns, gems, goblets, armor, chains, lamps and dishes—like the home shopping network exploded.

Azaha shrank herself to nearer Maven’s size. “Quite the hoard, isn’t it? I’ve been accumulating it for centuries. Be honest, doesn’t it make you want to steal some of it? You are only human.”

Maven squinted against the glitter. “What would I do with any of it? Especially if I am going to be lunch?”

“A human without gold lust.” Azaha laughed again, with another whiff of brimstone and some glowing cinders. “Too good to steal.”

“I didn’t say that.” Maven looked more carefully at some of the treasures. “What do fairy godmothers need gold for? Or jewels? Just something else to carry. I can magic up whatever I need to sparkle myself up. But I’m still me underneath.”

“But the magic ends at midnight, and all the sparkles are gone.” Azaha scooped up a large diamond in her claws. “Diamonds are a dragon's best friend.” The diamond refracted sparkling stars against the dragon's scales.

“Magic and the end of Faery. Magic and Gold. What is real and what is not?”

“What if the magic doesn't end?” Maven opened her mind, listening to the story of every object and the dragon's adventures. “What if the spell goes on and on for centuries until no one remembers why it was made, and what will end it? Does magic have its own life?”

Azaha turned from the ruby light to Maven. “You seek my help. What will you offer in exchange? You have no gold, no jewels, nothing but a peach-switch wand, a piece of glass, a bit of paper and a pencil, and a bit of fairy dust I have no use for.”

Maven had already considered this question. All she had to offer was her services. “I can grant a wish for you. Unless you want me to sort beans from gravel. Or just because I ask.”

Azaha chuckled again. “All right. My wish is for my youngest to stop ravaging the countryside and settle down to start his own hoard.”

“No one has told me you can't wish for others.” Maven took out her wand to listen for Azaha's youngest. She saw a golden dragon shimmering over a field of green banners carrying a dark-haired princess. She knew how to break Fiona's spell.

“Okay, O Great Dragon Azaha, you got it, but you'll have to take a number on this story.” Azaha scrabbled through the hoard and pulled out a crystal the size and shape of a soccer ball. She stared into it and

nodded. “Done. Very nearly done, by the looks of it, although we should be able to witness the climax.” She curled up like a cat and nodded for Maven to sit.

“Magic,” Azaha lectured, “is just energy changing shape. Physicists in Mundane know it already, but it upsets them too much.”

Maven said aloud, “They have to do the math.” She was glad she didn't have to do the math...it might never have added up.

Azaha continued. “Changing state usually requires physical effort...work. When Fiona came to Faery, almost no one did any work—only magic. Think of the stories you know. They use magic only when nothing else works.”

Maven nodded. She remembered the sorcerer's apprentice whose brooms took over the sorcerer's lair and wrecked everything. Those stories didn't have happy endings.

“But when the magic is put into a solid form, not for ritual, but for mundane things, it casts its own spell, through its own will and desire. Then only magic can undo what it has done. It does not leave itself an out. That's why you are taught not to grant your own wishes.” Azaha sent a rueful look at the crystal ball perched on top of the pile.

“Fiona was young, much younger than you, with no experience in Mundane. H.R.'s Castle was home to a wizard who could not keep any staff.” Azaha shifted a chest of jewels out from under her front leg.

“Fiona set a containing spell on the Castle to keep it from reaching out and collecting every bit of the magic in Faery. But it soaks up every bit of magic anyone sends to it. How many wishes did you grant there?”

“In the Castle? Two, at least. Princess Vivienne was inside the

castle; Lady Dee was between the castle and the barns. I decided to grant Vivienne's before she arrived, but it hasn't been granted yet. She still does not have what she wants. I don't guess any of them do." Maven felt a sense of failure settle on her like the Serpent, but more deadly.

"And you walked away?" Azaha's tail flicked against the floor. "Most of the staff was caught up by the castle for trying to break the spell."

"Fiona poofed me out the first time." Maven counted back...just three days ago? "Cook stopped me from using the wand for the princess. I only talked to Lady Dee, but didn't grant anything So, I didn't grant any wishes inside the castle itself."

"Then, the castle should not have power over you." Azaha played with the diamond again, this time aiming a rainbow across Maven's face, warming her. Her gossamer spread itself around her, thick and silken.

"Thank you." Maven pulled the gossamer closer.

Azaha spread herself back to her full size and warmed the room from the fire in her belly.

What would magic wish for?

The Bump prickled again. Maven clutched the fairy dust, the comics, her marble, and her wand. She chanted a spell to break the glamourie.

Cold, wet, sulfurous darkness engulfed her. As her eyes adjusted, she saw outlines of bones, rocks, and a huge, scaly dragon backlit by the only opening. Azaha's head seemed far above her, and her huge claws dangerously close, but The Bump was satisfied.

"What's your next move, Azaha the Wise?" Maven stepped toward

the opening. Her scrap of gossamer hung from her hand, and Grizelda's dress dripped. Shivering, and in no mood to negotiate, Maven said, "I'm going back to Vivienne and the castle."

"Have you no fear, Maven?" The dragon's breath reeked of swamp gases.

"I'm too old and fat to run." Maven took another step toward the light. "Are you coming?" Azaha stepped aside, her tail still twitching a bit. "Magic can't save the day, even if you could get there in time, which you can't."

"Anyone ever tell you that you have a problem with negative thinking?" Maven scrambled out, shoving debris from the path with her bare feet. She began to feel angry and put upon. She could hear Azaha slithering and scraping behind her, rummaging through the mess.

The cave opened on a sheer cliff face, a misty river far below her, and virgin granite rising into clouds. Across the valley were more cliffs, but no path or vegetation to help her climb to the top. Maven tried to poof, but she was too cold and too tired.

"Move over," Azaha said. She stuck her head out and flamed the side of the cave. When it had cooled down for a few seconds, the dragon tossed a rough, brown robe on the hot rocks where it sizzled and steamed. "It ought to be fairly dry in a bit. Put it on, and you won't freeze your narrow butt off flying."

No one had ever called Maven's butt narrow. The woolen robe was not in bad shape nor soaked with rotted remains, only wet. She picked it up, shook it out, and dropped it over her head, still damp, but much warmer. "You said something about flying?"

“Yes, if you can climb up and hold on. I can carry a fairy godmother, even if I am old. And I don't want to miss this occasion, especially if it is the end of Faery.”

Azaha stuck out her neck and a wing. Maven climbed up and straddled the dragon's neck, feeling more like a sack of potatoes than a warrior princess. She didn't even scream when the dragon jumped from the cliff and plummeted into the mist below. A roller coaster ride with no line, no waiting, no one in front, and no safety bar.

Chapter Fifty

Wizard Con

Synchronicity, known as Luck and only called a lady when someone wanted to seduce her, harbored a soft spot in her cold heart for Jones. Just as the sprites herded the lot of wizards together, Jones appeared from the mist into their midst.

Whispers and chittering buzzed all around them. “Jonz. Jonz. Jonz-z-z” The sprites clued him in to the situation, and he had a plan.

A smaller blue ball of energy whizzed past his head, nearly singeing his hair. He repressed his startled reaction, just kept walking as the power ball zipped into the mist and disappeared. “Greetings and well met, Sir Wizards,” he said, this time holding up his hand as if to ward off or explode any energetic missiles. “Haven’t you boys had enough of this? Did anyone notice the fog? It’s really foggy out here.”

As the wizards looked into the fog around them, it began to coalesce, colors sliding across its nebulous surface like rainbows in a puddle of gasoline.

“All that magical energy just rolling around, attracting the fog, bringing it nearer and nearer,” Jones said, lowering his voice in volume and tenor, “until it dissolves us all.” He could feel them staring at him, though the dark hid their faces. He could feel their fear, and he heard the sprites clicking and buzzing all around them.

“If someone could just get a few good wizards together, we could reverse this whole thing. But where would someone find wizards who would work together?” Jones wandered between the wizards through the

wood, feeling his way step by step, partly by sound and partly by his aura brushing the trees. It helped that the sprites eyes reflected the least bit of light. A few of them were leading him somewhere, out of the forest, he hoped.

As he crept through the darkness, dodging the conjured creatures and getting oriented, he remembered Tulip's warning that the magic attracted Mundane, and King Elroy's castle was full of stored magic. If he could just reverse the polarity of the energy, then the attraction would become repulsion, and the fog would go away. He would be able to find Tulip, start over with her, convince her to love him, and learn to be her very own wizard.

But first, Jones had to get to the castle, and figure out how to reverse the energy. To do that, he had to get these scared dudes back into some self-confidence.

What does a wizard wish for?

He kept talking, as if to himself. "A smart man could think of just the right words to reverse a spell." He paused for five seconds. "No different from cracking a password or deciphering an ancient language" Another pause.

"A strong man could swallow his pride and work with other men, each exerting himself to join the larger good."

Jones turned in each direction, as if casting a circle. "Where could I find men of true magic who a shared bond of experience. Strong, wise men? True Wizards? Alas, none such are to be found."

By the time the sprites led Jones out of the forest, a dozen wizards followed, muttering their own thoughts, imprecations against the king,

possible spells or anti-spells, and one or two conjectures of how Jones walked out of the fog, who he was, and who he might present himself to be.

“You there,” the wizard Osric called out, “from whence came ye, and what ken you of the Other Side?”

Jones felt a dozen lies slide across his mind, but chose the best one, the biggest of all...a truth they would not believe. He turned to face them.

“I live on the Other Side. Jones is the name, Brewster ‘Silicon’ Jones. Computer guru and all-purpose wizard, at your service.” He bowed with a gesture and a flourish. It was enough truth, so he added a hook and hoped it looked enough like a fly for them to swallow it.

“Our edges are dissolving as well, so I have been sent here to coordinate repairing the damage before there is,” he hesitated, smiling in the fashion of a dentist who has just seen the inside of your mouth and is thinking of a long vacation in the Bahamas, “any unpleasantness.” He counted to seven and smiled again. “Are there any wizards in these parts, men who can move energy at will with little or no equipment?”

Gasps went up from the wizards, a few of which turned to run back into the forest, but found themselves backed up by a multitude of insectoid, hungry-looking sprites. Osric just laughed.

“Show your skill, Mundane man. What sort of wizard be ye?” Osric demanded. “Ye don’t look like much.” The braver wizards chuckled at that, laughter being the bane of serious wizardry.

Jones did his little dance, zigzagged his arms, and took a step to the right. They started to laugh until he disappeared. Back in Mundane for

less than a second, he grabbed his alarm clock.

He wound it up and set the bell ringing as he reappeared, tossing it to the disbelieving Osric who caught it as it started its din.

Osric held it gingerly, attempted to look at its glowing face in the gloom while the hammer banged on the bells. “A device,” he said. “Not magical.”

“No. Not magic,” Jones said very slowly, emphasizing each word, “We don’t use magic in Mundane.” He took the clock from Osric and shut off the alarm. “Do you doubt that comes from the Other Side?”

“It’s merely a trick.” Osric thrust the clock back at Jones, “Sleight of hand, not magic.”

“But I can go back and forth at will.” Jones tossed the clock over his left shoulder and caught it behind him...amazing how handy juggling was. He was glad he taught the king; he had needed a refresher. “Can you? Ever been to the Other Side?”

It was first light and everyone could see Jones’ challenging sneer.

“Can you live without your magic?” Jones took a step closer to Osric, one step too close into Osric’s personal space. Jones bounced slightly on the balls of his feet, his back arched in challenge to the wizard. He gestured behind his back for the sprites to open a path behind him in case he had to run. Being able to run had saved his life more than once. More than ten times.

Osric was larger than Jones, but softer. He had not survived nearly as many bar brawls, nor even many fights of any kind except for the occasional wizardly prank. Jones suddenly seemed taller, harder, and cocky enough to fight anyone. The wizards backed away from Osric

making a half circle around him, while the sprites closed in to make a small ring. Jones bounced again, making his long ringlets dance. All sound stopped.

A snort broke the silence as a multicolored beast charged through the forest. It careened into trees and snorted, shaking its ponderous head then charged the castle, bellowing as if its rival approached its mate. As it crossed the open plains, a tendril of fog reached out, touched it, and sucked it in.

A gasp rose from the small crowd. They pulled themselves closer together, sprites shoulder to knee with wizards.

Jones put the clock in his left hand. He dropped the cocky stance, stood straight, and looked the tall wizard in the eye. "Let's take care of the castle first, man, and then settle this, wizard to wizard." He held out his hand.

Osric shook hands, maintaining face, though his was white with fear.

Jones scanned all his experience working with men, getting men to do a thing, but he didn't have anything the wizards needed, except a lie that he could save their skins. Fear worked pretty well for most folks, and he figured wizards weren't so different from most folks.

Jones led the wizards toward the stone walls followed by the sprites, who also wanted to see what would happen. They herded any wizards who might be considering escape.

Jones also considered the possibility of sending the energy back to Mundane. If the castle just discharged its magic, then maybe the polarity would be reversed, and it would balance. The mist would be repelled

instead of attracted.

He'd dabbled in witchcraft with Red; she always cast her circle one way for gain and the other for banishing. Jones wasn't sure of the word— widdershins? But banishing was always counter-clockwise.

Would it be better to ask the big wizard, show his ignorance, and let the wizard have some of the glory? No, he'd better tell them what to do and let them figure how to do it. He hoped they would believe him. He decided to lie big.

"Now, we've studied this Magic/Faery phenomenon," Jones said, taking on the tones of one of his more ponderous professors in one of the several schools he flunked out of. "What you've been trying to do is to banish it, and while that seems logical, Mundane is not logical." He put all the authority he could muster into his voice. It might be his own life he saved.

"What we are going to do," he continued before anyone else could speak, "is to create a vortex to pull Mundane toward the castle and at the last moment, reverse the energy, let it discharge to balance the polarity, dispelling the mist, and releasing the magic from the castle. You'll be free to practice your magic again."

The sprites cheered, but the wizards began to calculate, some in their heads and some with their fingers. They did not like how the numbers added up.

Osric spoke up. "Where is this energy to be sent from, and who will direct it? You?"

Jones heard the challenge, and a deeper tone beneath it. "The magic itself will discharge, and yes, I will direct it from yonder tower." He

pointed to the easternmost tower, the tallest one with a spire above its garret room.

Osric laughed. “You’ll be fried!”

Jones turned toward him. He pulled out his most sincere “I love you forever” expression and peered soulfully into Osric’s face—picturing him as Tulip to get the right feel. The intimacy of the expression made Osric back up a pace.

Jones said, “I have come here to do what has to be done. I have my own kind of magic, but if it kills me, so be it.” He was surprised the words came out so strong, but they were effective. Then he remembered the lie so many of his friends and countrymen had died for. “I am willing to give my life for the safety of Mundane.”

The wizards, too, bought it.

Another wizard stepped forward. “What do we have to do?”

The scapegoat leads the sheep to slaughter. Jones took on a kingly stance. “Make a circle around the castle. Spread yourselves out as far as necessary, but stay in sight. Use your hands or your wands or whatever you do to send energy around like this.” He drew a circle clockwise in the dirt. When you see me wave from the tower, reverse the direction. Make sure the energy moves in this way all around the castle, and then immediately reverses to this direction.”

“Start out deosil and then switch to widdershins?” Osric asked. “Are you sure?” Several others spoke up.

Jones wasn’t sure, but as long as they thought it would work, it just might, this being Faery. “Of course. Would I bet my life on something I didn’t think would work?”

He had hedged that bet too, planning to duck out of the scene as soon as he signaled for the change in direction. If he pulled this off, and he could get back, then maybe Tulip would have him. See him as a suitable partner for a fairy godmother, not just a dreamer with a thirst for beer...no more hangovers.

The pain in his head would not let up, but he was used to that. Pain was just energy, like a weed was a flower in the wrong place. Maybe this would put his head to rights too.

The wizards spread themselves around the castle with the sprites making a second semicircle, covering all sides evenly except the east where the fog crept ever closer. Jones spent no time dashing to the top of the tower; he stepped to the left and instead of going back to Mundane, stepped into the tower.

“What a way to fly!” He stood at the balcony and signaled them to start the energy moving. With each round, the fog came closer, six rounds...seven...eight. When the ninth circle passed around, Jones saw the tendrils of fog reaching for his tower, and he waved his arms, to change the direction. The wizards responded one after another like a few people in a crowd trying to get a wave started. Just as the last wizard waved, the castle shuddered, and Jones took his step to the left.

But while he was in the fog, so was the castle, at least the part of it he was standing on. From the fog came wind, whistling around the tower, Jones ducked inside and tried again to escape.

Two thoughts crossed his brain, first, he was going to die without ever seeing Tulip again, and second, he hoped the castle didn't land on anyone, especially not any fairy godmothers.

Chapter Fifty-One

Castle Ruins

In her office, Fiona and King Elroy peered into her crystal ball. It changed the scene again, this time to the throne room of the present. It was strewn and deserted. She gathered several arcane items into a scrap of gossamer, and poofed them both to the castle.

The journey was not instantaneous. Nor was it smooth and uneventful. They shuddered through exploding colors, searing heat, bitter cold, and smells that left them breathless and dizzy. But in a few seconds, they stood beside where the castle had been, at edge of a great hole in the ground, watching a spirited retreat of terrified wizards and spooked sprites.

Dust and dirt rained from the sky, as the wind flowed toward the space where the castle had stood. But the sky was deep blue, and the dirt a rich brown. The trees of the forest were bright green as were the leaves of grass that peeked through the dirt, and the sun shone golden on everything, making purple shadows.

The mist of Mundane had dissipated.

“My castle! My kingdom!” cried the king. “It’s gone. Gone.”

“Not quite all of it, Your Majesty. Run!”

She jerked his arm and transported them both away from the crater of the castle’s foundation.

From a great height, a dark spot fell toward the ground, growing in size and speed. Darkening the glowing sky as it fell, a large iron object smashed into the crater left by the departed castle. It did not explode,

however, but rippled the ground for a few dozen leagues.

Silence followed the crash. Fairy godmother, sprites, and wizards, picked themselves up, felt for bruises and bones, shook hands with each other, and made comforting noises. The forest trees shook their branches and stretched to see if they were broken. The wizards began to tell each other what they had seen, what they had done during the circle of magic.

The sprites joined together and began to hum, fiddling their wings in a most mournful way. They withdrew further into the forest, disappearing as their kind wont to do; yet their hum began to have words... "Jonz gone, Jonz gone, Jonz gone"

Fiona dusted herself off, and beckoned to the king, who sat weeping openly on the ground. Fiona consulted her crystal ball. A tight grimace, with a look of satisfaction, if not amusement, pulled up the corners of her lips

"That last bit was your iron dungeon, the only part of your castle, as I recall, that was actually constructed rather than being made whole from magic. You would be better to construct your own castle this time, as magic castles seem to bring their own kinds of problems."

The king stared at her, his garish clothing littered with forest debris and his face streaked with mud. "But how to build it? Where shall I get the materials, the labor? How shall I pay for it?"

"You are the king. Administrate. Consider a deal with the dwarves. They do excellent craftwork with stone. Now that your populace has had a taste of the Other Side, they may be very willing to help you get back to a normal kind of kingdom."

With that advice, Fiona poofed back to her office. She wanted very

much to see what other ramifications had shaken the foundations of Faery. She wanted to find Maven and Tulip, to repair the damage to their training their unorthodox methods had created, despite its successful results.

Neauwae would need a fairy godmother soon, and Tulip certainly knew the territory. She had returned, not giving up her magic for the erstwhile human. He was certainly gone with the wind that evaporated the castle and pushed the fog out of sight. For the time being, though the Veil was completely ripped away. How could she weave that barrier again to keep him out?

But the more pressing priority was what to do about Maven's stories. Was this truly the end of Faery, the stories leaking away through the gaping hole left by King Elroy's castle?

Chapter Fifty-Two

Tulip and Jones

Tulip climbed into her pod, drained from her adventures, but happy. She was a fairy godmother, and the only one to survive living in Mundane and coming back to tell about it. She was glad there was only room for one in her hammock.

Although she fell asleep quickly, she began to turn and thrash about. She heard someone calling.

“Jonz...Jonz...Jonz...”

Softly at first, and then loud enough to wake her in a cold sweat. She shook off the dream, but she could still hear the cries, mournful and lamenting, coming from her wand. She listened to the wand. All of her sprite clients called his name. What else could she do but go to them and learn what happened? Tulip stretched out her gossamer and poofed into the dark forests of Neauwae.

She heard the despondent humming, piercing, droning, like metal blues played on guitar and bagpipes. It had the rhythm, the structure of blues, and the sprites swayed in time. They moved enough for her join the wake with no explanation except that Jonz vanished in a great flash. They mourned him.

She listened first to the droning, and then to her wand, but the sprites version was so fragmented and full of insectoid imagery she could not understand. She listened for some other part of the story.

In a local tavern, wizards celebrated being alive, each telling of his exploits in the forest. Tulip poofed there, disguising herself as a peasant

to remain inconspicuous. She spoke to a kitchen drudge but she didn't seem to know anything about Jones.

Osric described the disappearance of the castle. "It exploded into colors and sound as it was sucked into the mist, but then the mist folded in on itself leaving only the woodland behind. There was a great hole in the ground where the dungeons were, but the rest of the castle just vanished in fire and smoke." He paused to take a drink. "The old fairy godmother appeared with the old king, just in time to see the great iron dungeon fall back from the sky and ripple the earth for leagues around."

Everyone raised his glass. "To the dungeon," they cried and quaffed.

"What say you, Osric?" someone called out. "Did you face the Man from the Other Side, or was he merely one of the beasts we created?" The hubbub subsided as Osric lowered his mug and stared at the floor.

"He saved us all," Osric said, "He came from the Other Side, and took the castle with him. He was captured with us when we were in the dungeon; he escaped and came back for us." He raised his mug again. "To Jones!" He quaffed.

"To Jones," the others cried, swilling down their drinks.

The door swung open again, and a skinny, longhaired figure bounced in.

"To Me! Oh, I am touched," he said. "Can a guy get a drink around here?"

Tulip's cry of relief was lost as the wizards cheered for Jones. As soon as the wizards had lifted Jones to their shoulders to honor him and bang his head on a few rafters, they all settled in to drink the landlord's finest.

Tulip dried her tears of joy, and disguised herself as a bar maid and came to sit on Jones's lap. She didn't want the wizards to realize what she was.

Jones was his usual cheerful self, telling silly stories, but he did not pay her a lot of attention, despite her ample charms displayed at his eye level. He was keeping an eye out for someone else. He quaffed with the rest of them, and let them tell him how wonderful he was.

At last Tulip whispered in his ear, "Don't you recognize me?"

He leaned back in the chair and looked at her face, past the big bar maid persona she wore. His eyes misted up, and he kissed her on the cheek. "Can we go somewhere a bit quieter?"

She stood up and took his hand.

The wizards noticed and began to hoot and tease Jones, but he got up, waving his hand behind him and followed Tulip out of the inn.

"I've missed you so much!" he said, and he kissed her again, deeply, the way she had come to love.

But this was Faery, not Mundane, and the rules were different. "You need to come to the forest," Tulip said. "I'll take you."

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When Tulip brought Jones into the middle of the droning sprites, the sprites began to sing, fiddling their wings together like a thousand mad devils come to Georgia. They formed a conga line and danced through the forest.

Tulip jumped and spun too, her small breasts bouncing in time with the gossamer flipping around her sweet thighs.

Jones ached to kiss her again. He joined the dance, bouncing and shuffling along behind the sprites until the tail of their bunny hop brought him to Tulip. He offered his hand, and she accepted, allowing him to swing her into an embrace as they twirled around. He could not remember how he'd learned to dance, but leaned into the magic of the moment, spinning her, and embracing her, dipping her and eventually leading her away from the confusion.

Perspiring and out of breath, Jones and Tulip sat on a log and watched as the sun sank behind the trees. All the colors flowed through the land; even the deepest green, violet, and indigo shadows merged into velvety black shimmering with magic. A lone star shimmered in the lightest blue band above the reds and mauves—star light, star bright.

What does a fairy wish for?

Could he grant that wish?

He watched as Tulip pulled her hair up off the back of her neck and thinned out her gossamer. She was so beautiful, with magic all around her, not the tired and soon to be faded woman she had become in Mundane. She smiled at him and stretched, showing him her beautiful body, whether innocently or not, he could not tell.

“What happened to the castle?” she asked. “How did you get away?”

He hadn't had time to really pace the story, to tell it just right with all the timing and imagery it needed, but this was his chance to have the most wonderful woman he had ever known fall in love with his words,

his best magic.

“I got the wizards lined up around the castle, with the sprites behind them. They made the energy swirl around the castle, bringing the Other Side closer and closer. The wizards were waving their arms, and the sprites were spinning around—it was something to see. I was in the top tower, watching the fog come closer, ready to signal them to change the direction and step back into Mundane.

“But as soon as I signaled, the fog grabbed the tower with me still on it. I ducked inside to keep from falling, and tried to shift out. I hadn’t really planned where I would go, only out of the castle.

“But I hadn’t realized the castle was almost all magic...it disappeared under me and into the chaos between the dimensions. So there I was, floating alone in a sea of weirdness, and I thought of you, and how much I missed you when you came back here.

“Of course, I knew you were happy here, and how miserable you were in Mundane. So I thought about you, how beautiful you are, and how your eyes sparkle, and the next thing I knew, I was in the tavern, and there you were.”

Jones brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, barely touching them. She sighed and leaned her head onto his shoulder. He held her shoulders to support her and keep her warm. He said nothing, not wanting to lose the moment. The magic flowed around them, through them, connecting them to every leaf, breeze and being in Faery.

He thought how hard she worked on The Other Side, how she faded, how tough Mundane life made her. But now she was the lovely fairy who rescued him in the castle. He would marry her, and ply a wizard

trade to make her a haven to come home to after a long day of fairy godmothering.

He turned his head ever so slightly just to kiss her forehead, hoping she would raise her little nose to his and meet his lips, closing her eyes to lean into his embrace as she had that first time.

And she did. She leaned into his arms, slid her warm palm along his cheek and behind his neck. Her nipples brushed against his chest.

“No,” screamed a thousand scratchy voices from between chitinous jaws. “No! Not fairy godmother!” Sharp pincers grabbed them both, pulled them apart, amidst loud wing-buzzing and imprecations.

“Not take magic!”

“We protect!”

“Jonz come. Jonz go!”

The sprites clustered around the humans, separating them. They held hands for a moment, but Tulip squeezed his hand, and let go. Her gossamer grew longer and thicker against the damp of evening, revealing no less of her beauty, but covering it in thick, soft, glistening silk. She shook out her hair, and stood facing him. He reached out for her, but the sprites pushed him further away.

Tulip shook her head and let the sprites take her away.

Chapter Fifty-Three

The Grand Wedding Day

Vivienne stood in her confection of a wedding gown, gossamer lace, peasant embroidery tracing fertility symbols on translucent linen. Examples of all the arts of her kingdom right down to each turned rosewood button, each faceted stone of her necklace and coronet, each flower of her bouquet chosen for its perfect shape, color and fragrance.

Speechless, Lady Dee arranged the gown and flowers, weeping tears of envy and joy, though the ceremony was still an hour away.

The gardens outside were hung with yards of deep green cloth stenciled with the Prince's arms, a serpentine dragon gilt, which seemed ready to fly from the banners flapping in the wind. Musicians filled the air with love songs. Wine punch bubbled through fountains.

If the neighboring nobles learned to trade instead of looting, the whole area could be the kingdom Vivienne wanted to rule—benevolent, productive, and happy, even sitting beside H.R.

Where was her pesky fairy godmother?

Vivienne wished repeatedly she would not have to go through with this. H.R. had become sweet and attentive. Maybe she would fall in love with her prince and all would be right. He listened to her ideas and even made some of them the law of the land. She would play the part, anyway, and make the best of it. But no one said she would be happy doing it.

Meanwhile more guests were arriving.

The Castle itself seemed uneasy. Wind whispered and lamented like

the storms of winter, while the Midsummer Sun shone through a sky so blue it hurt to look at it. Flowers bloomed everywhere, and fountains splashed, while colorful birds sang and fluttered through the halls.

Cook had a few words with one of the walls about birds in the kitchen, however, and the birds flew elsewhere.

Still, the Castle seemed to shift on its foundations, as if its footings hurt. New rooms appeared to accommodate all the guests, but the staff wondered more than once if the guests might be trapped if the Castle felt neglected or unappreciated, or if it simply forgot about them.

What do castles wish for?

The kitchen expanded itself to a great hall in its own right, spits turning by themselves, pastries browning in giant ovens, vats of stock and fat fed by fires that roared or merely glowed as necessary. Dozens of cooks and assistants strived to present as wonderful a meal as had ever been seen. Vegetables chopped, carved, and skewered into sculptures, meats arranged as delicately as if the animals had survived being cooked, pastries troweled into whimsical shapes. There was even some simple chicken soup with basil for a cleansing course simmering in an alcove all by itself, and a mighty kettle, which stayed full of tea.

Ashleigh, the lady of the caterers, mumbled to herself, quietly at first and then loudly to anyone who would listen. Her staff nodded and frowned in silence as they worked; they had heard it all before.

“I could have been a princess, not my ugly sister. She thinks she is so high up. Well, so is a raven's last tail feather.”

The tirade had escalated the night before when after sweating in the kitchen all day, she spotted her sister walking in the garden with the

short, pimply prince Ashleigh had rejected for her husband.

“It's all that fairy godmother's fault. She made me see things all wrong. If I had my wish back, things would be different.” She wielded her cleaver with abandon, and everyone in the vicinity took care to keep any stray appendages far from her reach, expecting a spray of blood at any moment.

Cook pulled Gob and Bog aside, as if for last minute instructions. “She sounds like one of Maven's clients. Anyone seen Maven lately?”

Gob shook her head. “I heard she was sent to the Troll. No one comes back from there.”

Bog whispered, her eyes wide, “I heard she brought back a fairy back from The Other Side.”

“No one has done that before either,” Cook said, “If you can find out where Maven is, if she is in Faery, if she is alive, try to get her to come back here.” She waved her hand, and her assistants scurried away. Cook wiped her hands on her apron.

“Even if I had my wand back,” she said to the kitchen, “I don't think I would want in on this one. This story is about to break wide open, and I don't know which way it is going to fall.”

The kitchen didn't answer.

Cook poured herself a cuppa, and sat back in her rocker to listen and ponder. She sipped for a while, then swirled the leaves and stared into them. She didn't understand what she saw, but she didn't like the looks of it. She wondered if she would survive the story, for it would obviously come to an abrupt end.

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Lady Dee hoped the lavish displays would generate enough income to pay for all the effort put into them. For all the pangs of envy she felt for Vivienne being married to a man of means who seemed to love her, Lady Dee had enjoyed every minute of the preparations.

The coordination of all the minute details, the plans for the spectacle, then for using every scrap for something else after the hoopla was over. Maven had granted her every expressed desire and more, except Dee's deepest wish unspoken.

She couldn't even think of asking. It was too much to ask. She already had a wish, she was far too old for such nonsense, and there were no suitable suitors anyway. Who would have managed this occasion? Another tear slid down her face and dropped on her working gown. She would have time to change now Vivienne was ready.

Her junior assistant crashed in, derailing Lady Dee's train of thought. Nell was in her new green dress with a ribbon in her hair and a glow on her cheek, thrilled by all the excitement of the day.

"Yes, Little Nell, What is it?" Lady Dee smiled at the happy child. Little Nell was looking around at Lady Dee's quarters which had expanded again to make workspace for her notes and a command post for issuing orders, but she didn't say anything.

"Are the musicians, jugglers, and acrobats behaving themselves?" Lady Dee prompted. "Are the Morris dancers staying in their own pavilion?"

“Yes, milady.” Nell's bright smile was disarming; it made her seem simple when actually she was quite bright for her age. But then her expression faded. “Some of the people aren't happy though. They are saying their wishes weren't granted. Didn't we do everything like you said? Aren't you pleased?”

“Yes, Little Nell.” Lady Dee patted her neatly braided hair, as a thought of unfulfilled motherhood flitted through her mind. “You and the rest of the staff have done a wonderful job, and with your very own hands, not with magic.”

“Oh, but there's magic everywhere here, milady. All the people are talking about how the Magic Prince is marrying the Icy Princess. Some say the Prince will die. Some say the Castle will fly away. And some say...” For a moment, Little Nell looked very serious, pale, even frightened.

“Yes, Nell? What do they say?”

“They...say...we will all be taken...to....” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “The Other Side.” Little Nell put her arms around herself, shivered, and looked up at her supervisor with open, trusting eyes.

Lady Dee hugged the child to her. “I had a wish granted once,” she said, squatting in a most unladylike way to see Little Nell face to face. “So, I think the magic is still working.”

“Me, too.” Little Nell said, her bright grin shining forth again. “I wished to have fun, and I am. What did you wish for?”

“I wanted to be useful, to help all the people here.” Lady Dee smiled too, even though another tear crept out of her eye.

“Do you ever think you could have wished for something else?”

“No,” Lady Dee said, her smile sagging a bit as she patted Nell's hair. “I never did.”

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H.R. paused in his pacing. “What if she never loves me, Henry? She is always so cold.”

Henry had no answer. He found the Prince a fine fellow and did not know why his lady would have none of him.

The Prince began to pace again. “I have talked to her, listened to her, and let her have her way about everything. She has asked for so little. I thought she would be pleased. She lights a fire in me, a desire I have never known, despite all the women I have tasted.”

Henry found it hard to talk to his boss, especially when his boss had the literal power of life and death over Henry and his loved ones.

“Sire, I feel that way about Daisy, but she is making me wait until Midwinter, when the feed is gathered and the barns are secured, when her work will not fill even the shortest day. She says only then will she be able to be with me. I am impatient, but I am content.”

“But she loves you.” H.R. threw his arms wide, making his robes swirl around him and knocking his crown askance.

“Yes, Sire. With us it was but a glance and we knew.” Henry searched for words. “The Yule log requires a lot of kindling to start, but it burns for three days. Keep piling up the tinder and the kindling. A spark must soon come on a hot summer night. Strike her flint with your steel.” Henry smiled. “At the right time, at the right place, and blow gently until the tinder glows, building a fire is an art, Sire. But the fire is what makes a hearth; a hearth is what makes a home.”

“Hah.” The prince released his frustration in a great, forceful breath,

and for a brief moment, Henry thought he saw the blue edge of a flame coming from the prince's mouth. He dismissed it as a trick of light in the restlessness of the castle. He bowed, and the prince waved him away.

H.R. stood alone in his rooms, staring out his window into the pavilion for his wedding. "Will you bring her apartments to me," he asked the Castle, "or will you continue to hide her away?"

Chapter Fifty-Four

The Bad Penny Spent

In the edge of the garden past the pavilion, a couple walked, watching the antics of acrobats and dancing to the lyre and flute. The man, his ringlets hanging below the shoulders of his wizard's robe, juggled with a juggler, catching his rhythm and at one point, when he seemed likely to drop one of the juggler's balls, turned it instead into a butterfly.

The woman with him laughed, her golden hair shimmering in the sunlight between her fairy wings. A wizard and a fairy godmother together, a most unusual sight.

"Tulip, my love," Jones said, "I was thinking of staying here in Faery, setting up shop to do a little wizardry. I might find a small keep somewhere, maybe chat up the local dragon, and play poker with the wood sprites. What do you think? Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

Tulip walked along, looking into the edge of the woods. "You'd get bored." She stared into the darkness under the trees, looking away from him. "There's no beer here, either. Chemistry just doesn't work. You'd have to go back." She turned to him and smiled. "But you'd like that better anyway, not being tied down to one dimension."

They walked together into the woods in silence, feeling the dappled sunshine warm each spot it touched in the cool of the shadows.

"The right girl would make up for all that," Jones said. He put his hand on the small of her back, just below her wings, and pulled her to him gently. He kissed her, and she kissed back, but without passion,

without the embrace he expected.

“Maybe,” she said, “But I’m not the right girl. I was ready to give up my wand for you in Mundane,” she said. “But I am truly a fairy godmother now, with responsibilities.” She leaned closer, hugged him tightly.

He felt the edge of her wand in her pocket; it was not glad to see him.

“I could give up my magic in Mundane. I had to. But here, I can be a fairy godmother, what I have wanted all my life. You made it possible, you showed me what I could do, and now I want to do it.”

She put her hand on his scraggly, bearded cheek, looked into his deep blue eyes, and remembered the surge of energy that had taken them into Mundane. What she felt for him was not like that. “You are a true wizard though you don’t know it, and one day you will learn what that means. But it never works out with a fairy and a wizard, or a fairy and a human, for that matter, not for long. For although I am a human, and a changeling, I am a fairy.”

She stepped back. “You’re a wizard now, at least when you are on this side. It would never work. I am very grateful for your help.”

At least she didn’t say they could still be friends. Jones had been dumped before, kindly, viciously, even indifferently.

But Tulip was different. She showed no regret, either for being with him, or for leaving him now. The sting of it, the truth of her words choked him too much to reply, so he simply bowed before her. He offered his hand, held high in chivalry, to lead her back to the festivities to regroup. He had never really pursued anyone before. If she left, she

left.

But this was Faery, a new life and a new time.

She pulled his head down to hers, kissed him again, and then poofed herself away.

The rustling forest was still brightly dappled with sunshine, birds flitted and chirped, and a warm breeze blew. But his world was darker than the fog of the Veil.

He sat on the ground, leaned his head into his hand and wept.

One by one, forest sprites, gathered around him, sitting on their haunches or standing by in the silence. A few of them began to saw their wings together, humming in minor keys along with his pain. When he looked up at the new sound, he was encircled by curious faces with multifaceted eyes.

A chill went up his back. He had never seen so many of them, and not from their eye level. These sprites were bigger than the others. He wiped his face with the back of his sleeve and pulled a disarming smile from his back pocket.

“What’s up, guys?” he asked.

One sprite moved forward. “You are the Jonz?”

“My name is Jones, Brewster Jones. Are you kin to the sprites over in the Eastern Kingdom? I am pretty good buddies with them.” Jones hoped these sprites were buddies of those too.

“Yes,” the sprite said, “Cousins.” There was much nodding and sawing its wings.

“Good,” Jones said, laughing. “I thought you were going to eat me.”

“You not dead. Great honor eat body of Great Jonz.” It revved its

wings into a mighty buzz. The others joined in, the tone vibrating the very ground where Jones sat

The wing buzzing got louder. Jonz pulled his spine straight and folded into lotus position.

“Aaauuuuummmmm” he hummed, trying to match pitch or harmonize. As he hummed, he heard underneath the sound a whisper of a story, the story of the Great Jones who brought the world back from the evil fog, who turned and returned the Magic to the Eastern Kingdom. And from that story grew a chant.

“Jonz come, Jonz go. Blessed be Jonz.”

Jones continued to hum. As the chant grew in strength and power, he stood. Then realizing he did not want to be a defrocked savior, he danced his zigzag step to the left, shuffled, and disappeared. He could come back whenever he wanted, if he ever wanted to.

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When he arrived in Mundane, he was standing at the door of Red’s apartment. He must have knocked already, for as he reached up, the door was jerked open and she was there, as beautiful and scary as she had always been.

“What, your little twat threw you out, and you don’t have anywhere else to sleep tonight? That your story?”

Jones hung his head and didn’t answer.

She opened the door wider, and waved him in. “I don’t know why I

put up with you. One night. One. On the sofa. By yourself!"

He nodded, but walked in. He found his smile again, and let it shine on her. "Thank you," he started to say, but she spun on her heel toward her kitchen.

"I must be out of my freaking mind," she said, throwing her hands into the air.

He had heard it before many times. He sighed. *Me, too. Why be bar slime when I could be a wizard in Faery?*

But he also knew he would get laid tonight.

Tomorrow would be time enough to decide what to do, how to go back, and whether to convince Tulip she was wrong. But that would be after Red had her way with him.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Wedding Jitters

Daisy's work had been finished for some time, but she still puttered around her quarters near the dairy. She would not be with Henry during the ceremony because he would be with the princess. She knew that Henry, as the Princess's footman, had to stand behind her as part of her retinue, a guard, but Daisy wanted him with her, with the common folk. He had taken on plain ways, learned to work hard, to see where the food he ate and clothing he wore came from. Maybe she was wrong to put him off for so long.

For the first time, she wondered if she might have been able to learn to be a princess. It did not seem that Vivienne was so special...not like Cook and Lady Dee. The caterer obviously thought anyone could do the job of princess.

Vivienne had given Daisy a green gown embroidered with tiny daisies. Wearing it for an afternoon would please Henry, and he would see her beside all those fine ladies with their useless hands, and tiny, satin-slippered feet.

She managed to get into the dress, but had to ask Bog for help with her hair. There was no time for an elaborate arrangement, so Bog tied her hair back with yellow and green ribbons, free and wild as a vagabond. Daisy went barefoot, as the satin slippers that came with the dress were much too narrow for her wide, sturdy feet.

No one challenged her right to enter the seating area for the nobility, and Log in his golden and green livery escorted her to an end seat where

she would have a perfect view of everything. He smiled at her, and bowed, as if she were a true lady, and as if he had not been at the dairy before dawn asking for a few squirts of hot milk over his morning biscuits.

She hid her feet beneath her chair, and observed the people around her. They did not seem very special, or even very different from her friends who stood behind the ribbons that separated standing from seating. She wondered if Henry would see her.

Chapter Fifty-Six

The Accusation

The sun climbed at last to its zenith above the waiting crowd.

Arranged in front of them, was a dais, covered with flowers and green cloth stenciled with golden dragons. The higher nobles sat in the shade, lower ones in the sun, and the commoners stood behind and to the sides. The crowd murmured and laughed, a thousand conversations chattering at once. At that moment, a shadow crossed the pavilion, too swift for a cloud.

A gasp rose from the crowd as the wind from a huge dragon's wings fluttered the banners and decorations. It circled the grounds three times, each time lower until its claws nearly brushed the tip of Vivienne's tower. The dragon landed at some distance and then walked back through the fields, scattering Daisy's cows, but staying far enough away from the crowd to keep from scattering them as well.

From the dragon's back, a figure dismounted. She shook herself off, straightened her gossamer and poofed behind the standing commoners. With great dignity and a smile for Gob, she allowed herself to be lead to the shady seats at the front with of the highest nobles, where she joined Fiona and Belle.

Fiona and Belle whispered together for a moment in their front row seats. They made room and a seat for Maven. A tall figure swathed in gossamer against the sun, accompanied by Tulip, poofed into the shaded seats as well. Like gossamer, the tent made itself bigger, and each found a seat.

There was not a lot of conversation though, as each one had her own thoughts and stories to listen to.

A flourish of trumpets announced the wedding party, startling the guests, who bent the knee as the prince appeared on a litter in the shape of a golden dragon. Rocky and Stoner carried the litter by supports shaped like leathery wings. They set the litter on its base beside the dais, to await the bride and groom after the ceremony.

H.R. strode up to the dais alone, his crown glittering in the sun. Vivienne had insisted on a folksy, peasant ceremony, so Lady Dee arranged a simple wood and straw broomstick for them to jump, and an earthenware goblet surrounded by flowers and vines in a heart shape on the dais. A black cauldron stood behind the flowers, stark in contrast to the colors, wood for a fire was stacked beneath it on a mound of stones.

H.R. gestured for the trumpets to play their flourish again, and when they finished, the other musicians began a lively folk melody. Little girls danced down the length of the center aisle, strewing flowers and leading a group of boys who spread out a green cloth for the bride to walk on. Older girls walked in holding garlands of flowers, ribbons, and vines. At the end of the dance, the music changed to a slower, almost mournful tune as Lady Dee escorted in the bride.

Vivienne was beautiful, smiling at each of the children who stood at the edge of the aisle and her workers, nodding to the visiting nobles in their shaded tents, and the lesser nobles seated in the sunshine.

Henry met her at the foot of the dais to assist her up the ramp to her prince, who held out a trembling hand to her. She curtsied to him, and he bowed to her, leading her to the center in front of the altar. They

stood together above their subjects and their peers, for a moment, radiant in the sunlight.

As Henry walked back to his place below the dais stairs, dazzled by his princess, he saw Daisy in the crowd, big and robust beside the gentry of the courts. She was so beautiful in her gown, he almost ran to her. She caught his eye and smiled at him. He was relieved to turn and face the wedding couple, as he was afraid his desire would be obvious to all the guests.

Fiona stood up, whispered to Maven to watch closely and pay attention to the whole story as it unfolded. Fiona then poofed herself behind the bride and groom and lit a fire in the cauldron with a Word.

She invoked the Powers and cast a circle around the crowd. She presented the couple to the guests, and wrapped a red ribbon around their wrists. She asked H.R., “What do you offer to your Princess?”

H.R. had made a list of great declarations of love, but he found himself nearly speechless. “I offer you...myself...my kingdom...to merge with yours...and my love.” The fires within him blazed and his very soul cried out for her to accept him, to love him in return. He trembled to think of the power she held over him.

“What do you offer your Prince?”

Vivienne opened her mouth, but a wail of rage came from the banquet garden where a woman plunged past the guards, fighting her way across the space in front of the dais. She ducked under the prince's golden dragon to point at Maven.

“Her. She ruined my life. She broke the rules of magic. Let me at her.”

Rocky, Stoner, and Log grabbed the woman, Ashleigh, the caterer's wife. She struggled against them, so it was all they could do to hold her.

"Peace, woman." Vivienne said, stepping forward and dragging the prince with her. "Explain yourself, and if it is within my power, I will make it right for you."

Caught up in the princess's commanding tone, the caterer's wife stopped struggling. "Like you have had any better luck with her, you and your magical prince, the one you don't love."

The word Love echoed from the Castle and rippled over the assemblage. Murmurs began an undercurrent that pulled against Vivienne, pale but unwavering, as she stood firm in her persona. "What do you mean?"

Fiona began to pull magical energy to her, to brace for the break in the tension she felt around her, so she could channel it, keep the crowd from becoming a mob.

The caterer's wife pointed to Maven. "She claims to be a fairy godmother, but she is just another human. She said I could go to the ball, but she made everything ugly. So my wish was not granted. I want my true wish. She owes me"

Daisy had risen to her feet, unconsciously, as did Lady Dee and Grizelda, still wrapped in gossamer, sitting behind Maven. All of them started moving toward the woman who struggled against the large men who barely restrained her

"Answer her, fairy godmother," Vivienne commanded. "What about my wish, and these others here? Have any of us received what we asked for?"

Maven stood then, walked out to face her group of clients. The rest of the audience squirmed in their seats, struggling to hear and see her answer. The wise ones also glanced about for a quick exit if things went sour. Maven looked at each one, steadily and in the eye.

"Each of you made your choices, and each of you got what you asked for. If you didn't ask for what you wanted, then that is not my concern." She turned to look at the whole crowd, even pausing for a moment to catch Fiona's eye. She gazed at Azaha as well, not looking for approval, but challenging them to prove her wrong.

"No, I didn't. You changed my mind," Daisy said. "I wished to be beautiful so the prince would fall in love with me."

"You broke the rules," the woman screamed again, struggling against Rocky and Stoner as if they were mere fops, more confident she was right. "You are here from the Other Side to put an end to Faery."

Waves of emotion broke over the crowd as the ones on the outside pressed in to hear, and the ones on the inside surged to get away.

"Is that true, fairy godmother?" Vivienne said, still in command of herself, her tone quieting the crowd as Fiona drew energy from them. "I did not get what I wished, to rule my own kingdom without marrying." She jerked her arm free of the red ribbon.

"From my perspective, Your Highness, that's what you are doing now." Maven's voice rang out clear and direct. "You are the Queen of these parts, done by your own hand, in your own way."

"No," Vivienne said. "If you have served these as you have served me, then magic is truly in danger."

Maven drew herself up to her full height. She poofed into the middle

of the aisle in the center of the crowd. Belle raced to catch her, but before Belle could do anything, Maven drew her wand out of her pocket.

“Fine,” Maven said.

With a deep breath, she pulled up her anger, the energy from the ground and from the frightened onlookers, and in her mind's eye, stared down the Serpent itself. She felt the power of the solstice sun, the dark moon, the dragon, and even Fiona and her cauldron. Maven snapped her wand like a bullwhip.

“Be careful what you wish for,” she roared, her voice silencing the entire assemblage like a clap of thunder. Afraid to move, people were like statues, frozen in fear. Their eyes darted, searching for exit routes and their ears scanned for signs of when and where they could run.

An older knight wearing a wolf-skin kilt gave a roar, jumped up from his seat, and ran toward the dais. Lord Hollyhock bowed to Lady Dee, in his newly polished breastplate and then swept her off her feet, threw her over his shoulder and carried her away.

H.R.'s eye fell upon Daisy in her silken dress; she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and she had the smallest feet. He moved toward her, his foot dragging the ribbon Vivienne had torn from their wrists. By the time Henry saw what was happening, H.R. had run to Daisy's side, and clutched her to his breast, her bare feet off the ground, though she was nearly as tall as the prince.

Henry forgot his place. He pulled the prince's arm away from Daisy, facing the prince, lover to rival. Henry squared off at the prince, ready to fight. Rocky and Stoner released the caterer and ran to protect H.R., as Daisy broke away from him and stood with Henry.

Vivienne watched, her heart wrenched by H.R.'s enchantment with another, her desire for him kindling. For his part, H.R. drew back from Henry and Daisy, realizing who Daisy was, and he bumped into Maven.

"I wish someone would love me for my true self," he moaned, "I wish."

"Try letting them see your true self." Maven tapped him with her wand. "Tell her your true name."

H.R.'s body stretched and expanded. He bellowed.

Vivienne came to him, not knowing what to say or do. He transformed from a man to a huge, golden dragon. H.R. roared, belching a flame high into the sky, as if he would burn the very sun.

The guests scrambled away from him, screaming and trampling each other. Some tried to enter the Castle, but found no doors open to them. Others started toward the fields, but they would not run from one dragon to another. Some were able to get through Castle gate, but most headed for the dark forest, less afraid of what they could not see than what they could.

Vivienne stared up at him, then climbed up onto a claw and let him raise her to his fearsome face with fangs longer than her forearm and slit-pupil eyes of emerald, which shaded from green to gold to grey and back like a kaleidoscope.

"I have always dreamed of dragons," she said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I have waited for you almost forever," he said. His eyes changed from green to gold and back.

"Can you change at will? Can we have children?"

“You aren't afraid?”

She kissed the scale on the cheekbone nearest to her. “I am sorry I was so cold to you.”

“I love you.” The dragon brought the princess closer to his cheek.

“My name is Hieronymus Ryuu, and I ask you to be my mate.”

The princess stroked the dragon's eye ridge. “I love you, my dragon prince, but I think I'll just call you H.R.”

To their left, Little Nell flopped down flat on her belly. She wailed, “I want my mommy. I want my mommy.” She started kicking her heels against the ground and tearing at her hair.

A ragged, tired woman, much the worse for wear, fought her way against the panicked mob. “Nell. Little Nell,” she shrieked. She pushed people out of her way, clawing her way to the screaming child.

Her mother held her and stroked her hair, and dropped hot tears of joy on Nell's face. Mother and daughter sank to the ground, oblivious to the chaos around them.

A great crashing sound issued deep from within the Castle. Maven stomped toward it, pushing through the throng. “What do you want, then?” she shouted at the castle.

Fiona had been muttering and gathering energy all this time. She waved her arms wide, brandishing both her wand and a burning stick from the cauldron fire, and cast a spell on everything to stop it in its tracks before more damage was done. Everyone and everything paused, poised in mid-step, birds in midair. The flames of the cauldron froze like shards of sunlight.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Reality Bites

Maven glared at her in return and shifted her weight against Fiona's spell. Like a person moving in a dream, she turned to face Fiona, hands on her hips, chin jutted out.

“What do you think you are doing?” Fiona demanded. She held out her arms to keep the energy taut against the crowd, and against Maven. “Haven't you created enough chaos here already?”

“I am doing my job...the best I know from what I've been taught.” Maven stood stout, her feet rooted to the ground. “If you hadn't sent me unprepared to Ashleigh, she might have had a chance to be happy.”

She raised her wand, held firmly in her hand. “Are you sure you want me to take over your job, after a week in training? I know I've got a lot more to learn. But you have a wish, just like everyone else here.”

“I am not your client. Do not presume.” Fiona pulled up her most fearsome aspect, the very glance from which made even Belle flinch. She sent out a fearsome glamour from her solar plexus to engulf Maven in terror.

Maven never wavered. “Maybe not, but I can listen to a wish, whether I decide grant it or not.” Maven shifted her weight again, stretching her neck to each side so it popped, while never losing eye contact. “You'd be better off with Tulip—she's the one who figured out what was causing the problem with the Veil.”

“You can't undo my magic.” Fiona tightened her hold on her spell, keeping everyone motionless, except Maven who straightened her back

and took a steady step toward Fiona.

“No, but I can work around it. And you can't undo mine either.” A thought, like a small white butterfly, fluttered through Maven's consciousness. An image came to her like the last piece of a puzzle, of another story. An ancient fairy, dark and punishing in her anger at being neglected, challenged by a young fairy, new on the job, who dared to mitigate the curse of her elder. Fiona had been that fairy, the one who changed the death of a princess to sleep, one who could freeze time and space by changing the magic of another—transmuting a curse until it could be broken.

“Age and treachery do not always prevail over youth and enthusiasm,” Fiona said, “but that's the way to bet.” She didn't smile, and the strain of holding so many people prisoner began to tell on her usually ageless face.

Maven laughed. “You forget I am not young, and while I don't have your experience, you don't share mine. So again, are you real sure about what you want?” Maven was free now of Fiona's spell, able to move at will. “What will it be, Fiona? I know you want to retire. Are you ready for me to take over?”

“You will destroy us all!”

“You are doing a good job of that yourself, what with your one story, and a worn-out, threadbare one it is. You don't even have a story for you and Belle. Can't you see why your FGMs fall into their own stories?”

She took the comic pages from a pocket. “Look. This is what happens to stories in Mundane. This is where your fairy godmothers go.”

She held out the colorful newsprint.

Fiona would not release her wand to take the paper, but her eyes and her mouth opened wide in horror. "Pictures and words. What were you thinking? How could you bring that here? It will destroy everything."

"Yes, the last bit of Faery is being sucked into Mundane right through the Veil. You need to see what's really happening!"

Maven took out her stub of a pencil and paper, and wrote, "Fiona and I are in Mundane." She took out a pouch of fairy dust and held it in the same hand as her wand. She made a swooping circle to include both of them.

They were sucked into a vortex of nothingness that deposited them on a late summer evening in a deserted parking lot where a stripped out minivan stood rusting on its hubs, and what had been a strip mall was merely a clump of rotting lumber under a leafy blanket of vines.

Steamy air clogged their lungs. A full moon rose across from the sunset. Mosquitoes dived in to feast on the new meat. Without magic to support her, Fiona became a wizened crone, wearing on a rag of gossamer and barely able to stand.

Maven, too, drooped in the Grizelda's ragged dress, clutching her wand and the fairy dust.

Fiona stumbled as they landed, clutching Maven to get her balance. She was getting too old for this.

Maven shook the paper almost in Fiona's face. "The stories are used over and over, twisted, bent, spindled, and mutilated." She put the paper in Fiona's hand. "They are not just written down, like in fiction, but they are drawn out so people don't even have to use their imagination."

Fiona looked at the simple, crudely drawn pictures, but each had writing, a bit of a story. Bits of several stories just thrown away—magic degraded and discarded. She turned away from Maven.

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Fiona swayed on the asphalt while Maven poked around in the remains of the building. She stared at the rusting metal frame of the vehicle and shuddered at the waste of it.

Maven dragged a box-shaped object into the parking lot.

“Hocus Pocus,” she intoned with her wand and a sprinkle of fairy dust. “Get in focus. Show me Fractured Fairy Tales.”

A light spread out from a point to make moving pictures. There was no sound until Maven bonked the box a few more times.

There were fairies, giants, and castles, but they were all the same kind of crude drawings with rude speech and poorly played music. Fiona was appalled.

After a few minutes she turned away,

“No,” Maven said, “That’s just for kids, and it was a long time ago. I don’t even know what kids watch these days. But watch this.” She held her wand pointed at the box and flicked again and again, each time making a new picture appear.

These were like real people caught in the box. They moved and spoke for a few moments and then another picture started with different people, beautiful people with rich clothing, though hardly appropriate.

Every few minutes a new story, and then a lot of little stories. The heartbreak of psoriasis. Squirrels eating out of boxes. Insects repelled by some spell she could not work, though the box said it over and over, and Fiona repeated it carefully. The insects in this place continued to swarm and bite her.

“This is what happened to your fairy godmothers and everyone else in Faery.” Maven shook her wand at the box. “They escaped into Fiction and from there into movies and from there into TV, which is what this is. And from there into games and the internet and ...”

“These are movies? Things that move? Moving pictures?”

“Yes, and commercials. They try to sell you something. Like the bug repellent.”

“I cannot use the spell until I pay for it? How do I pay them? There is no energy exchange here.”

She reached for the word inside the box. A bolt of stored electricity shot from the monitor and knocked her away. The last of her glamourie left her. She lay withered and gasping for air.

“You've killed me.” Fiona whispered. “You want my job and my power so badly?”

“No,” Maven said, swatting a mosquito. “I don't want it at all.”

Fiona coughed, rasping for breath.

“Don't you see?” Maven cried, “You haven't left yourself any out. You haven't given yourself any life to live.”

Fiona raised her wand, pointing it at Maven's forehead. She muttered a curse, her arm shaking with the anger of it.

Maven made no move at defense. She could see the drain of energy

from Fiona's face.

Wheezing with each breath, Fiona trembled, her face pale and greenish. The spell had no effect whatsoever, however deadly it might have been in Faery. Fiona started coughing. All of her years in Faery weighed on her in Mundane.

"I'll take you back. No one will ever know you were here." Maven put her arms around Fiona, despite Fiona's feeble attempts to struggle away.

Fiona sagged against Maven. The hate in her eyes turned to fear, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

Maven poofed both of them back to Faery, most careful not to touch Fiona's wand and sap the last of Fiona's strength.

The wall seemed ever thicker and the timeless space ever deeper on this trip back.

Maven held tight to Fiona and chanted, "There's no place like Faery. There's no place like Faery. There's no place like Faery."

When her arms ached, her throat was raw, and her heels sore from being clicked together, Maven landed back on the wedding dais. She was very tired, and her gossamer fell from under her cotton dress.

Fiona began to slip from her arms onto the dais. She wasn't breathing.

Maven slapped her wrists, listened to her heart, which made no sound, and tried to remember how to do CPR. She moved Fiona's jaw to try to breathe into her lungs when she saw the strands of gossamer tied around her wrist. The youngest Spinster had said it was her life.

Would she die if she took it off?

“One way to know for s-s-sure” hissed a soft voice beside her.

Maven fumbled with the knot, one handed, finally just jerking the thread to break it. She tied it around Fiona's arm making tight square knots and wondering what kind of spell to cast. Fiona just lay there, white, and shriveled.

Maven took out her pencil and paper again to write but the paper tore and the pencil broke. Finally Maven took her wand and pulled every bit of energy she could to her and sparked her wand to Fiona's. Everything went dark.

Maven could not feel anything, see anything, not even dirt under her feet.

“S-s-she's-s-s here,” whispered a voice from her left. Maven slid her foot out in that direction, feeling for a place to stand. It felt solid. She put her hand in front of her, reaching out to feel for any kind of edges or obstacles. She felt Fiona's body by her foot. She grasped Fiona's hand and they floated together.

“This-s-s way” came from first one side, then another, calling, whispering in her ear, leading her along the way. “Bring her back if you think you can. Or leave her here.”

Other than the whispery voice, no sound echoed to show where she was, or what else might be there... She tried to make a light with her wand, but while she could see a tiny spark, it did not even illuminate her hand holding the wand.

“Still as much in the dark as ever.” Her voice echoed in her ears. “I must not be dead... there's supposed to be a tunnel with light at the end.”

Maven felt an icy breeze cross her feet. A bony hand floated in front

of her. She grabbed it.

“Okay, now what?”

She heard nothing, but she still clutched the bony hand. She visualized the wedding, the sunshine and grunted.

“C'mon. You, too, Snake.”

Her next step was into nothing, cold and swirling. She was used to the swirling, but not the bump at the end of the ride. She nearly fell, and Fiona crashed into her.

Fiona immediately jerked away from her, fully restored to her former self. She stuck out her arm but she had no wand, just wisps of gossamer tied to her wrist.

“What does-z-z Maven wis-s-sh for?”

This time they both heard it. Fiona turned her head to face the Serpent, which was coiled at her side, its head level with hers, grinning, and flicking its forked tongue.

Maven faced Fiona, vulnerable to attack with her wand at her side, but braced strong on her feet and in her will.

“I wish,” she said firmly and clearly, “I wish to become a good fairy godmother.”

“You will do as I say,” Fiona said. “You will follow my directions implicitly until I formally release you from training. Is that clear?”

“I will listen to you and learn from your training” Maven said, “But I will do as I damn well please.”

Fiona picked up two of the frozen burning sticks from the fire. “Never again threaten to grant a wish for me.” Fiona said, crashing the sticks together to release their energy and restore everyone to movement.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Be Careful What You Wish For

Vivienne stared entranced into her dragon's glittering eyes. H.R.'s crown was looped around one of the knobs above his eyebrow. He delicately pinched it between two claws and placed it on her head.

"My Queen," he rumbled, a wisp of smoke coming from his nostrils. He lifted Vivienne to his neck, and once she settled herself, he leapt into the air to begin their honeymoon.

Daisy stepped back from the shadow of the dragon, more surprised than afraid. Henry's arm was around her, still protective, ready to die in the defense of his love against either Prince or Dragon. She turned to him, whispering in his ear, "I love you, dear Henry. Let's go back to the barn. I know where there's a broom we can jump."

Henry had learned in the court whatever her Highness said was to be done immediately without question or complaint, so he ran with Daisy to the dairy, stopping only to bolt the doors behind them.

The caterer came from the banquet tables in the garden toward Ashleigh. "I have heard nothing for weeks except how you did not get what you wanted, how you were tricked and robbed of your chance to be the queen. I have had enough." He laid his chef's clothing at her feet and walked away.

For once, Ashleigh was speechless.

A great rending sound came from the Castle as it began to shake and topple in on itself as the spell was broken. The energy radiated out in rainbow colors, like gasoline on a puddle. Maven poofed closer to it.

“Do you want to go back to being a pile of rocks and a few arches?” she shouted, “or do you think you could bring yourself to accommodate this crowd and a couple of dragons besides?” The grinding sounds stopped, although rocks still toppled from the highest towers.

Cook and her crew had run outside, each of them transformed as the spell dissipated. Cook shrank from her ruddy bulk to a fairy of decidedly elfin looks. Bog, Log and Gob transformed into wood, earth, and water sprites. Rocky and Stoner returned to their former ogre selves, and ogres and sprites disappeared into the forest. The dragon's shadow flittered across the shaky rocks from a great height.

Maven stomped up to the castle, took her lucky marble out of her pocket, and placed it on a rock that might have once been a foundation. “You might need something solid to work with.”

Cook joined Maven as she held her wand toward the Castle. “I have no wand, but I can still move a bit of energy, I expect.”

Tulip came running up to join them, with Belle puffing behind her. “We'll help,” Tulip said, her wand already blazing with the magic.

“Humph,” said Fiona, either an opinion or an expression of a not-so-soft landing. They linked hands, Maven and Tulip holding Fiona's shoulder. Fiona channeled their energy into the Castle with her bare hands. The Castle renovated itself into as sparkling Art Nouveau Palace with turnip turrets and slinky buttresses.

“I hope you are pleased with yourself,” Fiona said, facing the Palace. She dropped her hands and faced Maven. “Are we quite finished here?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Maven said.

Fiona was greeted by a young woman dressed in red silken rags, leather, and a snake, accompanied by a wolf. She sighed and pointed to Maven.

“Greetings, Old Magic Woman!” Princess Ane with an X grinned as she hugged Maven. “Great party!”

Her baby fat had hardened into muscle, and she added a knife, quarterstaff, leather girdle, sandals, and breastplate to the shreds of her gown.

The crowd parted as she strode to the banquet garden. She spoke to a knot of nobles, one of whom fainted at the sight of her long lost daughter, alive and unrepentant.

Fiona shook her head. “Report to my office, first thing in the morning. No excuses. No coffee!” She walked into the crowd and disappeared.

The rest enjoyed the party, which they figured would last well into the wee hours, putting them in the right frame of mind for Maven's second week on the job.

The End.

If you have enjoyed Maven and her adventures,
Please leave a review where you obtained the book.

I'd really appreciate it.

About the Author

Charlotte Henley Babb

Writing healing fiction that makes people laugh while they are changing their lives. "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing. Are you overdone yet?"

I began writing when I could hold a piece of chalk and scribble my name--although I sometimes mistook "Chocolate" for "Charlotte" on the sign at the drug store ice cream counter.

At the school library in third grade, I discovered Louisa May Alcott and Robert Heinlein, an odd marriage of the minds, which have had the most influence on me to explore how the world might be made better. I read lots of fairy tales. More recently, I've devoured Terry Pratchett's wonderful work, and that of Esther Friesner and Robert Asprin.

Having misspent my youth in class, teaching English in high schools and junior colleges, I felt like a fairy godmother with a classroom full of princesses and princes who'd been turned into frogs. Writing is a powerful wand for making transformational magic.

I bring to any project a number of experiences, including work as a waitress, technical writer, washing machine gasket inspector, cloth store associate, secret weapon, web designer, and telephone psychic.

I'm now exploring how to be my own fairy godmother to make my wishes come true. This book is the first one

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