DRAGON
SPELL
FATED TOUCH BOOK ONE
MAC FLYNN

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PROLOGUE

From tragedy, hope springs eternal.

For me, that hope was a long time coming. My parents were out on the rare dinner night. It was their anniversary, if I recall. Six years of marriage, and four of them with me. I'd been left with my grandparents, the ones who had raised my dad. Grandpa was always a blast, letting me ride his back, and Grandma was the best cook in the county.

Then the doorbell rang. That sound was long and hollow, like the tolling of a church bell at a funeral. My grandmother answered it. I can remember sitting on the floor of the living room with Grandpa. The doorway looked into the entrance hall. Two policemen stood on the stoop. Their voices were low, but the pity in their eyes was loud and clear, even to me.

Grandma's hand flew to her mouth and her eyes widened. Tears pooled in them as she stumbled back.

"Bee!" Grandpa shouted as he flew to his feet and hurried over to her. He caught her before she dropped.

She spun around and buried her face into his chest. Her sobbing wracked her body. It was then that I knew that something truly terrible had happened. Grandma never cried. The policemen left. Their terrible duty was done. Now my grandparents had their own terrible duty to do.

Grandpa helped Grandma into a chair and came over to me. He knelt in front of me and clasped my hands in his large, worn ones. His eyes looked into mine.

He was trying not to cry.

“Jane, there’s. . .there’s been an accident,” he told me. I nodded. I knew about those, but why was he crying? “Your parents. . .your parents’ car rolled over. They didn’t make it.”

“Make it to dinner?” I remember asking him. I didn’t want to face the truth. Why would I?

He shook his head. “No. They’re. . .they’re dead, pumpkin, but don’t you worry. Grandma and I will take care of you.”

He had more words of comfort to give to me, but I didn’t hear them. I *couldn’t* hear them. My parents. Dead. I was just old enough to understand what that meant. It meant they weren’t coming back. No more of Mom’s smiles. No more of Dad’s piggy-back rides. Gone. Fleeting innocence vanished in a single instance.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Grandma wiped her own and joined Grandpa in front of me. She opened her arms. I fell into them, balling my eyes out.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” she whispered to me through her own tears. She couldn’t stop them coming any more than I could stop mine. “We’re going to take good care of you for them.”

Grandpa wrapped his arms around us, and for a long time we sat on the floor joined in our grief.

Maybe that’s why I’m so close to them, and why it was so shocking to find out just how little I knew about them.

1

Tears dry eventually, and I had a lot of time to dry mine. My grandparents helped, especially during those first few months. It was a hard transition from one life to the next, but their quaint little two-story cottage nestled up against the last remnants of wilderness in the city limits helped ease my pain. There were trees to climb (and fall out of), squirrels to chase (and be chased by), and the quiet walk through the brambles (followed by a hard scrub of peroxide against my many scratches).

Quiet. Peaceful. Secretive. There were some places I couldn't go, and the rules were laid down as I broke them. Curious as I was, it didn't take much time to break *all* of them.

The first started with a curious exploration of the attic. The little cottage's attic was a narrow strip along the highest peak of the roof, and over the rafters of the second-floor ceiling were placed ply-wood and on top of that were chests and boxes filled with the unknown.

My grandparents thought I couldn't reach the ring on the attic trap door, but I reached it via an end table in the hall and a heavy stack of books swiped from my grandfather's extensive library on the first floor. My precocious self grasped the ring in both hands and gave a might tug. The trap door came down followed by the heavy wooden ladder. It hit the floor just shy of scuffing the top of my grandmother's end table.

I rhetorically wiped my brow and scurried up the ladder to the unknown. The

attic was dark, lit only by two small windows at either end of its long stretch. They showed the setting sun. My grandparents would be home soon from their card party. I crept along the ply-wood that acted as the floor and feasted my eyes over the many trunks and boxes.

One of the boxes caught my attention. It was rectangular and made of a dark wood. The faces were unadorned except for the lid which had a honey bee flying in front of a bolt of lightning. My young, childish mind thought they were cute, so I plucked it from its stack and tried to pry open the lid. No-go. A small silver lock in the clasp kept me from discovering the mysteries of what I had dubbed The Bee Bolt Box. I tried to pry it open with the nail of my pinky finger, but it wasn't a good substitute for a pick.

As I was still fumbling with the lock the shadows outside lengthened. A faint sound came from below me, but my complete concentration lay on prying that wonderful box open. Maybe I could use it as a jewelery box, or maybe a box to put my little glass animals. Or maybe-

"Jane!"

I yelped and spun around to face the trap door. The last glimmer of sunlight disappeared from the windows, and only the glow from the hallway light gave my weak eyes a look. My grandfather's face peeked out from the floor like a disembodied head. For a second I thought his head had come to scold me for my prying like some haunting figure. That got me screaming and in my fright I dropped the box.

My grandfather's eyes widened and he used the floor to lung up and forward. He stretched out his hand and caught the box in his palm.

My grandma peeked her head above the floor and looked around. "My goodness, it's dusty up here."

"And that makes it no place for a young lady," Grandpa added as he set the box back in its place courtesy of the dustless spot atop the boxes.

Grandma's eyes fell on the box and her face lit up in glee. "Are we to have-"

"Dinner," he interrupted her. "Isn't it about time for dinner, Bee?"

She sighed, but a little smile played across her lips. I quickly learned that that look meant trouble or teasing, or both. "Oh, I suppose so. Come along now, you

two, before you change into a couple of shades."

"But I can't be shade," I protested in my infinite four-year old wisdom as my grandfather shooed me toward the trap door.

"You won't be because you're staying out of here," he assured me as we climbed down the ladder. Grandpa pushed the door back into the ceiling and turned to me with his steely gaze. He knelt in front of me and set his hands on my shoulder before he looked into my eyes. "Now Jane, I'm going to lay down a few rules. The first rule of the house is you don't go up to the attic."

"Why not?" I wondered.

"Because it's dark up there."

"But I'm not afraid of the dark."

"And musty."

"I like dirt."

"And you're not supposed to be up there."

"But why?"

A snort escaped my grandfather's lips as he shook his head. His expression was less of annoyance and more of admiration. "You'd make a good High Inquisitor."

"What's a high quizzer?" I asked him.

He shook his head and stood. "It's nothing. Just forget I said it."

"But why should I-"

Grandma took my hand and led me toward the stairs. "How about we start dinner together, Jane? You can help me boil water for the spaghetti."

That was a good distraction. Spaghetti was my favorite meal, not least of which because the meat balls my grandma made were always huge. However, that didn't entirely wipe the episode off my mind.

I glanced over my shoulder and looked forlornly at the shut attic door. Maybe someday I'd go back.

2

That little adventure happened a long time ago. Two decades, to be exact. Nearly my entire lifetime, and at the ripe old age of twenty-four I found myself wondering what to do with my little old existence. College was nearing its end without a focus-or job-in sight, I was without a boyfriend, and my roommates were too fixated on theirs to be of much company. So what was a lonely girl to do to think her life over?

Maybe she'd go home, and that's exactly what I did. Home to that little cottage nestled against the woods with all its wonderful memories. Maybe the scent of the summer trees and the green grass would reinvigorate my tired soul.

I gave them a call, was rewarded by a quick chat with their answering machine, and headed off for the far reaches of Colmouth, a city of bright lights, hot concrete, and a cute little cottage with my room waiting for me like a shrine waiting for its god. Seriously. My grandma had preserved it since my leaving four years before. For that I was grateful and amused, mostly because my grandpa had had plans to enlarge his library by consuming my former bedroom.

The main road into the city passed through the fields and forests that made up the hinterlands of the large hamlet. The sun was starting to set as I reached the thick patch that abutted that little cottage. I rolled down my window and breathed in the fresh scent of leaves and morning dew that survived in the darkest shadows of the woods.

As I rolled to a stop along the wide shoulder of the road and took in the

sights. It was a surreal moment. Beside me was the busy traffic of the normal world, and before me lay the mystical land of untouched wilderness. A part of me yearned to know what lay in those shadows.

A flock of birds flew out of the trees. Their screeching broke the misty spell of the silence and made me start back. In that brief moment something inside the shadows moved.

I leaned forward and squinted at the growing darkness, but only caught the dark trunks of trees and bushes. The black forms of the birds disappeared in the distance, leaving nothing but the silence once more.

Still, a small voice inside me warned me that something wasn't quite right. I put on my blinker and eagerly rejoined the traffic.

My childhood home was only three miles from the road as the crow flies, but the roads weren't as straightforward. Twenty minutes later found me pulling into the driveway. A beat-up old pickup, a rustic relic my grandfather refused to get rid of, sat in the left-hand spot while my usual spot was open to me.

I stepped out and looked up at the quaint, two-floor cottage. The firehouse-red shutters smiled down at me like heavy mascara against the tan walls of the rest of the house. The door was a brilliant violet purple courtesy of my grandmother's zany fondness for colors that didn't match. I remember them receiving a lot of complaints from the home owner's association, and one letter was especially strongly worded. It had demanded my grandmother remove from the lawn a herd of stuffed beavers she had acquired from a taxidermist friend. That had been a prickly situation.

I tugged my two suitcases out of the passenger seat of my small car and hefted them up to the stoop. A small sign on the left of the door made me pause and smile. It read Cave Canem, Latin for 'Beware of Dog.' The funny thing was we'd never owned a dog, but my grandfather was so fond of the old saying, dusted off from one of his many books, that he'd put up the sign, anyway.

I opened the door-they never kept it locked-and stepped into the small hall. The stairs to the second floor stood against the wall to my left, and on either side of me were doorways to the rest of the ground floor, along with a narrow hall to the back rooms of the house.

I dropped my suitcases in a pile at my feet and took a deep breath. “Grandma! Grandpa! I’m home!” My grandmother flew out of the dining room on my left and clasped one of my hands in hers. Her large blue hair comb, an ever-present fixture atop her head, nearly wedged itself up my nose. She looked up into my eyes with such a pleading look that I almost laughed. “You’ve lost something again, haven’t you?”

My grandfather followed after her and ran a hand through his wispy, thinning white hair. “And very well, too. We’ve looked everywhere for the phone, but we can’t find it.”

“So you guys didn’t get my message?” I asked him.

He snorted. “We haven’t been able to find the blasted thing for a week.”

“Did you try calling it?” I suggested.

He shook his head. “We would but we’ve only got the one, and its battery is dead.”

I snorted. “I wondered why I got sent to your answering machine without a ring.”

Grandma squeezed my hand and her lower lip trembled. “You’ll find the poor thing for us, won’t you? It’s lost somewhere in this large house.”

I smiled and patted the top of her hands. “It’s all right, Grandma. I’ve got this.”

I slipped out of her clutches and stepped into the living room. My fingers danced over the side table on my right as I scanned the room. The phone wasn’t in the obvious places. Maybe it wasn’t obvious. I tapped the cover of a book that lay near the lamp on the table. Maybe it was-

Something caught my attention. I squinted at the bookcase against the wall to my right. A smile slipped onto my lips. “I think I may have found it.”

I walked over to the bookcase as my grandparents stepped into to the doorway. Three of the large volumes were pushed out from the wall. The usual habit of my grandparents was to have the books pushed against the wall so they could put small curiosities in front of the books. I reached behind the books and a moment later drew out my hand, and the missing phone.

Grandma clapped. “So wonderful!”

I shrugged as Grandpa took the phone. He glared at the object. “So much trouble. . .”

“It’s a marvel of modern technology, Simon,” Grandma scolded him.

He scoffed. “Modern is a subjective word, Bee.” His gaze fell on me and he noticed I was staring hard at the bookshelf. “Something the matter, pumpkin?”

I swept my eyes over the bookcase. “No, but it’s just-well-” I snorted and shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing is something,” he argued as he took the phone from my gleeful grandmother.

“It’s just that I always thought there was something behind this wall,” I admitted as my eyes fell on the space where the phone had been hidden. Near the three books sat a dry tome about the inner workings of a sexton. “You know, like a secret passage or something like that.” I reached out of the book.

“Shouldn’t you get to unpacking before reading?” Grandpa advised me.

I dropped my hand and turned to him with a teasing smile. “You guys don’t mind me moving back for a little while and cramping your style?”

“We’ll manage somehow,” he quipped with a devilish glint in his eyes.

Grandma stepped up and grasped my hands in hers as she smiled at me. “Welcome home, Jane.”

And what a welcoming party awaited us that night.

3

I trotted upstairs and to my intact bedroom. Even the fluffy kitten sheets were unchanged, though cleaned by my thorough grandmother. I dropped my suitcases onto the floor and plopped my butt on the foot of the bed.

Introspection was never pleasant, and I didn't find it so then. College, a job, life. None of it sounded appetizing. I looked down at my hands that lay in my lap. Surely there was something more that those pale hands could do with themselves.

"Jane!" Grandpa called from downstairs. "Your grandma's dinner is ready!"

"I'm coming!" I replied. I stood and let life-choices drop to the background of my mind. Dinner was ready, and I needed to prepare my stomach.

My grandfather was an adequate cook, but my grandmother was insane. Boiled beets in jello was a staple of the table. Another favorite of hers was chicken drumsticks served cooked in a roast. How she got a dozen of those drumsticks into a single ten-pound roast was beyond either of us.

I girded my iron-clad stomach and proceeded downstairs. A hint of chicken gave me a hint, but it turned out I was on the wrong scent. I reached the dining room doorway and paused.

There, spread out on the table, was a sane meal. The drumsticks were on a plate that didn't include a roast. Nothing floated in the jello. Even the orange juice was without its usual pulp the size of Alaska. My grandmother sat proudly on the right side of my grandfather with him at the table, and there-on his left-

was my seat, pulled out and ready for me.

“I thought that after such a long time with that bland college food you might take some time to get used to normal food,” my grandmother told me.

I smiled. It was good to be home.

We supped on the delicious food and dined on a white wine dredged up from the rough-stone and dirt-floor basement. The conversation was more intelligent than most of my college lectures and wandered over such topics as gardening, Cicero, and deep-sea diving. My grandfather was a fountain-well of knowledge equal to the legendary Well of Urd from Norse myth. I considered him Odin, nickname he took as high praise, especially since he hadn’t even needed to trade an eye for his knowledge.

We finished dinner and after the dishes were cleared we all strolled into the living room. A more apt name for the room was a library extension. Half the walls were covered in bookshelves. A television sat in a corner, used only by my grandmother to watch the cooking channel.

A large window looked out on the backyard and a smaller one on the front lawn. The shadows of the trees loomed over the tiny house like a giant over David, but in the warm light of the living room we settled into our usual chairs. Well, except for my grandma. She sat in front of the television with her legs crossed and watched a chef roast a duck. I shuddered to think what evil ideas entered my grandmother’s mind.

A clock hung over the unused fireplace that was the centerpiece of the room. It stood opposite the doorway, an imposing piece of architecture made of rock taken from the local area and smoothed to near-perfection. My seat of choice, a well-cushioned armchair, sat near the chimney.

As I read one of my grandfather’s many books on medieval farm equipment a dry smell hit my nose. It was the scent of ash. I glanced at the fire. We hadn’t used it in a decade after the last fire nearly consumed the house. A few bits of ash floated down to the empty tray. My first thought was a stuck bird, so I closed my book and kept my eyes on the ash as it grew more pronounced.

“Guys, I think there’s a-”

A huge deposit of ash dropped from the chimney and splashed over the tray.

The gray dust spread over the room, causing us all to jump up and cover our mouths. The ash invaded my mouth and I could hear my grandparents cough, but only their dim outlines were visible to me.

Another outline caught my attention. This one came from the chimney. The dark figure crawled on all fours out of the hearth and stood. As the ash cleared I could get a good look, and what I saw made my jaw hit the floor.

This was no Santa Claus. The creature was as bulky as the jolly elf, but that's where the resemblance ended. Its face was that of a man, but with a piggish nose and tusks that protruded from either side of its mouth. The thing wore a dirty shirt of the roughest wool over which hung a vest of equal cleanliness. Its feet were covered in leather shoes and the billowing pants were made of the same rough material as the vest. At the thing's waist tucked between its bulk and its belt hung a saber.

The thing unsheathed its weapon and pointed the blade at us. Its voice reminded me of gravel with a hint of a shoe squishing into mud. "Against the wall!"

My grandfather narrowed his eyes at the intruder. "Who are you?"

"I said against the wall!" the thing barked. We apparently didn't move fast enough because the creature charged Grandpa with the saber as its battering ram.

Grandpa sidestepped the fiend and drew out his leg. The piggish man tripped and skidded snout-first across the hardwood floor. He hit the carpet in the entrance hall and flipped over. His nostrils flared and he fumbled for his sword that lay by his side.

"You'll pay for-"

"That's enough," a new voice spoke up.

The intruder looked up. Another pig towered above him, but this new intruder wore a clean but old cloak. His spiny hair was neatly combed back and he smiled as he bowed his head to us.

"Good evening, Bee. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Sage." The figure looked them up and down, and shook his head. "Time hasn't been kind to you, has it?"

"Who are you and what do you want?" Grandpa snapped.

“Who I am is Gargan, leader of the Porcine Pirates,” he introduced himself. “As for what I want-” his eyes flickered to my grandmother, “-I’d like Bee to accompany me on a little adventure.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’d rather not. I don’t like ham.”

“And we’re retired,” Grandpa added. “So just return from where you came from and never come back here.”

Gargan chuckled. “I’m afraid I went to a lot of trouble to find you, so I’m not leaving without some compensation.”

My grandfather grabbed the lamp closest to him. “I won’t let you take her without a fight.”

Gargan leaned his head back and let out a great, belly-jiggling laugh. “You? Fight me? Have you looked at yourself?”

My grandfather darted up to the pig and jabbed the sharp top of the lamp into Gargan’s gut. The man gave a wheezing breath and stumbled back. He doubled over, giving my grandpa ample angle to crack the lamp over the back of his head.

Gargan went down hard to the floor. His bloodshot eyes looked up at my grandfather with fury. “Men!”

More pigs stampeded out of the dining room and from the hall. They jumped my grandfather and tore the stumped remains of the lamp from his hand. Another socked him in the gut.

“Leave him alone!” my grandma shouted as she hurried forward. A pig grabbed her and pinned her hands behind her back, but she still thrashed and tried to pull away to go to her husband. “Sage!”

“Let her go!” I growled as I grabbed my heavy book and flung it at the beast that held my grandma. The spine hit the thing in the forehead. The thing flinched and whipped its head to me.

Two of the pigs marched toward me and yanked my arms behind my back so hard I felt my sockets pop. They shoved me to my knees and kept me down as my grandma was led to the front door.

Gargan climbed to his feet and brushed the creases from his old cloak. The pigs pushed my grandpa to his knees before their leader and Gargan scowled

down at him. “You stupid human!” He knocked the back side of his hand against my grandfather’s head. My grandpa’s head whipped to one side and blood slipped out from the corner of his mouth where Gargan had struck him.

Grandpa’s eyes flickered back to Gargan, and there was a look in their depths that I’d never seen: anger. Pure, unrestrained anger. My grandfather twisted out of the pig’s grip and lunged at Gargan. Gargan drew a dagger from beneath his cloak and slammed the handle into the side of Grandpa’s head. He flew to the side and slid a short distance across the floor until he crashed into the wall separating the dining room from the hall.

“No!” I screamed. I tried to break the grip of my own captors, but they held fast.

Gargan sneered at Grandpa as he sheathed his weapon. “Let’s leave here.’ He turned toward the door. “The smell of humans disgusts me.”

“What about this one?” one of my handlers called out.

Gargan paused and half-turned to sneer at me. “We don’t need followers.”

There was a sharp pain on the side of my head and then I knew nothing.

4

Nothing, that is, until consciousness returned me to the waking world where I was greeted by a terrible pain on the side of my head. I groaned and tried to move away from my own body, but a pair of strong hands pinned me to the floor.

“Easy there, pumpkin,” my grandfather soothed. My eyes flitted open and I saw my grandfather kneeling over me. There was a terrible gash down his left temple, and dried blood coated the left side of his face. His lips were tightly pursed and his eyes studied me with worry. “They gave you a bad knock.”

My eyes widened. “Grandma! Is Grandma-”

“Gone, but lay still,” he insisted.

“We have to call the police!” I pleaded.

He shook his head. “That won’t work. Not in this case.”

My mouth dropped open. “But she’s been kidnapped! We have to-”

“We have to remain calm,” he advised me. “Now first off, let’s get you sitting up.” He assisted me into a seated position where the pain in my head throbbed. I winced and clutched my aching skull. He pulled my hand away. “Let me get a good look at it.” He performed a cursory examination and drew back to smile at me. “As tough as Bee, and with my stubbornness. A generally terrible mix, but in this case it proved useful.”

“We have to call the police,” I persisted as I glanced at the window. It was very dark now, but a glow on the horizon told me the sun would be rising soon.

“We’re the only ones who can save your grandmother but that won’t happen until we get you on your feet,” he told me as he took my hands and helped me to my feet.

I steadied myself before I tore my hands from him and glared at my grandfather. Tears slid down my cheeks and I balled my quivering hands into fists at my side. “What the hell are you talking about? Who were those guys?”

He studied me for a moment before he sighed. “They were porcine, a rather brutish breed of shifters.”

I blinked at him. “A breed of what?”

“Shifters. Creatures that take on human form, or vice versa,” he explained.

I shook my head. “That’s. . .that’s insane, Grandpa.”

“No, it’s the Shifting World, but one can be excused for confusing the two,” he mused as he walked over to the bookshelf that had hidden the phone.

I turned to follow him and shook my head. “You’re not making any-” He tilted the top of the book on sextons and the whole bookshelf spun ninety degrees to reveal a hidden area, and in the floor of that space a ladder that led into the ground. The lower half of my jaw now reached the basement. I pointed a shaking finger at the bookcase, but my wide eyes lay on my grandfather. “There. . .there’s really a secret passage behind that?”

He slipped into the space and proceeded to climb down the ladder. “Yes, and I know this is a lot to take in all at once, pumpkin, but we do have to hurry.”

I shook off my shock and hurried after him. The ladder led down to a narrow passage some two feet below the floor. My grandfather disappeared from sight, so I hurried down the ladder and set foot on the dirt ground. The walls were a mixture of wooden support beams that held back the dirt and a few heavy stones. My head barely brushed the ceiling and my shoulders nearly touched either wall. The air was dry and made me sneeze.

A string of white lights illuminated the passage and revealed the space to be a very long tunnel. My grandfather turned a corner and again disappeared from sight.

“Hey!” I yelped as I hurried after him. “Wait up!”

I reached the three-way intersection and looked down the side hall. Grandpa

was climbing another ladder. I scurried down the new hall and reached the bottom rung. My head tilted back to see where he'd gone. There weren't any lights upward, but I could see his butt still climbing up many rungs.

"Grandpa!" I called.

"Hurry along, pumpkin!" he replied.

I sighed and began the climb. The ladder stretched past the first and second floors, and soon I found myself at a hatch through which my grandfather had vanished. I opened the hatch and peeked over the edge.

I was in the attic. My grandfather scrounged through a pile of boxes not too far from the true entrance to the space.

"Where is that blasted thing?" he muttered to himself.

I climbed out of the hole and just ducked a flying shoe box. "What are you looking for?" I asked him.

"Ah-ha!" he exclaimed as he dove his hands into a trunk. He drew out a small, familiar wooden box. It was the same bee bolt box from long ago.

I walked over to him and pointed at his discovery. "We came up here for this?"

He smiled. "Yes. Now we can go save your grandmother."

"Why'd we take this way? Why not the stairs?" I suggested.

"I doubt that Gargan fellow left anyone behind as sentries, but one can't be too sure," he pointed out as he scooted around me and back to the hidden trap door.

I spun around and threw up my arms. "This is all *nuts!*"

My grandfather paused as he knelt on the floor and turned to me. I'd never seen him so serious. "That may be, but we're the only ones who can save your grandmother, so there's little time to waste."

"If we're the only ones who can save Grandma then why didn't they kill us?" I countered.

"Fortunately, the porcine people have a rather low opinion of humans. They think they can blow on us and we'll be killed, though some of their breaths are pretty vile. Now-" he opened the door, "-follow me and be quick. We've lost a few days already."

“A few-” He disappeared into the hole before I could interrogate him further. “But we’ve only been out for a few hours!”

There was no response. I groaned and hurried after him. We returned to the intersection of tunnels beneath the house and this time took the path that led away from the living room. The musty air was replaced by dank mold and tree roots now stuck out of the walls.

“Where are we going?” I asked him.

“To the tree,” he told me.

“Why a tree?”

“Not *a* tree, *the* tree,” he corrected me.

“What’s special about this tree?” I persisted.

“It’s the portal to the Shifting World,” he revealed.

I pinched my nose between my fingers, and at our furious pace I nearly poked out both eyes. “Grandpa, there’s no other worlds. There’s just this one and the afterlife, and I’m not so sure about the second.” I paused and furrowed my brow. “Actually, I’m not sure about the first one, either.”

“You’ll see,” he promised as he broke into a trot.

Even with him so much older than me, I had a hard time keeping up with my grandfather. We hurried past a growing number of intertwined roots and a few holes showed up courtesy of the local gopher population. The tunnel grew shorter and I could hear the faint gurgle of running water somewhere nearby.

We reached the end of the tunnel, and rather than a ladder there was only a trap door. My grandfather put his shoulder against the door and pushed. The planks rose an inch before it clapped back down on its frame.

He looked to me. “Looks like youth is needed here, pumpkin. Give me a hand with this.”

I stepped up and, because of the narrow tunnel, turned to face him. We put our shoulders against the door and pushed upward. The wood was incredibly heavy and clumps of fresh dirt fell over us. We heaved the door open and it clattered onto its top, revealing a canopy of trees and above that the brightening sunrise sky. The gurgle came from a creek not more than ten yards away. I knew that creek. It was two miles from our house. We’d made all that distance in the

tunnel.

Grandpa climbed out first and I crawled after him. I got a look around the other side of the trap door and saw that a thick layer of grass and dirt lay on its top. My grandfather strode into the woods with a few words of encouragement. “Hurry along, pumpkin! We’re almost there!”

I climbed to my feet and followed him. He led us a quarter of a mile deeper into the woods until we reached a small clearing. The open space was lorded over by an ancient oak. Its thick branches blocked the sky and its children populated the forest as far as the eyes could see.

Grandpa walked up to its trunk where the bark had split. A small, dark hole led into the interior of the ancient plant. I marveled that the tree was alive with such a terrible hole.

My grandfather paused and knelt on the ground. His hand traced the footprints of many boots. “It looks like this Gargan fellow didn’t send any more than what we saw, and they all returned with him.”

I squinted at the myriad of mud and prints that overlapped one another. “How can you tell?”

“Practice,” he told me as he stood. His eyes followed the trail and stopped at the opening in the tree. He took a deep breath and tucked the box tighter under his arm. “One last time. . .” I heard him mutter.

“One last time for what?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “Nothing. Follow me and mind your step.”

Grandpa stooped and slipped into the hole in the tree. He vanished as though the darkness had swallowed him. I hurried up to the hole and leaned inside. The air wasn’t musty like I expected, but was rather fragrant, like an open field in bloom.

“Grandpa?” My echo came back to me as though it had traveled to the end of a very long tunnel and back. “Grandpa!” No reply.

I took a deep breath and climbed into the darkness. My foot tripped over a loose root, and I would have fallen had I not tumbled into an infinite darkness. I floated for a moment before it felt like a hundred hands grabbed the edges of my person and yanked me forward. A rush of wind whipped past my face and my

scream was behind me almost before it came out of my mouth.

The surreal travel lasted only a moment before I was thrust forward and ejected into bright light. I rolled across some lush green grass and stopped after a few yards on my back. Above me a shimmering sun smiled at my prone form. I sat up and my eyes widened.

Stretched before me was an endless field of flowers dotted with patches of trees. A few small hills broke the monotony, and in the distance the white caps of tall mountains hinted at a very different environment.

I wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

5

"Hmm. I gained more weight than I thought."

I twisted around and gaped at the figure behind me. Standing there decked in the clothes of my grandfather was a young man on the good side of forty. His short sandy hair glistened in the bright sunlight and his handsome features still held the bloom of youth. He held up the waist of his pants as they tried to slip down to his ankles. The wooden box was still tucked under his arm.

I struggled to climb to my shaking legs and looked him up and down. "G. . .Grandpa?" I stuttered.

He looked up and sheepishly smiled at me. "In the flesh, pumpkin. The young flesh, that is."

I pointed a shaking finger at him. "B-but how? Who? Where?"

"Time differences with a touch of magic, me, and the Shifting World, as I told you before," he answered me in his dictionary-like manner.

I shook my head and furiously blinked my eyes. "This has to be a dream. It just has to be."

"If only that was true, pumpkin," he agreed as he tried to take a step forward. The box fell from his arm and clattered to the ground. "Drat." He bent over, and in doing so lost the grip of his pants. They slid down and revealed his polka-dotted boxers.

"Let me take that," I insisted more out of habit than any acceptance of the

weird situation.

He sighed. “I suppose some things never change. Even as a young man I find my self struggling to balance life.”

I stooped and scooped up the box. The bolt and bee stared back at me. Now the fun little colors weren’t so funny. I took a deep breath and looked sternly at my young grandfather. “Now, tell me everything that’s going on. *Everything*.”

“I suppose I do owe you that much, if only so that we may survive this world,” he mused as he swept his eyes over the field. “This is the Shifting World, or rather a part of it. The portal between worlds is through there.” He pointed at a large tree nearby. It was a perfect replica of the one back home. “The trees have joined souls, so anyone can use it to travel to our world. Your grandmother and I did so many times before your father was born, though the last time we went was about forty-four years ago.”

I gestured to his person. “And. . .and *this?*”

“Time passes differently in this world. For every year that goes by in this world, a year and three-quarters passes in ours. Excluding leap years, of course, when it’s a full two years. Here that brings about a rather festive season where-”

“But that doesn’t explain how you got *younger*,” I persisted.

He smiled. “Time is ruthless, especially in this world. It demands you look your age, and in this realm I would only be a young seventy-four.”

“That is *not* young!” I argued.

He chuckled. “Perhaps not in our world, but in this world it’s not uncommon for even humans to live past two hundred.”

I ran a hand through my hair and shook my head. “This is. . .this is just nuts.” I glanced down at the box held in my other hand. I grasped the sides in both hands and thrust it at him. “What’s in here?”

“Some rather important trinkets,” he revealed as he pulled out a key from his pocket. He held the opener to me. “Now that we’re here you can open it.”

I took the key and after a few moments of trying to get my shaking hand to work I succeeded in inserting the key. The lock sprang and dropped onto the ground. I took a deep breath and opened the lid.

Inside was a purple velvet interior, and on that surface lay a few cheap-

looking medallions along with a dog whistle. I blinked at the contents before I looked up at my grandfather. “This is it?”

He turned his nose up and sniffed. “Those are rather valuable items in your hand.”

I drew out the dog whistle and held it up between two fingers for him to see. “A dog whistle?”

“Actually, that item you hold is a summon flute, a rather rare and miniature flute,” he told me.

I set the whistle back in the box and lifted up a square medallion that hung on a chain of gold. The border was ringed in gold and the faces were a glistening silver. On the front face was etched a lightning bolt, and on the back was a tornado. “And this?”

He took the medallion from me and smiled fondly at the object. “My first medallion. That’s how I received my nickname here.” He drew the chain over his neck and the medallion fell into place over his chest. His fingers danced over the bolt insignia and he chuckled. “So long ago. So many adventures.” He cleared his throat and looked up at me. “On that note, you shouldn’t refer to me as ‘Grandpa’ or ‘grandfather’ in this world. Storm Sage, or merely Sage, will do.”

I blinked at him. “Why should I call you that?”

He puffed out his chest a little and nearly lost his pants again. “I happen to be a rather famous individual in this world, so any family connection to me may endanger both of us. You should also call your grandmother ‘Bee.’ That is-” he scanned the horizons and frowned, “-when we catch up to those hog hijackers.”

“Why do they want Grand-” A look of warning from my grandfather stopped me. “Why do they want Bee?”

He shook his head. “I can’t say, but she has rather a unique ability with animals, hence the summon flute.” He furrowed his brow. “I wonder if the fools realize she can control far fewer animals without the focus the flute gives her.”

My shaky legs became downright wobbly. I clutched my head and slowly sank down onto my knees. My grandfather turned back to watch me sink.

“Jane!” he cried out as he dropped after me. He grasped my shoulders and

looked over my face. “You’re pale. Is it the sun?”

I bowed my head and snorted. “The sun, the grass, this *whole world existing at all!*”

He clasped my chin between two fingers and raised my eyes to his. A soft smile spread across his lips. “Whatever happens I’m sure you’ll be fine. You *are* the granddaughter of the Great Storm Sage and the Beastly Bee, after all.”

I blinked at him. “‘Beastly Bee?’”

He chuckled. “A rather amusing nickname your grandmother peddled a very long time ago.”

I nodded at the medallion that hung around his neck. “So that thing really controls storms?”

“Creates and controls,” he corrected me.

“Can. . .can I see you do that?” I asked him.

He stood and shook his head. “We wouldn’t want to catch unwanted attention. Besides-” he hoisted his pants up again, “-we have more important matters to which to attend, like finding an appropriate pair of pants and Bee.”

I climbed to my feet and looked around. A primitive dirt road passed by ten yards from where we stood and stretched to southward and northward. “It shouldn’t be too hard. They had only a few hours head start.”

“In our world, yes, but in this world several days have passed since they came through,” he reminded me as he looked around. “There!” he shouted as he stumbled forward. He stopped a few feet from the road and stooped to pluck a small blue object from the grass. I hurried up to him and saw that he held my grandmother’s hair comb in his palm. He pursed his lips and glanced in either direction. “Which way?” I heard him mutter.

“Can’t you use your tracking skills?” I suggested.

He shook his head. “No. There’s been a rain since they passed through here and a little bit of cart traffic. We’ll have to guess and hope it’s the right way. Here, hold this.” He handed me the comb and walked into the middle of the road.

I looked down at the comb and pressed the item tightly between my cupped hands. “Grand-Sage?”

“Yes?” he replied without looking at me.

“What’ll they do with. . .with Bee if she can’t help them?”

My grandfather’s back stiffened and his voice was flat. “They’ll kill her.”

I bit my lower lip to keep it from trembling. My fingers pressed hard against the teeth of the hair comb. I shut my eyes to stop the tears of fear. That’s when I heard her. My grandmother.

“Let go of me!” My eyes shot open and there was a woman in the hold of two of those brutish porcine. She wore the same flowered dress as my grandmother and had the same spunk as she thrashed and dug her heels into the dirt. “Let go or I’ll bite you!” she warned them.

I whipped my head to my grandfather and pointed at the group. “Grandpa! They’re right there!”

He raised his head from his search of the road and blinked at me. “Pardon?”

Gargan stopped at the lead of the group and turned to sneer at my grandmother. “Will you be quiet?”

“They’re right there!” I repeated before I rushed the porcine who held Bee. I aimed my shoulder at the nearest one and rammed my body into his.

That is, if I hadn’t gone completely through him. I stumbled and twisted around to fall butt first onto the road. The scene continued to play out.

My grandmother glared right back at Gargan. “Don’t you use that tone on me, young man! I have friends in high places!”

He chuckled. “I’m sure you *did*, but not anymore. How long have you been out of this world? Nearly seventy years? Even here that’s a stretch of decades.”

Sage came up to me and knelt by my side. His worried gaze was ever on me. “Are you okay, Jane?”

I shook my head as a sly smile slipped onto my grandmother’s lips. “I warned you.” She pressed lips together and whistled a sweet, chirpy song.

A flock of black birds rose from the nearest thicket of trees. They flew high into the sky in an arch. At the apex they pressed their wings close to their bodies and dive-bombed the porcine. The pigs waved their hands madly in the air to repel the attack of beak and claw as the screeching birds tore at them.

“Shut her up!” Gargan called to his minions. One of the men knocked Bee

upside the head. She dropped limp in their grip and hung there. The song ended and the birds scattered. “Now let’s hurry up,” Gargan ordered his men.

The pair of porcine dragged my grandmother between them in the northerly direction. Her head lolled to one side and her comb fell where my grandfather had found it near my feet.

The scene and all its players vanished. I was again alone with my grandfather, or had I always been alone?

6

"What's the matter, Jane?" he asked me again.

I shook my head as I gazed with wide eyes at the vanished figures. They'd disappeared in a blink of an eye. "I-I don't know. I saw Grand-Bee and Gargan and the others. They were just right there." I pointed at where they vanished. "But now they're gone."

My grandfather furrowed his brow as his eyes flickered between my face and the comb clutched tightly in my hand. "You're sure they were just here?"

I nodded. "I'm sure!" I frowned as my tried to reconcile how I had witnessed the scene and my grandfather had not. "At least, I think saw them. They were dragging her that way." I pointed northward.

Sage took the comb from my hand and studied the object. "There doesn't seem to be a spell attached to it. . ." I heard him mutter.

"What kind of spell *would* there be?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I don't know. Perhaps a seer spell. Here." He held the comb out to me. "Take it again and see what can be seen."

I took the comb, but we remained alone. I shook my head. "There's nothing there."

"Hmm." Sage stood and cupped his chin in one hand as he studied me. "How very strange."

"What's very strange?" I questioned him. "What's going on?"

"I wish I had an explanation, but come-" he held out his hand to me while

the other kept a hold of his pants, “-we have a group of porcine to catch, and northward is as good a direction as any other.”

“But what did I see?” I persisted as I took his hand and he helped me to my feet.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure we’ll find out when we reach Bee,” he assured me as we started our slow walk up the road. “Now let’s be off, at least to find myself a decent set of trousers and both of us a new set of clothes.”

I looked down at myself. There was dirt, but otherwise I was clean. “I think I’ll be okay.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure you won’t, unless you want to catch the attention of every creature in this world, bears included. They’ll be quite interested in your unique, otherworldly smell.”

“There are bears in this world, too? How?” I wondered.

“A joined world tends to share its creatures as well as its sentient beings,” he told me.

I glanced nervously over my shoulder. The plains around us were empty but for the occasional birds. “What other things are around here?”

“Well, there are birds, and man-eating squirrels.” My jaw hit the dirt road and he chuckled. “I jest.” I was halfway to metaphorically wiping my brow when he made an addendum to his list. “It’s the rabbits that are man-eaters, and that’s no lie. Stay away from anything cute and cuddly. It’s learned that such a skin attracts the rather unwary of the sentient creatures.”

A cloud floated over us followed by a chill breeze. I tucked the box under one arm and wrapped my arms around myself. “What about the weather?

“Generally mild,” my grandfather reminisced as his eyes took on a faraway look. “Though the peaks of the Bracken Mountains are a tough spot if you don’t have the proper attire, and a blizzard might sneak up on you in a matter of seconds.”

Another cloud passed over along with its persistent child, the cold wind. I shivered. “What’s with the-hey!”

My cry came as I felt a pair of sharp claws clutch my shoulders. I was lifted off the ground and the box clattered to the road where I had just vacated. I

whipped my head up and my eyes grew as large as saucers.

Above me and the length of a bus was the scaled body of a dragon. The unmistakable long snout, sharp teeth, and leathery wings denoted this creature's species, along with a tail that acted like a rudder at the back. The front claws held me while the back claws were tucked close against its pale belly. The rest of the monster was a pale shade of gray, though the scales glistened in the sun as though they'd been sprinkled with glitter. It was like watching a river in motion, only I wanted no part in this swim.

"Grandpa!" I screamed as feet stretched into yards beneath me.

My grandfather stumbled after me with one hand on the belt of his pants and the other with the box clutched under his armpit. "Hang on, Jane!"

"Tell *this* thing that!" I snapped back.

"It's a dragon," he corrected me as he slowly fell back against the speed of the strong wings. "They generally are very docile except when provoked, or hungry-" With each word his voice grew a little more faint, "-and they're known to eat-"

The rest of his sentence faded into the widening gap between us as the dragon took an updraft and rose into the air. Fortunately, I didn't need to hear the last part. My mind was perfectly capable of guessing what he was going to say, and my heart followed suit by playing the tango on double the usual speed.

The dragon flew me and my musically inclined heart over the plains to a small, craggy hill that stretched above the flatlands. The hill had a few overhangs, and it was on one of the larger ones that the dragon landed. It set me down on my feet, but my legs were so shaky that I stumbled away from the beast and dropped backward onto my butt. I gaped up at the monstrous beast with its sharp fangs, flaring nostrils, and swath of black hair.

Wait, hair?

The dragon not only had quick-acting Rogain, but also a problem with its build. Namely, that it was losing its body mass, and quickly. The dragon shrank to human form and even added a nice set of duds that consisted of a loose fitting white blouse shirt, a black vest over that, and rough, brown leather pants. A worn trench coat covered most of his new form, and a 'he' it turned out to be as his

stubby chin replaced the prominent dragon chin. The gray dragon eyes changed to gray human eyes, and in a few seconds I was gaping at a handsome human man.

He took a step toward me in fine black leather boots. “Are you a sorceress?”

I scuttled back and shook my head. “N-no.”

He looked me up and down, and his eyes showed his doubt. “Then why are you dressed so strangely?”

I shrugged. “I-I don’t know. I always dress like this.”

He tilted his head to one side. It was the cutest expression. “Then who are you?”

I snorted. “Who am I? You’re the one who just kidnapped me! Who the hell are *you*? *What* the hell are you?”

A sly smile slipped onto his lips as he walked toward me. I scampered back on my hands and rear until one of my hands slipped into nothing. I glanced over my shoulder and watched a few bits of rubble slide loose and drop down the sharp hillside. Footsteps made me whip my head back to the not-dragon.

The man walked up to me and held out his hand. “My name is Caius, and since you seem to have emerged from a lonely cave, I am a dragon shifter. And you are?”

I swallowed the boulder in my throat and nodded. “Jane. Just. . .just a plain human.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Jane, now would you like me to help you up or are you comfortable on the rock?” he teased.

I reluctantly took his hand and he helped me to my feet. Maybe a little too exuberantly helped because I stumbled forward into his chest. He caught my upper arms in his strong hands and chuckled. “We seem to be becoming acquainted quite quickly.”

I blushed and pushed away from him. “W-well, kidnapping a girl generally does that.”

“I only meant to ask you if you were a sorceress,” he defended himself.

I snorted. “Is that how you ask all your questions?”

“Only if they’re to a lovely woman,” he countered.

“Jane! Jane!” The voice was that of my grandfather. I peeked over the edge and saw him standing at the bottom of the hill. He was bent over and even from that distance I could see him trying to get air into his lungs. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” I called back.

Caius offered me his arm. “Care for a ride down?”

I cringed. “I think I’ll avoid flying the Claw Skies for today.” He gave me a puzzled look. I sighed. “I’ll just climb down.”

“It’s too steep,” he argued. “Now just let me help you.”

“No. I’m really-hey!”

Caius swept me into his arms and nestled me against his firm chest. I glared up at him until I saw his wings spread out behind him. He walked us toward the edge.

“Wait! Hold up! Lemme off!” I yelped as he stepped off the precipice.

We tipped over the edge and dropped toward the unforgiving ground. Caius opened his wings and took in all the air from around us and all the air from my lungs as I let loose a loud scream. I clung to his chest as we glided over the rough rocks of the hillside and sailed down to where my grandfather waited. Caius landed on his legs and soon put me on mine.

I immediately took the opportunity to sink to my knees. My grandfather hurried over and knelt by my side. A teasing smile lay on his lips.

“Have a pleasant trip?” he teased.

I raised my head and glared up at him. “Yeah, *Sage*, it was just hunky-dory.”

“‘Hunky-dory?’” our new companion spoke up.

Sage stood and smiled at him. “A saying of happiness where we come from.” I snorted. He nudged me with his foot and kept his attention on our new ‘friend.’ “And you are?”

“Caius,” the man re-introduced himself. “A fellow traveler like yourselves.”

“I don’t think we’re into the habit of kidnapping other people,” Sage mused.

“He thought I was a sorceress,” I spoke up.

“Your clothes *are* rather odd,” Caius protested as he looked my grandfather over. “And ill-fitting.”

“I found a rather successful diet,” Sage admitted as he hitched up his pants

higher. His eyes flitted over Caius' form and he arched an eyebrow. "How very odd."

"What is?" Caius asked him.

Sage rubbed his chin as he inspected the dragon man. "You seem to have quite a strange aura, young man. Is there perhaps a hiding spell around you?"

Caius tensed but kept the smile on his lips. "I'm sure it's just your imagination."

Sage gave him a knowing smile, but nodded. "Perhaps it is, but for what were you wanting a sorceress?"

"I'm looking for someone. An old friend," Caius admitted. He nodded in at the north. "I heard he'd gone that way, but I haven't been able to pick up his tracks."

"That person wouldn't happen to be a porcine, would it?" Sage asked him.

Caius narrowed his eyes. "It would, but what do you know of it?"

"We are also after Gargan, if that's whom you seek," my grandfather revealed.

The dragon man eyed us with a careful gaze. "You don't appear to be his followers."

Sage chuckled. "Quite the contrary, and I believe from your tone and posture that you are of the same band as we."

Caius gave a stiff nod. "I am. He stole something valuable from me."

"Then we have something in common. He has stolen my wife, though for what purpose I cannot guess." Sage eyed him. "You wouldn't happen to know the reason, would you?"

Caius pursed his lips. "I don't, but if Gargan is involved it won't be good."

I wrapped my arms around one of my grandfather's and gave a tug. "Could I have a talk with you, *Sage?*"

"If you'll excuse us," Sage requested before I half dragged him away.

I stopped out of earshot of our new companion and spun around to face my grandfather. "What are you doing?"

"Making the acquaintance of a fellow traveler," he told me.

"A fellow traveler who just *happens* to be following Gargan so soon after

us?” I pointed out.

A soft smile slipped onto his lips as he looked at me with admiration. “Smart thinking, pumpkin. The same thought struck me. However-” he glanced over his shoulder at our waiting companion and studied him for a moment, “-even if this fellow turns out to be an agent of Gargan, he’s still likely to lead us to where they have taken Bee.”

I pursed my lips. “And if he decides he gets hungry on the way and won’t wait for his boss to catch us in a trap?”

“We’ll keep him well-fed,” Sage assured me as he broke off and strode back to Caius. “Would you like to travel with us?”

Caius’ eyes flickered to me and that evil sly smile twitched at the corners of his lips. “It would be my pleasure.”

7

"If you don't mind a simple detour," Sage mused as he hitched up his pants, "-we're in need of some more appropriate attire."

"I'd prefer it. We don't want to catch the attention of Gargan's men," Caius pointed out.

Sage turned to the north and squinted into the distance. "If I recall, there was once a village along this route where a fine seamstress once lived."

Caius shrugged. "Perhaps. I'm not from this area myself."

"Where do you hail from, my friend?"

Caius smiled. "From further south. And yourself?"

I rolled my eyes. Even my amateur eyes could see the two were trying to pump one another for information.

Sage gestured down at himself. "We come from a very different land."

"That's certainly true, and I don't think I've caught your name," Caius noted.

Sage bowed his head. "My name is Sage."

"That's quite a title to take, even among the followers of Gad," Caius commented.

"'Gad'?" I repeated.

Sage coughed into his hand. "How silly of you to forget the omnipotent god, my dear Jane."

"God's here, too?" I piped up before I bit my tongue.

Caius studied me with an arched eyebrow and his teasing smile. "You don't

know about god and dragon shifters?”

“She’s led a rather sheltered life,” Sage explained as he handed me the wooden box along with a warning glare. “Sometimes it makes her blurt out odd things.”

I dumbly nodded. “Yeah, what he said.”

Caius looked between us for a moment before he turned his attention to the northern horizon. “Well, if we’re going have any hopes of catching Gargan then we’d better get going.”

“Could we fly on your back?” I suggested to the dragon. “That would make things quicker.”

Caius chuckled. “You really have been living in a convent.”

I glared back at him. “I’m just new to this-” a warning look from Sage made me turn my trajectory, “-this whole ‘traveling the world’ thing, okay?”

“Dragons, or most shifters, can’t use their full form for very long. The strain is too much for our bodies,” he told me.

I looked at the road and drooped. “So we walk?”

“We walk,” Sage agreed as he led the way with his pants threatening to drag.

I followed after him and Caius, annoyance that he was, sidled up beside me. His stupidly handsome looks didn’t keep back the sullen anger I felt against his crack about the convent, so I kept my eyes glued to my grandfather’s back. It was strange not to see his wispy hair and neck wrinkles. I almost missed them.

“I’m sorry about the convent joke,” he apologized.

I shrugged. “It’s all right, I guess.”

“How long ago was your friend’s wife captured?” he wondered.

I shook my head. “I don’t really know. Time is. . .well, it was a traumatic experience, so I’ve kind of lost track of time.”

He stared ahead and chuckled. “You don’t trust me.”

I whipped my head to him and glared at the dragon. “Your introduction was to kidnap me!”

“I really did think you were a sorceress,” he insisted.

“Have you met any sorceresses?” I questioned him.

“Two, but one turned out to be a hag,” he admitted. A faraway look slipped

into his eyes as he smiled fondly. “She almost ate me, but we certainly had some fun-” he paused and glanced at me before continuing, “-some exciting times.”

I snorted. “I know what sex is.”

He feigned surprise. “You do?”

A devilish smile slipped onto my own lips as I nodded. “Yes, and I’ve even participated a few times.” My grandfather broke out in a fit of choking. “*With protection*,” I added.

“Protection from what?” Caius asked me.

I waved away his question. “From unintended consequences, but that’s not important. What’s important is that I know a lot about the world, just not the fine details.”

“Like a dragon shifter,” he mused.

I frowned at him. “Are there really that many of you guys?”

A flash of pain flitted across his eyes before he turned his face away from me. “There’s quite a few, and yet not very many.”

By his tone I had the horrible feeling that I’d somehow hurt him. “Did I say something wrong?”

He shook his head and his smile returned. “Nothing I probably didn’t deserve.”

I stopped and held out my hand. “Truce?” He paused and turned to look from my hand to my face. I grinned. “Or don’t you shake hands in the real world?”

He grinned and took my hand in his strong grasp. I felt like my bones were going to be crushed. “They do, and I accept your truce.”

“Could you return my hand?” I whimpered.

He winced and released me. “Sorry. I’m not usually so physical except in fights.”

“Do you get into a lot of those?” I asked him.

He gave me a wink. “Only when the need arises, and it does arise a lot.”

Sage had continued up the road and now had a fifty-foot head start. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled at us. “We need to hurry along now, children, or we won’t make the village before-” His teasing was interrupted by him tripping over his own pants.

“Sage!” I yelled as Caius and I hurried up to him.

Sage sat up and rubbed his temple as he glanced up at me. “In case I don’t make it even to the village, tell Bee I love her.”

I snorted and wrapped my arms around one of his. “Stop being a baby and let’s get you up.”

Caius took my grandfather’s other arm and together we hefted him to his feet. The dragon man steadied him before he looked him over. “I may not be able to carry you on my scales, but I can still carry you on my back.”

Sage hitched up his trousers and shook his head. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had the joy of being on an adventure, and I’m not going to lose one inch of road to being carried.”

Caius shrugged. “If that’s what you want then I’ll have to take another companion.”

“Hey!” I yelped as he swooped in and lifted me into his arms. I glared up at his grinning face. “I can walk just fine!”

“We wouldn’t want you to fall like your kin,” he argued.

I started back and my lips flapped open and shut. “L-like my what?”

He chuckled. “Kin. The resemblance is unmistakable, particularly that glint in your eyes.”

Sage smiled. “Smart lad. Yes, we are related, but I would like to request that you not let that secret on to the rest of the world.”

“Of course, but on one condition.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What?”

“That I get to carry you to the next village.”

I rolled my eyes. “For God’s sake. . .”

“All I ask if the pleasure of your close company,” he pointed out. “Surely that’s worth the secret I’ll keep close to myself for the rest of my life.”

“Deal,” Sage agreed.

“Grandpa!” I snapped out of habit.

Caius laughed. “So that’s the relationship? You look quite sprightly for a grandfather.”

Sage smiled. “You should see me in top form, but let’s hurry along so your

‘condition’ may be met.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” I protested.

“No,” was the reply from both men.

I crossed my arms over my chest and sank into Caius’ arms. A dark cloud settled over my brow. “Gentlemen’s agreements, my ass. . .”

“I’m only trying to protect you from the dangers of the road,” Caius assured her as they walked the winding road.

I snorted. “What? Like a sprained ankle?”

Sage stopped and squinted into the distance. “We may yet find out. Look.”

I looked at where he nodded. An old woman shuffled our way. She was dressed in a ragged shawl and a blue dress that was stained at the bottom edges. Her long, disheveled gray hair cascaded over her shoulders. One of her hands grasped a twisted stick that she used as a cane. She stared at the ground and mumbled to herself as she swayed to and fro on her journey toward us.

“An old woman?” I guessed.

Caius set me down and walked up to Sage’s side. His eyes flickered to my rejuvenated grandfather. “You’re only human, aren’t you?”

A soft smile slipped onto Sage’s lips. “To be human is to be many things.”

“Then you’d better stay back and let me handle this,” Caius commanded.

Sage bowed his head and took a step back. “As you wish.”

“It’s just an old woman,” I protested as the wizened old creature came within fifty feet of us.

The ancient creature must have heard my voice because she raised her head. She smiled and nodded her head in greeting. “Fare greeting, fellow travelers!” she called to us.

“Fare greeting, old mother,” Caius returned.

She looked up at the sky and squinted her eyes against the bright sunlight. “Quite lovely weather today, is it not?”

“It is, old mother, but that’s no benefit to you,” Caius countered.

The old woman returned her attention to him and blinked her eyes. “What do you mean, young sir? The sunlight is the bread and butter of the old.”

Caius nodded at the ground beneath her feet. “Then why don’t you offer the

sun its due and cast a shadow."

The woman's wrinkled features twisted into an ugly scowl. Her lips curled back in a crooked grin that revealed her sharp teeth. "You're quite attentive, dragon cull, but not attentive enough to notice that I've taken yours."

Caius' eyes widened and he looked down. I followed his gaze and gasped. The high sun cast a round shadow beneath him, but that shadow now twisted into the two-dimensional figure of a small dragon. The creature opened its mouth and I felt a vibration run through the air. It was in pain. At the same time Caius gasped and clutched his chest as he dropped to his feet.

"Caius!" I shouted as I rushed forward.

Sage blocked my path with his arm. His face was calm but for the look of disgust directed at our new foe. "Hag."

The old woman grinned. "Yes, and proud of my heritage. Not like you filthy humans who destroy not only your own past and future, but those of other species."

Sage scoffed. "Quite noble words for a creature that survives off consuming the souls of others. Release the man in your power immediately."

She cackled. "And leave his tasty soul to rot in his mortal form? Hardly!"

"Run!" Caius choked out as he doubled over. "Just run before she gets you!"

He cried out as a white glow appeared around his body. Part of the glow broke off as a tear-drop shaped translucent blob. The blob arched over the road and landed in the open palm of the hag.

She chuckled as she raised the blob to herself. "Quite a pure soul. Yes, it shall be very tasty." Sage strode past the trembling Caius and stopped ten feet from the hag. The woman looked up and sneered at him. "You dare to challenge me? Or do you wish to go before your friend?"

"I challenge no one, but I offer you a chance to escape," he extended to the creature.

She snorted. "You would grant me leniency? You who has no power over me?"

"I may not have power over you, but-" he stretched one arm straight above his head, "-other elements are at my command."

I heard a deep rumble and the sun vanished. My eyes looked to the skies and my jaw hit the dirt as I beheld a giant storm cloud appear out of nothing. Lightning shot across one half to the other, followed by a thunder boom that shook the ground.

The hag gaped at the clouds as I did. Her wide eyes lowered to look again at her antagonist with new respect, and fear. “Who. . .who are you?”

My grandfather smiled. “Your end. Goodbye and good riddance.”

He flung his arm down. A bolt of lightning shot out of the cloud and struck the hag. She exploded in a brilliant white light that sent her innards sailing over everything. I ducked a particularly large piece of flesh and twisted around where I tripped over my own stumbling feet. My butt met hard earth and my head tilted back to watch the cloud disperse as quickly as it had come. The soul piece she’d held in her hand flew back into Caius and the glow around him disappeared.

I looked to my grandfather as he turned to me with a smile. The medallion around his neck gave off a soft glow that slowly faded. “What do you think of your grandfather now?”

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I swallowed the lump in my throat and gathered my scattered thoughts into a few scattered words. “H-how? When? Where?”

He chuckled. “Quite a while ago, and that’s a story too long to tell at the moment.”

Caius struggled to his feet and studied Sage with narrowed eyes. “Who are you really?”

Sage shrugged. “Just your average traveler.”

Caius shook his head. “No average traveler could summon a storm that powerful that quickly. Only-” He froze and his eyes widened.

“Only what?” Sage asked him.

He narrowed his eyes and his face hardened. “What is your full name?”

Sage smiled. “My full name is Storm Sage, Bringer of Bolts, Lord of Lightning, and Keeper of the Medallion of Tempestia.”

There was silence for a moment, and then I snorted. “Seriously? That’s your name here?”

He stretched to his full height and frowned at me. “It is, and don’t tempt me to legally change yours to match it, young lady.”

I glared at him. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

“Wait a moment,” Caius spoke up as he pointed at Sage. “You’re telling me you’re Storm Sage, the most powerful sorcerer of the last five hundred years?”

A little bit of air left Sage as he wrinkled his nose. “Hardly only five hundred. The number should be closer to a thousand.”

“But you vanished eighty years ago!” Caius argued.

“Seventy-nine and three quarters, to be exact,” Sage corrected him.

I leaned back and scrutinized my grandfather. “You’re seriously that important here?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” he countered.

I snorted. “It’s just a little hard to swallow that an historian could be a powerful magician.”

“An historian?” Caius interrupted us. “You chose to leave the road behind to be an historian?”

Sage shrugged. “It was decent pay and kept my family safe, at least until this Gargan fellow came barging into our lives. However, that’s not quite the most important matter at hand. We have to hurry along or we may never find their trail.”

He turned away and proceeded up the road. Caius stepped up to my side and watched Sage leave with a mixture of disbelief and pensive thought. His voice was soft and low. “Even his aura is hidden. . .”

“What’s that mean?” I asked him.

He shook himself and looked down at me. “An aura is a flow of energy that comes from people and things with powerful magic.”

“So like what Sage saw around you?” I guessed.

“Do you have any magical abilities like your grandfather? I don’t sense anything around you.” He’d evaded my question, but I let it drop.

I snorted and shook my head. “No. I can’t even work the magic of an electric toaster.”

“An ‘electric toaster?’” he repeated.

I waved off his question. “It’s nothing. Anyway, Sage is right, we need to get going.”

We caught up to my swiftly-walking grandfather and I sidled up to his side. “So are we going to meet a lot of hags on the road?” I asked him.

“Not often, but there are other dangers along these routes,” he warned me.

I winced. “Like what else?”

“Dragons who kidnap beautiful damsels,” Caius spoke up as he joined us on my other side.

“I think I can handle those,” I quipped.

Sage swept his eyes over the vast, dipping plains before us. “It’s been some years since I went over these, but during our adventures we met vampires, ghosts, nymphs, naiads, and the occasional doppelganger.” His eyes took on a wistful, if slightly lecherous, look. “One of them was particularly amorous and tried to seduce me.”

“So no angels?” I joked.

He chuckled. “No, nor any gods, though there were plenty of people who thought they were.”

“Like you with your abilities?” I teased.

He puffed out his chest a little. “They’re not the work of an amateur, if I do say so myself, though I must admit meeting a hag isn’t a safe endeavor.” He furrowed his brow. “It was rather strange to meet one so boldly out in the day, though. She must have been desperate for sustenance.”

“Could that thing have really taken our souls?” I asked him.

“In a heartbeat,” he assured me.

“That hag said something about you,” I mused as I looked up at Caius. “She called you a ‘dragon cult?’”

“Dragon cull,” Sage corrected me.

“So what does that mean?” I asked my two companions.

Sage coughed into his hand. “It’s a rather-well, a rather rude-”

“It means I’m a dragon that’s been rejected by my own kind,” Caius explained.

“She could tell that?” I asked him.

“Dragons don’t usually travel without other dragons, much less with two humans,” he revealed.

I wrinkled my nose. “Isn’t that kind of racist?”

Sage smiled. “Species tend to keep to their own even in our world, pumpkin. However, as enlightening as this moral and philosophical discussion is, we

should be going.” He started on his way and didn’t look back as he called to us. “Come along now, children!”

Caius and I glanced at each other. We both shrugged and hurried after his quick stride. The winding road took us across the grass-covered field and past trees that I recognized as elm and oak. Familiar is a welcome sight among the unfamiliar, but it was also perplexing.

“So, um, Sage?” I spoke up as I wracked my mind for how to phrase this question with Caius present. “The trees here are the same as home, right?”

“Yes, though there are many other varieties that aren’t native to our home,” he told me.

“So is there anything else especially different about this place? Besides old ladies trying to kill us at every turn?”

He lifted his eyes to the blue sky. “The stars are rather different.”

“The stars are different than where you’re from?” Caius asked us.

Sage glanced over his shoulder and chuckled. “We’re from a rather long way off.”

“I’ve traveled a good distance myself and never found the stars to be different,” Caius mused.

“Where have you traveled, young man?” Sage wondered as he slowed down so we walked shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

Caius smiled. “Oh, just a few places. Mostly the cities.”

“Then perhaps you visited the Trails?” Sage asked him.

“A few times.”

“Where are the Trails?” I spoke up.

“A rather depressed section of one of the major cities,” my grandfather told me.

I looked at our surroundings. “So what’s this place called?”

“The Plains of Fiora,” Sage revealed as he wistfully glanced around us. “Legend says that a goddess blessed the flowers to be ever-blooming as a gift to her mortal lover before she ascended to heaven.”

My eyes widened. “Is it true?”

Sage laughed and shook his head. “I highly doubt it, but I must admit the

flowers blooming year-round, even in the winter, leaves me puzzled."

"A magic user who doesn't believe in a little godliness?" Caius mused.

"So long as the gods leave me to my own devices I will leave them in my books," Sage assured him. He nodded at the road ahead of us. "But I believe we're coming to the village of Woller where a seamstress of exceptional quality awaits us."

We crested one of the short hills and found ourselves looking down into a small hamlet. A group of two dozen huts huddled together near a passing stream. Their roofs were made of thatched reeds taken from the water and stone mixed with wood posts were their walls. A few gardens grew behind the homes with their trees full of fruits and their vegetables riping on the vine. To the left was the start of a small range of mountains with tree-covered sides and scragged tops.

Sage hitched up his pants and sighed. "Now let us hope she hasn't passed on."

We walked down into the sleepy village, and I looked from left to right. Most of the adults sat just inside the open doors to their hovels. Their narrowed eyes, glistening in the strong sun, watched us with tense observation. A pair of children sat outside one of the houses.

"Children!" I heard their mother hiss at them from inside the house.

The children scurried to their bare feet and both limped painfully into the house. Their mother, also bare of foot, glared at us before she slammed the door shut.

"Friendly village," I mused.

"Outsiders often cause more trouble than benefit," Sage told me as we neared the end of the short main street. He stopped before a small hut with a porch roof. Beneath the roof, seated in a rocker, was an old woman. She looked worse than the hag. Sage smiled and walked up to her. "Are you not Miss Nelly?"

She narrowed her eyes at him as she continued to push herself back and forth with her bare feet. "What if I am?"

"Do you still weave your wonders, old mother?" Sage asked her.

The old woman stopped her rocking and eyed us with a careful, searching

look. “Strange weather we’ve been having.”

Sage smiled and nodded. “Quite strange.”

Her gaze rested on the medallion around his neck. “Could be the work of a magician.”

“It might, Miss Nelly, but we’re not looking for magic, but for clothes,” he reminded her.

“We’re looking for a magician,” she snapped as she raised one bare foot. The old woman wiggled her toes at us. “Someone’s made off with our shoes.”

“Can’t you make more?” I suggested.

Nelly stomped her foot back to the ground and glared at me. “Don’t you think we’ve tried that? Those get stolen, too! And all the night after they’re finished!” She pounded one fist against the arm of her rocker. “Blast that thief, and his curse!”

“What curse?” Caius inquired.

She stabbed a finger at her bare feet. “That monster steals our shoes and curses the owner with these terrible pains! I feel like I’m being stabbed all over my soles!”

“It can’t be that bad,” Caius argued.

Nelly whipped her head up and narrowed her eyes. “Not ‘too bad,’ young man? *Not too bad?*” She gingerly rose to her feet and took a careful step toward him.

A strange movement at her feet made me look down. My eyes widened as I beheld the flesh of her feet push out like it was a bag of Lego blocks being squeezed. Her toes twisted and twitched, and she nearly twisted her ankle to escape the terrible flow of the bulges.

Nelly’s face twisted in pain and with a frustrated cry she fell back into her chair. She clutched her chest and clenched her teeth as her eyes flickered up to him. “Does that prove my point, young man? No one is spared this horror. The men are unable to thresh the fields, the women to hoe their gardens. Even the children can hardly stand to run, though the poor darlings try.”

“We would be glad to help, but we’re rather in a hurry,” Sage told her.

My jaw hit the ground. “Gr-Sage! We should help them!”

He turned and the stern look in his eyes made me shrink back. “We have other matters to attend to, remember?”

I stabbed a finger at where the children had disappeared into their house. “But children are being hurt! We have to help!”

Sage studied me with a strange, faraway look in his eyes before he hardened his face and returned his attention to Nelly. “Then that is the only way we might acquire clothes?”

Miss Nelly eyed us with her sharp wisdom. “There’s always geld, but my services don’t come cheap. That fiend’s gone and stolen some of my best cloth. And it’ll cost extra so we might hire a magician.”

“How much extra?” Sage wondered.

She leaned forward. “How much geld do you have?”

“Not an eld to our name,” Sage told her.

Nelly sneered and dropped back against her rocker. “Then off with you! Shoo! I’ll have nothing more to do with such heartless and cheap creatures!”

“Is there nothing you won’t take in lieu of geld?” Sage persisted.

She rubbed her chin. “That would depend on if you know magic, for I wager normal folk can’t catch this fiend. We’ve tried, and he has always eluded us.”

Sage pursed his lips, but bowed his head. “We do have some talent in that area.”

“Then you’ll rid us of this fiend?” she asked him.

He nodded. “We accept.”

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Nelly pointed at withered old finger at the rocky hill that rose up behind the houses on the opposite side of the road. “The villain lives there, of that we’re sure. We’ve searched everywhere else, but the nooks and crannies of those hills could hide an army.”

Sage bowed his head. “We will return tomorrow.”

“I’ll have the outfits you want by then,” she promised.

Sage smiled. “A cape, if you would, for myself, and perhaps I might borrow a belt?”

A hint of a smile moved the corners of her lips as she reached down and unbuttoned her own belt. She tossed the belt to him. “We shall see about the cape, now off with you.”

“Wait a moment,” Caius spoke up as he looked from Sage to Nelly. “Don’t you need to measure us first?”

She turned to him and turned her nose up to sniff the air. “I need only see you to know your sizes.”

“Come along now,” Sage insisted as he walked across the road. “We have a long hike ahead of us.”

Caius and I hurried after my swift grandfather and met him behind the other houses. I sidled up to him. “Are you sure we need to do this?”

He turned his head to me and there was a twinkle of admiration in his eyes. “No, but thank you.”

I blinked at him. “What? Why?”

“For reminding me how much like your grandmother you are, and how much of a fool I can be.” He returned his attention to the high hill in front of us.

For myself I slowed to a stop and gaped at him. Caius came up to my side and watched my grandfather steer himself onto a narrow path. “He has a lot of respect for your opinion.”

I shook myself and looked up at him with an arched eyebrow. “How do you see that?”

He nodded at my grandfather. “I was brought up on the many adventures of the great Storm Sage. Some of them weren’t flattering.”

“What kind of not-flattering?” I asked him.

“He wasn’t known for helping others, and acquired the nickname of Cold Gale among some of the smaller towns.”

I winced. “So he didn’t help people much?”

“Actually, he helped everyone who needed it because his companion would convince him to do it. Her name was Beastly Bee, if I recall.” My face fell as he looked down at me. “She’s the one you’re trying to rescue, isn’t she?” I bit my lower lip. He smiled. “It’s all right. We all have reasons for our secrets. But your grandfather there-” he returned his attention to Sage’s retreating back, “- if he truly wanted to leave, he would have left without the clothes, but your words struck the heart of the Storm Sage and made him change his mind.”

I pursed my lips and followed my grandfather as he climbed the path. The great Storm Sage. Cold Gale. I didn’t know any of these men, and yet they were my grandfather.

“Are you coming?” Caius called from ten feet ahead of me. A teasing light entered his eyes. “Or would you like me to carry you again?”

I glared at him and stomped toward him. “You know, you don’t have to stay with us. You could go on ahead and see if you can find Gargan.”

A soft smile lit up his handsome features as he studied me with his gentle green eyes. “I could, but I think I want to remain with you.” My cheeks warmed with a blush. He cleared his throat and nodded up at my grandfather. “Besides, I think he’s a little out of practice, or that hag wouldn’t have gotten as far as she

did with me.”

He climbed the path after Sage, leaving me more flustered and speechless than I’d ever been in my life. I shook off my blush and hurried after them, and together we made the arduous climb up the rocky path. The green grass of the plains was replaced by prickly bushes and knotty pines. The terrain roughened. One side of the narrowing path was the steep hillside with its weeping rocks courtesy of an underground spring. The other side was the quick drop to a nice bit of forest beneath us where the hillside had deposited a millenia of sharp, jagged rocks, a harsh and final consequence to unwary travelers.

Which turned out to be me. My foot slipped on one of the damp rocks and in trying to gain my balance I slammed my stumbling feet on the edge of the path. The rocks and mud gave way, cutting the path’s width in half and leaving me with not enough room to walk. I twisted around and clawed for a hold in the hillside. The stones loosened beneath my fingers and rolled past me over the precipice. The jumble of rocks crashed down to their brethren below as my legs slipped over the edge.

“Jane!” Caius shouted as he reached out for my hand. We missed each other by a hair’s breadth, and I fell over the side.

Time slowed down as I felt air rush past me. I could see Caius’ look of terror and determination as he prepared to jump off the path after me. My grandfather raised his hand. His medallion glowed and a strange white mist appeared out of his arm. It slithered around him like a snake made of fog and swooped down past Caius.

I gasped as the snake wrapped itself loosely around me and stopped my fall. The fog whipped at my clothing, making it rise and flap around me. That’s when I realized I was in the middle of a dust devil, or in this case a dust snake.

The windy creature flew me back up to the trail and deposited me on the ground between the two men. Sage knelt in front of me and set his hands on my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

I wrapped my arms around my shaking body and looked up at him with a shaky smile. “A-adventuring isn’t as fun as the books tell it.”

A small smile appeared on his lips as he shook his head. “No, it isn’t, but

come on."

"Was that the squall serpent?" Caius asked him.

Sage helped me to my shaking feet and arched an eyebrow at our companion. "How would you know that?"

"Your reputation proceeds you, even after this long," Caius explained.

Sage chuckled. "I see. Yes, it was the squall serpent, though with less emphasis on the 'squall' part."

"M-more magic?" I managed to stutter out.

He nodded. "Yes, but let's not try that again. Aside from the danger, I don't want to warn our foe that we're coming."

"You have an idea of what we're after," Caius commented.

"I do," Sage confirmed. "What we happen to be chasing is most likely a shoemaker."

I blinked at him. "A what?"

"A shoemaker, otherwise known as a small elf," he explained.

I snorted and held up my hand as we climbed the path. "An old hag, a small elf, and a-ah!" My foot slipped on the wet rocks again, but this time Caius was the one to catch me before I performed a rerun.

"And a handsome dragon," he finished as he set me on my feet again.

"I think we should get going before we lose a certain someone," Sage teased as he turned to face up the path.

We continued our journey, but a question nagged at my mind. "If this elf is a shoemaker than why's he stealing shoes? Shouldn't he be making them?"

He didn't turn around when he answered me. "I'm not sure, but I hope to find out tonight."

A crooked smile slipped onto Caius' lips. "You want to trap him with our own shoes."

Sage nodded. "Yes, and I imagine Jane and my own attire will be a most tempting treat for him, but first we have to reach the highest point of the hill."

"So he can smell the shoes from wherever he's hiding?" I guessed.

"No," Sage replied as he glanced out over the forests below us, "-so I can enjoy the stars and the open fields. It's been a long time."

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We wound our way up the winding path and reached the hilltop at sunset. The top was bumpy and speckled with trees over an area of some forty yards, but a small clearing provided a good spot for camp.

Sage sat on a log and caught his breath. “Climbing is rather harder than I remember here.”

“You’re still older even if you’re not old anymore,” I reminded him as I took a seat at his side.

His eyes held a mischievous glint as he looked to me. “Then I should let you two young folk build a ring of rocks for the fire and collect the wood. It will get quite chilly up here, otherwise.”

“If it comes to that I offer my warmth to Jane,” Caius spoke up.

Sage chuckled. “That’s a kind offer, but I myself would rather have a fire, now off with you.” He gave me a gentle push off the log and I stumbled to my feet. “And don’t go too far.”

I turned to him and frowned. “Why?”

A dark cloud settled on his brow as he set the box on his lap. “The shoemaker isn’t some sunny Santa Claus elf with a mischievous streak. Elves can be dangerous if they feel threatened, and we’re most certainly threatening it by trying to stop its activities.”

I winced, but proceeded to collect the firewood. Caius grabbed a dozen loose

stones and made a ring out of them. After a few minutes wandering the trees I returned to find he'd also dug a hole in the ring to protect the fire from a chill wind that occasionally blew across the hilltop.

I deposited my load close to the rocks and admired the size of some of them. "So being a dragon shifter must be nice. I mean, being strong and being able to fly."

His back was to me as he positioned the last of the stones closer to its brethren. I noticed his back tensed. "It has its drawbacks," he told me as he patted the rock and stood. "But that should do it."

"What kind of drawbacks?" I asked him.

"Here, let me handle those," Caius offered as he stooped and picked up half my bundle of sticks. He set them into the fire pit in a careful log-cabin style with the smaller ones in the 'house.'

I knelt beside him. "You're not answering my question."

"I think we're going to need more wood," he commented.

I pursed my lips as I studied his face. His eyes were glued to his task. "It's that bad, huh?"

He paused and sighed. "Listen-" he turned his face to me and for the first time outside the hag incident I saw no humor in his expression, "-you don't know much about what goes on in the real world, and some things are better left unknown."

I frowned and stood. "Fine. I'll go get more firewood." I turned to leave, but he grasped my hand and stopped me. I looked down to find his eyes searching my face.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way," he apologized.

"It's fine," I growled as I wrenched my hand free. "Anyway, I'd better get that wood before it gets dark."

He looked away and nodded. I marched toward the woods. A quiet cough made me pause at the log where my grandfather sat. "I hate to interrupt a lover's quarrel-"

"He's not my lover!" I snapped. My voice was a little too loud. I noticed Caius wince. My shoulders sagged. "I'd better go get that wood."

I trudged into the trees with my mind frustrated at not only Caius, but myself. Why was I getting so worked up over his secrets? My grandfather and I had a far larger one, and we weren't exactly being forthcoming with it.

It's because you like him and want to know about it.

"Shut up," I growled at my thoughts.

Bite me.

I sighed. Even my inner thoughts were being a pain in the butt.

I gathered another load of wood and lumbered back to the campfire. The men had managed a good fire and Caius now sat on another log opposite my grandfather. Sage had his shoes off and had set them beside him. When I arrived Caius was passing him a small satchel from his coat.

Sage saw me and held up the bag. "Dinner is served."

"Good," I sighed as I dropped my load near the fire. "I'm starved."

I plopped my butt on the log next to my grandfather. Sage pulled out a thick slice of meat and handed me the bag. I accepted the invitation until I opened the drawstring mouth. A terrible odor hit my nostrils and curled my innards. It was like sniffing roadkill.

I clapped my hand over my face and shuddered. "What is this?"

"Don't tell me you've never had fink," Caius spoke up with feigned shock.

"My grandma kept our house fink-free," I told him as I held the bag out for Sage to take.

"That's all there is to eat," he warned me.

My face fell and I gingerly opened the bag again. The smell wasn't any better, so I quickly slipped my hand in and out. What I held resembled jerky, but with the putrid smell of decay. I watched my grandfather take a bite and a couple of chews.

"What's it taste like?" I asked him.

He chewed a little more and swallowed. "It tastes very similar to chicken."

I perked up. "Really?"

"No."

My shoulders drooped. I looked at the slice and took a bite. The meat was tough, but the taste was wonderful. It was like chewing on hardened hamburger

mixed with pork. “This isn’t too bad!”

Sage watched me take another bite and chuckled. “I’m glad you’re enjoying your rat.”

I froze mid-bite. “You’re joking?” I mumbled through a mouthful of food.

He shook his head. “No. Fink is rat.”

My first instinct was to gag. My second came from my stomach and told me to shut my trap and enjoy the rat flavor. I swallowed hard and couldn’t help but shudder. “Yum.”

“Fink isn’t an easy prey to catch,” Sage mused as he turned his attention to Caius. “How did you manage that feat?”

Caius smiled. “Let’s just say it was easy enough for me to acquire, but not the hunter.”

“You stole it,” Sage bluntly accused him.

Caius shrugged. “Let’s just say I wandered past the cart without paying.”

My jaw hit the dirt. “*You stole from a street vendor?*”

“It’s been done before,” he defended himself.

I threw the bag at his face. He deftly caught it in one palm before the leather made connection with skin. “You’re nothing but a thief! Is that why you’re after Gargan? So you can steal something from him, too?”

Caius stiffened and a cold look slipped into his eyes. His voice was terse and harsh. “Don’t put me together with that swine. I want nothing more than to get back-” He clenched his teeth together and turned his face away.

Sage cleared his throat. “Well, on that note might I suggest some of us turn in? This may take a long while, so we should take turns standing watch. I’ll volunteer for the first shift.”

“I’ll take the second,” Caius snapped as he slipped off his log and onto the ground. He leaned his upper back against the hard surface and set his chin on his chest before he closed his eyes. “Wake me when the little gremlin comes.”

Silence fell over us. I glanced up at the sky as the last rays of sunlight left this strange world. Stars appeared, but my grandfather was right. None of the constellations were familiar to me. I couldn’t even find the Milky Way, though the sky was perfectly clear. It made me feel for the first time how truly separated

we were from our world.

And how much trouble this one was. I looked down at Caius. His chest had slipped into a rhythmic up and down motion. I turned to Sage and lowered my voice to avoid the thief overhearing me. “You think we can trust him?”

“Because he’s a thief?” Sage returned as he prodded the fire with a thick stick.

“Because he’s not telling us everything,” I pointed out.

“Nor are we to him,” Sage countered as a soft smile spread across his lips. His playful eyes flickered up to me. “I would say that makes us apt companions, does it not?”

“We’re not thieves,” I reminded him.

His humor fled him as he looked up at the starry sky. “Theft is the least of our worries here.”

“Like more hags?” I guessed.

He nodded. “Yes, and other horrible things that I hope won’t need mentioning.”

My eyes drifted down to the box that lay in his lap. I nodded at the wooden container. “What else is in there?”

He shook himself from his reverie and held the box out to me. “See for yourself.”

I took the box and opened the lid. The comb was the first item my eyes saw. I picked it up and pressed it between my palms as I looked around.

“Do you see anything?” he asked me.

I sighed and shook my head. “No. Maybe it was just a fluke on the road.”

“Your fluke took us in the correct direction or we would not have met him traveling the same way,” Sage pointed out as he nodded at our sleeping companion.

I frowned at him before I looked to my grandfather. “Why do *you* trust him so much?”

“I have a great deal of experience with new acquaintances,” Sage pointed out with a smile. “That’s what leads me to believe that this fellow-” he gestured to Caius, “-means *us* no harm. Gargan, however, might feel his wrath.”

I pursed my lips and returned my attention to the box. I set the comb back down and picked up the whistle. “So this lets her control animals?”

“Communicate is a better word,” he told me. “One doesn’t control animals so much as convince their playful minds to do what you want.”

“So is that hard to do?” I wondered.

“Not for your grandmother. She has quite the knack for it.”

I fingered the little whistle and my heart grew heavy. A few whispered words escaped my lips. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“I know your grandmother enough to have faith in her ability to survive any situation, and with her customary humor intact.” He chuckled. “The poor fools are probably sleeping with flees and stopping to pick lice off themselves every few miles which will slow them down and allow us to catch them.”

“And then what?” I wondered.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure, but I am curious to know why they kidnapped her.” His gaze fell on our companion. “Perhaps our searches are related.”

I snorted. “Maybe, but good luck getting that out of him. Anyway-” I jerked my head toward the fire, “-did he breathe on that to light it?”

“Not all dragons have brimstone breath,” our sullen serpent spoke up.

I yelped and leapt to my feet, spilling the contents of the box. Out rolled a strange, cloud-colored ball, a white substance similar to putty, my grandmother’s hair comb, and a singed ball-point pen.

Sage’s eyes widened and he stooped to pick up the pen. “My lucky pen! It was with this that I learned I had the ability to control the weather,” he mused as he admired the mechanical device. “I was holding it when I summoned my first lightning storm. Needless to say the pen was slightly cooked by my over exuberant first lesson in storm power.”

I hardly gave my grandfather any mind as I glared at Caius. “You’re supposed to be sleeping!”

He peeked one eye open and smiled at me. “And miss such an interesting conversation?”

Sage pocketed the pen, slipped the other items back into the box, and turned

his attention on us. “In the future you might want to change the rhythm of your breathing. No one is that consistent for that long a time.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Caius promised as he sat up. His eyes flickered between us. “What’s your true story, if you don’t mind my asking?”

I frowned. “Maybe we-” My grandfather held up his hand.

Sage’s eyes remained on Caius. “Perhaps it’s time we did tell him the whole-”

“Grandpa!” I shouted as I pointed at his shoes.

They were missing.

11

We all leapt to our mostly-clothed feet and looked around. “There!” Caius shouted as he pointed at the trail we’d climbed.

A dark figure some two feet tall and clad in leather clothing was waddling away, and in his hands was my grandfather’s clean pair of white shoes. At Caius’ shout the short figure yelped and dashed off down the trail.

“After him!” Caius shouted as he hurried after the thief.

“A moment, if you will,” Sage argued as he tiptoed across the hard, pine needle-covered ground. “Unless you wish to carry me, that is.”

Caius skidded to a stop and glared at him. “This isn’t time to be funny!”

“On the contrary, the joke is on our friend,” Sage informed him as he reached where Caius stood. He gave the dragon a wink. “I know something that little fellow doesn’t, and with it we’ll soon track him to his lair.”

“What is it?” Caius questioned him.

“I placed an icicle of my own magic inside one of my shoes hat is slowly melting through a hole. Its droplets will lead us to it.”

Something caught my attention and I pointed at the ground. “You mean that icicle?”

Sage and Caius followed my finger. There, laying on the ground in a puddle of its own water, lay a tiny icicle.

Sage’s eyes widened and he whipped his head up to stare wildly at where the elf had disappeared. “Pick me up and follow that elf!”

Caius swept him into his arms and rushed down the trail with me trailing behind. The dragon boy was fast. *Really* fast. My human self stumbled over every rock and root while he seemed to float over them. At a curve in the path where the options were turn left to keep on the trail or turn right and bounce down to a short ten-foot drop into a clump of trees, my feet decided right was a good option.

I yelped and tumbled over the side. Fortunately, my bones broke my fall and I rolled to a stop courtesy of a hard tree trunk and my shoulder. I sat up and groaned. Tomorrow my body would be in contention for best bruises of the year.

“Jane!” I heard my grandfather call out. I’d never heard such panic in his voice. “Jane!”

“I’m-” I shifted and winced. “I’m alive.”

“Wait there,” he instructed me. That sounded like a really good idea, so I leaned my back against my roll breaker and closed my eyes.

In a moment Caius and Sage were at my sides. I opened my eyes and was thankful for the worried looks on their faces. That is, until my grandfather lifted one of my bruised arms.

“Ow!” I yelped.

“It’s not broken,” he mumbled as he inspected my person.

“Need some help with that?” Caius offered.

“There doesn’t appear to be any serious damage,” Sage assured him as he checked my eyes. He leaned back and smiled. “You’re as durable as steel.”

“I guess that explains why I feel like I’ve been riveted,” I quipped. I adjusted my aching body and looked from one face to the other. “What about the elf?”

Caius shook his head. “It was gone before we reached the first corner.”

Sage leaned back and rubbed his chin as he studied me. “There is something we found.”

“What?” I asked him.

He reached into his pocket and drew out a small cap. “This was laying on the trail. In his hurry our ‘friend’ dropped it.” He held out the small hat to me. “Might we see if lightning strikes twice?”

I blinked at him before I understood what he meant. “You mean if I see

anything?” I guessed. He nodded. I shrugged and reached out for it. “I guess we can-”

The moment I touched the cap I let out a small scream. The elf stood only two feet in front of me and walked in my direction. His face was gnarled like a combination of a shriveled apple and old leather. He wore a rough wool shirt and pants, dyed with some green and brown colors so that he blended well with the forest surroundings. Atop his head was the tell-tale cap.

The elf turned at the last second and scurried along the loose rocks to my left where he disappeared behind a mess of vines. I felt a weight lift from me and an unknown instinct told me my television show had ended.

“Did you see anything?” Sage asked me.

I nodded. “You didn’t see him at the corner because he didn’t reach it,” I told them as I pointed a finger at the vines. “He went in there.”

Caius furrowed his brow as he looked from one of us to the other. “How does she know that?”

Sage smiled as he took the cap from me. “That is a mystery to solve another time. In the meantime, let’s go pay a house call to our new acquaintance.”

The men helped me to my feet and we walked over to the vines. Sage picked up a long stick and poked at the greenery. The tip didn’t meet any resistance, so he drew them aside. A short, narrow cave was revealed to us. The dank smell of fungus wafted over us and made me wrinkle my nose.

“I don’t think I can fit in there,” Caius spoke up.

Sage chuckled as he crept up to the hole. “The advantages of being as ‘skinny as a prayer bug’, as Bee often tells me.”

“A what?” I asked him.

“An animal similar to a praying mantis,” he told me as he studied the opening. “Now if we would be quite we might have a chance of sneaking up on this elf, provided he hasn’t set traps along this route.”

I stiffened and my voice as a littler higher than usual. “Traps? What kind of traps?”

“That’s difficult to say without finding them, or setting them off,” he mused before he crawled into the cave.

“Sage!” I hissed as he disappeared into the darkness. I sighed.

A chuckle made me glance to my right where Caius smiled at me. “The Storm Sage isn’t quite as hard as he used to be, is he?”

“No, but he’s still a pain,” I muttered before I jerked a thumb at the cave. “Now are you staying here or do you want me to shove your ass into the hole?”

He flashed me a lecherous smile. “As much as I would like that I think I can manage.”

Caius knelt on the ground and eased himself into the tunnel. It was a tight squeeze, but he managed without the bottom of my shoe. Damn it.

I followed and together we crawled over the rough, rocky ground. A few bits of straw hinted at habitation, but I only found them through sheer luck of the hand as my eyes were completely useless in such darkness. That’s why I ended up running into the back end of Caius.

“What’s going on?” I hissed.

“Sage has stopped, Caius told me.

“A moment,” came my grandfather’s voice from up ahead. “I seem to have triggered a trap.”

My blood ran cold. “W-what kind of trap?”

“I’m not sure. My hand is still on the mechanism.”

“Should we back up?” Caius suggested.

“I don’t believe that would save you,” Sage replied.

I could feel my heart thump hard in my chest. “So what do we do?”

“Remain still for a moment. This has forced me to turn on a light.” A faint golden glow came from his medallion, and with its I could see the tunnel stretched into the distance and beyond the ring of light. Sage leaned forward and inspected his left hand. “There’s a string beneath my hand that leads-” he followed the string up the wall and over our heads, “-a small pile of loose rocks above my head.”

Caius studied the ceiling. “I might be able to remove them from the net.”

“I would appreciate that very much,” Sage requested.

Caius raised one hand, but a noise stopped him. “Who invades the space of Tom Taildrum?” a crackly male voice called out from down the tunnel.

“Visitors, oh tailoring one!” Sage replied.

“Hmph! More like thieves! Perhaps I should let the whole ceiling fall on you!” Tom threatened us.

“Then you’d be trapped in here,” Caius pointed out.

There was a pause before Tom laughed. “Don’t you think I’m smart enough to have two ways out of here?”

“I’d say you’re not or you would’ve laughed faster,” Caius retorted.

“Well, I do, so don’t try me!” Tom snapped. “Now get back out of here and don’t come back!”

“I would dearly like my shoes back, and the others you stole,” Sage requested.

I noticed movement at the farthest reaches of Sage’s light. “You’re not getting anything, so just get out of here!”

Sage glanced over his shoulder and his eyes flitted up to the ceiling. Caius nodded and began to quietly pull the stones from overhead while my grandfather continued talking. “We really do need those shoes back, Mr. Taildrum.”

“They’re mine, so you can’t have them!” Tom screeched.

“Then might you at least tell us why you cursed the villagers with such a terrible affliction?” my grandfather insisted.

“You would, too, if they were climbing all over *your* mountain trying to flush you out like you were a rabbit!” There was a tiny sniffle. “Makes me wish those good ol’ days were back where every animal would hand over their fur to me.”

“Is there any way we might help?” Sage offered.

There was a snort and a growl. “I don’t need your help or anyone else’s, now get out of here before I drop the whole ceiling on you!”

“The stones are down,” Caius announced.

“What? What stones?” There was a pause and I noticed a short figure down the tunnel skipped a little closer to us. “What are you doing down there? Get out now!”

Sage gingerly raised his left hand, and when nothing happened he continued down the tunnel. “We will gladly obey, but not without the shoes.”

“Stay away from me! Back, I say! Back!” Tom screeched as his figure

danced from foot to foot. “Get out! Ah!” The light from Sage’s medallion fell over him, revealing the gnarled face I’d seen in the vision. He yelped again and disappeared around a corner.

Sage reached the end of the tunnel and stood in a short room. Caius and I followed, and we found ourselves in the den of the leather king, or so it looked like. The walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in shoes and rough leather that hung stretched on the walls.

“This could make a lot of shoes,” I piped up.

Sage’s attention lay completely on one corner of the room. A piece of hide was stretched out on a board, and a pair of shoes peeked out from beneath the board. That wasn’t unusual in such a shoe-strewn place, but these shoes quivered.

Sage’s medallion glowed and he swept his hand to one side. A wind cut across the room in the same motion and blew away the hide board. Our little fiend was revealed in all his quivering glory. He yelped and shrank back into a pile of shoes, one of which belonged to my grandfather.

“W-who are you to invade my sanctum?” Tom asked us.

“Merely some travelers who wish to help the villagers with their thief problem,” Sage replied.

“And their foot problem,” I added.

He blinked his eyes at me. “Foot problem? What foot problem?”

“Don’t play stupid with us,” Caius spoke up as he stepped forward. “Casting a sympathetic spell on shoes is easy, even for an amateur elf.”

A flash of anger swept across Tom’s eyes, but was quickly replaced with tears. He clasped his hands together in front of him and sniffled. “Have mercy on a poor elf. I’m only doing what I must to survive in this harsh world.”

“How about you make your own leather to supply your needs?” Caius suggested.

Sage held up his hand to silence our new friend and looked down at the elf. “We demand only the return of the leather you stole and a promise on your own soles that you won’t harm the village again.”

Tom’s face slipped into a sullen pout. “Then what’s left to me?”

“Whatever you acquired through your own means,” Sage told him.

His eyes flickered to me. “What about a lock of her hair? That should be a fair trade.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Is that it? Here.” I plucked a hair from my head and held it out to him.

“No!”

12

Both Sage and Caius leapt forward. Sage reached my fingers first and snatched the thread of hair from me a half second before Tom got a hold of it. The elf grabbed at Sage's hand, but my grandfather stepped back out of his short reach.

Tom's face twisted into a furious rage that reddened his cheeks and made his eyes glow light red in the dim cave light. "Give it to me!"

"So you can make her your slave?" Caius spoke up. "Not likely."

I whipped my head to him and my jaw hit the leather-bound floor. "Make me into his *what?*"

"The possession of the parts of a person's body, even their hair, and given willingly, will bring the victim under the power of the magic caster," Sage explained to me as he pocketed the hair. "That's called sympathetic magic, and elves are very adept at it."

Tom cackled and did a jig. "What's been given is mine, and I'll take it myself!" He leapt at me and landed on my hair. His little grimy hands dug into my hair and scalp. I screamed and flung him around as he held onto me like a bronco rider.

"Revoke the permission!" Sage shouted at me as he and Caius hit the wall to avoid my frantic movements. Tears welled up in my eyes as he yanked at my hair.

"How?" I snapped as he grabbed the body of the little troll.

“Say ‘I revoke permission!’”

“I revoke permission!” I screamed.

The elf screeched as an invisible force yanked him off me and slammed him against the far wall. He dropped face-first to the floor amid his treasures. Our short foe growled as he climbed to his unsteady feet. His eyes glowed a bright red now, and his teeth were long and sharp.

“You’ll pay for that,” he snarled as the glow extended to light up his body like a bug lamp, only this didn’t attract bugs.

It attracted the leather. The scraps, shoes, and hides shuddered and slowly slithered to him. They wrapped around his body like armor and built up layer upon layer, creating a terrible monster of leather.

Caius wrapped his arms around me and drew me back. “I think we need to leave.”

“Agreed!” Sage enthusiastically admitted as he, too, made a hasty retreat to the tunnel.

Sage went first followed by me. Caius brought up the rear. I heard a roar and looked over my shoulder. The red glow extended down the tunnel and I could see something stoop and look down the passage at us. It was Tom. Emphasis on the *was*. The face was worse than any scarecrow I’d ever seen, and the red eyes that peeked out beneath dozens of layers of leather as though looking out of a deep tunnel sent a chill down to my soul.

Caius shoved my rear forward. “Don’t look back! Just move!”

The leather face disappeared and the ground began to tremble. Rocks and dirt dropped from the ceiling and pelted our heads. One large rock struck me on the temple hard enough to drop me face-first into the dust. I came up choking, and something warm slid down the side of my face. I reached up and winced when my fingers found a thick river of my own blood.

Caius scurried up to my side and wrapped one arm around me. He pressed his own body hard against his wall to avoid me scraping my side as he half-carried and half-dragged me to the opening. More rocks fell and large chunks of dirt dropped on top of us as the trembles worsened. Sage waited for us at the opening and helped me out of the hole. Caius pushed off with his feet and flew

out just as the tunnel collapsed inward.

Caius rolled to a stop a few yards off as Sage helped me over to him. My grandfather set me on the ground beside Caius and knelt in front of me to inspect the side of my face. He didn't have much time to look before an explosion of rocks behind us grabbed our attention.

The hill we just vacated was pushed outward, throwing huge chunks of debris everywhere. Boulders sailed into the sky and toward us. Sage raised his hand and a larger version of the tornado that had saved me earlier wrapped around us. We sat in the eye as the rocks and dust were sucked into the vortex and thrown out. In a moment the chaos ended and Sage dropped our wind shield.

The hill was gone, and in its place was a hideous monster. Tom Taildrum was wrapped in layers of leather that made him into a hulking, engorged monster. He was now as tall as Caius, and his waistline was nearly the same measurement.

Even the elf's fingers were fattened by the leather as he pointed one of them at us. "No one insults Tom Taildrum and gets away with it! I'll skin you alive and use your flesh for a new pair of shoes!"

"I am fond of my skin," Sage quipped as he raised his hand to the sky.

His medallion glowed and a dark cloud appeared out of nowhere above us. Against the natural order, thunder roared before a bolt of lightning zipped down from the sky. Tom yelped and ducked down into his leathery flesh a moment before the electricity struck him. The scent of burnt leather wafted over the air and the grass around him was singed, but other than a few frayed edges around the collar he was unscathed.

Tom peeked out from his suit to survey the situation before he popped his head up. His face was one massive grin. "Pathetic! Your lightning is nothing against my new body!"

"Please tell me you have other tricks," I pleaded.

Sage pursed his lips as he stared hard at our triumphant foe. "Yes, but the close quarters means we may be swallowed in the damage."

Caius stepped in front of us and turned his head to the side so one eyes looked at Sage. "Protect Jane."

"What are you going to do against that?" I asked him.

He grinned. “What a dragon shifter is good at.” He looked to Tom and his skin began to change color to silver. “Getting rid of small problems with big solutions.”

Caius’ body stretched and morphed. It was mesmerizing to watch the tail slide out of his clothes and the wings burst outward. Scales popped out from his skin and his head lengthened into a snout. His body stretched out in all directions, including toward us.

“A little further back, perhaps,” Sage suggested as he helped me to the edge of the small clearing.

Tom Taildrum didn’t wait for our friend to finish his transformation before he charged. Caius was now a half body taller than him and swatted the elf with one of his claws. The elf was flung backward, but bounced off the wrecked hillside and landed neatly on his feet.

Tom laughed. “Not even a scratch from your filthy claws!”

Caius finished his transformation and stood tall and proud in his full dragon form. His shimmering mane and scales reflected the twinkling stars above us as he gave off his reply in an echoing roar. Tom tried to clap his hands over his ears, but his pudgy arms wouldn’t reach.

Caius charged. The elf grinned and thrust his hips out. His body swelled up like a balloon and collided with Caius’ face. The dragon was thrown back and landed hard on the ground onto his side. The earth shook and for a moment his whole body flickered like poor reception on a television. This television had x-ray capabilities because I swore I saw his skeleton. Then his flesh was back and he was climbing to his feet. He shook his jarred head and snarled at the huge dwarf.

Tom laughed as his form shrank back to its tall, leather-clad size. “Do you want some more of this wonderful feast?” He patted his stomach and his entire body vibrated like a tight drum. “I can expand as far as these hides, and hides, as you may know, can be quite flexible.”

Caius grinned, revealing his long rows of sharp teeth. He charged Tom, and the elf puffed out like a puffer fish. Caius, however, turned at the last moment and rushed around his bulky side. Because of his bulky size Tom couldn’t turn

with the lithe dragon and could only move his head and waddle his feet one small step at a time.

Caius circled the elf and encompassed his body around the bloated form. His dragon tail slipped around Tom's rear and, like an expert soccer player, he kicked Tom forward. The elf yelped and tumbled forward straight into the open, waiting jaws of Caius. The dragon's sharp teeth blew out the air in the leather and Tom screamed as he was engulfed by that powerful mouth. Caius raised his head and took a few deep, careful chews before he swallowed.

My jaw hit the ground. I couldn't look away as I pointed a shaking finger at the dragon. "Did he. . .did he just-?"

Sage chuckled. "Yes, yes he did."

I shook myself of my stupor and whipped my head to my grandfather. "B-but he can't do that!"

"Would you rather that little leather monger had done the same to us?" he countered.

"But. . .but people just don't eat people!" I argued.

He cupped his chin in one hand as he studied Caius. "In the Shifting World anything is possible, but this does pose a problem."

"You mean besides the murder charge?" I quipped.

He shook his head. "No. Nelly won't be pleased to know a dragon ate her leather."

Caius stiffened and his eyes widened. Sage and I tenses as a huge bump appeared in his throat. Caius made a terrible wheezing noise as the bump inched its way up his esophagus.

"H-he's not climbing up, is he?" I asked my grandfather.

"Wouldn't you rather him be eaten now?" Sage teased as his eyes remained glued on the dragon's pulsating throat.

Suddenly murder wasn't so bad as Caius braced his front feet. He tilted his head back as the lump reached just beneath his lower jaw, and with a powerful burst of force coughed out a huge brown wad. The ball rolled across the ground and came to a stop a few feet from where we stood.

My eyes scanned the wet wad for signs of movement, but there was nothing

but oozing dragon slime. I looked to my grandfather. “Is that. . .is that a wad of leather?”

Sage chuckled as Caius turned to us as his body slowly shrank. “How foolish of me. Through their own efforts it’s a little known fact that dragons are rather particular eaters, and I’d forgotten how adept they are at picking through their food and spitting out the bones.”

I felt the color drain from my face as I turned my head to my grandfather. “So Tom’s really-?”

Sage nodded. “Yes. Our friend removed the elf from his leather armor and ate him, but coughed up the leather like a cat with a hairball.”

I felt my head grow woozy, but it wasn’t from the disgusting description. The world spun around me and my legs dropped out from under me.

“Jane!” I heard my grandfather yell as the world went black.

13

"Jane? Jane?"

I wrinkled my brow and tried to bury myself deeper into the warm covers. "Not now, Grandpa. I'm having a funny dream."

There was a soft chuckle. "What's it about?"

A smile slipped onto my lips. "You're a wizard and Grandma can talk to animals, and there's this big dragon guy who's kind of cute."

"Am I?"

That voice. My eyes flew open and fell upon the grinning face of Caius. He stood behind my seated grandfather, and we all were in a small room with wood plank walls. My grandfather's attire had changed. I sat up to gape at his appearance. Gone were the coarse pants and the large plaid shirt, and in their places were a pair of soft brown cotton pants a gray cotton shirt with shining brown buttons up the center. Over all of that was a blue-gray cloak that floated with every little movement of his body as though he was embraced by a cloud.

Sage noticed my perusing of his person and looked down at himself with a chuckle. "Quite beautiful, aren't they? She even made me the cloak."

"And nearly killed us," Caius added with a smile.

Sage straightened and coughed into his head. "Yes, well, there was the matter of her finest leather being swallowed and spit back out, but she has the talent to get out the toughest of dragon stains. But if you'll excuse me for a moment." He stood and stepped to the side and back toward the door. "I'll see if Jane's clothes

are ready.” He slipped out, leaving me with Caius.

That was fine. I had something I had to say to him. “Um, Caius?”

He looked down at me with curiosity. “Yes?”

My eyes flickered down to his stomach. “Did. . .did you really eat that guy? The elf?”

He grasped the top of the chair with both his hands and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Was that the only way?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “It was the only way I could think of.” A grin slipped onto his lips. “Unless you thought me picking his pockets would have helped.”

“I-” I looked down into my lap and clutched the covers, “-I just wanted to thank you for helping us. I mean, you didn’t have to, but you did, and I’m. . .I’m. . .”

“Yes?” he persisted.

I took a deep breath and lifted my eyes to stare into his. “I’m glad you did, and I’m sorry I was so mean to you about being a thief.”

He took Sage’s seat and folded his arms before he shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

I frowned. “No, it’s not okay. I was a real jerk back there and I forgot that you didn’t even have to be with us. You could’ve gone ahead and left us to fend for ourselves, but you didn’t.”

His eyes softened as he studied my face. That evil crooked smile lay on his lips. “What can I say? I was always a fool for a pretty face.”

My cheeks warmed with a blush and I averted my eyes to stare once more at my lap. “I. . .I’m just saying-” He leaned over and set his hand atop one of mine. I whipped my head up and found our faces were only a few inches apart. His eyes were even prettier up close.

“I know what you’re saying, but you don’t have to say it,” he whispered. My gaze inadvertently lowered to his soft lips. Man, were they tempting. “As I said before, I was glad to come with you.” Did he move closer? He definitely moved closer. Our lips were almost touching. His voice was lower, if that was possible, and soothing. It was like listening to a soft breeze blow by your face on a cool summer’s day. “And I’ll be glad to keep with you-” Almost there. So close!

“Well, that’s taken care of!” Sage shouted as he flung open the door and marched into the room. We flew apart like two polar opposites and I turned away from him with a face redder than a fire truck. Sage paused and studied us with a sly smile before he cleared his throat and walked over to the bed. Over one arm was draped a few articles of clothing. “Did I interrupt something?”

“No,” Caius spoke up as he stood. “I was just telling Jane I was going to check the skies for any signs of Gargan and his men. Excuse me.” He strode out of the room.

Sage plopped himself down in his chair and chuckled. “Quite an excitable fellow, isn’t he? And handsome.”

“I-I hadn’t noticed.” I also hadn’t looked my grandfather in the eye since he came into the room.

Sage laid the clothes on the bed beside me. “Pity. He seems to have noticed you.”

I whipped my head in his direction and blinked at him. “You think so?”

His eyes glistened with mischief. “Yes, but you seem very interested in him, just the same. Are you considering an occupation in thievery?”

I picked up the top cloth and admired a soft white blouse like what my grandfather wore, but with frillier cuffs. “I just thought I’d give him another chance, that’s all.” I pressed the shirt against me and studied the look. “Do you think this’ll fit? It looks a little baggy.”

A telling glint in my grandfather’s eyes told me he wasn’t buying my really poor attempt at deflection, but he played along. “They’re made to be a little loose to allow air to flow through on these hot days. The cloak-” he lifted the bottom of the three pieces of cloth and revealed a brown cloak, “-will keep you warm.”

“I guess I’ll try them on then,” I told him as he swung my legs out of bed.

“Should I call in Mr. Caius to assist you?” he teased.

I pointed a finger at the door “Out.”

He held up his hands and backed up. “It was merely a suggestion.”

“*Out.*”

Sage bowed out and I turned to my attire. The brown cotton pants were

billowy, but not so much that they felt like they were going to fall off. The blouse fitted me perfectly, and the cloak was so light I hardly knew it was on my shoulders.

I stepped out of the bedroom and found myself in the main room of Miss Nelly's small hovel. The area was covered in stretched leather, bits of cloth, balls of yarn, and several spinning wheels. Baskets hung from the ceiling, and from them draped slips of hem fabric and twine. The floor was a dangerous place full of needles and cotton balls lying in wait to stab and trip.

The front door was open and a stream of early morning sunlight lit up the small room. I walked out onto the primitive porch and found Nelly in her customary chair. Sage was seated on the porch steps, but stood and turned to me when I walked out.

He surveyed me with a pleased smile. "In those clothes you look just like your grandmother."

I looked down at myself. "So this is what people-" I paused and my eyes flickered to Nelly. She sat in her rocker with a pair of needles in her hands and leather in her lap. "So this is what other people wear?"

"If they have the honor of wearing Miss Nelly's sturdy clothing," Sage added.

Nelly nodded. "Yes, and they'll outlast many an adventure."

I held up my old folded clothes. "What do I do with these?"

"Miss Nelly, will you do us a favor and hold our old clothes until we return?" Sage requested.

She gave a wink. "Aye, that I will, but don't go tarrying too long or I'll find a use for them."

Sage looked up at the bright morning light and furrowed his brow. "If Lady Chantura grants us her grace we should be back within a week."

"Chantura?" I asked him.

He turned his head to me with a smile. "Lady Luck, or Fate, whichever you prefer."

"And what are you wanting me to do with the other set?" Nelly spoke up.

"Hold them, as well," Sage told her.

“Other set?” I asked him.

Sage averted his eyes from mine and waved his hand to dismiss my question. “Merely an emergency set for Bee.”

Laughing children caught my attention, and I looked to the road. Kids ran to and fro with bright smiles on their faces and their laughter following them like happy echoes. Mothers drying dishes stepped out of their houses and watched the children run with twinkles in their eyes. The men were gone, but far off in the fields were heard the murmur of deep throats singing with their work.

“Wonderful music, isn’t it?” Nelly spoke up, and I noticed her gaze lay on me.

I blinked at her. “Music?”

She nodded. “Yes. The sounds of life now that our curse is lifted, and that’s all thanks to you and yours.”

“It was our pleasure, Miss Nelly,” Sage assured her as he stepped off the porch. “And thank you for the clothing.”

She smiled and bowed her head to him. “Farewell, Storm Sage. I hope you find what has brought you back to this world.”

Sage grinned. “You still have a wonderful memory, Miss Nelly.”

“And if I’m not mistaken you have someone to find,” she returned as she nodded down the road. “You get going and catch those fiends that have Bee.”

Sage’s eyes widened. “You saw them?”

She wrinkled her nose as she gave a nod. “Yes. Those fiends thought they could sneak through here during the night five days ago, but I watched them from my window. Porcine they were, and with them was a face I hadn’t seen in ages.”

“Was she okay?” I spoke up.

Nelly threw back her head and laughed. “That she was! She was giving them a time with cockroaches. I could hear them mumbling about their provisions being spoiled.”

Sage swept his arm across his chest and bowed lower to her. “Thank you for the information.”

She waved away his thanks. “None of that now, Sage. You just get along and

get Bee away from those horrible creatures, and come back for a spell. She was always the best at convincing moths to stay out of my knitting."

I noticed a strange look slip into his eyes, but in a moment the expression had passed and he smiled at her. "We will. Come along now, Jane."

Together we left the village behind and proceeded on our way, but I felt a heaviness settle on me that I couldn't shake.

14

We'd only traveled a half a mile before I looked around. "Where's Caius?"

Sage pointed upward. "There."

I followed his finger and noticed a large shape high above us. The shadow flew lower and I saw the shimmering belly of our dragon friend. Caius tucked his wings against his body and dove down like a bullet. My eyes widened as he targeted where we stood.

"Uh, should we move?" I asked my grandfather.

Sage smiled as he watched the small hill hurtle toward us like a dinosaur-killing asteroid. "Wait a moment and watch."

I shrank down as Caius plummeted closer to us. Fifty feet. Forty feet. Thirty. I yelped and flung my arms over my head. At twenty feet he spread his wings out and glided over us. A wind followed him that tugged me along so that I stumbled after him. Sage had braced himself and managed to stand his ground, but I ended up on said ground on my knees. I whipped my head up and watched Caius land fifty feet from us.

He transformed back into his human form and approached us with a smile. His teasing eyes fell on me, prostrate as I was on the dirt road. He stopped before me and held out his hand. "Breezy today, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know. I've been admiring the ground," I quipped as I took his hand.

He pulled me to my feet and Sage joined us. “I assume your search was fruitless.”

Caius nodded. “Yeah. I couldn’t see any sign of them.”

“Nelly informed us they had traveled through four days ago during the night,” Sage told him as my grandfather looked ahead of us at some distant mountains. “With such a head start they could be across the valley by now.” His eyes flickered to Caius and he looked the shifter up and down. “You’re sure you can’t carry both of us?”

Caius pursed his lips. “I’m sure.”

“If my memory is correct, dragons should be capable of carrying such a light load,” Sage persisted.

“Not this dragon,” Caius returned.

Sage sighed. “Then we will have to make do with another mode of transportation. Otherwise, we’ll never catch them.”

“What other transportation is there in this-” I caught myself before I said ‘world.’ “In this area?” A thought struck me and I snapped my fingers. “What about your powers? You lifted me up on that hill when I fell over. Why not do that with all of us?”

Sage rubbed his chin. “Though the winds under my control are capable of carrying us over great distances, they are unreliable. If a crosswind were to cut through us we could be carried far off course, or even torn to bits.”

A little bit of the color drained from my face. “I think we should keep our feet on the ground.”

Sage dropped his hand and chuckled. “Actually, I thought we might ride. There’s a stable not too far off where we might procure some beasts.”

“How can we be sure Gargan isn’t using them?” Caius pointed out.

A sly smile slipped onto Sage’s lips. “This is rather a unique stable with unique animals, so they limit their clientele to only the best.”

Caius grinned. “That might leave me out of it.”

“We will have to see,” Sage mused as he marched forward. “But come along now, children! An adventure awaits!”

Caius and I glanced at each other. He shrugged before he followed my

grandfather. I sighed and joined the group at the tail end. We wandered over hill and dale until the sun was high above us.

My stomach growled, reminding me that food had been a long time ago. Caius glanced over his shoulder, and with a teasing smile he tossed me some more of the fink. “If you don’t mind eating stolen rations.”

I bit into the jerky and wagged the remaining piece in my hand at him. “I do mind, but starving to death won’t help Bee.”

Sage chuckled. “Quite right, and if we should come into any geld we’ll be sure to frequent the jerky cart a great deal.”

“It’s a long ways to this jerky shop,” Caius warned him as he took a bite of his own piece. “Twelve days as the sparrow dives, and fourteen on my own wings.”

“That’s quite a ways for a dragon to fly, especially one incapable of carrying two humans,” Sage mused.

Caius frowned. “I had my reasons.”

“That I have no doubt. What was this item that Gargan stole from you?” Sage wondered.

Caius turned his face away from Sage’s prying gaze. “A family heirloom.”

A twinkle of knowing slipped into Sage’s eyes, but he merely smiled and looked ahead. “I see.”

“Sage?” I spoke up, and he glanced over his shoulder at me. “What if Gargan’s already reached those mountains? What if we can’t find them after that?”

Sage’s face softened and he slowed down to sidle up to my side. He wrapped an arm around my waist and smiled at me. “I’m sure Bee will have thought of that and left a clue for us to follow.”

“Speaking of following,” Caius wondered as he studied me. “I’ve seen a lot of magic in my time, but I’ve never seen anyone track someone by touching an object they’ve owned. How’d you do that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just touched the hat and saw-I don’t know, a shadow? Like it wasn’t real, but it’s what happened. At least, I think that’s what happened.”

“We will have to study your talent at another time,” Sage mused as he nodded at a bend in the road. “That’s where we turn off.”

The hills on either side of the valley edged closer to one another, pinching the plains. The trees from the opposing foothills stretched out and nearly touched both sides of the road, creating a canyon-like gap of foliage.

“Off the road?” Caius asked him, and Sage nodded. “How far off?”

A sly smile slipped onto my grandfather’s lips. “That would depend on our party.”

“Meaning what?” I asked him as he led us off the beaten path.

“Meaning we will see how long-” He jerked to a stop and his smile widened. “It would appear we have quite a pure party for a thief being present.”

Caius and I moved up to his sides and saw a small, low stable before us. A barn and horse yard sat in a small clearing of the left-hand trees. The yard was made of thick poles and the barn was a gabled design with a low shed on either side. A clapboard house on the left finished off the picturesque scene.

“I didn’t see this from the air,” Caius spoke up.

“The magic that surrounds these stables keeps flying eyes from seeing it,” Sage revealed as he chuckled. “And most travelers would hardly notice a shimmer of light from this direction.”

“So it’s protected by magic that only lets a few people see it?” I guessed.

“A few *honest* people,” Sage corrected me as he tapped the side of his nose. “That would be the rub. Now then, let’s see how many of these noble steeds we might be able to procure, and for what price.”

Sage led us across the short strip of plain grass and onto the dirt that surrounded the yard. Nothing moved save for a breeze through the trees that surrounded the area. We skirted the fenced yard and walked up to the central open barn door. Six stalls were on either side, and from them I could hear the munching of beasts. I walked up to one of the stalls with a noise and looked in. My jaw hit the floor.

I turned to my grandfather who still stood in the doorway with a sly smile on his lips. “There’s nothing here,” I told him.

He chuckled. “Naturally. There are several layers of magical protection, and

one of them is to make the creatures invisible without permission to take them out."

"And permission you won't get if I know that voice," a raspy voice spoke up.

I whipped my head to the far end of the barn. A figure silhouetted by the sun stood in the doorway. They wore black boots and a tan shirt with matching pants. On one hand they held a switch, and their other hand was covered in a long, thick black leather glove.

They took a step inside and revealed themselves to be a woman past middle age with short snow-white hair. Her sharp eyes studied us, but most of her attention lay on Sage.

Sage bowed his head to her. "It's been a long time, Miss Rhiannon."

She raised her nose and sniffed the air. "That's *Mrs. Rhiannon* to you."

Sage chuckled. "Then you were finally saddled. Was it Pullen who finally tamed you?"

"And what a fight it was," a man's voice spoke up. He appeared behind Sage, a man of the same age as Rhiannon but with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes much like my grandfather. The man wore the same outfit as his beloved, but without the ominous switch; though both his hands had the thick leather gloves on them. "She bucked me off more times than I can count, but I finally wore her down."

"Only because I thought you were going to hurt yourself getting down on your knee so often to propose," Rhiannon spoke up.

Pullen laughed as he came up behind Sage and clapped him on the shoulder. "But where have you been, Sage? And where's Bee?" His eyes fell on me and his eyes widened. "And who's the lovely little lady you've brought?"

"Bee is where we need to be, and why I've come here," Sage told him as his gaze turned to me. "As for the young lady, she's a new companion, along with this young gentleman here."

Caius bowed his head. "A pleasure."

Pullen chuckled. "That explains the noise in here. A dragon shifter would cause them to be a bit restless."

I looked Caius up and down before I returned my attention to Pullen. "How

can you tell he’s a dragon shifter?”

Pullen nodded at Caius’ face. “His whole body is a tale. A few lines in his face, the ways his muscles tense. He’s like a fine draft horse ready for war or a nice trot through the countryside. No other shifter holds such bearing.”

“As educational as this conversation is, we are in urgent need of some of your fine beasts,” Sage spoke up.

Rhiannon walked up and stopped five feet from Sage. She looked him over with her sharp, hawk-like eyes. “Have you any geld?”

“Not an eld to my name, as I told Nelly,” he told her.

Pullen looked over Sage’s clothing and laughed. “And yet you seem to have a pair of her finest clothes on your back! How did that happen?”

“A story for another time, old friend, but we really are in a hurry,” Sage insisted.

“Not without some geld,” Rhiannon reminded him.

“Perhaps a helping hand will be as good as geld,” Pullen suggested as he smiled at our group. “One of our animals escaped from the yard last night and our son, Pryder, has been out all morning trying to find her.”

Rhiannon frowned. “He’s still out there with monsters out and about as they are?

“Are the roads no longer safe?” Sage asked her.

She shook her head. “No, not for fifty years. It’s almost like their senses have left them and they wander about day and night unsure of anything but to attack anyone they see.”

“We’ve found them starving in the woods when there was plenty of food to be found in the trees in late summer,” Pullen added.

“We haven’t time to assist you against every evil creature, but we will gladly assist young Pryder in finding your lost animal,” Sage offered.

Rhiannon tightened her hold on the switch, but nodded. “Agreed, but only if you catch the animal before him, or *truly* help him in finding her.”

Sage smiled and bowed his head. “We will see if we can’t do both.” He turned to Pullen. “In what direction did young Pryder go?”

Pullen nodded at the door through which we’d come inside. “The tracks led

across the road and into the woods. Other animals escaped as well, but we managed to bring them back in the yard as you saw when you passed them."

I blinked at him and stepped up to the door where I leaned out. There was nothing in the yard. Caius followed my example and his face showed his confusion. We glanced at each other before I drew back into the barn and turned to the others. I opened my mouth, but Sage stepped up to my side and set a hard, heavy hand on my shoulder.

"We'll have your animal back to you before nightfall," Sage assured them.

"And we'll be ready with your own animals when you return," Pullen promised.

15

My grandfather turned me around and marched me out of the stables with Caius following. I squinted at the corral as we passed, but there wasn't even a whiff of a barn cat, much less a creature capable of carrying us along the road.

I whipped my head to Sage and frowned. "What we he talking about back there with the animals being in the yard? There's nothing there."

Sage slipped his hand off my shoulder and looked ahead as he chuckled. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Jane, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"I studied history, not philosophy, and my history degree is telling me his mind *and* yours is a little gone," I quipped.

"You'll see in good time," he assured me as we stopped at the road and faced the woods opposite the stables. He rubbed his chin before he glanced at Caius. "You wouldn't happen to have picked up on the scent of the lovely couple to whom we just spoke, would you?"

Caius slyly smiled. "Is a goose-bled red?"

I blinked at him. "A what?"

"A very colorful goose," Sage told me as he looked at Caius and swept his hand toward the forest. "If you would lead, young man, we will follow."

Caius led the way into the woods. I sidled up to my grandfather and lowered my voice to a whisper as I leaned toward him. "So do dragons have a good sense

of smell?”

“And hearing,” Caius spoke up without turning.

I frowned at the back of his head. “So how good are we talking about?”

“Less than that of a dog, but much better than the average human,” Sage told me.

“What about a dog shifter? Do those not exist?” I wondered.

“They do, among many other creatures,” Sage confirmed.

Caius slowed and glanced over his shoulder. One of his eyebrows was arched as he studied me. “You didn’t know other shifters existed?”

I shrugged. “I. . .I led a sheltered life, okay?”

Sage feigned a sigh and forlornly shook his head. “It was the homeschooling. We should have encouraged her to go to the academy.”

I blinked at him. “They have academies in this-um, area?”

He turned up his nose and waved his hand at the question. “Quite a number, but they’re hardly worth speaking about.”

“I heard a story that you were thrown out of the most prestigious when they caught you stealing from the library,” Caius revealed.

I whipped my head from Caius to my grandfather. “You *stole* from a college library?”

“An *academy* library, and ‘steal’ is such a harsh word,” Sage argued. “I would say I was merely appropriating a book or two.”

“You were only saved from the Blue Binds by a quick bit of magic,” Caius added.

Sage glared at him as I arched an eyebrow. “The who?” I asked them.

“The library’s own personal police force,” Caius told me.

Sage cleared his throat. “Yes, well, reminiscing on old times won’t help us in these modern times. Have you found the scent of the young man whom we must find?”

“Yes, but it might be a better idea if we were following the scent of whatever creature his family tends,” Caius pointed out.

Sage smiled. “Yes, but have you its scent?”

“No, but I don’t know what I’m looking for, either,” Caius countered.

Sage chuckled. “That would ruin the surprise.”

“But it might get us to Grandma faster,” I spoke up.

Some of Sage’s humor fled as he gave a nod. “Yes, but I don’t believe his parents will help us if we don’t come back with both steed *and* son, and with monsters about the young man is in greater danger than his steed.”

Caius lifted his nose to the air. “I think I smell something. It’s far off, but it might be him.”

Sage nodded. “Lead on, young Caius, and let us hope the monsters haven’t noticed him.”

We hurried forward into the thick trees. They were clumped so closely together that only sporadic beams of light managed to break through to the floor. I stumbled and tripped over rocks and root as we climbed over fallen trees and down into holes where once proud pines had stood proud before being toppled.

The road behind us disappeared behind the curtain of bark, and soon I lost my bearings. “Does anybody have a compass?” I piped up.

“Quiet,” Sage whispered at me, and the tension in his voice raised the hair on the back of my neck. It was the same tension he’d had when we were facing off against that tiny little demon.

We crept along for a few miles, and the terrain grew rougher. The relatively even plains angled upward toward the foot of the mountains and instead of the soft grasses scrub brush grabbed at our new clothing. I was relieved when I noticed a glimmer of thick, broad light ahead of us, and in a few minutes we stopped at the edge of a small clearing.

The trees were only ragged stumps with their carcasses tossed into the middle in a haphazard heap. The trunks were partially burned, and a little wisp of smoke still rose from the pile. A makeshift bed of leaves and branches lay on the ground on our left. Above that hung a young man.

I blinked twice at the upside-down figure. It was a man of maybe eighteen with fine brown hair and skin tanned brown by many days in the open fields. He hung by his legs which were roped by a vine to a large branch of a tree that stood at the edge of the clearing. His eyes were closed and there was a terrible gash upside one side of his face. A few droplets of blood dripped down to the ground

beneath him.

I took a step toward the young man. “Is that-”

Sage whipped his arm out and blocked my path. I looked down at him and saw that his intense eyes scanned the area. “A moment.”

That moment proved to be important as a noise came from behind the wood pile. A huge hulking creature rose from the ground and stared at us over the eight-foot tall heap.

The creature was undoubtedly a troll, but unlike any I’d seen in my fairy tale books growing up. This one had the vague resemblance of a slouching, hulking figure, but the finer details were like a child had hacked up a ball of phlegm and tried to form a human figure out of it. There was the head, the body, and the stumpy limbs, but the muscles were uneven lumps, the eyes were askew, and there was no nose. The mouth was a flapping opening with rotten teeth.

Its beady black eyes fell on us and narrowed. His fat mouth curled up in a loose grin. When he spoke his voice was deep and echoing. “More fresh meat.”

Sage pressed the box into my hands and glanced at our dragon friend. “Caius, if you would please draw Jane away.”

My jaw dropped. “You’re seriously going to fight that thing?”

“Fresh meat!” the troll roared as he slothed around the pile toward us.

“I think we should give your grandfather some room,” Caius suggested as he grabbed my upper arms and pulled me away.

I dug my heels into the ground. “I’m not going to-hey!” Caius had lifted me off the ground and carried me backward. “Let go!”

Caius let me go, but ten yards into the forest. “I think you’re still underestimating your grandfather’s abilities,” he warned me.

I glared up at him. “I don’t want to just leave my grandfather to-”

“He’s not just your grandfather,” Caius reminded me as he nodded at the clearing. “He’s also the Storm Sage.”

I followed his gaze and watched the troll face off against my grandfather. The creature licked its fat lips with its even fatter tongue as it studied my delicious relative. “You look good. A little stringy, but good.”

Sage smiled. “I’m afraid I’m a little tough to swallow.”

“I try you now!” the troll thundered as he charged toward Sage with his arms outstretched.

The medallion around Sage’s neck glowed as he held up one hand. “Then try this.”

His palm faced the charging monster, and from his hand flew a focused blizzard of ice shards and snow. The freezing shards of water slammed into the troll’s face and chest, cutting his flesh like paper cuts fingers. The troll jerked to a stop and bellowed in pain. He flailed his hands in front of him to block the onslaught of winter, but that only made the icicles stab into his arms and hands. The troll stumbled back onto the fire and crashed atop the blackened trees.

Sage drew back his hand and switched it for the other. His palm glowed red-hot and from his hand came a column of flame that was so hot I could feel the heat from where I stood. The fire lit the pile of trees under the troll like it was covered in diesel. The trees went up in a ball of flames, consuming the troll in a blast of heat that was so fast he only had time to let out a short scream before he was incinerated.

My grandfather closed his fingers around his hand and shut off the fire line. He wiped his hand on his pants and turned to us with a smile. “Now let us get our new friend down from that terrible position.”

Caius strode forward and I followed along until we reached the clearing. I stopped and gaped at the pile, or what remained of it. There was only a pile of ashes where the troll and trees had once stood.

“Careful,” Sage instructed as the men cut the young man down from his inverted perch.

I shook myself from my shock and hurried over as they lay him on the ground. Caius inspected his person, particularly the gash on the side of his head. “He’ll live, but a blow a little farther forward would have killed him.”

“Good news is always good news,” Sage philosophized as he drew out a small bit of cloth from inside his cloak. He whetted the cloth with his magic and softly patted the wound. The young man groaned and his eyes flickered open. “Good afternoon, young Pryder,” Sage greeted him.

The young man blinked at him. “How. . .how do you know who I am?”

“Your parents were concerned about you and asked us to come help you in the search for the animal,” Sage explained as he slipped his arm beneath the young man’s back. “Do you think you can sit up?”

Pryder nodded, so Sage and Caius eased him up. He winced and clutched his head before his eyes widened. “The troll!” He whipped his head around. “There was a troll! It was hiding behind that pile and-”

“Is no longer alive,” Sage finished for him.

Pryder blinked at him. “Dead?” Sage nodded. “B-but how? It was so large!”

Caius grinned and his eyes flickered up to Sage. “Let’s just say he shouldn’t have built such a pile, but let’s see if you can stand.”

They helped him to his feet. He swayed a little before he found his footing. A shake of his head and some of the fogginess in his eyes vanished and he looked to all of us with a bright smile. “I-I don’t know how to thank you. You saved my life.”

“Thanks for later, young Pryder,” Sage advised as he looked around. “There may be other creatures in these woods, and we still have the animal to catch.”

Pryder’s eyes widened. “That’s right! I’d found her trail when I stumbled on that troll!”

“Which way had she gone?” Sage asked him.

Pryder pointed at the back of the clearing. “That way. I should have noticed something was wrong because she skirted the clearing, but I was so happy to find her tracks that I didn’t notice the troll until it was too late.” He gingerly touched the wound on his temple. “He hit me with a stick, and then the next thing I remember is you standing over me.”

“A little more care next time, young sir, but a lesson learned is a lesson kept,” Sage mused as he herded us in the direction Pryder had pointed. “Now let us find the beast and return to the safety of the plains.”

Pryder led the way through the thick forest. I tried to look for tracks, but like the empty yard these were invisible to my eyes. We wound our way through the trees for another mile before I heard the gurgle of a small creek. The forest parted to allow the life-giving water, and when we stepped out we saw our prey by the flowing water.

The steed was a horse, but sleeker and taller than any one I'd ever seen. Its lithe body moved like the rippling waters of a spring creek, and its white mane flowed out behind it like sea grass flowing through those waters. The steed's eyes were a brilliant blue that stared at me as though it could see into my soul.

The creature raised its head from where it had been drinking and turned to us. In the middle of its forehead was a single, white horn.

16

I turned my face to my grandfather and pointed a shaking finger at the creature. My voice was a squeak of its former self. “I-is that a. . .a-”

“Unicorn?” he finished for me. I could only nod dumbly. He chuckled. “It is, and you won’t find a more magnificent beast among any others in the world.”

“Nor any finer unicorns than the ones in our stables,” Pryder spoke up.

A crooked smile slipped onto Caius’ lips as he looked down at the young man. “So that’s what it is. Your family runs a stable that’s part of the Fable Line.”

Pryder straightened and puffed out his chest. “Yes, and one of the first to be this far to the west.”

“Part of the what?” I spoke up.

Pryder blinked at me. “You’ve never heard of the Fable Line?”

I noticed Sage smiling and shot him a glare. “Let’s just say I’ve lived a rather sheltered life.”

“The Fable Line is a system of stables that allow its patrons to take out a unicorn and return it to any of the other stables,” Sage explained to me.

“So they share the unicorns?” I guessed.

Pryder laughed and shook his head. “No. The unicorns are stabled and come back.”

“A matter of magical portals,” Sage interrupted as he set his hands on my

shoulders. “But that is less important than you fetching the steed for us.”

I whipped my head up and gaped at him. “Me? Why me? I don’t even know anything about horses!”

“We must see if this search for the unicorn was a fool’s errand for us,” he told me as he gave me a push toward the creature.

I stumbled, but caught myself and looked over my shoulder. My grandfather smiled and nodded at the unicorn. I pursed my lips, but turned my attention to the beautiful creature. Its soft blue eyes still watched me. I shuddered beneath that intense gaze, but eased toward it. The creature stood as still as a statue, but I expected it to bolt as I stopped a few feet from it and stretched out my hand.

A thought struck me mid-attempt and my eyes widened. I couldn’t stop my voice from sounding a little higher than usual. “What happens if it doesn’t like me?”

“It may maul you to death, or perhaps trample you,” Sage warned me.

“Or just bite off your hand,” Pryder added.

I winced. “Isn’t there a written exam I could take?”

He chuckled. “Life isn’t in writing, but I don’t believe you have anything to fear from the unicorn.”

“Nothing to fear. . .” I grumbled as I stretched my hand closer.

I started when the unicorn stretched its neck and met my hand halfway. My shock turned to delight when my fingers touched the smooth velvet of its long nose. Its hair was as soft as down, and yet warm like a heated blanket. Its eyes drew me closer and I buried my face into its mane. The strands were like the softest bed covers heated by an afternoon sun. I couldn’t help but laugh as the unicorn nuzzled me as I nuzzled it.

A clapping made me look back. My grandfather was the clapper, and his smile was as bright as the sun. “Wonderful! I knew you had that spark in you!”

I blinked at him. “Spark?”

“Not just anyone can touch a unicorn,” Pryder piped up as he studied me with pleasure. “Only those with a kind heart can do it.”

Caius folded his arms, and his smile was a little bitter as he looked at Sage. “That means this was for nothing. I doubt either of us could touch something

like that, and I don't think you want to let Jane go ahead without you."

Sage gave him a wink. "I wouldn't be so sure." He walked over and stretched out his hand. The unicorn tensed beneath my hands and stretched out its neck to give his hand a long, hard sniff. After a moment the unicorn gave a soft knicker and nudged its nose into his hand. Sage smiled and petted the beast on the nose before he slipped up to its side to face Caius. "Care to give it a try?"

Caius shook his head. "I'll pass. I may not be able to carry you two, but I can carry myself as fast as any unicorn."

"Are they very fast?" I asked my grandfather.

He stroked the unicorn's nose as he gave a nod. "Legends speak of the unicorn having the ability to 'travel as the shadow travels,' or so the saying goes. For what we need, however, a simple gallop will do and we shall be upon our prey within a day."

"You can get some more unicorns at the stables," Pryder spoke up as he drew out a halter. "And I'm sure my parents will be pleased to give you them for free when they hear what you've done for me."

Sage dropped his hand and turned to the young man with a smile. "That's what we're expecting. Now lead on, young Pryder, and let us escape these dank woods before I start to grow mold."

Pryder slipped the halter over the beautiful creature and led her, and us, back the way we'd come. I couldn't help but glance at the pile of ashes as we passed by, a testament to a stupid troll and my grandfather's powerful abilities.

We reached the edge of the woods and the Plains of Fiora opened to us once more. I breathed deep her sweet grass and drying dew. We crossed the road and walked toward the stables, but I paused and looked northward. A rider was approaching us. They trotted along on an old nag, and they themselves were dressed in rags similar to those worn by Gargan's men.

I stepped aside and let the man pass. He didn't give us a second glance, but kept his eyes glued southward. I turned and followed him as he disappeared down the road before I returned my attention to my grandfather who patiently waited at the edge of the stable yard.

"He didn't see the stables at all, did he?" I asked Sage as I walked up to him.

Sage closed his eyes and shook his head. “No. Only those without ill intent and who are of a good heart can see the stables of the Fable Line.”

“So are we that different from everybody else?” I wondered.

He smiled. “You mean are we above the average peasant? In deed, not always, as Caius has no doubt been telling you my past exploits and my rather-well, cold behavior.”

I winced. “He did say something about that. . .”

My grandfather set a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “The past is the past, pumpkin. Your grandmother tamed me so that I might ride one of those unicorns, but your father softened my heart. And you-” he tilted his head to one side as he studied me with a soft look, “-you made me human.”

I blinked at him and my mouth opened a little. “You. . .you were always human, right?”

He graced me with a sly smile and a wink. “Perhaps I should keep that a secret for a while longer.” My jaw hit the ground. My grandfather laughed and patted my shoulder. “Easy there, pumpkin. I have always been human. Rather cold as a young man, but human.”

“But how do you know about. . .about this?” I asked him as I gestured to the world around us. “How’d you meet Grandma? How’d you become a wizard?”

“That’s a tale for a campfire, so I will reveal all, or as much as night will allow, this night,” he promised me as he jerked his head over his shoulder in the direction of the stable. “Now let’s rejoin our companions and see about those unicorns.”

We found Caius waiting for us at the open stable door. “Everything all right?” he asked us.

“It will be after we are seated atop some of these fine steeds,” Sage assured him as he walked past to the family group.

Rhiannon had Pryder wrapped in a tight, I’ll-never-let-you-leave-again hug. The young man for his part was struggling to breath. She released her pale child, but only to arm’s length so he could feel the full force of her frown. “How could you be so reckless? You should have waited for your father to come with you!”

Pryder winced and pointed a finger at his other parent. “But he’s the one who

told me to go look for her."

Rhiannon whipped her head around so that Pullen felt the burn of her glare. "You *what?*"

He held up his hands and his smile was a little shaky. "I couldn't have known there was a troll about. They haven't been spotted around here for twenty years, at least."

"You *know* how dangerous it is out there nowadays!" she growled.

Sage cleared his throat. "Before you do away with one or more of your stable helpers, Rhiannon, might they saddle a few of your finest unicorns for us?"

Rhiannon pursed her lips, but released her son from her hold and her husband from her death eye. "Of course. A promise is a promise, and you are worthy of the honor of riding our unicorns."

"Free of geld?" I spoke up.

She stiffly nodded her head and the words came out in tortured syllables. "Free of geld."

"We need only two of your steeds this run," Sage assured her as he walked up to the unicorn we'd found. He stroked the side of her neck and smiled at Rhiannon. "Though perhaps you might send us some credit along the Fable Line."

Rhiannon sighed, but gave a nod. "Very well, but don't take our kindness too far, Storm Sage."

Pryder's eyes widened and he looked at Sage with awe mixed with disbelief. "Storm Sage? *The* Storm Sage?"

Sage smiled and bowed his head. "The one and only, returned for-" He paused and cleared his throat. I swore I saw his eyes flicker to me for a second, but I couldn't be sure. "-returned for a time."

"Well, since it's been many years I'll remind you of the rules," Rhiannon suggested as her husband and son went about saddling two of the unicorns. "Make sure you return the unicorns to a stable within a week's time, otherwise they're liable to disappear from under you while mid-gallop, and you'll have a landing that you might not walk away from."

"We'll be sure to do that," Sage promised as the two unicorns were brought

to us.

Pullen drew the familiar unicorn to me and smiled as he held out the reins. “I believe this one has taken a liking to you, miss, and would be honored to have such a beautiful rider.”

I eyed the steed with a nervous look. “She might not be honored after she finds out I don’t know how to ride her.”

Pullen chuckled. “I’m sure any unicorn would be glad to have you on its back, and Menander is a boy.”

I blinked at him and ducked down to study the undercarriage of the beast. The unicorn did indeed have all the tools of the male trade. I straightened and sheepishly smiled at Pullen. His eyes twinkled as he handed me the reins.

“Let me help you up on him,” he offered.

The help was necessary. The unicorn was about twenty hands tall, making him six and a half feet high. That dwarfed my short five-foot-something frame. Pullen gave me a boost in the butt so that I swung my other leg over and plopped into the saddle. Rhiannon did the same favor to Sage, and in a moment both of us sat atop our fine steeds, though only one of us comfortably.

I leaned over the edge and winced at the distance to the ground. “Do these things come with guardrails?”

Sage drew his unicorn beside me and chuckled. “No, but I do suggest you hold tight to your reins.”

A little bit of color left my face. “Why?”

“If you lose your grip on the reins you’ll be thrown to the ground during his gallop,” he warned me.

Rhiannon frowned up at him. “You intend to gallop them? With a novice rider?”

“Unfortunately, we have an engagement to make, and time is of the essence,” he explained as he turned his unicorn to the stable doors. “Farewell, friends, and beware of trolls!” He cracked his reins and the unicorn bolted from the stables.

“Hey!” I shouted.

“Better get after him,” Pullen advised me as he gave my unicorn a slap on the rear.

Menander whinnied and shot forward. I yelped and ducked low against the horn of the saddle and the neck of the steed. We flew out of the stables and into the bright sun. I blinked against the harsh light and tried to shake off the blur that had become the landscape, but the blur didn't shake off. I'm not good at judging speeds, but we must've been clocking in at eighty miles an hour and it didn't matter the terrain. Dips, hills, and the flat plains were all the same.

Everything sped by except my grandfather who I could see ahead of me. He slowed so that our unicorns galloped abreast of each other. I glared at him from my low riding stance. "This is nuts!" I screamed.

He chuckled. "And exhilarating!" He lifted his face and let the wind whip at his young features. I had to admit I could see what Grandma had liked when they met.

A shadow flew over and ahead of us. I dared a look up and saw the familiar silver body of the dragon Caius flying fifty feet above our steeds. His wings were stretched wide and flapped with a hard rapidity that made me wince at the strain.

"Can he keep that up?" I asked my grandfather.

He followed where I looked and gave a nod. "Yes, though not as long as a unicorn."

I pursed my lips as I watched Caius fly ahead. "So can he stay with us?"

Sage eyed me with a teasing look. "Are you saying you would miss him?"

A stupid blush accented my cheeks and I sunk lower in my saddle. "T-that's not what I'm saying, and you know it! He's. . .he's useful! And. . .and-"

"And handsome," Sage added.

I glared at him. "I was going to say useful."

"You mentioned that already."

"It bears repeating."

He chuckled. "It is rather important, but you needn't worry. Tonight will give him as much rest as he needs for the journey tomorrow. And then-" he looked ahead of us at the wide expanse of plains that ended in the foothills of some steep, snow-capped mountains. His face hardened and a glimmer of anger flashed through his eyes. "Then we will see about dealing with Gargan and his

men.”

His expression frightened me. I swallowed the lump in my throat. “You’re not going to kill them, are you?”

“He tried to do the same to us. It’s only fitting we should return the favor,” my grandfather snapped. I shrank back from his harsh, murderous words. Sage sighed, and the action soothed his looks before he turned to me. “We will see what’s to be done. Now let’s hurry along.” He pressed his feet into the unicorn’s sides and his steed bolted ahead of mine.

I cringed, but did the same. Menander leapt forward into the quick gallop and I held on for dear life.

17

We traveled across the plains and reached the foothills as darkness gathered on the horizon. The road skirted the foothills and made westward, but Sage stopped us at the edge of the trees and raised his eyes to the heavens.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him as I followed his gaze. Caius had traveled well over the trees, but had circled back.

“It seems our dragon friend wishes to abandon the road,” he mused as he dismounted.

Caius landed near us and reverted back to his human form. It was mesmerizing watching such scaly girth shrink into such handsome features. “Is something the matter?” he wondered.

“You seem to have a different opinion than following the road,” Sage commented as he studied the dragon man. “Would that perhaps mean you know exactly where they’re headed?”

Caius stiffened a little, but gave a nod. “I do.”

I frowned at him. “Why didn’t you tell us that sooner?”

“Would it have made a difference?” he pointed out. I opened my mouth, but no good counterargument came to mind. He looked between Sage and me. “They’re headed toward a place called the Wyvern, a cavern of enormous size that’s supposed to be located inside this mountain.”

“But you sound doubtful of its existence,” Sage mused.

Caius shrugged. “It’s just a legend passed down in my family, but what they stole from me is very real.”

“And that would be?” Sage persisted.

Caius shut his lips together and his eyes hardened. I rolled my eyes and marched up to him where I stuck a finger in his chest. “Now listen here, Mr. I’m-So-Cool-I-Can-Do-This-Alone. My grandma’s in trouble and you keeping secrets from us isn’t going to help get her or whatever you lost back, so you can either tell us the whole truth or you can stay out of our way. Got it?”

Caius looked at me with bewilderment before he burst out laughing. Sage joined him, and I found myself glancing between the two with a mixture of anger and confusion. “What? What’d I say?”

My grandfather gathered himself and wiped the tears from his eyes. “You never cease to remind me of your grandmother.”

“And that has to be the most foolishly sentimental speech I’ve ever heard someone give,” Caius added.

I glared at both of them. “Well, it’s true, isn’t it? Us working together has worked so far, so why not get it all out so we know what we’re dealing with?”

Sage leaned over and stroked the side of his unicorn’s neck, but his eyes were on Caius. “And can you not trust someone who is trusted by a unicorn?”

Caius sighed, but nodded. “All right. Gargan stole a scroll which is a map of the Wyvern halls. I can’t be sure, but I believe he intends to find the central hall and with the incantation at the bottom of the map he will imbue himself with the power of my ancestor, granting him immense strength and speed.”

My jaw hit the ground, but I shook off my shock and stared hard at him. “Are you telling us the truth?”

A smile teased the corners of his lips. “You don’t believe me?”

“That’s. . .that’s a little hard to swallow,” I returned.

“It’s the whole truth, though however much of the legend is true is a matter of belief,” he told me.

Sage rubbed his chin and furrowed his brow as he stared hard at the ground. “How puzzling that he would kidnap Bee when he clearly has all the tools in his possession.”

“Maybe not,” Caius spoke up as he turned to him. “The Wyvern is supposedly locked by a special gate that only an elder dragon can open.”

“So can you?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “No. The elder dragons died out thousands of years ago.”

“So what’s the different between a dragon and an elder dragon? Age?” I guessed.

“The elder dragons were of a pure bloodline going all the way back to the Mother Egg,” he explained to me. He noticed my blank expression. “That was the womb of the first dragon.”

Sage’s eyes widened. “A pickerjacket!” Both Caius and I stared at him as if he’d gone mad.

“A what?” I asked him.

“A creature capable of unlocking any lock, no matter how powerful the spell that seals it,” he clarified as he paced the ground beside his unicorn. “How foolish of me! Of course they’d want Bee to control an uncontrollable creature!”

Caius frowned. “So that’s how they intend to reach the inner sanctum.”

My face paled a little as I turned to Caius. “So is the part about being imbued with elder dragon power true?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, but I’d rather not find out.”

“Unfortunately, we will have to wait for another day,” Sage mused as he lifted his eyes to the darkening sky above us. “Unicorns are slower during the night, so we’ll camp here until sunrise.”

“Do you really think we’ll catch them tomorrow?” I asked him as we dismounted. “They did have a four-day head start.”

Sage turned back the way we came and nodded in that direction. “What do you think?”

I followed his gaze and gaped at the wide expanse we’d covered in only a few hours. The Plains of Fiora stretched out before us like a well-kept yard with weeds at the edges. A far off plume of smoke showed the location of the stables. I couldn’t even see a hint of Nelly’s village.

“Did we really-” I took a step forward and winced. The inside of my legs twanged with pain from the long ride. I leaned one hand on my saddle and tried

not to cry as my words came out in a squeaky voice. “Never mind. We really covered that much ground.”

Sage chuckled as he led his horse toward the trees. “I may not have the skills of Bee, but we’ll see if I can make you comfortable.”

“Really comfortable?” I pleaded.

“Moderately so.”

I hung my head. “Just kill me now. . .”

“I could carry you for a distance tomorrow,” Caius offered.

I sighed and raised my head. “No, I can get through this for Bee.” I took a gingerly step toward the trees and clenched my teeth. “On second thought, she wouldn’t want me to be crippled. I’ll take the friendly skies with you tomorrow.”

Sage tied his unicorn to a lone tree surrounded by the last vestiges of plain grass before he glanced up at the mountain in whose shadow we stood. The slope was gentle for a hundred yards and then angled sharply upward. The grass and proud woods were replaced with scattered rocks and gnarled trees.

“Flight may quicken our speed, and the terrain won’t be easy for an inexperienced rider,” my grandfather mused before he looked to Caius. “Are you sure you can carry her for a few hours?”

Caius nodded. “I can, but not much more than that.”

I glanced up at Menander. “What about him?”

Sage walked up to my unicorn and smiled at the beast. “It’s not far to his home. We will set him free in the morning and he’ll find his way back in a short while.”

“But Rhiannon told us to bring him to a stable,” I reminded him.

“Would you rather he wait here? Or come with us into danger?” he countered.

“No, but-” I looked up at the beautiful mount and bit my lower lip, “-I just don’t feel right in letting him go.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind a slow walk home among the plains,” Sage assured me as he turned away.

I stroked Menander’s nose and his bright blue eyes met mine. There was a softness and sentience in them that soothed my fears. Mostly.

Sage and Caius set up a nice fire, and for once I wasn't volunteered for fire duty. I leaned up against a tree and watched Caius take my chore. In a short while we had enough to last the night and Sage knelt in front of me.

There was a sly smile on his face as he looked up at me. "I'm afraid I'm going to need you to remove your pants."

I frowned. "Why?"

He held up a couple of damp clothes. "So I can place these on your chafed legs."

I glanced past him at Caius. He'd found another log against which to lay. He looked peaceful, but I noticed his breathing had stopped and his slitted eyes stared at me under his tense brow. "I don't think that would be a good idea," I warned my grandfather.

He chuckled. "Well, if you insist on sleeping with your wounds, then I'll put these away-" he drew away from me.

I shifted and winced as my raw flesh rubbed against my pants. "Wait." Sage paused. I sighed and hung my head. "I'll do it."

Sage raised himself on his legs and set the damp towels aside. "Very well. Let's get you up now."

"Before we do anything-" I interrupted as I looked again at our companion, "-Caius needs to resume breathing and go behind a tree."

Caius raised his head and blinked as though awakening from a deep sleep. "What? Was my name called?"

I snorted and stabbed a finger at a thick tree behind him. "Go."

He sighed, but stood. "All right, but I could lend a hand in this-"

"*Go*."

Caius bowed low to me before he spun around and marched over to the trees. He stepped behind a tree, but not the one I pointed out. The one he chose was a sapling. It hardly hid his arm, much less the rest of his body. I cleared my throat.

Caius 'peeked' around the tree, which was more like him looking over it. "Is something wrong?"

I pointed at my choice. "That one."

He looked down and studied his chosen shrub. "This one suits me."

I stabbed a finger at my tree. “*That one.*”

He shrugged, but reluctantly slipped behind the other tree. I climbed to my feet and gingerly slipped off my pants. My bare legs revealed the extent of the chafing. The skin was rubbed red on my inner thighs, and a few blisters had formed.

Sage draped his cloak over the dirt and eased me back down to the ground. He laid the warm, damp clothes over my wounds. I clutched the ground and hissed.

“There’s some poultice in the cloth that should heal your wounds somewhat,” he assured me as he stood. A cold wind flew by and made me shiver. He smiled. “Let me get you one of the blankets from the saddles.”

“This’ll work better,” Caius called out, and a moment later his own coat was tossed out from behind the tree.

Sage caught the coat and bowed his head. “Yes. This will have less unicorn hair.”

“So they shed?” I asked him as he draped the coat over me.

“As well as any horse,” he told me.

I shifted beneath the coat and reveled in the warmth that still lingered from Caius’ body. Sage returned to his tree and looked to our companion. “It’s safe.”

Caius stepped out and admired me wrapped as I was in his coat. His eyes shone with a mischievous and warm light. “You look good in my coat.”

I blushed and turned my face away. “I guess. . .”

He resumed his laying against the log, and I chanced a look at him. The warm, crackling fire cast a soft glow on his features. He looked so angelic, so handsome.

So out of my league.

18

Sage cleared his throat and glanced over at our scaly friend. “I was curious to know how Gargan managed to steal such a valuable article from a thief.”

Caius’ soft look hardened as he stared into the fire. “I was away from the shrine at the time where the scroll was held.”

“How’d he even know it was there?” I wondered.

He leaned back against the log behind him and crossed one leg over the other. “The legend is old enough that a lot of people know about it. He probably learned about the location of the scroll from one of the villagers who left a few years ago during some tough summers.”

Sage rubbed his chin as his eyes took on a faraway look. “If my memory serves me, the dragons of Wyvern were of a peculiar sort.”

A bitter smile crossed Caius’ lips and his eyes flickered up to him. “You could say that.”

Sage returned his smile with one of his own, but with more genuine feeling. “I see.”

“I don’t,” I piped up as I frowned at my conspiring compatriots. “What’s so special about the Wyvern dragons?”

“Wouldn’t you rather hear how I came to be such a great and powerful wizard?” Sage suggested.

I snorted. “Only if it ends with me getting some really expensive slippers.”

He chuckled. “Not quite, though in these lands one never knows what magical articles one will find. Even a hairbrush may hold some special magic.”

“You mean like when I touched Bee’s brush?” I guessed.

Sage nodded. “Yes, though even I can’t figure out how you came to see such visions.”

I draped my arm over his shoulder and looked him in the eye with a teasingly scolding look. “We’re supposed to be talking about you, remember?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, you’re quite right, though I’m not sure if our new companion-” his eyes flickered to Caius, “-won’t think us a trifle touched in the head if I explain the whole tale.”

Caius smiled. “I’d like to have the upper hand on your origins, if you don’t mind.”

Sage leaned toward him and looked at him with a twinkle in his eyes. “Then you’ll believe me when I say we’re from another world?”

Some of Caius’ humor fled as he arched an eyebrow. “You mean a different area?”

My grandfather shook his head. “No. Jane and I come from a completely different world than this one, a world where magic is long dead, many animals don’t exist, and neither do you.”

Caius sat up and frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sage held up his hand. “It’s not a threat, merely the truth. For the past nearly eighty years Bee and I have lived in another world far from this one, away from its many peoples, cities, and adventures.”

“Prove it,” Caius demanded.

“Were our clothes not enough proof?” Sage countered.

Caius’ eyes flickered from Sage to me and back. They were a window into his soul as his common sense fought against another emotion I couldn’t quite read, but the look in his eyes as they lingered on me made me wonder if maybe it wasn’t a budding affection for us, otherworldly or not.

Finally he slumped against his log and closed his eyes as he graced us with a crooked smile. “I guess that does explain a lot.” He opened his eyes and they fell on me. A sly look slipped into them that made me frown. “If you ever need

private tutoring of this world, I'll be glad to offer my services."

I smiled. "If I need a lesson on thievery I'll be sure to go to you."

"I might be able to provide you with lessons in that area," my grandfather offered.

I turned my face to him and nudged my elbow into his ribs. "You're not even providing me answers about how you two found out about this place."

He looked at me with a funny expression. "Well, truth be told it was your grandmother who found me first. As you know the cottage belonged to my parents, and one day she stumbled out of the woods in unusual garb and with her strange knowledge of another world." He flashed me a grin. "I must admit I was smitten from the first."

My jaw slowly descended to the ground. "You mean. . .you mean Grandma's from *this* world?"

He nodded. "Yes, though I believe she would have been just as unusual had she been from ours. We met that fateful day, she led me to the tree in the woods, and the rest, as Caius has told you, is history."

I shook myself out of my stupor and then shook my head. "That doesn't tell me how you got to be a wizard!"

"Sage, but that's for another time," he told me as he shifted his back against his tree and bowed his head. His eyes closed and his voice grew soft. "For now we sleep. Tomorrow should prove challenging, or at least interesting." I glared at him and reached for his shoulder.

"Wait," Caius spoke up. He nodded at my grandfather's chest. "He's asleep."

I dropped my hand, but glared at my relation. "He always was good at getting out of tough questions. You should have seen him slip out of the room when I asked him about the birds and the bees."

"The what?" Caius wondered.

I shook my head. "Never mind. It must be an 'other world' thing."

"So you're really from another world," Caius mused.

I leaned against my tree and sighed. "Yeah, and before you ask it's a lot different from this one. There's cars, planes, and indoor plumbing."

"Planes?" he asked me.

“They’re big metal birds that let us non-dragons fly,” I told him.

“Are there really no dragons in your world?”

I shook my head. “Not a one. Heck, there’s not even shifters, at least as far as I know.”

Caius gazed into the fire and I could see his furrowed brow. “It must be very peaceful there.”

I snorted. “Only when traffic is fast. Otherwise, hold on to your hat.”

His eyes flickered to me. “Will you be going back there after you’ve rescued your grandmother?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I mean, what do I have here?”

Caius was quiet for a moment before he slipped lower on his log. “I see. . .”

Though the words were few, the pain was hard to miss. My heart grew heavy as I looked over the handsome man. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He leaned his chin on his chest and closed his eyes. “I know.” In a moment he, too, was asleep, leaving me alone.

I looked over the two men in my life, my grandfather and this stranger who I couldn’t shake from my thoughts. An idea slipped into my mind, lifting my heart with hope. Bee was from this world. Maybe he could-

I shook my head, dispelling that crazy thought. He belonged to this world, I to the other. That’s how it had to be.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe-just maybe-I didn’t want it to be that way.

Morning came, and with it the back ache that comes with sleeping on the hard ground. That was quickly alleviated by the greater pain that came from my legs. I used the tree as an assist and clutched Caius’ long coat to my waist as I gingerly climbed to my feet. My inner thighs ached like a badger had gotten a hold of them and tried to dig holes into me.

I started when a pair of hands grasped my arms. Caius leaned to one side and smiled down at me. “You look like you could use a fly today.”

“Or a Tylenol,” I quipped as I eased one foot forward. My thigh brushed against Caius’ coat and sent shivers of pain up and down my body.

“I can’t offer you that, but I can offer my services in helping you put your

pants back on," he told me.

I snorted. "With your 'help' I don't think my pants would get back on any time soon."

"I will assist my granddaughter," Sage offered as he appeared from the woods hitching up his own trousers.

Caius reluctantly stepped behind his tree and my pants were slipped on. Sage was gentle, but even his soft touch couldn't stop all the pain. Thankfully, the billowing aspect of the pants gave me some relief, but I remained standing as we ate our cold breakfast of jerky. After several days of subsisting on that meat the flavor wasn't so great anymore.

Sage untied Menander from his tree and led him toward the plains. He released the unicorn and stepped back. "Time to go home, noble Menander." The unicorn whinnied and pawed the ground. Sage frowned. "You can't follow us. The danger is too great." Menander threw its head back and neighed. Sage sighed and turned to us with a shrug. "There appears to be no convincing him to leave us."

I stared at my grandfather, but pointed at the unicorn. "You can understand him?"

Sage smiled. "It's rather easy. You merely listen to their eyes. However, we don't have time for a lesson." He untied his own unicorn and mounted the saddle. "We have some porcines to catch."

Caius stepped up to me and took his coat. "Ready?"

My shoulders slumped. "No, but let's get this over with."

"I promise to be gentle," he swore as he moved backward away from me.

His handsome features were distorted by his transformation, and in a moment a large dragon stood before me. I expected him to wrap one of those large claws around me like before, but instead he knelt down and stretched out one arm as a ramp. He held very still as I climbed aboard and sat side-saddle at the base of his neck where I grasped some smaller scales. His arm provided good footing for my feet to help steady me.

Caius stood and opened his wings. He lifted us off as gently as a helicopter and up we flew into the air. I leaned over and watched the trees and my

grandfather grow smaller, but Caius stopped before they were ant sized. He flew up the mountain and my grandfather followed. A flash of white followed him, indicating that Menander was still being stubborn.

The mountain stretched before us, a fortress of trees and stone. Little canyons were etched into its sides by many springs, and its white peaks hinted at a cold landing. A few flat areas revealed hidden meadows of crystal-clear ponds and nesting deer, or some animal close to them. I couldn't get a good look at them, but they looked like they had an extra horn in the middle of their antler rack.

The going was slow only because we had to wait for Sage to navigate his way through the wild terrain. More than once I saw his unicorn slip on rocks and navigate around trees so thick even a mouse couldn't get through.

After several hours Caius made an abrupt turn and I fell against his back to keep my tight grip. "Don't you have some blinker lights I could use?" I quipped as he flew in a tight circle over a patch of open ground.

He descended and we met my grandfather coming up the mountain. "What is it?" he asked us as Caius tilted to one side so that I slid down.

He reverted back to his human form and jerked his head over his shoulder. "We're getting close, and I thought I might have spotted a lookout."

"Did he spot you?" Sage wondered.

Caius pursed his lips and gave a nod. "I think so."

Sage sighed as he looked in the direction of our foes. "Then we can't rely on the element of surprise to assist us."

"A frontal assault?" Caius guessed.

Sage nodded. "It's the only way, and we must be quick about it before they set their own trap. How far are the ruins of Wyvern?"

"A short trip over those rocks," Caius told him as he indicated an old avalanche of boulders behind us. They rose up some sixty feet and filled the depth of a small canyon.

"Then let us go."

Sage left his unicorn untethered and we climbed the mass of boulders. The going was slick, but after ten minutes we reached the top and found ourselves in

another world. A border of pine trees guarded the border to a steamy jungle. Vines hung low from broad-leafed trees that sported smooth bark. The sparse weeds were replaced with a carpet of greenish-blue, knee-high grass that tickled at my calves. Birds with brilliant plumage flew overhead and sang their sweet cooing songs as they flitted among the vines and trees.

“No wonder people know about the legend,” I spoke up.

“It is rather visible from the sky,” Sage agreed as he walked into the jungle. “But remember to keep your eyes open for our foes.”

An animal track led us through the border of pines and into the thick tangle. The edge of the mountain grew farther away as the trail led us along the small plateau. Boulders littered the area, but I noticed several stones that looked like they’d been cut by human hand.

“Was this a village?” I whispered.

“A city once,” Caius told me as he glanced for only a moment at the ruined foundations. He looked ahead and his face hardened. “But that was a long time ago.”

The ruins became more numerous, and columns rose up from the grass-covered ground. Their broken tops were covered in vines, and their toppled bodies were soaked in wet moss. I tripped over a stone and overturned it, revealing its smoothed edges. The disturbed moss also showed more fashioned pave stones around the one I’d kicked. That made me look up and down where we walked. It was a long, wide thoroughfare that was completely carpeted by the grass.

I yelped as my foot sank into a deep hole. My entire leg disappeared and I was left kneeling on the ground with my vanished foot dangling in the ground. I tried to pull myself out, but roots and rock held me fast. Caius knelt beside me and easily lifted me out of the hole.

I looked down at where my leg had disappeared. There was only darkness. “I think the public works department needs to get on these potholes before someone’s dog disappears. Or a bus.”

“There are several levels to the city,” Caius warned me as he studied the area around us. “I guess access to some of them was swallowed by the forest.”

“I almost gained access,” I quipped as I sidestepped the hole.

“Walk gingerly,” Sage advised as we continued on our way.

We reached a long row of broken columns that lined both sides of the avenue. Sage froze before he grabbed my arm and pulled me behind one of the columns. Caius followed suit, but on the other side of the road.

I leaned forward to see what lay ahead. “What’s-” Sage wrapped one arm around me to draw me back and clapped a hand over my mouth.

“Quiet,” he hissed.

That’s when the murmur of voices caught my attention. They floated down from higher up the road, and from the occasional snort I surmised they were the porcine we were looking for.

Sage drew me behind him and glanced across the way at Caius. Our dragon friend leaned into the road for a moment before he jerked backward. He held up five fingers. Sage nodded and turned to me to press the box into my hands.

My pulse quickened as I looked into his face. I wasn’t too experienced with this adventuring stuff, but even a novice like me could feel a fight coming. My memory reminded me that the last time we’d tangled with these porcine we hadn’t come out too well. I couldn’t stop shivering as I grasped my grandfather’s hands. Sage smiled and squeezed my hands as his medallion softly glowed.

“Wait here,” he whispered.

I shook my head and mouthed ‘no,’ but he drew way. I tried to cling to his hand, but his fingers slipped out of mine and he sidled up to the edge of the column. He glanced at Caius who nodded, and together the two went out to fight.

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A second after they slipped out the alarm rang out among the porcine. “Hey! Stop! Halt!”

I hurried up to the edge of the column in time to watch Caius punch one of the porcine in the side of the fat face. The pig hit the ground hard and didn’t get up. That left three other guards who drew out their sabers and charged Caius.

Sage stepped in front of Caius and held out his hand with his palm aimed at them. A wind tunnel flew from his palm and engulfed them in its swirling vortex. They were lifted off the ground and dropped their weapons as they flailed around looking for a hold. Sage swiped his arm across his chest and they were flung into one of the nearby columns.

The guards had stood in front of a small stone archway that led into the mountainside. Lit torches on the walls allowed light down the dark tunnel, and in their depths I watched shadowy figures run toward the doorway. In a moment another half dozen of Gargan’s piggish men appeared, armed and angry.

Sage tried to trap them, but only caught one before the others dove out of the way. Two of them leapt on Caius and shoved him to the ground. His wings burst out of his back and pushed him upward where he slammed his forehead into the face of one of his captors. The pig grunted and stumbled back while Caius lifted the other off the ground and stood. He threw the porcine into the brush.

One of the pigs who evaded Sage’s attack noticed my head peeking around

the corner. His nostrils flared before he rushed toward me. My eyes widened and I yelped before I disappeared around the column. Without a weapon I was as good as dead, but I still had my feet and they didn't fail me as I raced around to the far corner of the column. The pig followed and we started a game of ring-around-the-rosy as the others fought in the background.

"That's enough!" The fighting paused as all looked at the direction of the booming voice. Gargan stood in the doorway, and for the first time his cloak was drawn back so that I saw a round leather case like a map tube tied to his waist. Behind him were two of his henchman. They stood on either side of my grandmother.

"Bee!" Sage shouted.

"She'll be dead if you don't lay down your weapons and stop fighting," Gargan growled.

"Keep fighting!" Bee shouted before one of her guards clapped his dirty hand over her mouth.

Sage pursed his lips, but lowered his hand and the light from his medallion vanished. One of the porcine snatched his medallion.

The two porcine around Caius circled him. His eyes flickered between them and where I stood. The porcine behind me grabbed one of my arms and twisted it behind me, wrenching my shoulder nearly out of its socket. I yelped and clenched my teeth. Caius froze and a terrible look of fury filled his eyes, and in that brief moment of vulnerability his opponents grabbed his arms and yanked them behind him. He stiffened at the pain, but his burning eyes remained on me.

Gargan smirked as he strode up to Caius. "I wouldn't have expected to find the solitary bone dragon traveling with a pair of humans."

"And he's so handsome!" Bee spoke up.

Gargan's nostrils flared and a sly smile appeared on his face. "A masking spell? Are you afraid your new friends will reject you?"

"A man that handsome shouldn't be hiding anything," Bee commented.

The porcine leader paused in his preening and rolled his eyes. "Gods grant me patience. . ." I heard him mutter.

"Bee, now is not the time to comment on Jane's companion," Sage scolded

her.

Her eyes widened as did the smile on her face. “*Jane’s companion?* So she’s brought us a boyfriend at last!” She clapped her hands in glee, and hopped up and down. “We’re going to have great-grand babies!”

I choked on my own spittle. “He’s *not* my boyfriend!”

Gargan threw back his head and laughed. “That dragon? A companion to anyone? He’s nothing but a thief!”

“And he has an occupation!” Bee squealed.

Bee’s insanity cut Gargan’s humor short as he clenched his teeth. “Shut her mouth and keep it shut!” he barked at his men, one of whom resumed covering her mouth.

Sage chuckled. “She’s quite a handful, isn’t she?”

Gargan spun around, and in so doing he swung his arm out. The back of his hand struck the side of Sage’s face. He stumbled to the side and fell to his knees on the hard ground. “As are captives who are useless to me.” He raised his eyes to the porcine who stood over Sage. “Kill him.”

The porcine drew out his dagger and stepped up behind Sage. A yelp made me look back to Bee. Her mouth shutter now had a fine imprint of her teeth on his hand and she strained against the hold of the other one.

“Hurt any of them and I won’t help you!” she shouted.

Gargan half turned to her and glared at her. “You haven’t helped so far, human.”

“I’ll do it,” she swore as she looked down at Sage.

“You can’t!” Caius shouted at her.

She softly smiled at him. “I must.”

Gargan smirked. “Then you’ll open the door for me?” Bee’s face hardened as she looked to him, but she gave a nod. He chuckled. “Then let’s go do it,” he suggested as he strode toward the tunnel. He paused on the threshold and turned to his men. “And bring them along with us just in case she changes her mind.”

Bee and her guards followed Gargan as he walked down the dark path. Sage was yanked to his feet and the box was grabbed out of his hands. One of the porcine shoved me forward so I was abreast with my grandfather. Caius was

pushed into us and we were herded into the tunnel.

We arrived at the end of the tunnel and the area opened to a small entrance hall. The whole area was carved from solid stone and our footsteps rang out like a battalion of soldiers. The ceiling rose up some twenty feet over our heads and created a half dome that ended in the opposite wall. Faded frescoes decorated the stone. I could make out scenes of people surrounding bones, but the pictures were too worn away by mold to understand what was taking place.

On the wall opposite the tunnel stood a pair of stone doors. Each half of a round lock was inserted into the center of the each of the doors, connecting them and keeping us out. A tiny hole signified the insertion for the key.

Gargan stopped before the door and turned to our company. His eyes fell particularly on Caius and he slipped his hand into the left pocket of his coat. “This would be much easier if you had a key to this door, bone dragon.”

Caius straightened and his face hardened. “I don’t.”

Gargan sighed and shrugged. “Well, that would have forfeited your lives, but fortunately this annoying wasp-” he turned his attention to Bee, “-has the ability to open the lock.”

“That’s *Bee*,” she corrected him.

“I don’t care what it is so long as you can open that door!” he snapped. He took a deep breath and his smirk returned. Gargan drew out a small bag and clasped the drawstring that shut the mouth. “Control this beast or we’re all dead.”

Bee straightened and tilted her nose up at the bag. “I need my flute to control such a rude beast.”

He frowned. “What flute?”

She nodded at my grandparents’ magic box that one of the porcines held. “It’s in there.”

Gargan’s hand atop the lid lowered to his saber. “This had better not be a trick.”

“It’s no trick,” Sage spoke up. “A pickerjacket is a fickle creature so that a summon flute is almost necessary for every beast friend.”

Gargan turned to me and jerked his head toward the box. “You open it and

hand her the flute, and don’t do anything foolish.”

The porcine guard thrust the box into my hands. I opened the lid with my shaking hands and pulled out the flute. Bee smiled at me and held out her hand. I walked through the crowd, but paused as Caius caught my gaze. His anger was quelled, and concern now resided in his face.

I’m sorry I mouthed as I passed by him. This was his family’s treasure I was giving up. He pursed his lips, but gave a curt nod.

That didn’t alleviate the guilt as I handed the flute off to Bee. She took it and gave me a wink. “Everything will be all right. You’ll see.”

“None of that!” Gargan snapped as he stabbed a finger at the doors. “Just open them!”

She looked past me and glared at our lead captor. “Patience, young man.”

“I’m not-” Gargan stopped himself from calling himself older. “Just open the doors!”

Bee wrinkled her nose, but turned to face the doors. She stepped up to within three feet of the door and put the flute to her lips. “Open the bag, young man.”

Gargan clenched his teeth, but pulled on the string. The bag parted like a flower petal and revealed a small black bee on his palm. It was the size of a bumblebee, but without the stripes. The creature emitted a loud humming noise from inside its tiny body that sounded like a helicopter taking off.

The bee creature zipped up and made for Gargan’s face with its stinger swung out to face forward. Gargan’s men leapt into action to save their leader, but Bee blew on her flute. A melodious sound filled the stone cavern. The music was like a song of a sweet bird, and I found myself soothed by its soft sound.

The porcine, however, howled and clapped their hands over their fat ears. Gargan snarled at Bee. “Such a song wouldn’t soothe a kitten!”

“Then I suggest you look ahead of her,” Sage spoke up as he nodded at his wife.

Floating a foot in front of Bee’s face was the pickerjacket. The hornet flew side to side in a gentle rocking motion, and its humming was now a low purr. Bee stepped aside and changed the tune to a hollow ring. The pickerjacket flew forward and zipped into the lock. A moment later there was a rumble and with a

loud creak the doors slowly parted into their opposite walls.

Gargan opened his bag and Bee played a quick little ditty. The pickerjacket flew out of the lock and into Gargan's palm. He tied the bag and tucked it back into his jacket just as the doors finished opening.

Gargan marched forward with a gleeful grin on his face. We were pushed behind him and followed the porcine into a large chamber. The ceiling now towered above us some hundred feet and the walls were giant frescoes filled with dragons depicted without their skin. They flew over a tall mountain which was covered by a vast city of carved stone. The colors were so vivid that only the moss that grew from the cracks obscured the pictures.

"Wow. . ." I murmured as I swept my eyes over the scenes.

My gaze lowered and settled on what could only be described as a huge stone sarcophagus. The hard coffin measured thirty feet wide by fifty feet long, and stood ten feet tall. It was in the shape of a rectangular and stood in the middle of the huge room atop a short platform that was itself sunk into the room. A short flight of two steps all around the floor led down to the sarcophagus.

I glanced at Caius. "Who's in there?"

His reverent eyes remained on the coffin as he replied in a soft voice. "The founder of Wyvern and one of the last dragon elders."

Gargan hurried past us and stopped at the top of the steps. His beady eyes studied the coffin with an eager jerkiness that showed his impatience. He popped off the lid to the case and drew out an ancient piece of parchment that he unrolled. The paper was in near-perfect condition other than the yellowing of age and a crumpled part in the center of the right side.

On the surface was drawn a complicated diagram of two chambers, one smaller than the other. I recognized an enlarged drawing as showing the pair of doors.

"It's a blueprint of this place?" I spoke up.

Gargan half-turned to us and showed off his tusk-accented grin. "A blueprint and a spell written into the drawing that expands throughout this entire cavern." He spread his arm over the area. "This whole place is one giant spell. Perhaps the largest in the history of the world."

“And the spell gives you the power to obtain the strength of the ancient dragon laid to rest in that sarcophagus,” Sage guessed.

Gargan chuckled. “Not just the strength, but the memories and the intellect. I *become* the ancient dragon.”

“Leave it alone!” Caius shouted as he tried to march forward. His porcine captors kept him at bay.

“Jealousy doesn’t suit anyone, especially a hot-blooded dragon,” Gargan scolded him before he turned to again face the sarcophagus. He stretched the blueprint to its fullest extent and admired the drawings. “It’s taken decades for me to find this finished original and not the copies stored in the libraries, and now I will have my reward.” He cleared his throat and chanted a few words that echoed around the stone walls. “Oh sacred ancestors of old, hear my prayer! Grant me thy soul so that I might smite my enemies!”

We all waited with bated breath, and our reward was exhausted lungs. Gargan frowned and the blueprint sunk a little. “Oh sacred ancestors of old, hear my prayer! Grant me thy soul so that I might smite my enemies!” Nothing happened. “Grant me thy soul so that I might smite my enemies!” Disappointment was again his reward.

“Perhaps your accent is off,” Sage teased.

Gargan spun around and crushed the map between his hands as his face boiled red. “Open that sarcophagus!” he screeched at his men.

Half of the porcine scurried forward. They clamored onto the lid and chipped away at the chink that held it in place. The hard gray mixture fell to the floor and shattered. A few minutes of hard work and they knocked it away at the last. The pigs dropped off and climbed aboard one another to form a porcine pyramid. The ones on top grabbed the side of the lid and pushed. The lid eased to one side and a poof of dust rose up from inside the coffin.

Gargan rolled the blueprint up and tucked it into its case before he marched forward and stomped on his men to get to the opening. He looked in and his eyes widened before he whipped his head to Caius.

“Where is it? Where is the dragon’s body?”

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Caius' eyes widened. "What are you saying? That the body isn't there?"

"You know it isn't there!" Gargan snapped as he marched down off his men and up to Caius. The pig was a half a head shorter than the dragon, but his puffed cheeks and flared nostrils made him look nearly as big. "Now where is it?"

Caius shrugged. "I don't know."

Gargan sneered at him before he spun around to face Bee. He marched up to her and grabbed her hair. The porcine yanked her down onto her knees beside him and drew out his saber. He pressed the blade against her throat before he looked up at Caius. "I'll ask just once more: where is the body of the dragon elder?"

"I said I don't know!" Caius insisted.

Gargan pressed the sharp edge against Bee's throat and she winced. A thin cut appeared and blood trailed down her neck.

"Bee!" Sage shouted. He tried to hurry forward, but the porcine grabbed him and held him back.

"Tell me where it is!" Gargan demanded as he pressed his blade deeper into her throat.

"Stop it!" Caius yelled as he strained against his captors. "I'm telling you the truth! I don't know what happened to it!"

"Then she dies!"

“Wait!” Gargan paused and turned his attention to me. My pulse quickened at the look of murder in his eyes. “I can tell you where it is.”

He sneered at me. “How?”

“Just let me touch the scroll and I can see what happened to it,” I told him.

He scoffed. “So you might destroy it? Do you think me that stupid?”

“I can show you where it’s hidden, but I have to touch that scroll, or maybe just the leather case,” I insisted. His eyes still showed doubt, but there was consideration, too. I held out my hand. “What do you have to lose?”

Gargan pursed his lips, but drew his weapon away from Bee’s throat. She relaxed and took in some much needed air as he untied the case and tossed it to me. The case rolled across the ground and I stooped to catch it. I gingerly took the case in my hands, unsure of what I would see, if anything. Nothing happened, so I popped open the cap and tilted the leather so that the blueprint slid into my hand. I unrolled the parchment and my fingers brushed against the smooth ink that made up the drawings.

A strange sensation like a calling made me look up and back the way we’d entered the tomb. There was a new face among the ugly porcine. This one belonged to a handsome man with soft features and a bright smile. The stranger stood near the opening with the fresh blueprint in his hands and proudly inspected the walls. He wore a soft silk shirt and pants, and on his belt was tied the case for the map.

Workers walked past him carrying buckets filled with what looked like cement mix and ladders. They were grimier than him, but even the poorest wore faded silk. They bowed their heads to him as they passed, but he was engrossed in his perusal of the room.

Another man joined him of equal dressing. “Quite a feat to have created such a magnificent vault, especially for a dragon steeped in more magic than planning,” he commented.

The first man nodded. “Yes, and if my calculations are correct it should last until the end of time.”

His companion chuckled. “Isn’t that tempting the gods?”

The man with the map shook his head. “Not at all. My math was perfect, and

this drawing-” he held up the map, “-proves it.” A sprinkling of dust landed on the outstretched map. Both men looked up, and I followed suit.

The perfect ceiling was marred by a large crack. The second man frowned. “I don’t recall that crack there a moment ago.”

The face of the man with the map had gone white. “Because it wasn’t.”

His companion whipped his head to him and his eyes widened. “Could your calculations have been off?”

“Impossible!” the other argued. He paced the floor with his eyes ever on the crack. “It can’t be possible!”

“I must inform the rest of the council of this event right away,” his friend insisted as he strode from the tomb.

“Wait, Duece!” He reached the other man and grabbed his shoulder to spin him around. “Please don’t tell them just yet! I’m sure I can fix this!”

Duece frowned at his friend. “You and I have been friends for a very long time, Faberius, but I cannot stand by and let you destroy the remains of our venerable ancestor.”

Duece shrugged out of Faberius’ hold and marched away. “Duece! Duece!” Faberius called out, but his friend didn’t stop.

A wisp of fog covered the men, and when it cleared the scene had changed. Faberius stood dumbstruck before the tomb. Ladders led up to the opened lid and men moved up and down removing large bones from inside. They exited the room not through the main doorway but out a large gateway at the rear of the tomb.

“This cannot be. . .” Faberius muttered. The map hung loosely in one hand as he shook his head. “It was supposed to last forever.”

“Nothing lasts forever, Faberius,” a voice spoke up, and Faberius turned to find Duece standing in the doorway.

The architect’s face twisted in fury. He rushed over and threw a punch that Duece easily caught. Tears sprang into Faberius’ eyes as he searched his friend’s face. “Why? Why did you want to destroy my life’s work?”

Duece shoved his fist away and glared at him. “Are you mad? We had to remove the remains or it would have been crushed by the weight of the city!”

“That doorway was only meant as an escape!” Faberius shrieked as he gestured to the rear exit. “Using it has doomed my creation!”

“Your creation was doomed when you failed to take into account the full weight of the citadel!” Duece reminded him. He took a deep breath and pursed his lips as he watched the men remove the bones. “As it is, you’re fortunate the council didn’t call for your head.”

Faberius sunk down onto his knees and hung his head. “My creation. . .my beautiful, wonderful creation. . .” His eyes hardened and his hand grasped the right side of the blueprint, crumpling the paper. “I won’t have it. . .” I heard him mutter as he rose to his feet. His eyes glowed with a maniacal brilliance as a sick smile slid onto his lips. “But someone will. Someone will have it, and I don’t care if they collapse this whole city.”

Faberius turned away from the work and drew out a pen. He scribbled a few lines at the bottom of the page as he passed by me. I couldn’t see the words, but they glowed with as unnatural a light as I saw in his eyes.

“Grant me thy soul so that I might smite my enemies. . .” I heard him murmur before he stopped at the archway.

“What are you doing?” Duece shouted.

Faberius spun around and glared at his old friend. “Destroying what I made!”

“Guards!” Duece shouted.

A pair of guards grabbed Faberious’ arms. He struggled, but in his efforts to escape his pen fell from his hand. He looked up to catch one last view of his ruined masterpiece. A sick smile spread across his lips as the parchment was torn from his hand.

The scene vanished and a wave of exhaustion fell of me. I stumbled backward into Caius’ waiting arms. All eyes were on me as I shook the fog from my mind and stood on my own two feet.

“It was moved,” I announced to friend and foe.

Gargan sneered at me. “If that’s all you learned from the map then you’ve ended your life.”

I met his anger-filled eyes with my steady gaze and frowned at him. “I also saw where they took the bones.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Where?”

I pointed at the back wall. “Through there.”

Gargan strode around the giant coffin and over to the wall. He pounded his fist against the thick stone before he half-turned to me. “There’s nothing here but solid rock.”

I nodded at the wall a little to his left. “It’s a little more over there, and one of the stones beside the wall was stuck out. I think it was the one with the little dot in the middle.”

Gargan moved a few steps to his left and pounded on the wall. The reply was a hollow sound. A pleased grin spread across his face. He raised his saber and slammed the blade into the grout between the stone I pointed at and its neighbor. The porcine grabbed hold of the grip with both hands and braced his feet for a pull.

“Wait!” I shouted as I stretched out my hand toward him.

He paused and frowned at me. “Why?”

“Because if you open that door this whole place might collapse!” I warned him.

Gargan sneered at me. “This is a poor trick.”

“It’s no trick,” Sage spoke up as he studied the ceiling with its myriad of cracks through which mold grew. “There’s very little holding this ceiling up. A small earthquake would soon bring down those heavy stones upon our heads.”

The porcines now looked up at the ceiling as though it would fall on us with only a breath of air. Gargan marched over to me and grabbed my arm. He tore me from Caius and yanked me against his side. “Then you go ahead with me.” He looked to one of his men. “Pull out the stone!”

The porcine eagerly scurried to the secret opening and stuck his own blade into the grout. Gargan and I followed and stood before the wall. The porcine grasped the handle and drew back the weapon. The stone shifted and scraped as it was drawn outward. At the same time a doorway some ten feet tall and eight feet wide opened beside him.

The movement of the stone wall made the tomb tremble, and we were pelted with pebbles of rock from the ceiling. The captors and captives scooted over to

the opening as the dust fell from the walls. The vibrations grew more violent even as the hidden door finished its movement. Piles of moss plopped onto the stone floor as the lid bounced up and down atop the body of the coffin. Clumps of stone dropped from the ceiling and shattered on the floor, bringing with them heavy mounds of dirt.

Gargan got a good grip on me and pulled me into the wide tunnel. The passage wasn't safe from the vibrations as dirt and stone crumbs dropped on our heads. A particularly hard vibration shook loose a few large boulders which crashed down onto the heads of some of the porcine. The piggish men threw up their arms and screamed as they were buried by the several tons of stone.

Caius leapt out of the way in time to avoid their fate and threw himself to the floor a few inches shy of the rubble. He rolled over to face the pile of rock. An arm of one of the victims stuck out of the mound of stone not more than a foot from him.

Gargan paused long enough to look over his shoulder. "Get him up and out! Now!"

Another porcine pulled Caius to his feet and we hurried down the passage. A light at the end bespoke hope, and Gargan quickened his pace to a slow sprint. He dragged me over the threshold and out into the thick air of the wild jungle. The others followed, and behind them came a dust cloud as the passage completely collapsed behind us.

We were out of one danger, but still stuck in another.

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We were down three porcine, but my group was unscathed but for a thick layer of dust over us and a few cuts from the jagged falling ceiling.

Gargan looked around us. We stood on the far side of the mountain and a stone step led down. Another stairway led upward toward the peek. He turned to me. “Which way, witch?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I just saw that they took the bones away,” I told him as his grip on my arm was painfully tightened. “I don’t know where they took them.”

“Then look at the blueprint again!” he snapped.

“I can only see it once,” I insisted.

With a cry he threw me to the ground at the feet of my friends. Caius stooped and helped me to my feet as Gargan turned to face us. He unsheathed his weapon and pointed the blade at my chest. “If you don’t know where it is then you’re useless to me!”

Bee tilted her head to one side and a smile slipped onto her lips. “It’s down.”

Gargan paused in his anger and glared at her. “How do you know?”

She looked up at the sky as a little bird flitted away through the branches of the wild trees. “A little bird told me.”

“Then *you* lead,” he demanded as he drew her away from Sage and to the

front of our group.

The porcine were fewer in number, but still able to put a captor to each of us as we were marched down the broken, moss-covered steps. The decline was steep and I grasped any bush and vines that I could get a hold of. I slipped on one of the stones and Caius caught my arms before I turned into a tumbling ball of broken bones.

I looked up at him and could see in his eyes a tension that made my pulse quicken. The same was probably reflected in my own eyes as I tried to figure out some way of ending up on the living side at the end of this death march. We were only pawns, and eventually the pawns would be sacrificed out of uselessness.

A porcine guard shoved the flat edge of his saber into Caius' back. The dragon glared at him, but helped me to my feet and we proceeded down. The stairs wound leftward away from the main ruins of the city to a small plateau. A ring of purposefully planted oak trees stood as sentinels around the open area, and in the center was a huge mound. The dirt was covered in a carpet of flowers, but their gray petals didn't lift my spirits.

Gargan stopped at the edge of the mound and studied the flora before he looked to Caius. "Are these flowers dragon blooms?"

Caius nodded. "They are." I looked up at him in question. "These flowers only grow over the bodies of dragons, and they only bloom when the dragon had a particularly strong aura."

A sly smile slipped onto Gargan's lips as he pushed Bee into the arms of one of his subordinates and drew out his cutlass. "Like a dragon elder."

Gargan stabbed the long blade into the hill and his weapon made a hard, hollow sound as it struck something of equal hardness. The porcine pulled his blade out and half-turned to his men.

"What are you waiting for?" he snapped at them as he jerked his head toward the pile. "Get digging!" He looped his arm around Bee and drew her against half his chest. The porcine pressed the blade of his weapon against her bleeding throat. "You, too! All of you! And don't try anything foolish or your beloved companion will know your punishment."

We went to work with our hands and the porcine with their weapons. I grabbed a flat stone and climbed a little higher than the others to start near the top. My rock dug deep into the earth and scooped away a couple of inches at a time until I struck what Gargan had found. I knelt on my knees and used my hands to scrape away the dirt until white rock appeared.

My hands brushed against the white rock and I let out a gasp as I was lifted off the ground onto the back of a beast of bone. It had all the tell-tale signs of a dragon, but like the pictures in the Wyvern there was no flesh. The only thing keeping the bones together was a strange white glow like thin silk that connected the cartilage. Its eyes were a brilliant red, but the color didn't fill me with terror. Rather, they were like looking into a warm fire on a cold night.

The creature defied logic by flying high over the mountain that contained the Wyvern. The wind didn't whip at my hair like it should have, and I felt no breeze across my face or clothes. Still, I clutched onto a shoulder blade just behind the head and leaned over. Far below us was not the ruins of a once-great city, but the beginnings of a grand metropolis. Stone pillars rose up from the jungle floor and half-finished roads wound through recently fallen trees.

"Wow. . ." I murmured.

The dragon took a sharp turn sideways and dove down toward the hills. Its giant shadow slipped across the ground and seemed to chase us before my ride settled near the peak of the mountain on a flat spot.

I slid off, but past experience taught me that to lose hold was to lose the scene, so I clutched onto his shoulder to keep the connection alive. The dragon was a full four times larger than Caius in his full form with not a speck of skin over its bony body. The snout still reached to the top of my head and still had the sloped forehead and horns to tower over us.

The dragon lowered its head to study the people below us. I saw they were human, or at least appeared to be. Some of them, however, had wings upon their backs as they flew from one end of the rising city to the other.

The dragon transformed into one of those half-man beings, but I kept my hand on his shoulder. The man that appeared looked very much like Caius, though his hair was pure white and trailed far down his back. He surveyed the

city with a soft smile.

“So magnificent,” I heard him murmur. His good humor vanished as he winced and clutched his chest. A bitter smile replaced his former glee. “And yet, I won’t be able to see its end. What a pity this great power grants me so weak a heart.”

“Jane! Jane!”

The dragon man in front of me spun around and looked at me with wide eyes. In his quick movement I lost contact and the scene vanished. The sky replaced the jungle along with the faces of my concerned grandparents and Caius. I shifted and realized I lay on my back atop my discovery. My hand was still draped across the white rock.

“Are you all right?” Sage asked me.

I sat up and clutched my head before I nodded. “I-I think so, but I saw the-”

“Get her off of there and keep shoveling!” Gargan shouted.

Bee and Sage grabbed my arms to help me to my feet, but Caius stooped and scooped me into his arms. He carried me off the mound and down to a nearby tree where he set me on the ground and leaned my back against the tree. His hands grasped mine and he looked me in the eyes.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked me.

I smiled and nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Get digging, dragon!” Gargan yelled.

Caius turned his head to one side to glare in Gargan’s direction before he returned his attention to me. He cupped one of my cheeks in his palm and studied my face. When he spoke his voice was a low whisper. “Stay here. Things are going to get worse before they get better.”

I didn’t have time to nod before he stood and returned to digging. Gargan glanced in my direction and narrowed his eyes at me, but a call from one of his men made him look away.

“Chief!” one of the porcine shouted as he stumbled away from the dragon’s head. He pointed a shaking finger at the face. “I-I think it looked at me.!”

“Don’t be a fool!” Gargan snapped as he stalked up to his minion. He shoved the porcine away and looked at the dragon bones. “This thing’s been dead for

thousands of years. It isn't about to wake up again. Now-" he drew out the blueprint and unrolled the parchment. An eager smile lit up his face as his eyes looked over the top of the paper at the bones. "-we will see if this works." The porcine and my companions scuttled away from the half-unburied creature as Gargan read the words again in a clear, loud voice.

"Oh sacred ancestors of old, hear my prayer! Grant me thy soul so that I might smite my enemies!"

The earth shook and a bright glow surrounded the bones. The earth over the body exploded outward, pelting us with the hard dirt. I threw up my arm against stones and pebbles, and as I did so a brilliant light arched into the air and slammed down into Gargan.

A small explosion erupted around him. The grass beneath his feet was burned away. The parchment met the same fate as it, too, was consumed by the hot glow of the light.

The porcine grunted and stumbled back, but remained standing as the brilliance entered his body. All of the light from the bones was transferred to him and he glowed as bright as the sun for a moment before the last of the light was absorbed into him. After the last speck of brilliance left its body the bones collapsed into large pile of dust.

There was quiet for a moment before Gargan straightened and looked down at his stubby hands as though he were viewing them for the first time. "So this is it. . ." I heard him murmur.

One of the other porcine took a cautious step forward. "Gargan? You all right?"

Gargan raised his head and a maniacal grin spread across his face. He whipped his hand out and grasped the forehead of his minion. In one hideous move he squeezed the porcine's head between his fingers. With one last terrified squeal the porcine's skull was crushed. Gargan released him and the pig fell face-forward onto the ground, his dead eyes staring emptily into the trees.

The other minions stumbled back with their tusked jaws agape and their eyes full of horror. "W-why'd you do that?" one of them asked him.

Gargan turned to face them and his eyes shone with an unnatural red light.

“Because I no longer have any use for you.”

The porcine squealed and scattered. Gargan rushed forward with terrifying speed and grabbed another of his minions. He picked the porcine up by the back of the head, but instead of crushing him he threw him into the air. The porcine shrieked as he flew over the trees and landed in the wilderness far out of sight.

The last of the living porcine squealed away into the woods and a tense silence fell over us. Sage swooped in and swiped his medallion from the dead porcine.

Gargan turned to face our group with his twisted smile. He raised one hand to study his palm and chuckled. “What strength. What power! And it’s all mine!”

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Caius stepped to the front and looked at him with a hard glare. “It’s not yours.”

Gargan chuckled. “You seem to forget, thief, that I have rightfully taken what was no longer owned. Now if you don’t mind I want to test this power out on a worthy opponent.”

Gargan rushed Caius who blocked the first punch, but missed the second. The fist landed a hard blow on the side of his face and sent him sailing across the meadow. He skipped across the ground and slammed into a tree. His body flickered like bad television reception as it had done before, but only his left hand changed as it flickered between flesh and bone.

Gargan stalked over to the flickering Caius and picked him up by his collar. He raised him above his head and chuckled. “Your masking spell is failing you, bone dragon. Perhaps I should help it.” He raised his free hand and repeatedly punched Caius’ face. Blood poured from Caius’ mouth and nose, and his face swelled up.

“Let him go!” I yelled as I tried to rush forward. Sage grabbed me. I twisted around and glared at him. “What are you doing? We need to help him!”

“This is a fight between dragons now,” he warned me.

I pulled on his grip and shook my head. “I don’t care! He needs our help!”

A noise made me turn around and I saw Gargan throw Caius to the side. Caius landed hard on his left side and the flickered ended in a soft burst of white

light. The flesh from his left hand vanished, and all that remained were the bones, and they were connected via a soft glow of light that shimmered like silk.

My jaw hit the ground, but there were more surprises in store as Gargan backed away from Caius. “Can’t you put up a fight, bone dragon, or has all the spirit left your line and gone into me?” He thought his little joke funny enough to throw back his head and laugh.

Caius rose to his feet and narrowed his eyes at the pig. He balled his hands into fists and I saw his body expand a little. His gaze flickered over to us and he tensed before he returned his attention to Gargan. “If you truly have all the power of my ancestor then let’s take this into the air.”

Caius leapt into the air and in a quick moment transformed into his dragon self, but this wasn’t the same dragon self as before. Gone was his flesh and in its place was a bone body like that of the dragon elder from my vision. He flapped his wings hard and flew over the trees toward the steep drop over the mountain. Gargan grinned and opened his arms wide. His body, too, expanded and in a moment he had changed his form into another bone dragon, though his bones were of a more pinkish color than gray.

However, Gargan was a grotesque mockery of an elegant dragon. His snout was short and still piggish, and his wings were so fat they hardly looked usable. The feet that supported him were flabby trunks and ended in short talons.

Gargan flapped his chubby wings and the air pushed us back. He took off from the ground and flew after Caius. They clashed in midair, their claws and teeth slashing at each other. Gargan had the advantage and it showed. Caius was kicked back by Gargan’s back legs and the piggish dragon slashed his claw across Caius’ chest. A quick twist by Caius avoided a mortal wound, but a large gash opened in his scales and blood poured down the length of his body.

My face was a picture of horror as I turned to my grandparents. “There has to be something we can do! What about that deadly bee?”

Sage’s eyes remained on the battle as he shook his head. “The pickerjacket’s stinger isn’t strong enough to penetrate the scales of a dragon.”

“What about your wind power? Or your lightning?” I suggested.

“I’m afraid I’m a little rusty, pumpkin, so there’s a very real chance I would

strike Caius with my power," he warned me.

I was filled with frustration as I looked back to the fight. Caius turned and fled upward at an angle to give some distance, and Gargan pursued. They were small figures in the sky when Gargan fell back a little. I squinted and noticed his body shuddered a little, but he quickly recovered and flew after Caius.

A memory flashed across my mind, and I spun around to face my grandparents who still watched the battle. "Grandpa, you have to get me up there with that wind tunnel!" I told him.

Sage frowned at me. "Why?"

"Because I think I know how to defeat that thing, but I need to tell Caius how!" I explained. They glanced at each other, and both of them had doubt in their eyes. "Please!" I pleaded.

Sage pursed his lips, but gave a nod as he stepped back. "Very well, pumpkin, but don't do anything foolish."

"And don't forget to fasten your seatbelt," Bee reminded me.

I gave her a smile and a thumbs up as Sage's medallion glowed. He stretched out his hand to me and a wind vortex came out of his palm as before. The wind picked me up and shot me into the air as quick as a bullet. I squinted my eyes to keep the wind out as I was propelled across the sky like a shooting star. Sage arched me over the flying dragons as Gargan still chased Caius.

I landed hard on the slick surface of Caius' bone body and nearly slid off. He didn't help by making a hard turn to throw me.

"It's Jane!" I yelped as I clutched onto a vertebrae.

Caius righted himself and looked over his shoulder at me. I expected his voice to be deep, but it was almost melodic. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to save your ass, and mine," I retorted as I climbed up to his shoulder blades. There was a good place where I could set my feet against his rib cage behind me and clutch onto his blades in front of me so I was tucked low. "You have to fly higher!"

"Higher? Why-" A sound of snapping jaws interrupted us.

Gargan was less than a tail's length away. His fat teeth snapped at Caius' tail trying to bite it clear off. Caius cracked his tail like a whip and smacked Gargan

in the side of the face. The piggish dragon fell back a body's length, but quickly recovered and flew after us with murder in his red eyes.

"Just do it!" I shouted.

Caius turned his face upward at a steep angle and flapped his wings hard. We ascended toward a group of wispy clouds that floated high above the mountain. I looked over my shoulder and saw that Gargan followed us. His large body strained to keep up as we climbed higher and higher. The glow that connected his form flickered and in some cases changed from whitish to red like an emergency light slowly warning its own that something was going wrong.

We reached the clouds and Caius twisted around so we flew level with the ground through them. "Hold on!" he warned me.

I barely had time to grasp tighter before he spun in a tight circle, causing me to lose track of which way was up and down. The clouds around us spun, too, and we left behind in our wake a thick batch of clouds shaped like soft ice cream out of a nozzle. Caius flew up in an upside arch as Gargan, lost in the thick clouds and his wings beating at a slower rate, emerged much later after us. We ended up behind him and Caius rammed one of his wings, knocking him to the side and throwing off his balance.

Gargan recovered and, with an angry roar, flew after us as Caius turned away. He flew upward again and I coughed as the air around us grew thin. The ground was so far below us that the areas were now patches of different-colored dirt.

I looked over my shoulder. Gargan flapped hard to catch up, and each flap made his glowing body light up like a red Christmas light. Eventually his whole body glowed with that blazing red color, but he kept up his pursuit. We reached the tip of the clouds and Caius spun around to face our foe.

Gargan flew up so that we faced each other. He was so out of breath he could barely chuckle. "A nice final view for you, isn't it?"

"The only one who's time has come is you," Caius warned him as he looked over the piggish dragon's red and pink body. "You've reached the limit of your powers."

Gargan lifted his fat nose and sneered at us. "I've hardly begun to tap this

limitless power!”

“Then try to catch me,” Caius dared him as he turned and flew higher.

Gargan took the bait and followed us, but with each flap he became slower. At more than three body lengths behind us Caius turned and flew in circles around our huffing foe. Gargan could only turn his head and snap his jaws uselessly as we sped around him.

“Hold still and fight!” he challenged us.

“If you want,” Caius agreed as he took a sharp turn and rammed his head into Gargan’s side.

Gargan tumbled back but caught himself, though not without his body shuddering. He clenched his teeth and flew at us, but Caius swung his tail and landed a direct hit to Gargan’s snout. The pig dragon fell fifty yards beneath us before he righted himself. With a roar he flew up hard and fast. Caius easily dodged Gargan’s snapping jaws and flew back.

Gargan tried to follow, but the emergency light that was now his body gave up. His body shuddered and the lights that connected his bones failed. The first part to drop off was his tail, and the destruction worked its way up from there.

Gargan glanced behind himself and his eyes widened. “W-what’s happening?”

“That’s the bad part about being a bone dragon,” Caius warned him as we watched Gargan writhe in terror. “You use all that power and your body falls apart.”

“H-how do you stop it? How?” Gargan howled as the collapse nearly reached his wings.

“You don’t.”

With a terrible roar Gargan’s wings fell apart and he dropped out of the sky. We watched from our position as he plunged to the ground far below us. A speck of dust showed where he hit the ground that would be his final resting place.

We’d won. Thank Gad.

23

Caius glanced over his shoulder to study me. “How were you so sure he would run out of energy?”

I shrugged. “I saw it when I touched the bones of the dragon.”

A wide grin slipped onto his toothy mouth. “Are you sure you’re not a witch?”

I leaned over one side and winced at the far ground. “No, but I’m sure I want to get down.”

“Hold on,” he recommended as he turned his nose downward.

I yelped and clutched onto him as we dipped downward as quickly as I’d flown up. He flew us to the small plateau where my grandparents waited for us. I was glad when I could slide down his bones and onto the hard ground.

Bee rushed up to me and wrapped me in a bone-crushing hug. “That was wonderful, Jane! And so exciting to watch!”

I pulled her to arm’s length to get some air and smiled at her. “It was pretty exciting being up there, too.”

Sage came up to us with a broad smile on his face. He set a hand on my shoulder and gave a nod. “You did very well, Jane.”

I looked past him at Caius who stood off by himself. “I think he did better.”

Sage turned to Caius and walked over to the young dragon man. He held out his hand to Caius and smiled. “Very well done, young dragon.”

Caius shook his head. “It was nothing.”

Sage nodded. “You belittle a good deed. You saved my wife and many others who would have fallen beneath the claws of that piggish bore. Let me thank you for that and shake your hand.” A crooked smile slipped onto Caius’ lips and he took Sage’s hand in a firm handshake. Sage came away with a wince and cradled his hand in his other one. “Maybe I’m not as young as I think I am.”

“Don’t hoard this handsome young man’s attention all to yourself,” Bee scolded my grandfather as she hurried over and enveloped Caius in her tight hug.

“Thanks,” Caius wheezed before he was released. I stepped up to him as my grandparents moved back. Caius held his hand out to me and grinned. “We work pretty well together, don’t we?”

I swatted his hand away and wrapped him in a hug almost as tight as my grandmother’s. Almost. Caius was stiff for a moment before he returned the gesture with a softer hug.

“Don’t do anything that stupid again,” I whispered.

“I’ll try,” he returned.

I tore myself from his hug and took a step back to cross my arms over my chest. A glare slipped onto my lips as I stared hard at him. “What which one is it?”

He blinked at me. “Which one is what?”

“Are you that white dragon or the bone dragon?” I questioned him.

He pursed his lips before he held up his left hand. It was still bone. “Bone.”

I tapped my foot on the ground. “Then why didn’t you just say so?”

“Bone dragons are hunted for their bodies. They’re rumored to cure any ailment,” Sage told me as he studied our companion. “I might venture to guess our young friend here sought to hide his true identity to avoid becoming someone’s aphrodisiac.”

Caius glanced at Sage and nodded. “You’re right about that.”

“And might I also venture to guess that the masking spell weakened your abilities?” Sage mused.

Caius smiled. “Again, you’re right.”

“He always likes to show off his knowledge,” Bee spoke up with a fond push of her shoulder against his.

“Speaking of knowledge,” Sage returned as he turned to his wife. “How did that porcine know how to find you?”

“He bragged about using this,” Bee revealed as she dug into her dress pocket and drew out her balled fist.

She opened her hand for us. We crowded around her and saw that she held a small round orb in her palm that was the size of a grape. Its smooth black surface absorbed the light around us and seemed to swallow it in its dark depths.

I looked from the ball to Bee. “What is it?”

Sage plucked the orb from Bee and raised it above his head to study it. “It seems to hold some sort of black magic that-ah!” He yelped and dropped the ball. It splattered to the ground at his feet and melted into the earth.

“Was that a trap?” Caius wondered.

Sage frowned at where it had disappeared. “I don’t think so. Rather, there was a spell so that the orb couldn’t be inspected.”

“That sounds like a pretty specific spell,” I mused.

“And powerful,” Sage added as he knelt down to study the earth. The grass the orb had touched was dead. “It takes a lot of nuance for someone to know when they’re being watched. To attach such an arbitrary emotion to an object takes quite a bit of skill.”

“Anyway, he said it could find anybody he wished, so he found me through the portal,” Bee finished. She wrinkled her nose. “He was such a bore. He hated all my jokes and hardly ever smiled.”

“Well, with all our mysteries solved I suppose we should be getting home,” Sage mused as his eyes flickered to Bee.

Bee’s face fell as she met his gaze. “I suppose so, but-”

“There are meetings and there are partings,” Sage reminded her.

Bee hung her head and sighed. “I know. . .”

I knew what they meant and glanced at Caius. His attentive gaze lay on my grandparents My heart grew heavy when I realized I probably wasn’t going to see him ever again, but an idea struck me that lightened my mood. “Maybe. . .maybe we could spend one more night here?” Everyone glanced at me and I shrugged. “Why not? It looks like it’s going to be a nice night and then we can

start tomorrow for home."

Bee smiled and nodded. "That's a wonderful idea! And we can use them to get us most of the way home!" She gestured to the woods, and from the trees emerged our two unicorns with Menander leading the way.

He walked over to me and with a whinny he threw his head back. I smiled and stroked his nose. "Sorry about leaving you, but how did you even find us?" The unicorn pawed the ground.

Sage walked up to my side and chuckled. "He said you're easy to smell."

I lifted one arm and gave a whiff before I wrinkled my nose. "I smell what he means. I'm really looking forward to a bath."

"Then you wouldn't want to stay here a while longer?" Sage wondered.

"You behave yourself, Simon Howard," Bee scolded him.

He sheepishly smiled and drew back to turn to her. "It was merely a suggestion. Oh, and I have something for you, Bee." He stooped and set the box on the ground where he retrieved my grandmother's hair comb. Sage set it in her hair.

Bee brushed her fingers against the comb before she smiled at him. "You always knew how to make a girl feel special." She stood on her tiptoes and pecked a kiss on his cheek.

Sage blushed and coughed into his hand. "Yes, well-"

"Don't be so silly," Bee teased as she looped her arm around one of his.

"I might fly you tomorrow, if you're looking for a quick ride," Caius spoke up.

Bee looked him over and furrowed her brow. "Young man, you are in no condition to carry more than one of us."

Caius shifted and winced as he clutched his chest. "Perhaps not."

His clutching reminded me of the battle and that terrible wound he received. I hurried to his side and held his arm to support him. "Why the hell didn't you tell us it hurt?"

He raised his head and sheepishly smiled at me. "A dragon has his pride."

Bee scurried up to Caius and took his other arm. "I'll have you healing in a moment, but first let's set you down. The bees don't like tall dragons."

“Bees?” I asked her as she tugged us toward a thick tree.

Bee pulled Caius to the ground and knelt beside him. She reached for his shirt, but he held up his hands to block hers. “I can undress myself,” Caius assured her.

“I’m sure you can, young man,” Bee agreed as she slapped his hands out of her way and tore open his shirt.

My hand flew to my mouth to stifle my gasp. A horrible gash was revealed to us complete with clotting blood and torn flesh. “Is he going to be okay?” I asked my grandmother.

She studied the wound for a moment before she smiled and gave a nod. “Yes, I think so, but he’ll need that bee poultice.” She drew out her flute and played a short song on it.

We looked around waiting for the results, and soon a soft sound reached my ears. The noise grew louder until I found it came from behind me. I spun around in time to watch a swarm of bright green bees emerge from the woods. They flew over the clearing and stopped behind my grandmother.

She stood and turned to them, holding out her hand in the process. One-by-one the bees landed onto her palm and flew off, and with each bee a small mound began to appear. At the end of the line she held two handfuls of green goop.

As the last of the bees flew back to the cluster that floated in front of her Bee smiled and bowed her head to them. “Thank you very much, and may Gad smile on you.” They bowed as a whole entity and flew up. Bee turned back to Caius and knelt before him, separating her goo-filled hands so they hung on either side of his wound. “This may hurt,” she warned him.

Caius frowned as he studied the stinking green goo. “What is-ah!” Bee had slapped both hands onto his wound. He clenched his teeth, but an unmistakable hiss whistled through them.

Bee drew back her hands and smiled at her work. His gash was completely covered in the goo. “There. You should be all better by morning.”

“Thanks. . .” he grumbled as he gripped the dirt on either side of him.

I turned to my grandmother as she stood. “What was that stuff?”

“Saliva from the beeler,” she told me as she licked at some of the goop on her fingers. “Delicious and medicinal.”

Sage stepped up and grasped her upper arms. “Let’s get you cleaned up now, Bee, and get ready for nightfall.”

She smiled up at him and gave a nod. “That’s a wonderful idea! The bees told me the night should be wonderful.”

I glanced at Sage and arched an eyebrow. He smiled and shrugged as he led my grandmother off to clean her hands.

We all pitched in and soon had a nice ring of stones with a warm, crackling fire. Night fell over us, and the bees were right. The stars shone brighter than I’d ever seen them, and there were more lights in the sky than a huge city.

Caius sat opposite me laying against his customary log he’d managed to carry over. His soft eyes reflected the flickering fire as he studied me. “Can you see as many stars as this in your world?”

I shook my head. “Only if you go out into the woods far away from the city.”

“Then there are a lot of cities?” he guessed.

I nodded. “Yeah. We live on the outskirts of one of them, so we see more stars than most people.”

“And that’s a world you want to go back to?” he persisted.

I dropped my eyes from the beautiful sky to his searching gaze and arched an eyebrow. “I don’t really think we have a choice.”

Bee stood and pulled my grandfather up with her. “Come along, dear. I think we’re getting in the way.”

“Maybe that’s what I want,” Sage teased, but let her draw him away.

My grandmother’s soft voice floated over to us. “They make *such* a cute couple, don’t they?”

I rolled my eyes, but Caius’ face showed nothing but his intense look. “Your grandmother seems to be quite the handful.”

“You have no idea,” I told him as I poked the fire with a stick. “I have to find everything for her because she keeps losing things like her glasses and the home phone.”

“‘Phone?’” he repeated.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing, just a way we communicate in my world.”

Caius arched an eyebrow, but returned to gazing into the fire. A pensive look marred his usual good humor. “You have no choice but to go back to this ‘phone?’”

I snorted. “Some people would say that, but I could live without it.”

His eyes flickered over to me. “Then you might stay?”

My shoulders slumped. “I. . .I don’t think that’d be a good idea. I mean, my grandparents are going back.”

Caius’ gaze glanced past me and where my grandparents had gone. An unreadable intensity slipped into his eyes for a moment before he shook his head and slid down his log to stretch himself out on the ground. “I see. . .”

A yawn interrupted my reply and I covered my gaping mouth. “So what about you?” I wondered.

He arched an eyebrow. “Me?”

“Would you want to visit my world?” I suggested.

A half-smile slipped onto his lips. “I don’t think I’d be welcomed there.”

I snorted. “You’re a cute guy who can save a girl some gas money. I think you’d be welcomed.”

Caius crossed his legs and stared hard into the fire. “I think I’d be a little lost, and for a thief that spells trouble.”

And that was that. Tomorrow we would be separated, probably forever.

My heart was heavy as I eased myself onto the horse blankets laid out for my bed. “I see. . .”

Caius opened his mouth, but paused and shut it. I lay on my side and closed my eyes. In a moment I drifted off to sleep with bitter-sweet thoughts of a certain dragon man in my mind.

24

It wasn’t the sun that woke me up, but muted voices. My eyes fluttered open and I found myself staring into the dying embers of the fire. Across from me stood my three companions deep in argument.

“What aren’t you telling her?” Caius hissed at my grandparents.

“What do you mean?” Sage returned.

“You may be able to fool her because she trusts you, but anyone else can see you’re hiding something,” Caius accused him.

Sage stretched himself to his full height as Bee set a hand on his shoulder. “I only mean the best for her.”

“The best would be for you to be honest with her,” Caius insisted.

“Is that what she wants, or yourself?” Sage wondered.

“I only want her to know the truth, and I’m sure she wants that, too,” Caius told him.

“Are you sure your own desires aren’t guiding your questions?” Sage countered as he studied the dragon with a slight touch of amusement in his eyes. “That perhaps you would want her to stay with us?”

“Stay with you?” I spoke up as I threw off the blanket and climbed to my feet. The nervous looks in my direction made my heart quicken. “What’s going on?” My gaze fell on Sage. “What aren’t you telling me?”

My grandma looked up at her husband. “We have to tell her some time, Sage. Better now than later.”

Sage sighed and met my worried eyes. “We can’t come with you, pumpkin.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? Come where?”

“There’s only a certain amount of times one can travel between worlds, and we’ve used up ours,” he explained. “That means we can’t go back to our world.”

“That’s why we didn’t come back here for so long,” Bee added. “That, and your father.”

“But-” I whipped my head from one to the other, “-but I can’t leave without you guys.”

“We made wills in case this should happen,” Sage assured me. “They’re in Bee’s desk in the top left drawer.”

“No, the bottom left drawer,” Bee corrected him.

My mind whirled with impossible thoughts of me returning to my world without them. Being alone in that old cottage without their laughter and smiles. Tears sprang into my eyes as I shook my head. “I’m not going anywhere without you guys. You’re all I have.”

Sage set his hands on Bee’s shoulders and smiled sadly at me. “We wish we could come with you but the portal won’t less us, so this is the way it has to be.”

I balled my shaking hands into fists and frowned at him. “If that’s the way it has to be then I’m not going.”

Sage released Bee and walked up to me. He searched my eyes. “You’re sure? These lands are dangerous, and there’s no telling what may happen.”

I pursed my lips and waved my hand toward the far distance in the direction of the tree portal. “What do I have to look forward to there? An empty house and your guys’ wills? Not seeing your faces again? That-” I choked on my words. “That would be like my parents dying all over again, and-” I steadied myself and crossed my arms over my chest as I frowned at them. “I’m not going through that again. If that’s what’s waiting for me there then I’d rather stay here.”

“I’m so glad!” Bee squealed as she rushed over to me. She enveloped me in another hug that pushed the air out of my lungs. “We’ll have such fun together!”

I winced as I felt a rib bend under the pressure. “Not if I don’t start breathing.”

Bee drew us apart and looked me over with glistening tears in her eyes. “I

can show you this wonderful world of mine!”

“We can start now,” Caius spoke up as he stepped forward. “That is, if you’ll have a bone dragon with you.”

I walked over and grasped his hands in mine as I smiled up at him. “It wouldn’t be nearly as much fun without you, and you really saved our butts back there. Besides, you have all the food.” Caius burst out laughing before he drew me into his arms and planted a deep kiss on my lips. By the time we broke apart I was out of breath, but very pleased.

“That’s for good luck,” he teased.

I looked down at the ground before I returned to his smiling face. “You can let me down now.”

“Why? I’m ready right now if everyone else is willing, and if you’re willing to be my rider.”

A sly grin slipped onto my lips as I studied him. “I don’t know. You might be too tame for me.”

Sage coughed into his hand, reminding both of us that there were relatives present. “If I might interrupt this double entendre competition, but it may be a little early to leave.”

Bee nudged him in the arm with her elbow and chuckled. “You’re a little rusty, Sage. It’s nearly sunrise.”

She nodded into the distance, and we followed where she pointed. The world was stretched out before us, and at its end was the horizon. A soft glow appeared across the faraway mountains and grew to soak the sky with its brilliance. The rising sun came behind its own rays and fell across the land to bless everything with its beauty.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“The first of many, I suspect,” Sage mused.

I glanced up at Caius. “You know, there’s one thing that’s been bugging me. Why’d the bone dragons leave here?”

He chuckled. “The earth was caving in everywhere, not just the tomb, so they packed up and moved.”

I wrinkled my nose. “That’s not very mysterious or exciting.”

“Some explanations in this world are a little boring,” he admitted as he scooped me into his arms. “But not me.” I glanced down at the bony hand that held me. He noticed where my gaze lay and some of the humor fled from his face. “Does it disgust you?”

I looked up at him with a grin. “Nope. I’m just relearning some anatomy, but-” he nodded at the glowing light, “-what *is* that that’s holding it together?”

“My soul and a little bit of magic,” he told me as he walked forward.

My pulse quickened as we moved toward the precipice. “Caius, what are you doing? Don’t you dare-*Caius!*”

He stepped off the edge, taking me with him. His wings opened on his back, bony but their glow shimmering in the light of the new day. My scream echoed over the lands as we sailed forward toward adventure.

Sage stepped up to the edge we just left and cupped his hands over his mouth. His voice echoed toward us via his wind magic. “There will be no adventure until we do one errand!”

A FEW HOURS later found us across the Plains of Fiora and at the small village. Nelly sat on her porch rocking away in contentment until Caius landed us with a hard thump in front of her house. She yelped and nearly fell backwards. Sage and Bee rode up, their unicorns covered in sweat but looking as beautiful as ever.

Nelly waved her fist at us. “What mischief are you trying to do in giving me a heart ache?”

“You’ll have to excuse the children, Nelly,” Sage answered as he dismounted.

“Nelly!” Bee squealed as she practically leapt off Menander and hurried onto the porch. She wrapped Nelly in a tight hug.

Nelly returned the hug and broke them apart to smile at Bee. “It’s been a long time, Bee, but time’s been good to you.”

Bee grasped Nelly’s hands and returned the smile. “As you, Miss Nelly.”

“We’ve come to pick up that other pair of clothes you made,” Sage told her before he gestured to Caius. “And might you have a glove for this young man

here?”

Nelly studied his bony hand and nodded. “Aye, and that’ll be free for you on account of letting me see my sweet Bee again.”

Bee pecked a kiss on Nelly’s cheek. “You’ve always been too kind, Miss Nelly.”

Nelly blushed and waved her away. “Bah! Nothing’s too good for you, sweet Bee. Now let me get that glove and your clothes.”

She stood and shuffled into the house for a moment before she returned with the bundles. Atop them sat a long leather, black leather glove. “This should do the trick,” she mused as she handed the glove to Caius.

Caius drew the glove on and it reached nearly to his elbow. He flexed his fingers and smiled. “It’s like I’m wearing skin. Thank you, Miss Nelly.”

“And here’s your clothes,” Nelly added as she held out the pile.

“Much obliged, Miss Nelly,” Sage thanked her as he took the new set for my grandmother.

“But what will you be wanting me to do with them?” Nelly asked him.

Sage winked at me as he answered Nelly. “We’ll come back for those after we’ve had a few more adventures.”

Nelly frowned, but pressed the bundles against her chest. “Well, don’t be staying away for as long as you did. An old woman’s liable to not last that long.”

“We will,” Bee promised as she pecked another kiss on Nelly’s cheek before she hurried to Menander.

She mounted her unicorn as my grandfather did the same. Caius took me in his arms and spread out his bony wings. He smiled down at me. “Ready for adventure?”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and grinned up at him. “Definitely.”

Caius leapt into the air and the ground grew distant beneath us. I looked down and saw my grandparents on their unicorns keep pace with us. They passed by the old tree with its secret, a secret I wasn’t ready to use. Maybe I’d never go back, but that didn’t matter. Not right then.

Right then I was ready for adventure, and boy was I to have that aplenty.

A note from Mac

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CAPTURED MEMORY:

I knew where I was and that it was the last place I wanted to be. Still, doubts lingered in my mind. Doubts that would lead me into trouble.

That was how this adventure began. Well, that and on the road. There were a lot of roads in the Shifting World, all of them primitive but with the familiar potholes of home. Some of them were large enough to swallow a unicorn, which happened to be the animal I rode at that time.

"Don't exaggerate, pumpkin," Sage scolded me as we traipsed our way down the dirt highway.

Even after just a little more than a week in this new world I'd learned that a flat stretch of road was considered a four-lane freeway. If two carts could pass each other and not be forced into the mud that hunkered on either side waiting to swallow an elephant then that was considered modern technology.

I leaned over the left side as we passed a pothole. There were a few white bones in the deep depths. "I don't think I'm exaggerating, Grandpa."

“Sage,” he corrected me.

“I don’t think I’m exaggerating, Sage.”

“Isn’t this wonderful?” Bee spoke up as she beamed at us. She rode in front of Sage in the same saddle. A few birds sat on her shoulders and a butterfly was perched atop her head.

Sage wrinkled his nose at the menagerie. One of the birds turned around and snapped its beak at him. “Do you have to bring so many friends with us, Bee?”

She breathed in the fresh air completely oblivious to the glares bird and man gave each other behind her. “It’s just like old times.”

“Too much like old times. . .” I heard him mutter.

I tilted my head back and looked up at the early morning sun. Sunrise was only an hour behind us, and the long day stretched before us. I sighed and my shoulders slumped. “I’d kill for some coffee.”

Sage shooed away the offensive bird and glanced over at me. “As we told you before, pumpkin, there’s no coffee in this world.”

I still cringed at that fact. “Maybe we could head back and I could grab a can from home?”

“That’s a week’s ride back to the tree,” he reminded me.

I shifted in the saddle and winced. “Don’t remind me.”

“What about your handsome young man?” Bee suggested as a dragon-shaped shadow flew over us. “Perhaps he’ll give you a nice ride.”

I watched the bone dragon fly over the road that stretched out before us. The Plains of Fiora were several days back and had been replaced by a narrow valley. A few rugged hills on either side teased us with the tall peaks of the mountains high above us. Trees lined both sides of the road and through their thick foliage I glimpsed ponds full of strange snake-looking frogs and geese that made a noise like a squeaky tire. The winding road followed a river on our left that rounded a rocky bend a mile ahead and went out of sight.

“I feel like I’m just using him like a horse if I ride him too often,” I argued.

“Pish-posh!” Bee assured me as she waved my concern away with her hand. “Male dragons are very fond of having pretty girls on their backs. Why, I remember the first time I rode a dragon shifter.” She leaned back against Sage’s chest and sighed. “What a wonderful feel it was with the breeze against my cheeks and his smooth, strong scales beneath me.”

“Naturally, this was before my time,” Sage mused.

Bee tilted back her head and smiled up at him. “Naturally, my love.”

The sweet looks they gave one another made me return my attention to the dragon above us. Caius turned as smooth as a spirited kite and returned to being in lock-step with our steeds. I bit my lower lip as I thought about his handsome features and that teasing smile of his. A slight blush came to my cheeks.

“She’s blushing!” Bee squealed.

I shook my head and frowned at my grandparents, both of whom looked at me with wide grins. “I’m not blushing! It’s. . .it’s just the sun! It’s too bright!”

Sage chuckled. “Then you’ll be glad to know we have only a few hours until we reach your first town.”

“Please tell me it has indoor plumbing,” I pleaded.

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. The town of Rubris is a rather trashy place as most towns go, even in the Shifting World.”

I wrinkled my nose. “So why are we going there? Is it the first stop on the road?”

“No. I thought we might test that strange ability of yours in the trash shops for which Rubris is known,” he revealed.

My face drooped. “Come again?”

“This will be such fun!” Bee spoke up as she clapped her hands together. “Rubris was where your grandfather found me a wedding ring, you know.”

I snorted and my eyes flickered mischievously to my grandfather. “No, I didn’t. He always told me he had to pay a mortgage on it.”

Sage cleared his throat and tightened his grip on the reins. “Yes, well, my memory isn’t what it used to be. Perhaps I was thinking of a different ring.”

“But it’s the only ring you’ve given me,” Bee reminded him.

A faraway look slipped into his eyes and a slightly lecherous smile adorned his lips. “Well, there was that one dancer girl, if you’ll recall, and the witch with the luscious-” He noticed the growing look of ire on Bee’s face and coughed into his hand. “But those were unimportant women, and beside the point. We should see if Jane’s abilities can be controlled. And speaking of Jane, perhaps we should figure out a new one for you.”

I blinked at him. “A new what?”

“A new name,” he reiterated as he swept his hand over the hills.

“What’s wrong with Jane?” Bee argued.

“It doesn’t exactly strike anyone as being of this world,” he pointed out. “I hardly remember finding any Jane, even in the largest cities.”

“So I should do like you did and add a noun to the front of my name?” I teased.

He flashed me a grin. “We can’t be all talented at what name we choose for ourselves, but perhaps something a little shorter will work just as well.”

Bee crossed her arms over her chest and looked ahead with a frown. “I still like Jane.”

“What’s wrong with Jane?” Caius asked us as he landed close beside our beautiful steeds. The unicorns didn’t even blink at the large dragon landing on all fours along the road. Caius shrank down to his human form and trotted along side my steed.

“Nothing a little name change won’t fix,” Sage assured him.

“I’ll think about it,” I promised as we neared the bend in the river. “But where’s this town supposed to be?”

Sage leaned forward and pressed himself against Bee’s back as he gazed around the corner of the rock bluff. “You can see it right. . .about. .

.now!”

We rounded the bend and the narrow valley widened into a huge bowl. The side of the bowl in front of us dipped down a hundred yards in a gentle decline that ended at a stone wall. The wall wrapped itself around a town some ten miles wide and twenty miles across. Houses and trash piles stood side-by-side in the winding, haphazard streets.

I stopped my unicorn and studied the sight. “That is a really big hole.”

“I suspect a volcano once occupied this area and blew its top several millenia ago,” Sage mused as he led his unicorn onward. “Now let us see what we can make of your unusual ability.”

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