

FAIRY CATMOTHER

A Maven Fairy Godmother Fractured Fairy Tale

*A fairy godmother transformed into a cat
must grant three wishes
to save her boss
and all of Faery
before the moon turns
without her powers,
her wand, her wings or her gossamer*

Excellent premise for a young adult novel

"When a newbie fairy godmother gets transformed into a cat, general hilarity ensues. Hard to wave a wand with paws, after all. Brilliant, hilarious, and a totally new take on old fairy tales! Read this now or hate yourself in the morning!"

--KG McAbee, award-winning author

ALSO BY CHARLOTTE HENLEY BABB

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AUTHOR STATEMENT

Once upon a time, I said, "I feel like a fairy godmother who takes students who think they're frogs and makes them into princes and princesses."

Too many of us are hampered by the presentation of the old stories in commercialized fairy tales. Cinderella did me wrong as I am a too-big brunette with size 11 feet, and certainly too redneck to become a princess.

So I write to give people—especially women of a certain age—the courage to make a wish and believe that it can come true, even if they look like sidekicks and colorful characters—and to make them laugh in the meantime.

Fairy Catmother

A Maven Fairy Godmother story by

Charlotte Henley Babb

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DEDICATION

For all those people
Especially women of a certain age
Who always wanted to change the world
and
For the MUG writers

CHAPTER 1 OLD MOON RISING

On Monday of her second week on the job, Maven, new Fairy Godmother, trudged through the back gate of the Palace of Princess Vivienne and Prince HR. It was now sculpted with flowering kudzu vines from the weekend adventure which nearly collapsed the Palace. The vines parted for her like curtains.

Every cubic centimeter of her body, from her stringy gray hair to her wide feet, was sore and tired from channeling too much of her own magic. She was aware of just how many cubic centimeters she'd accumulated in her life, and wished, but only silently to herself, that wishing and magic could do something about that. Maybe she'd learn that next week.

Rule Three: *Fairy godmothers do NOT grant their own wishes.*

In the east, the old moon was rising in the pre-dawn twilight, a ghostly smile or a smirking leer, depending on how she looked at it. For a moment, it sneered back, but faded to a crescent in a golden sky. No moon tonight and a new moon by Tuesday. An auspicious sign for what promised to be a trying day, as if she hadn't had enough of trying. She entered the Palace's kitchen, where her fellow fairy godmothers slept. They were unaware that they had been asleep for three days under the Palace's magic.

They had lost their wands, whether Maven still had hers at the end of the day remained to be seen.

Maven sank to the hearth where the coals still glowed faintly—the fire had slept as well.

"Please make me some coffee," Maven said to the Palace, as she had not slept at all. The only good thing about her first weekend in Faery was that it postponed her second week on the job, with unknown hell to pay for the events of the first week. A mug of steaming java appeared on the hearth, along with a teapot and two cups. The fairy godmother fingered her wand in her gossamer pocket.

Three days before, she had touched it to Fiona's wand, which had disappeared in the deathly darkness that had enveloped them both. They had been led back to Faery by Maven's familiar, the Serpent, and Maven had tied the gossamer strands of her own life around Fiona's wrist to bring her back to life.

Now even Fiona's wand was gone, and that left Maven with a question: Who would have control of whom? Did it make any difference either way?

Maven woke the other two fairy godmothers.

Tulip looked like a teen after an all-nighter with a bit of drool dripping from her full lips. She was curled on the floor, wrapped in her gossamer. Maven leaned over to tap Tulip's shoulder, feeling every hour of her age in the stretch. Would Fiona reinstate Tulip after her previous adventure in Mundane?

Calliope snored softly in the over-sized rocker where she'd spent much of her time when she was

the Cook for the Palace, before its spell had been broken. But now average-sized and maybe a bit more wrinkled than Maven, if only because she was thinner, she looked like a child.

"Calliope," Maven said, not touching her. "Wake up."

The older woman mumbled and tried to roll over, but the chair was not that big. "Such a lovely dream," Calliope whispered, still half asleep, "The princess and the dragon happy at last." She began to stretch and groan, working herself up to stand and ask the Palace for tea. She growled at Maven. "You're up bright and early."

"Fiona will be calling soon." Maven absorbed half of her coffee, hoping the magical equivalent of caffeine would keep her going. She felt unprepared for the day ahead. "Why do fairy godmothers go into their own stories?"

"To hide from Fiona." Calliope sipped her tea. "I don't know if you can retire from being a fairy godmother, but you'd have to give up your wand, and they don't want to do that." She sighed, as if she knew more than she was saying. "When they grant their own wishes and don't give up their magic, it always goes bad."

"But you weren't in your own story, were you?" Maven asked. "Before the spell was broken on the Palace?"

"No, I was on R&R, but remember the story I told you—the girl in the tower?" Calliope looked into the fire as if scrying into the past. "She was captured by a rogue fairy godmother. I don't know what

happened. It's never good."

Tulip hugged her gossamer around herself. "Are you thinking about leaving? You can't go."

"No, I've got nowhere to go but back to Mundane. Been there. Done that." Maven set her empty mug on the hearth, where it disappeared. "What's Fiona's going to do with me?" She didn't share about the weekend. Time for that later.

"Nothing for it but to wait and see." Calliope put her cup and the teapot back on the hearth. She stretched. Maven heard her joints pop.

Fiona had all the strings to pull, and they were at her mercy—maybe. At least, Tulip and Calliope would probably be reinstated with new wands. Would Maven resume training?

"Has she buzzed us yet?" Tulip asked. She at least looked more promising than the other two, still young, hopeful, fresh. She'd recently returned from a long stay in Mundane, glad to have escaped.

"No," Maven said. Maybe she could listen to Fiona again, and assess her mood, like with her clients. The only way to find out was to try it. She'd know soon enough if Fiona called the tune.

Maven held her wand to her ear, but Fiona did not show up in the slightest. Only once had Fiona's story leaked past her magical armor, and Maven did not yet know what to make of that snippet of Fiona's history. Maven went outside the Palace, hoping for better reception.

An image of Fiona appeared in her mind, scowling.

"Checking on your clients?" Fiona growled. "Are

they happy now that you have lavished their wishes on them?”

Maven pocketed her wand. “Yes, for the most part. Daisy is...”

“I did not ask for a report,” Fiona cut her off. “Bring your peers for new assignments.”

CHAPTER 2 FAIRY GODMOTHER SUPERIOR

Fiona Silverthorne, Fairy GodMother Superior, paced her office. The jars of fairy dust rattled softly against her agitation. Once again her erstwhile trainee, Maven Morrigan, had created a new problem and worked a solution. The underlying stress on Faery remained, however, and Fiona's wand was missing. She wondered how this had happened. She remembered Maven dragging her from Faery to Mundane against her will, where she felt the weight of all her eight hundred years. Unconscious for some time, when she awoke, her spell over the prince's castle was broken.

Fiona had exhausted the last of her personal magic in restoring the castle, done only with her partner Belle and the last three fairy godmothers. Tulip and Calliope had also lost their wands, leaving only Maven. Fiona would not give up the secret of going to The Garden to make new wands. She would have to improvise.

Powerful but untrained, Maven had broken two of the most powerful spells of the realm in her first week on the job, spells Fiona had cast, lasting for generations. But Maven was not ready to take over the guidance of wish-granting for all of Faery. She could not train new fairy godmothers or reinstate the half-dozen adepts placed in Restraint and Re-Education. Those fairy godmothers needed protection

as much as restraint—something Maven still needed to learn.

It was a dangerous time for Maven and for Faery. The path of power-over-others and the granting of one's own wish had been the undoing of many lesser fairy godmothers. It was why Fiona had brought Maven across the Veil into Faery, to keep her from discovering her inherent powers in Mundane with no discipline or understanding of dangers. Maven might become even worse than Black Anise.

But without her own wand to direct her will, Fiona too, strayed near that same path of power. Each of her spells, clearly thought out and focused in scope, left its mark on her wand. If Maven had broken that wand, that energy might merely have dissipated into the background magic that was Faery. But if she had touched her own wand to Fiona's, Fiona might even now be under Maven's control—consciously or not. Fiona had no way to know, and she dared not reveal to Maven that she might rule all of Faery just on a whim.

Maven's whims were too random and unpredictable. Fiona shuddered.

She paused in her pacing. She stared at the braid of gossamer wrapped around her wrist. The Spinners of Stories had gifted Maven a braid of her own story. Now Fiona wore it.

Fiona stared at the gossamer. If Maven had given up a piece of her life, then clearly, Fiona had been near death—or worse. By every tradition Fiona knew, Maven should take over as Fairy Godmother Superior. Had Fiona not taken on the job by killing

her own teacher, the evil Black Anise, not for her power, but to prevent her enslaving all of Faery?

The wand that had belonged to Black Anise called to Fiona, whispering through the magical ether that held Faery together, reaching out to her from the package that held the wand safe in Fiona's ancient desk. She had not destroyed the wand in order to restrain that evil energy, keeping it and whatever might be left of its owner locked inside the blackened wood.

Fiona had sworn never to use it, for any wand carried the energy signature and the imprint of the deeds of the one who had used it. The temptation might be too much to manage. If Maven had influence over her, she too might be tempted to use that wand.

Black Anise's wand channeled the energy that killed her, although the wand had been held in Fiona's hand. Fiona could use that to kill Maven, perhaps, but what would that do to herself?

A better way presented itself to Fiona—safe, a perfect fit for Maven's talents, and best of all, it matched the conditions of Maven's wish to be a good fairy godmother, but "do as she damn well pleased."

Fiona smiled. Her revenge for Maven's shenanigans would be even sweeter in that Maven had asked for it. She could not make a quality wand until she could get to the Garden, but she could rig up a temporary wand s for herself and the other two.

She'd make an example of Maven to keep the other two fairy godmothers in line as she re-trained them. Those two would have their own trials to deal

with, but there would be three fairy godmothers on the job.

Maven might work around the spell, as she had such a knack, but she'd have to do a lot of learning and growing to do it. While powerful, she lacked experience and training, and this Restraint & Reeducation assignment would prove her worth or get her out of the picture permanently.

Fiona went outside to a pussy willow shrub outside her office, made the formal request, and then broke a switch the length of her forearm and hand. She stripped the green wood bare and pricked her finger with a sharp crystal to charge the stick with her blood and make it her wand. It would do for the time being.

After a moment's thought, she made two more wands, one for Tulip and one for Calliope, carefully crossing her wand with theirs to keep some control over them as she stared back to work after their own return to the job. It was time to summon them and get them all back on the straight and narrow.

Chapter 3 A CAT CROSSES HER PATH

In the Palace garden, the three fairy godmothers prepared to go to work.

"Can we go to our pods first?" Tulip brushed off her gossamers, which still looked like the waitress uniform she had worn in Mundane. "I need to freshen up."

"Hold hands," Maven swirled her wand in a circle that surrounded them with a poof of magic.

They appeared near the pods outside Fairy Godmother Headquarters. Both Tulip and Calliope traipsed up the spider silk ramps, but Maven trudged on to the office. She needed to clear her head and take a moment to think.

Maven had taken a hard look at Mundane when she'd dragged Fiona to see the real world. While beautiful in some ways, it lacked magic. She'd seen her stripped-out minivan rusting on its rims in front of the collapsed strip mall where she had accepted her new job. Everything else missing—seats, windows, motor—not that a minivan with 350 thousand miles was a great ride. It was her former home. In Faery, she had some control of her life, if Fiona did not take it from her.

Near her feet, Maven heard a low, almost growling meow. To the side of the path was a black cat, its green eyes showing only a narrow slit of pupil. It crouched, whether to pounce on her or run

away, was not clear. Skinny, but not mangy, it had not decided whether to cross her path.

"Hello, Kitty," Maven said stopping. "What's the good word today?" In Faery, one thing was often entirely different from how it seemed. Her own familiar, the Serpent, sometimes showed up as a cat. She held out her hand, palm up, to pet the cat, but it hissed and backed away.

A nudge from Bump of Direction, her name for her intuitive link to the Collective Unconscious, suggested that the cat might be hungry. She pulled out her wand and poofed up a bit of tuna on a plate—not sure whose dinner she might have filched. She set the plate in front of the cat and backed away.

The cat sneaked up on the plate, sniffed it, and pawed the tuna—to see if it would move? Who knows what goes on in the mind of a cat? Finally, the cat decided to eat and scarfed down the whole serving. Then it sat back on its haunches and began to clean its face.

Maven watched for a moment, then said, "May I pet you now?" The cat looked up at her, its pupils now wide, deep black marbles, its fur like a shadow with strands of gossamer where the light struck highlights. It licked its paw and rubbed its face a few more swipes. Then it came over to her, purring, and wrapping itself around her feet. What did cats wish for?

She bent over and stroked the cat's back and behind its ears, where most cats can't reach with tongue or paw. The cat purred louder, bumping her head against Maven's hand. Then it stiffened, backed

up, and disappeared off the path.

Her wand gave her no information about the cat. Shaking her head, she made the dish disappear, leaving no evidence. Felt like Monday all right. She still didn't have her feet under her or know what she needed to do. She dreaded hearing what Fiona might do.

When she had touched wands with Fiona, a last ditch effort to restore Fiona's life after dragging her to Mundane, Fiona's wand vanished. Crossing wands risked having one take control, almost like being possessed. Had that happened? She knew Fiona had lied about her magical abilities at least once. Which of them had the stronger power? If it were Maven, she'd have to be extra careful, not to harm Fiona, but also not to take advantage or make her look foolish.

She didn't think the cat was Fiona. It felt like a real cat, without extra human vibrations or mannerisms. Yet it did seem rather strange that it waited for her. That kind of distraction did not help her think of what to say to Fiona. "I apologize for killing you. Are you feeling better now?"

Her wand beeped—nothing for it but to face the music and see who danced.

Maven refreshed her gossamer, swizzled her wand around herself, and poofed. When she got there, Tulip and Calliope had already poofed in, perched on Fiona's obliging toadstool hassocks, drinking tea.

Fiona was smiling, and that made Maven nervous. No matter. Whatever came, Maven would handle it. Surely anything was better than going

back to Mundane.

CHAPTER 4 FIONA STRIKES BACK

Fiona's office was dominated by a medieval desk on which lay a large ledger and a crystal ball set in a golden tripod. Around the walls, shelves held various-sized ceramic jars that rattled among themselves. No windows let in light, but dust motes danced in a shaft of light from no visible source. Fiona stood in front of her desk.

Fiona clapped her hands for the map of Faery, which flew into the room like a paper airplane and unfolded itself to hover behind her. The map showed that the lands of Princess Vivienne had merged with the realm of Prince HR, and they were both now a dark, healthy green shape with fairly solid edges. Further east, the kingdom of Neauwae, held by King Elroy, shifted colors which bled off the map to the east in tiny, Aurora Borealis waves of energy where Faery leaked into Mundane.

Fiona's office and the Twilight Lounge stayed centered on the map, despite the shifting borders of lands around them and the shrinkage of Faery in general. Fiona pointed to Elroy's rainbow-hued lands.

"Tulip, as you are most intimately connected to King Elroy, you shall be his resident adviser," Fiona said. She took a gossamer-wrapped wand from the desk and handed it to Tulip.

Tulip gasped. She had been the cause of the most

humiliating experiences in the King's life. They'd been dragged to Mundane when the King's magical castle was destroyed by Tulip's ex-boyfriend. The jars of fairy dust on Fiona's office walls inched closer to the edges of the shelves in case Tulip made a sudden outcry or gesture. They loved to embarrass her by falling off the wall. Tulip sat motionless.

Before she could respond further, Fiona added, "The Veil has been torn away completely in Neauwae. Keep me posted on all activities there, as we begin to repair the Veil." She peered at Tulip, daring her to protest. "Elroy's previous adviser disappeared with his castle, whereabouts unknown. You may, of course, grant as many wishes as you find appropriate."

Maven smiled to herself. She knew Tulip's most dear wish had been granted, even if it included putting up with the petulant king. Tulip had supported the king, working as a barmaid while they were trapped in Mundane, and now he would be required to repay that favor. Comeuppance for the King—how very typical of Fiona's sense of justice. She was happy to see Tulip reinstated but wondered what would fall her lot.

Fiona moved behind her desk and rummaged in one of the drawers. After a few moments and some release of dust and sparkles, Fiona brought out a pair of wings and another wand wrapped in gossamer. "I am reinstating you, Calliope, and assigning you to the kingdom of Vivienne and HR. The Palace will need some sorting out after its recent renovations." Fiona smiled as she handed the wings

and wand to Calliope. "While you can't do much for Maven's clients, all of whom now live there, others will need your help and guidance." She leaned back against her desk and folded her arms "See to it that you touch each of Maven's clients so that you can serve them while she is away on special assignment." She smiled at Maven with a cold stare. "I'm sure Maven's clients will all live happily ever after."

Special assignment? The tone of Fiona's voice chilled Maven's blood. She said nothing, waiting to find out if she too would be given a territory, or if Fiona would strip her of wings and wand to send her back to her old life in Mundane. She held her breath. Other parts of Faery went without a fairy godmother, judging from the lackluster colors of the magical map, but no stars glowed to indicate wishes being made. Most of the area around Vivienne's castle was iridescently green with hopes of wishes to be granted. Why send Calliope?

Restraint and Reeducation, R&R, was one of Fiona's teaching techniques. Calliope had worked as the Cook at the Palace for many years before the Princess came to be its mistress, an assignment of R&R earned by her change of a classic tale. When Maven had asked her about it, she refused to answer, only that Maven would know when the time came, and the time was right now. What else could a special assignment be, and why was Bump of Direction on red alert, but with no advice or course of action? Even her erstwhile familiar, the Serpent, failed to materialize or to whisper with its forked tongue in her ear. All she could do was wait.

"As for you," Fiona turned to face Maven. "I've had enough of your meddling." A wand appeared in her hand in mid-gesture, crooked and black with handling. Fiona had not reached for it, nor retrieved it from her desk when she had gotten Calliope's things. It materialized in her hand as if she had been holding it all along. Fiona pointed it at Maven. With one gesture, the wand inscribed an ellipse in the air around Maven. "Learn what happens with people who don't live happily ever after. You may do as you 'damn well please.' "

The tip of the black wand quivered ever so slightly.

"YEEEEEE--RRRRR--OOOOO--WWWWW--LLLLL!"
Maven screeched as she shrank into a gray tabby cat.

CHAPTER 5 WHAT CATS CAN SEE

Maven's fur stood on end, and her tail twitched madly. She crouched and hissed, staring at Fiona, ears laid back and teeth bared. The cat body struggled for control, sinking her claws into the toadstool, which winced and tossed her to the floor.

Landing on her feet, Maven growled, but stood still, with stiff legs and quivering tail. Slicing Fiona with her new cat claws was not an answer, no matter how much she wanted to. She was sure to get more than a kick in the ribs and flying lessons. Fiona just smiled, as if she read Maven's thoughts.

After a few seconds, Maven got her bearings. Her new perspective made everything much larger, so to get closer to Fiona's eye level, she jumped up on the toadstool where she had been sitting, and resisting the urge to lick her hand—paw—she wrapped her tail around her feet. She glared up at the other fairy godmothers, meowing to them for help.

The cat body was in considerably better shape than her human one. The jump had been easy, though the top of the toadstool was as high as her head standing on her back paws. Lots of other things came with the cat body—better hearing, sense of smell, and awareness of air currents through her fur and whiskers. She was overwhelmed with new sensations and different body mechanics.

But she could not see clearly, or rather, she saw

what she'd never seen as a human. Each of the ceramic jars had a small figure perched on it—the body image of the dust left from the death of the fairy whose dust was inside. No wonder the jars rattled and jostled on the shelves. The ghostly godmothers stood frozen in horror, eyes wide open, and hands covering their mouths, oozing a stench of fear and horror.

Calliope still had a smell of the kitchen around her—she wouldn't be any help. Tulip stared away from her, as if she were afraid to look. They feared the wrath of Fiona. Maven meowed again, trying to reach over with a paw to touch one of them, to make some kind of contact.

Fiona touched the wand to her desk, and a large, purple velvet pillow appeared. She walked over to pick Maven up and place her on the pillow. Then she petted Maven, running her hand along the fur on Maven's back.

"There's a pretty puss," Fiona said, her voice dripping sweet as poisoned honey.

Maven tried to scratch or bite Fiona, but the pillow held her motionless, except for her tail, which flicked like a whip. Maven calmed herself bit by bit, to wait for an opportune moment and to sort out the new sensations that overflowed her brain.

She'd never seen a mouse in Fiona's office, but they were there—probably her cleaning crew, and they smelled delicious. Other smells were not so pleasant; all three fairy godmothers were afraid, even Fiona.

Fiona's hand was still on her back, stroking her

fur, scratching her ears. Maven had to admit that it felt good, but she was not in the mood to be petted at the moment. She yowled again, struggling to pull her paws off the pillow, sit up, or even turn her head enough to bite.

She was thoroughly stuck in Fiona's magic, at least for the moment. She made herself relax, yawn, and curl her paws in front of her chest. The pillow allowed some movement, as long as she didn't try to scratch or bite.

She'd bide her time. She narrowed her eyes and watched, waiting for an opportune moment.

Calliope found her voice. "How long does she have to stay like that?"

Fiona lifted her hand. "Until she grants three wishes. She has a month, until the next dark moon. In the meantime, she can accompany me and observe the effects of her meddling."

"But," Tulip hesitated. "But she wished..."

Maven could see the gray fog around Tulip, an aura, dulled and close to her body; that was what fear looked like.

"Yes, she wished to be trained to be a good fairy godmother." Fiona sat behind her desk. Her aura was dark red, shading to black, some emotion Maven could not identify. "She failed to specify, however, the terms of her training, except for independence. What could be more independent than a cat?"

Fiona paused for the words to take effect.

Both Tulip and Calliope grew pale, backing away. This time the jars of fairy dust backed away too, not daring to call attention to themselves.

What they could not see, but Maven could, was the dark shadow of another woman behind Fiona, one who cackled silently and patted Fiona's head, just as Fiona patted Maven.

Fiona was under the spell of that dark ghost. Maven would have to get her magic back, or at least her voice, before she could do anything about it. At the moment, she could not so much as lick a paw to wipe her face. She tried to speak, managing only a soft chirp.

"Report now to your respective assignments." Fiona sat behind the desk. "Your clients await. I'll be watching, so feel free to ask for guidance, if you have any questions." She smiled, waving them away with an uncharacteristic gesture.

As the others poofed out, she pulled Maven's pillow closer. "Now let's just see if they pay more attention to my instructions than you do, shall we?"

Fiona set the ledger on the floor and pulled the crystal ball closer so that Maven could peer into it. Fiona moved her hand over the crystal surface, dialing in the scene she wanted. How Fiona worked the crystal, Maven couldn't tell, but each of Maven's clients appeared as they awoke at the Palace.

Could Fiona, or the spirit that possessed her, harm Maven's clients?

CHAPTER 6 WHAT CATS DO BEST

Pretending not to care, Maven licked her shoulder. Twice. She shifted her weight to one paw and raised the other to lick her wrist and wipe it across her whiskers.

Someone was chuckling, a threatening sound. With her paw still in front of her nose, Maven looked up.

The dark ghost stood behind Fiona, a shadow illusion of hands guiding Fiona's motions and peering over her shoulder. Then the figure looked directly at Maven, again smiling with malevolence.

Fiona was in danger.

The ghost woman smirked at her. Even her blurry cat-vision showed the expression clearly.

Maven did what any other cat would do. She licked her wrist again, wiped it across her eye and ear a couple of times, and then stopped, her tongue sticking out. She let the cat body take over.

She would have to guard against that if she were ever to get her human body back. Licking her fur was one thing, and it did come off in her mouth. Soon she'd lick herself all over if she wasn't paying attention.

BLEAH!

Bump of Direction said, "When in doubt, wash."

She wiped her wrist against her whiskers again, then put her paw down and settled down on her

cushion. She stared off into space, sitting very still, except for the slight twitching of the tip of her tail. She could move easily as long as she didn't try to attack.

While Fiona focused on the crystal ball, the shadow of the other woman laughed at her. They had chosen the cat persona because it had its own built-in responses. Now Maven would have to think both about what she needed to do, and how to make what came natural to the cat to work for her.

The cat also had a smaller brain with a lot more sensory information coming in. Somewhere, Maven's mind and her Bump of Direction were connected to this cat body, but they were more remote. Everything came through to her like a bad cell phone connection, with some echoed interference.

How much should she fight the cat body? She'd been in persona before, and whatever form a person took, the form had its own characteristics. The first time she'd been to the Twilight Lounge, Fiona turned her into Goldilocks and had chosen Mama Bear as her own persona. Maven had curtsied and chirped like a little girl, much to her shame, but after an hour or so, even Fiona started acting more like an actual bear and less like a storybook character.

Maven would have to find a way to make the cat's natural cussedness and Independence work in her favor.

How long had she been a cat—only a few minutes? Was Fiona's office any less magical than the Lounge? There was no way to know, and the jars of fairy dust certainly kept rattling among

themselves. Maven could almost hear what they were saying, if they were actually talking. What she saw more and more clearly, was the body language of the tiny spirits of the dead fairies. Would she end up there?

Maven resisted the urge to roll over and stretch. She'd expose her belly to that dark ghost, too much of a risk even if she might get a chance to bite and scratch.

Instead, she unfolded her paws and stood up to stretch, sticking her claws into the pillow, and arching her back. That felt really good, both the long stretch and extending the claws to pierce the fabric and pull against it.

Motion caught her attention across the room. Something skittered in the darkness behind the toadstool seats. Without a thought, Maven leaped from the pillow and bounded to the corner to see what it was. A mouse ran from her, running along the edge of the wall.

Maven pounced, catching the mouse in her claws. It played dead, though it quivered with fear. Maven bit it carefully around its neck and carried it back to Fiona, jumping from the floor to the pillow.

When she dropped the mouse, it ran right toward the crystal ball, between Fiona's hands, and into the ball itself. Fiona startled with a gasp, jerking her hands away. The dark ghost laughed.

Maven found she could move as long as it was away from Fiona and the ghost.

CHAPTER 7 THE GHOST AND THE CAT

Fiona glared at Maven, drawing back her hand to swat the cat. The ghost forced her head to look back at the crystal.

The scene in the crystal ball changed to one of green darkness, like a forest in the late evening. Fiona moved her hands to change the scene. Maven had used the crystal once when it wanted her to see something, but she didn't know how it worked. Wherever the mouse went, it was not where Fiona had been looking. Could Maven go into the crystal, and how would she know where to go?

Maven sat up, released from the pillow's spell as long as she didn't approach Fiona. She wrapped her tail around her paws, waiting to see what would happen. She hadn't killed the mouse, although she could have easily bitten through its neck. She'd kept just enough of her human thoughts to see what the reaction would be. The ghost hadn't been surprised at all. Maven figured the mouse had not been real, only a very palpable illusion.

What if it too had been a fairy godmother at one time?

Maven knew Fiona was in danger from the ghost, but she had her own fish to fry, so to speak, and until she got herself sorted out, there wasn't a lot she could do.

Ghosts and fairies didn't seem to go together, but

you take it like you get it. Maven had touched wands with Fiona yesterday, despite several warnings that crossing wands could give another adept power over her. Maven hadn't tried to influence Fiona, and she didn't think Fiona had tried to influence her at all, other than turning her into a cat, of course, and that might have been the ghost's idea.

She peered at the ghost who laughed in silence and nodded. If the ghost could hear her thoughts so easily, she'd have to think circumspectly.

Maven looked away, stabbed with a guilty thought that her own anger might have opened her up to the ghost's influence. If she hadn't taken Fiona to Mundane against her will, she might not have needed to spark her wand to Fiona's to bring Fiona back to Faery. Who was the ghost?

Maven tried to ask but only managed a faint meow. She meowed again, but Fiona was intent on her crystal ball. Maven leaned closer, bumping her head against Fiona's arm. Still, Fiona ignored her.

The ghost frowned and pushed the dark shadow of a hand through Maven's head. She felt only a bit of a chill. Fiona must be freezing with that specter wrapped around her.

The ghost frowned and tried again to push Maven away, but Maven tapped on Fiona's arm with her paw, claws retracted, meowing again.

Her cat lips would not make an F shape, or any other but Es, Os, Ws, and Rs. "Oweerowwweerr rooooww" did not sound at all like "Fiona, you're in danger."

Fiona pushed her away with her elbow but did

not look up from the crystal.

The black wand lay beside Fiona, but the ghost could not grasp it, though she let go of Fiona's shoulder to try. The dark, bony fingers curled through the desk but could not grip the wand.

The ghost grimaced.

Maven pawed Fiona's arm again, not clawing her but pulling on her gossamer to get her attention.

"Not now," Fiona said, "Take a nap. Isn't that what cats do?"

The ghost was now using both hands to move the wand, putting all her attention on it, making it move a millimeter or so.

Maven knocked the wand off the writing desk with a swipe of her paw. Then she bit Fiona's gossamer sleeve and pulled back on it as hard as she could, to get Fiona's gaze away from the crystal.

Fiona turned, straightening her arm to push the pillow away. "Let go of me."

Maven flattened her ears, and squatted back on her heels, but kept her grip on the gossamer. Fiona pushed the pillow off the desk, jerking away. She ripped the gossamer from Maven's teeth. She bent over to retrieve her wand from the floor.

Then the ghost moved in, completely surrounding Fiona in shadow. "If you want any of your clients to hang on to their happy endings, you'd better behave yourself." Fiona's lips were moving, but it was a different voice that came out, crackly and whispering.

Fiona's hand jerked out to grab the back of Maven's neck, immobilizing her, and dragged her

close, so that she could see into the crystal. A cow kicked a lantern into the straw of the barn where Maven's first client, Daisy, was milking. The straw caught fire quickly, and Daisy jumped up to douse it with the bucket of milk.

Fiona released her neck and moved her hand over the crystal to change the scene. "Your clients are in my hands now, so be a good kitty and let me take care of them."

Maven hissed at the ghost, her fur standing out like she'd stepped on a live wire.

"That's right, speak your mind for all the good it'll do you." The ghost laughed through Fiona's face. "She's mine now, and you have nowhere else to go and nothing you can do. Just watch and enjoy, Puss. Get on your little pillow and sleep, or it might be a long and bumpy ride."

CHAPTER 8 DREAMING OF BLACK ANISE

One day last week, Maven's familiar, the Serpent, had given her a wet Willie, licking in her ear, and ever since, she could understand the language of the birds. But as near as she could see, there weren't any birds here, only some mice and maybe a lizard or two, certainly no animals large enough to be seen other than Fiona and the ghost. She couldn't hear either of them. Of course, she didn't have a wand, so she couldn't focus her mind to listen that way.

Yet Maven heard whisperings, as not only the onomatopoeic sounds of the animals nearby, but the snatches of meaning, as if she listened to a hundred conversations in a crowded restaurant. It was overwhelming to hear all that stuff, and not be able either to block it out or to narrow her attention to focus on one or two conversations.

She found herself slipping into a nap to block it all out, but her increased hearing and the sensation of air moving her fur and whiskers kept her alert, if confused. She narrowed her eyes to slits to allow her to see more clearly but that didn't help her at all.

The ghost had completely overtaken Fiona's body, and she glanced over to Maven, every so often, just grinning that ragged, evil grin. She's won, for now, and she was gloating. It wasn't clear what else she was doing. She moved her hands over the crystal ball, muttering to herself.

"No opening there." A pass of her hand. "That one's happy." Another pass. "Ahh! That'll do."

Maven heard a surge in the undercurrents of sound, a sort of collective "Oh NO!" That can't be good, she thought. But there was nothing she could do at the moment, and she was comfortable. She settled herself down to process everything that had happened and think her way through to some kind of plan. What could she do to work around this spell? She was so tired. When had she slept through the night?

The next thing she knew, she was asleep.

* * *

The whispering settled down as she was snoozing, but she saw a story unfold.

The ghost had been a witch, Black Anise, who taught Fiona herb craft and spells, not fairy godmothering. Black Anise banished Fiona to another dimension after some kind of altercation. She stayed in her cottage, working her magic.

Maven mewed in her sleep, her feet and tail twitching.

At some point, Black Anise traveled to the local castle. She met up with the midwife on her way to deliver the queen's child. Anise killed the midwife on the road, taking on her appearance and her tools. The midwife lay dead in the road, looking like the witch.

Again Maven stirred in her sleep, trying to wake up, but she could not move. The scene shifted.

Fiona appeared in the queen's room, older, tired, stained, and tattered as if from a long journey. The queen groaned in labor as Black Anise prepared her spell. Fiona grabbed Anise's wand, swirling it around Anise. Anise disappeared. But she was not dead. Somehow the witch, Black Anise, was still inside the wand.

Maven woke up, startled, cold despite her fur. The ghost witch held the back of Maven's neck, keeping her immobile. Maven could not even yowl.

Now you know, words appeared in her mind, and you know that nothing you can do will make any difference. Not that you can do anything.

Black Anise wanted her wand back, and she wanted to become Fiona. She would destroy anyone or anything to get her power back.

CHAPTER 9 OUT OF THE OFFICE

When Black Anise released her, Maven gathered her feet and stretched, first with her backside in the air, and then each back leg. The witch moved back to envelop Fiona.

Maven watched, looking for any clue about how to protect Fiona.

"Nice kitty," Fiona crooned, "pretty puss." She scratched behind Maven's ears, which felt amazingly good. She purred a bit as Fiona scratched her head. "Now you lie down here and keep me company." Fiona patted the seat beside her.

Maven thought how long it had been since anyone touched her. She arched her back as Fiona stroked her, an involuntary move, as she could hardly imagine Fiona touching her in that way as a human, disturbingly intimate. But it felt good, nonetheless. Maven settled down into a loaf, curling in her front paws.

Fiona picked up her large ledger and opened it against the rail on the writing desk.

Feeling warm and comfy, she gazed through slitted eyes as Fiona made notes. She didn't know what the significance of the ledger was, as Fiona never used it while they were training.

Tulip had told her that in Faery, writing was strong and deep magic, not used lightly. The writing was not in a script she could read, or maybe her cat

vision was not clear enough to make out the letters. It didn't look like Latin letters, nor Cyrillic or even Arabic.

Then she heard a different voice whisper, "Good kitty." The witch grinned with Fiona's mouth. "I always like a cat as a familiar. Clean, quiet, not a lot of fuss and nonsense."

Fiona's hand reached over to pet her, and the cat couldn't move to escape, trapped again.

Maven must remember not to think like a cat, not to settle in and go with the flow, at least as long as the witch was paddling the boat. But it was so comfortable, so tempting to let her eyes close, to get the purr box going and to relax, letting all responsibility go and just making herself as cozy as she could. As if from a great distance, she heard a buzz of warning from her Bump of Direction.

She did what she could to open her awareness, to listen to whatever she could hear or sense, even if she could get no more of Fiona's story. She remembered what she had seen in the dark *zilchzeit* between the dimensions of Mundane and Faery and in her dream. Fiona had killed her teacher, a midwife, who was Black Anise.

Every so often, her tail twitched, giving her the impression that she couldn't remember something important.

A new wand lay on Fiona's desk, but she hadn't used it. She'd returned Calliope's wand and had given Tulip a new wand. She hadn't taken Maven's wand, but Maven didn't seem to have it now.

Where had the black wand come from? Had

Fiona hidden it until she needed more power?

Maven didn't know how to get to The Garden where she had made her own wand, and the new one did not seem to have much in the way of magic. Was this her fault, as she had destroyed Fiona's old wand?

Something needed to change. She needed more information to get out of the office to find out what she could from whoever might be able to help her.

She stretched again, and finding that she could move, she leaned over and bit Fiona, catching the soft skin on the back of her arm.

Fiona slapped her with the back of her hand, knocking the cat onto the floor. Maven scooted away to hide behind one of the sentient toadstools, which skittered away, exposing her.

"You don't know when you have it good," the witch said through Fiona's face. "Good luck finding a wish or three to grant here." She grabbed up the black wand, aimed it, the point quivering toward Maven, and swished it.

Everything went dark, and even with her cat vision, Maven could not see a single thing until she materialized with a thump, landing on her four paws in a forest.

CHAPTER 10 INTO THE WOODS

Stars twinkled above the dark treetops. No moon tonight. Maven remembered that she had only until the next dark moon to find three wishes to grant. Still, it was a whole month, and finding food was a larger priority at the moment. She had only herself, no wand, no wings, no gossamer. She probably looked like some mangy alley cat.

How would she grant a wish, how would she find a wisher, and what the hell was going on here anyway? Calliope once said something about a fairy godmother gone rogue, but who was she, where was she, and what had she done? And why hadn't Fiona sent that one to Grizelda the Troll as the entree for tea and a last meal? If that rogue had granted her own wish and was now in her own story, something Maven had been warned about, over and over on the first week on the job, maybe she needed to be rescued. How could Maven find her?

While one adept could not directly undo another's magic, Maven had a bit of experience in working around other people's spells.

Maven crouched, motionless, letting her cat senses fill her awareness. The only sound was the soft rustling of small creatures settling into their nests for the night or waking from their daytime naps to forage in the night. She could not identify what the sounds were, but she could locate the direction. She

could see pretty well even though it was already dark under the trees. There were many new smells, but nothing that seemed out of place: woodsy leaf mold, various animals, and old smells of people, not nearby.

She remembered the last time she was alone in a forest at night. She had faced the Hag of the Wood. That had turned out well, as Maven had been able to meet her challenge and then get back to Fiona after her next-to-last Restraint & Re-education vacation. But that time she'd had a wand and a familiar form to work with. What did she have now?

Time to take inventory. She tried standing on her back paws, which was difficult with such a long back and big head that did not sit right on her backbone. Walking in that position was out of the question--no need to look for boots unless they went seven leagues with each step.

How long was a league anyway?

She poked around in the leaves under the trees for a stick to use as a wand. After a few minutes, she found one about the right size, but she could only pick it up by biting it or by using both of her front paws, trying to balance on her haunches.

She tried waving the stick while holding it in her mouth, but nothing happened, except that a too-inquisitive chipmunk disappeared—probably under his own power. If she still had any powers, they were weak, and focus would be a problem. Holding the stick between her front paws while balancing on her back feet, she could move it by pivoting the end against the ground. That wasn't enough swizzle to

poof somewhere else, even if she had her own wand, and this was just a stick. She tried imagining the energy flowing along her body and through her paws to charge up the stick, but there was nothing. She let the stick go and returned to all fours, again listening.

Then Maven stretched her paws out in front, and her tail high in the air.

Something tickled the end of her tail, which she twitched, and then turned to hold it so she could bite whatever it was. Nothing was there, just an itch. Another itch nagged between her shoulder blades. She tried to lick, and then to scratch with a back foot. She was impressed with her own flexibility but irritated that she couldn't reach her own back. She rolled over to wallow in the leaves, making a bit of a nest by the time she had relieved the itch. She lay there on her back, looking up at the sky, wondering what to do next, wondering what would make her safe.

She couldn't talk, she couldn't walk on her back feet to manage a wand, if she should happen to find or make one, and clothing was completely out of the question.

In the meantime, Black Anise was in control of Fiona, not to mention all her clients.

CHAPTER 11 THE NIX

One thing she did have was night vision. In the starlight, she could see their inner light of objects, their soul, maybe. She could see sleeping dryads in the trees, and the outlines of mice marching along. That was odd. Along with the outlines of the mice was another shape, a woman like a drill sergeant in drag, keeping the mice in step and making sure they didn't drop anything. The mice were carrying food—nuts, berries, and a cooked pork chop. Maven's cat mind and her human mind struggled, both of them hungry. The cat wanted the mice, but the human wanted the pork chop, even though it had been bitten by a mouse. Maven was almost hungry enough to consider the mice.

The cat body took over and sprang at the mice. The mice scattered, mostly dropping their loads. The woman shouted at the mice, but they had disappeared, except for the pork chop, which lay quivering suspiciously. Maven sneaked up on it, lifting the edge of it with her paw, to find a terrified mouse underneath. She hissed at the mouse, and bit into the chop, dragging it away to eat. The mouse lay there for a moment as if dead, and then scurried into the darkness.

Maven didn't see where the woman went and could not smell her. But for the moment, that was unimportant. She could search for her later.

At least she could eat, easily ripping the meat apart with her sharp teeth. She did not allow herself to think about anything but meat as she dispatched the chop and gnawed the bone for the marrow. It was enough, though not all she could have eaten if there had been more.

Without a moment of thought, she licked her paws clean and wiped them across her whiskers to freshen up after eating. Maven started purring, lying on her belly and curling her paws.

Purring was very pleasant, soothing, and even seemed to improve her mood. Like human vision, the colors were less saturated than in the daylight, the sky now the deep navy of twilight, but the overall darkness not so opaque. At full moon, she'd be able to see very well, but even the starlight was enough to light her way.

Why had Fiona's ghost sent her here? She could feel that something was wrong with the local magic. Was there a story there that needed fixing, or was it already as mundane as it could be? It did not feel like Mundane, and clearly someone was using magic on the marching mice.

She had to believe that there was a reason for her to be here, or she wouldn't be able to grant any wishes. Of course, the ghost might have every intention of her staying a cat for the rest of her life, giving her three impossible tasks.

Silence swept through the forest followed by an eerie howling, too high-pitched for human ears. Time to find out who might need her help.

Maven trotted along, following the ululating cry

of grief, a song of loss, of longing, an ethereal sound, high-pitched enough that she would not have been able to hear it if she'd been human. Curiosity piqued, Maven slunk through the dark woods to find the source. She could see pretty well, considering that the stars were out, but she'd never been in a place that dark before. Her awareness grew of sounds and changes in the movement of air around her. She navigated to the loud wailing noise, sidestepping larger branches and brushing beside the tree trunks.

She came to a river where the bank hung over a slow-moving bend. Maven couldn't see anyone but the sound seemed to come from the water, right below where she stood. She stretched her head over the bank to see. The space under the bank was even darker than the woods, but she felt a swift movement of air and felt it ripple her whiskers. She jumped back just as a strange creature leapt up on the bank.

Maven crouched and hissed, watching the creature for any suggestion of where it would move next.

The creature was as tall as human, but thin and scaly, like a fish, with luminous eyes, and sharp claws at the ends of her webbed fingers. The creature paused, staring at a cat in the woods, but then she grabbed with her long arms, her toothy mouth ready to bite a furry morsel.

CHAPTER 12 FOREST CREATURES

Maven jumped, turning a somersault in the air to land already running away from the creature. She dodged between trees and underbrush to hide.

Instead of footsteps behind her, she heard a splash. She stopped beside a tree, her heart pounding. She listened to the sounds of the woods and the murmurings of the other animals around her. After a few moments, the song of grief began again. This time Maven listened with her cat mind, to hear the despair of a family taken away and the rage of revenge. If she had her wand, she could listen to the story, maybe even find a wish that didn't involve murder.

As she focused her cat mind on listening to the water creature, the sound ceased, as if a radio turned off. The water creature must have caught her prey. After a few moments, the sounds of the forest resumed, a moment of danger avoided.

Maven shivered inside her fur. She curled up to think about what to do next, and how to find some food and water away from the river. She held her nose up to sniff, hoping for a smudge of smoke, of a hearth with a bit of a fire, and perhaps a bit of porridge with a splash of milk.

If there were people around, they'd live pretty close to water. If she followed the river, she'd eventually find something, someone, or she would

risk the creature and see how hard it was to scoop up a minnow or two. She figured that it made no difference to go upstream or down, so she picked a direction and headed that way, keeping the sound of the water to the left. She kept a steady pace, not trying to run, since she had no idea where she was going, but just moving.

After a while, she knew she was being followed, although she could not tell by what. It didn't sound bigger than her, not like a big predator. Were there wolves in this forest? Bears? Badgers?

She must have slept through any biology classes she had taken, and she didn't remember ever studying forest ecosystems, only that bringing back the wolves was a good thing for Yellowstone. The wolves likely never left here, wherever here was.

She's helped a wolf once, but he might not recognize her as a cat, and she doubted she'd be able to reason with another animal at that.

After an hour or so, she stopped to rest, walking around in a circle three times, and settling into the leaves. She didn't intend to sleep, only to rest for a few minutes, listening and watching.

Her eyes drooped, but her ears twitched, hearing small sounds, something that sounded like snickering and giggling. She opened her eyes only a slit, meeting the gaze of a few dozen other eyes, only a few inches higher than her own.

Once they saw that she was awake, there was a buzzing, chattering sound, as if she were surrounded by cicadas. She sat up, but as she moved up her head, so did the creatures watching her—many,

many creatures watching her, more than she could possibly outrun.

Forest sprites, about four feet tall, shaped like cockroaches on steroids, but walking upright on four spindly legs. She'd met some before, found them cute and silly, but in the dark, they seemed ominous. She'd never asked them what they ate.

One of them spoke to her, in a halting voice. "You not cat. What you be?" The sprite tapped her shoulder with a long forelimb.

Maven tried to answer but only mewed. She pictured herself as a human in her gossamer and wings, hoping that they might be able to see the picture in her mind. Someone had told her that was how to talk to animals, but she had never tried it, not having pets of her own.

The snickering and giggling spread through all the gathered sprites.

New images popped into her mind: a bear wearing an apron, a mouse wearing a crown. What did that mean?

More forelimbs poked her hindquarters. She hissed at the sprites behind her, but they didn't back off. They clicked their mandibles at her, and hissed back.

In front of her, a path opened, lined on each side by the sprites, not at all cute or friendly. She leaped up and began to run. If they wanted to get rid of her that way, she would not argue with them.

At least she had some clue some stories were going on here, and at least some idea of who might have once been a fairy godmother herself. At the very

least, the spirits did not seem to want to harm her, only to get her out of their woods.

She was willing to work with that.

CHAPTER 13 THE OLD MILL

Her journey through the woods continued, still following the river, its sounds the only ones she heard. The sprites seemed to be herding her, moving other things out of her path, since the forest was again deathly silent.

After a long night of walking, Maven was tired. She hadn't seen any prey close enough for her to catch, and her human mind could not deal with the cat's thoughts of killing. It had been a long night, what with new senses and a new body to contend with, it had not been pleasant.

What do cats wish for?

Nothing. They eat, sleep, and play, or failing that, they eat and sleep. Maven hadn't done any of the above. The night in the forest had been cold, damp, and lumpy.

A change in the sound of the water alerted her to other new sounds. She came to a clearing, a dirt road, open on one side to a large pond bordering the woods. She waited for a moment, sniffing and listening before she walked onto the road.

At the end of the pond was a building, two stories tall, built into a dam. It must be a mill of some kind, a place where there might be people or at least shelter.

Too tired, to run, she kept walking, her legs tired, and her belly feeling as if it were wrapped around her

spine. She stopped again to rest for a moment, licking her shoulder to soothe a sore muscle. There was no apparent movement in the mill, but the miller likely lived somewhere else, anyway.

She realized that the sprites were gone. This was where they had brought her, what they wanted her to see. Could she trust them?

Nothing to do but keep going. A splash sounded in the pond, probably a fish or a frog. At least she hadn't turned anyone into a frog. She couldn't even do it now. As she approached the mill, it seemed huge, dark, and menacing.

She didn't think cats had that much imagination. It must be from hunger.

She made her way up the stone steps to a walkway that ran across the top of the dam and alongside the mill. She wasn't completely used to her cat instincts yet, but there were certainly mice here—their droppings scattered everywhere—and no other cat that she could smell. But there was food too. Maybe the miller would take her in, and she could do something about the mice. She shuddered at the thought of killing a mouse, much less eating one. She glanced at the door, sniffing and turning her ears to hear what was going on inside. Lots of new smells, rancid flour, mouse, sweat, wood—but no smoke, cooking, tea. Something was not right here.

She jumped up to the window sill to try to see inside, but curtains blocked her view. How to get inside?

Meow? Scratch at the door? No, that would likely get her a broom in the face or free flying lessons at

the toe of a boot. She figured to purr her way into the kitchen and see if there were any cat lovers around. Maybe a wife with a bowl of beans to snap who wouldn't mind a few ankle rubs. A cozy spot beside a hearth would be nice after a cold night in the forest, even if it had only been one. Then she could face the inevitable licking of the fur. She reminded herself to think only cat thoughts—food, sleep, food, play, sleep, food—as soon as she found that warm spot in someone's soft heart.

She'd always liked cats, she reminded herself. They were clean and independent. But the few she'd had also liked to be fed on time and were pretty picky about what they ate. She hoped she would be able to live the same way.

CHAPTER 14 HUNGER

Maven was getting very hungry, despite the pork chop. She heard her own stomach growl and she tightened her claws against the wooden walkway against the discomfort of it. Her head hurt, and she felt a bit woozy—even for her trim cat body, she'd had a lot more exercise than she was used to. There wasn't even a water bucket for her to drink from, and the mill pond was nasty and green, not to mention likely being the home of the water monster.

As she sat and wondered if she could eat wheat berries or even just flour, a mouse ran by. It was fairly brazen, just trotting along with no particular speed or timidity. She sat up tall, stretching her neck a little but watching every move the mouse made. She crouched as if she were going to curl up for a nap, but then sprang toward the mouse.

It saw her coming and darted in a different direction, but that attracted Maven's attention even more. She pounced toward it, and with three leaps captured it in her paws. Before she knew what she was doing, she bit its head off, breaking its neck with a small crunch. Her sharp teeth sank into its flesh and tore the small head off. The mouse's blood was salty and delicious. She licked the mouse and then patted it with her paw, squeezing out more blood—not a lot of blood in a mouse—then bit it several more times, tearing it into swallowable pieces and

gulping it down.

Her relief was immediate but short-lived. Her human mind came back online, and she realized that she had not only killed and eaten a mouse, but enjoyed it. She threw up on the porch—the sight of the bones and fur make her retch again, although even her vomit smelled good.

BLEAH!

Cat mind and human mind fought for control of the body. If she were to live as a cat, she'd have to learn to kill without guilt. Was that how she wanted to live? No. But she had to find a way to use her magic, to find the magic of cats, or somehow to find someone who would make a wish, one she could grant.

Her main wish right now was to find a warm, safe place to sleep and to see how things looked in the morning.

She snuggled up in the doorway and decided to make the best of it when another door opened, further down the walkway, and a man stumbled out. He was walking fast, almost running, but dressed only in a nightshirt, barefoot.

He'd left the door open. Maven could go in before someone noticed she was there, and maybe find that cat-lover. On the other hand, something was wrong, and she needed to know what it was. She followed the man across the walkway and into the brush beside the pond.

The man stumbled through the woods as though he was drunk. Maven couldn't smell any liquor on him, and she already knew that even if this neck of

the woods was close enough to the Realm of Fiction for him to find some tavern, alcohol didn't work in Faery. So something else was wrong. She crept closer to him, following along. She smelled a lot of information about him. He was dirty—not only the usual unwashed peasant, but dirty for a long time, homeless dirty, living in despair dirty. He was sad—she didn't know how she knew he was lonely, hopeless. If he would just state a wish—if she just had her wand to listen to him.

CHAPTER 15 THE MILLER'S DAUGHTER

The man, probably the miller, staggered across an open patch, his eyes open and staring, but not seeing. He stumbled into weeds, intent and driven, but not conscious.

Maven trotted along behind him, ears wide open to catch the sounds of other predators but mostly listening to him.

He came to the edge of the mill pond built up where the creek tumbled from the woods. He went to the edge of the pond and called the name "Steeeeviiiiie. Steveieeeee, my love." He knelt by the water and reached into it as if searching for something. In a moment, he fell in, headfirst, with not so much as a yelp or much of a splash. The pond must have been much deeper than it looked. He didn't come up. Even if he'd been unconscious, the water should have awakened him. He would float. But he didn't. No struggle, no gasping, nothing for long seconds. Maven tried to think what to do. She wasn't big enough to haul him out of the water, even if she jumped in. She didn't know if cats could even swim, but she couldn't just watch him die.

Part of her mind said she could walk away and find some dinner. There are things to eat in the woods, or she could even try to catch a fish. That door was still open back at the mill. Maven licked a paw and brushed those thoughts away. If she

couldn't help, what could she do?

Just then something rose from the water, the same green, fish-like creature Maven had seen before. She was humanoid, with large fins where ears would be, luminous eyes, and wet, slimy scales. She held the man in her long, bony arms. The swamp thing grabbed the man around his chest, squeezing him, forcing water from him. The creature ducked back under the water, then came back up and heaved the man over the edge of the pond.

The swamp thing looked at Maven then, its eyes glowing in the dark. It could see her, and connected with her in a way that said it was intelligent and something else, as if it could see something she couldn't. She thought she heard the word "daughter" in her mind, repeated several times with an image of a girl. Maven came closer to the man and patted his face with her paw. He was breathing, but asleep or unconscious. She couldn't tell if he was injured.

Again the words in her mind *Daughter. Mill. Now. NOW.*

The swamp thing rose again from the water and pointed at the mill, three times, and then dived again.

The man looked like he needed help, and the swamp thing probably couldn't breathe air. So it was up to Maven.

She galloped to the mill, but the door had closed with no opening large enough for her to get in. She scratched at the door and meowed, again and again. She looked for something loose to knock over to get the attention of the daughter the swamp thing had

thought at her.

There was a bell rope hanging four feet or so above the floor of the porch that ran across the front of the mill. Maven jumped for it, but missed, her body not yet responding quite like she wanted. She leapt again, and this time managed to get her claws stuck so that she could not get loose. She yowled for real then and slapped her other paw to the rope to keep from tearing the claw from its socket.

The bell rang once, but she couldn't let it go to ring it again, so she swung her feet back and forth, trying to get purchase on the side of the mill to pull herself up enough to get her claw loose. She grabbed the end of the rope with her teeth, fighting to retract that one claw, so she could get loose. Finally, she swung far enough to push off with her back feet to loosen the tension on the bell rope, which made it ring again. She could hear someone moving around inside, muttering curses against people who were out late, like the man.

The door of the mill opened, and a young woman, late teens, came out.

CHAPTER 16 THE MILLER RESCUED

Maven meowed at her, still trying to get her claw loose.

"Stupid cat." the woman said. "Don't you dare scratch me?"

The woman reached up with a foot and grabbed the cat's neck with her toes. Maven felt herself go limp, an odd sensation with her paws above her. The woman lifted her and she was able to get her claw loose, sore, but intact.

The woman set her on her feet. Maven scooted away from the woman, well out of arms reach.

Or in this case, feet reach.

Maven meowed again, wishing she could talk. She came up to the woman and meowed again, walking away and coming back, walking away and waiting for her to follow. How did Lassie and Rin-Tin-Tin manage to get people to follow them? They were dogs?

The girl looked out into the darkness. "DA? Da, are you there?" She picked up a tall candle holder in her mouth, but it didn't light up much more than her face. She went to the man's room to look, then came back out.

Maven took the chance of being kicked and came up to the woman. She bit the hem of her dress and pulled it toward the pond.

"What do you want, Cat?" she swiped at it with

her foot, dangerously protected by a wooden clog. Maven let go and ran a few feet away.

"Merrroow. Mer-ooow." She said, her choices being limited. "Prrrrrrtttt. Mrrrrowww." She went a few more feet and turned back to see if the woman would follow. "Merrrrroooooowwwwilll."

The woman stepped off the porch and came toward the cat, carrying her candle holder in her teeth.

Maven went a few more feet, and meowed again, over and over, until the woman came out far enough to find the man. He was lying face down, soggy, wet, and probably hypothermic, but he was breathing. In fact, he was beginning to cough up some of the water he must have swallowed. From the smell of the water, he'd not be wanting anything to eat very soon.

The girl finally saw the man, who was regaining consciousness, coughing and wheezing. She set the candle down, blew it out, and went to help the man.

"Da," she said, "Come in now. You'll catch your death." She struggled to get his arm across her shoulder and lever him up to his feet. He was much too big for her to carry, but she looked like she'd had a lot of practice.

He lumbered up, using her as a crutch. They staggered back to the mill and up the steps in the dark. By the time they got to the door, the man woke up.

"What are we doing out here?" he asked. "I'm soaked."

"You were attacked by that thing that killed Mama," the girl said. "Now go back to bed and rest."

I'll see to cleaning up."

The man just stood there staring into the night for a moment and then nodded his head. Along with the water from his wet hair and clothing, tears streamed from his eyes.

The woman went into the mill and brought out a blanket while the man took off his sleeping shirt. He had no boots or socks on. Using one foot and one shoulder, the girl wrapped the blanket around her father. She patted his back with her shoulder. "Go back to bed now. Get some sleep."

The man grunted, shivering, but went to his bed.

She turned to face Maven and pushed her out the door with her foot. It wasn't quite a kick, but Maven would be spending the night outside.

Maven went over to the remains of the mouse, and with her back feet, scratched it over the edge of the walkway into the water. She needed no reminders of that event and didn't want to be tempted to try it again. Maybe the woman would feed her in the morning.

CHAPTER 17 THE HANDLESS MAIDEN

The morning came, sunny but cool. Before the sun rose above the treetops, while the pond was still misty, Maven saw the water creature climb part of the way up the walkway. It tossed a few flopping minnows toward Maven. Maven didn't fight her instincts this time but snatched up each fishy morsel as quickly as she could. The water creature stayed only long enough to nod at her and then slipped back into the water as silently as she had come.

Maven thought her gratitude toward the creature, not being able to think of a picture to send. She hoped it would be received. She rubbed herself against the doorway, purring, hoping that the woman might come out with a bowl of milk or something else to eat, although there didn't seem to be cows or goats around that needed to be milked. She could hear the woman moving around inside, smelled something cooking over a fire, but she couldn't identify what it was. From the look of them last night, they were not the rich entrepreneurs of the folk tales she'd read long ago. They were poor and times, hard.

She wondered if it was too early for wheat to be harvested, and what the miller did when it wasn't time for harvest.

She trotted around to see if there were a garden or any kind of livestock—chickens or rabbits—and found nothing. Medieval life had certainly not been

one of her educational interests back when she was in college, but she remembered her grandmother's home, and how much of her food she had grown and preserved herself.

There should be grain, as the miller would keep some grain for grinding it, she thought, but there seemed to be nothing else. Perhaps it was too early in the spring here.

Like true love, food could not be created by magic, but only moved from one place to another, at least with the kind of magic Maven could do if she'd had her wand. As a child, she'd helped with the mundane magic of canning and drying food. She hoped the family had food in the house at least for themselves.

The miller and his daughter were good prospects for clients if she could communicate with them and find out what they wanted. Then she'd only have to figure out how to grant their wishes.

Maven jumped up to the window sill to find a bit of sunshine to bask in, occasionally taking a glance inside the room where the woman was working.

The woman managed everything with her feet, or her chin and shoulders. She stirred the pot on the hearth, poked at the small fire, and fed it a few sticks. She set the table with two bowls, wooden spoons, and two mugs, and poured hot water for tea from a kettle into an earthen tea pot. She had arranged everything so that she could reach whatever she needed, sitting or standing.

Maven was fascinated at the woman's ingenuity and how she managed, sitting on the floor or a low

stool to free up her feet, and keeping her feet rinsed and dried from a basin on the floor. Her clogs stayed by the basin too.

Maven remembered how difficult it was to try to wave a stick with her front paws. Maybe she hadn't tried hard enough. If she had her wand, she would know the woman's story, and maybe what she would wish for. She had to find out how cats managed to know what people were thinking.

A new sound attracted her attention. Someone was walking toward the mill, whistling. It was the first cheerful sound she'd heard in this forest.

CHAPTER 18 A WORSE MOUSETRAP

A young man, probably near the woman's age, late teens or early twenties, approached the mill. Not very tall, he was slight and mostly brown—hair, clothing, skin—tanned or dirty or both. He was carrying something in a bag over his shoulder. It was oddly shaped with lots of corners. He made his way cheerfully up the walkway and to the door. He stopped when he saw Maven. "Kitty, kitty," he said, offering to pet her. "There's a pretty cat, then."

He seemed nice enough, so Maven permitted him to scratch behind her ears, and rub her back. His touch was gentle, and he knew where the itchy spots were. Maven rubbed his hand, covering his farm smell with her own.

He knocked on the door and waited for the woman to open it. "Morning, Yz," he called out.

Inside the woman was sweeping. Her broom that had a shape like a shepherd's crook, so she could hold it between her neck and shoulder, and move it with one foot, hopping on the other. When she opened the door, she swept the dirt right onto the man, as if she didn't know he was there.

He seemed to be expecting something of the sort and skipped back when the door opened.

"When did your Da decide you could have a cat?" He asked. "Is it a good mouser?"

She said nothing for a moment but looked at the

bag in his hand. "What have you made now, Ward?" She didn't sound interested, only resigned. She set the broom down and came outside, pulling the door shut behind her with a short bit of wood nailed there just for that purpose.

"I've made a mousetrap," he said, "It'll catch several mice at one time, and then they can be released in the woods."

"Why not just kill them?" She shook her head. "They would just come right back in and join the party."

Ward looked away for a moment. "Can I at least try it out?"

"Might as well. Don't let Da see you in the mill though." Her tone of voice softened. "He had another spell last night."

They went to the door on the other side of the window, and since Yz didn't kick the door shut immediately, Maven jumped down and followed them in.

The mill was filthy, with mouse droppings everywhere, and a pervasive stink of damp, spoilage, and mold. No wonder they were poor. There was no food here for humans, nor for cats except mice. No food even for mice that Maven could smell.

Ward took his contraption out of the bag, setting several levers and strings into position. In the center of it, on a platform, he laid a sliver of cheese. "It's not very good, but I needed some kind of bait." Once he was satisfied that it was ready, he backed away from it. "Let's go, kitty," he said, and picked Maven up, to cuddle her in his arm. "I don't want to scare them

away."

"Not much chance of that," Yz said. She led them out and shut the door behind them. "How long do you think it will take for it to work?"

"Let's give it half an hour at least."

"I'd offer you some breakfast, but..." Yz said.

"Thanks, but I ate before I came." He said it quickly, adding, "I had to feed Mother, so I'm not hungry."

She nodded. They didn't have much to say, or perhaps there was too much to say, too much that had already been said and could not be helped.

Ward set Maven on the walkway, and she walked around his legs, bumping her head against him, learning his smells and marking him with hers.

"Where'd you get the cat?" Ward asked. "It seems nice."

Yz shrugged. "Da won't keep it. He hates cats."

"Right."

Another silence spoke volumes of back story that Maven wanted very much to find out. She spun her ear around, listening for a different sound coming from the mill. She went over to the door and reached up to try the latch. It was too high for her to reach. She mewed, and Yz came over to let her in.

The trap was still where they had left it, but the cheese was gone. The platform lay in the middle of the pieces of the trap, disassembled, and laid out with precision as if making fun of the inventor.

That made Maven prick up her whiskers. What kind of mice was able to take an invention apart?

CHAPTER 19 MAVEN MEETS THE MICE

Ward brought his bag back into the mill. "I must not have got the design right for it to fall apart like this." Ward picked up the pieces of his invention, a frown of confusion on his face. Most of them were not gnawed but merely taken apart as if the animals had understood the design and removed the parts that held it together. "I did catch a mouse in the barn yesterday. It worked then."

"I've told you," Yz said, staring out the door with a frown. "There's a curse on this place. It's all the fault of that thing that lives in the pond." She didn't wait for him to finish but went back outside. Her clogs clomped going down the walk, followed by the latching of the kitchen door.

"What do you think, kitty?" Ward sighed and hung the bag behind his back. "Maybe she's right. I would so much like to help them." He reached down to pat Maven. "You need to show her what you can do, earn your keep around here." He secured the door, locking Maven inside, and then trudged away.

He thought the mice were her problem.

In just a few moments, he was right.

A noise came from the walls, scratching, scabbling. Thousands of tiny claws dug into the walls, the floorboards, and everywhere else they had been hiding. A mat of small bodies surrounded Maven, staying just out of paw's reach, but menacing

nonetheless with their sharp teeth under their pointed noses. They all sniffed her, but watched and waited, looking at her and above her.

Maven licked her paw and glanced up to see if there were something behind her, maybe more mice waiting to drop on her from above. Nothing. Then she realized they knew that she wasn't only a cat. They recognized her human form and were appropriately afraid of it, as if they were very familiar with a fairy godmother in an animal's body. She twitched her tail, smacking it down against the floor. The front rows of mice jumped back, but after a moment, all of them rushed toward her, teeth bared.

Maven jumped straight up into the air, looking for somewhere to land, to run to, to climb to escape the biting morass of mice, but the only way open to her was down. She growled a warning, fluffed out her fur, and spread her claws as she landed. She kicked and scratched and bit, but there were many too many mice for her to fight.

If she didn't get away, she would die right there. Again she leapt, this time toward the door, hoping to be able to grab onto the rough wood with her claws and hang there long enough to figure out how to work the latch. The mice did not let go but chomped down as she flew through the air.

She scratched her way up the door, unable to get the mice to let go. The energy from them was not fear or anger. They were hungry.

She released a paw, trying to swipe at the latch. Her other claws were sliding, losing their grip on the old wood. She tried again, missed, while the mice

swarmed up to her. She climbed the door as high as she could. The mice that didn't have hold of her were scrambling up as well. She reached the door facing, with nowhere else to go but the plastered wall, no place to set her claws.

Maven panicked, horror overcoming her human mind. Her tail thumped hard against the door, trying to shake off the mice.

The next thing she knew, she was paddling in the mill pond, her many wounds stinging, but free of mice. She was drenched, but she was alive and very confused.

CHAPTER 20 MORE QUESTIONS - NO ANSWERS

Cats could swim, even if that wasn't their most fun thing to do. Maven paddled her way toward the dam but it was too slippery for her to climb. So she made for the near shore, hoping that the water creature was a day sleeper. Maven had never been a strong swimmer, but she kept at it, rather than drown. Finally, she reached the weed-clogged shore. She dragged herself out, drenched and cold. She tried to shake out her fur like a dog, but it wasn't that easy to do. Once she was out of the pond, she found some grass and rolled around in it, trying to dry herself. She chewed a few bits of grass too, for whatever good that might do.

There was nothing left to do but wash.

As she licked the stinking pond water from her fur, she made herself think about the mice. If they were that hungry, they had eaten everything in the mill. They had overbred while there was abundant food, but now they were in trouble. Did mice eat each other? They had certainly been happy to munch on her.

Licking her wet fur was even worse than she had imagined it would be. The fur caught in her tongue, and she swallowed a good bit of it. Her stomach growled at that, and the thought of eating some of her tormentors was much more appetizing. She'd never be able to eat them all or even to kill a

percentage of them. The woman, Yz, must be right; a curse of some kind was on the mill, the mice, and maybe on her and her father.

Why else would they stay, not move on to better food? Maybe they had nowhere else to go? What was holding them here?

Something came flying through the air and landed near Maven...a wet mouse corpse. She didn't hesitate, but ate it, tail and all.

Between the licking and the sun, she was beginning to dry out and get warmer. She went back to the edge of the pond to see if any other mice washed up on shore.

A long, green arm came out of the water and tossed two more mice at her. She ate them both, forcing herself not to think about it, or why the water creature would feed her.

A meal required more licking, and once she finished that, she trotted up to the mill again to think and nap on the kitchen windowsill in the sunshine.

Two things came to her mind, at least one connected to her Bump of Direction. One, while the mill was covered in mouse droppings, the dirt swept out of the kitchen was not. Why weren't the mice attacking the woman and her father? But more important, how had she managed to poof out of the mill and into the pond?

She'd always heard that cats could walk through walls, but she couldn't remember what happened, only that one moment she was climbing the door, and the next, she was swimming. That meant she

still had some magic, and the cat body knew how to use it, even if her human mind didn't. She'd need that magic to grant wishes. She'd need it to figure out what was wrong with the stories that now included her.

She curled her paws and started purring, hoping that would be the cat equivalent of deep breathing, which on the Mundane side always caused her to have a hot flash. She had lulled herself into a warm, half-sleeping nap when the kitchen door opened.

The miller came out. "Get out of here, you mangy beast. I'll not have a useless mouth hanging around to be fed." He swiped her off the sill and kicked toward her as she ran down the walkway. "Damn freeloader."

Maven dashed off out of his sight, hiding under the walkway where it crossed the dam. She still had a lot of thinking to do, and she needed to understand what was going on in this very wrong place.

CHAPTER 21 MAVEN FOLLOWS THE MILLER

The miller relieved himself off the walkway into the creek below the mill where the water flowed through a spillway in the dam.

It's organic, Maven thought, watching the yellow stream splash into the pond.

When he finished, he stomped back to the kitchen. "Where did that cursed cat come from?"

Maven crept closer to listen.

"I don't know, Da," Yz said. "It woke me up last night, yowling and carrying on."

"Don't you be feeding it." The miller's voice was rough and angry. "I won't have a cat here, not unless it can kill a hundred mice in a day. That one's too fat and lazy."

"No, I won't, Da. Here's your breakfast." Yz spoke quietly. "You'll feel better for something warm in your belly."

Maven heard porridge drop into the wooden bowls on the table.

"Where did you get this porridge?" Da might have been accusing her of turning tricks.

"I traded some herbs for it in the village." Yz's voice sounded very controlled, not revealing anything. "Village women don't have time to hunt in the woods."

"I don't like you going out by yourself," Da said, his mouth muffled with food, "and you stay away

from that farm boy. I don't trust him."

"Yes, Da. I only go out by day and never with him. I'm careful. I go places no one else goes."

Maven could tell from her tone of voice that Yz wasn't telling her father something, like who did accompany her on her trips. Yet another mystery.

Da muttered, "You can't trust any of these two-faced people around here." Sounds of a spoon scraping a bowl. "They'd as soon drown you as look at you."

Yz didn't answer. It sounded like a familiar conversation, one repeated day after day.

"That interfering wastrel was here again this morning, wasn't he?" Da growled.

"Yes. He made a kind of mouse trap." Yz spoke softly, "He thought it would help."

"And you let him in the mill to try it out? Stupid girl. Not everyone needs to know about that."

"He already knows." Yz sighed.

Probably everyone knew. The mill hadn't worked in a long time, based on the filth.

"So how many mice did he catch?"

There was a long pause. "None. The thing fell apart."

"This place is cursed." A long silence passed with only the sound of chewing. "I could put a hundred cats in there, and they'd all be dead in the morning."

There was another long pause. Eating was one way to keep from talking.

The miller spoke again after a few minutes. "I'm going out today to set some snares, maybe catch a rabbit or two."

"Good hunting, Da."

With a grunt, the miller stood up and walked out, clomping down the walkway.

Maven jumped down from the windowsill and followed at a distance to see what he might be up to. His hands were in his pockets, not carrying anything to make a snare.

On the other side of the mill, he plodded along a narrow path, one that showed little use. That was good for Maven, as there was plenty of underbrush for cover.

The miller wasn't paying much attention to the surroundings, staying on the path and making no move to find game. Maven was no hunter in any of her lives, but it seemed that something else was on the man's mind.

He'd nearly drowned last night, was saved by the water creature, and they were not talking about it. The water creature had sent Maven to get Yz to help her father.

The nix had fed Maven this morning.

Yz seemed to think that the water creature had put a curse on the mill, but it didn't look that way to Maven. It looked like the creature was concerned about the miller and his daughter.

What she wouldn't do to have her wand back. At least then she could make sense of these wrong stories.

CHAPTER 22 LISTENING TO HER WAND

The miller muttered to himself, never looking left or right. Maven trotted onto the path, her nose in the air. The forest was quiet, the breeze blowing slightly, bringing various smells she could not identify. Her tail rose behind her, its tip twitching.

She cut off her own mind chatter as she did when she listened to her wand. She could see the energy around the miller, dark, swirling with holes that might be the effects of near-drowning in the night.

A muttering of discontent came to her mind...damn farm boy...what was she thinking? I'm a failure...if only my Estevia could come back to me...got to take care of Yz...nobody will have her...she works hard...I never wanted that for her...

Maven froze in her tracks. How had she heard his thoughts? If cats were telepathic, she'd have been hearing their thoughts all along. It was just as if she'd had her wand for a second.

Maybe he had just been talking to himself, and she heard him. The muttering stopped then too, as the man turned around to look at her.

The miller's face distorted with anger. "I suppose you're a cursed talking cat, here to help me and mine?" He leaned over to grab a stick.

Maven tried to speak but only managed a mewling yowl. She stood up on her back feet, hoping she might look more human. She knew what he

wanted, but didn't have her wand and could not even manage waving a stick.

"Get away from me, evil beast. I'll kill ye if I lay eyes on you again." He flung the stick at her. She leapt into the underbrush, startling a couple of rabbits there who ran right across the man's path. He resumed his journey, paying them no mind.

So, he wasn't rabbit hunting after all.

When in doubt, wash. As she licked, Maven listened to every sound around her and peered through half-closed eyes to see who might be around. If the sprites were here, she could ask them. They might even tell her, but they were strangely absent, not so much as a snicker or giggle in the distance.

If the sprites didn't approach, she'd wait, or maybe go back to the mill. What did Yz do when she knew her father would be gone for a while?

Bump of Direction liked that idea better, so she started trotting back down the path.

As she moved through the forest, she picked up slight sounds of someone moving along with her, and once a bit of a chuckle. The sprites had helped her by herding her to the mill. Why did they want her to go back there?

She stopped, raising herself up on her back feet to see over the lower brush. The sounds around her stopped, as even the birds shut up, and everything became silent. She'd get no help here. The other animals did not recognize her as one of them, so she needed to get back to the human world and sort out the mess there.

Her intuition said Yz was the key to getting her

human form back, so she would have to find a way to communicate with the armless maiden, no matter what it took. Could Maven write a message in the dirt? Could Yz read?

Maybe she could bring her a dead mouse. Wasn't that what cats did?

A shudder shook down her back, remembering the tiny sharp teeth and claws of the mice. What could one cat do against a million mice? What could one cat do against the magic of some rogue fairy godmother? Surely that's what the sprites had meant, a rogue fairy godmother had screwed up the stories. How could Maven unscrew them?

CHAPTER 23 YZ GOES GATHERING

Before Maven got back to the mill, she saw something that even to her cat eyes was weird.

Yz rode on the back of a brown bear, full grown as near as the cat could tell, strolling through the woods. A wicker basket hung behind Yz from shoulder straps, and she chattered happily with her companion, who answered her in human speech. Maven followed at a distance, listening to the conversation, and watching the human form inside the bear carry the woman along. How did he manage to talk? Why did a werebear not change into a man? Convenience?

After half an hour or so, the bear stopped, and Yz slid off his back. He started digging, and she put roots and plants in her basket. They patted the dirt and leaves back in place, the bear with his claws, and Yz with her feet. She swung her leg over his back, and he took off again, lumbering along and talking with her as if a young woman riding a talking bear was the most natural thing in the world.

They moved along through the woods following their own regular stops. The bear left scat, marking the territory to protect it from both human and other predators. Maven wasn't sure what they were collecting, but she figured the plants were medicinal rather than food. Yz told her father that she swapped plants for food. Maybe she was the local hedge witch,

but why then didn't she have a garden, and why not use common plants to repel the mice? None of this woman's story made any sense.

Maven was getting hungry again, but nothing they gathered looked like food.

At last, the bear stopped again in a clearing. Yz set down her basket and took some bread and cheese out, as well as a bowl and water to wash her feet. As the couple ate their lunch, Maven crept up close to them to hear what they were saying.

The bear lay on its side, and Yz curled up against him like a large sofa pillow.

"Why not come to live with us?" the bear asked. "There's plenty of room, and Ma has invited you many times."

"I can't leave Da." She held a piece of bread to her mouth with her foot. "He nearly drowned last night, and he doesn't even remember it."

"Why does he stay at the mill?" The bear laid his head on his paws. "There's nothing left but those nasty mice."

"I wish I knew." She got a piece of cheese and ate it. "I think he dreams about my mom and thinks she is still alive. He is so lonely." She snuggled against the bear's brown fur. "Ward came by with a mouse trap yesterday. I think he wants to get the mill going again, maybe get his ma and my da together."

"He wants you," Cobb growled. "Who wouldn't want to marry someone as talented and hard-working as you?"

"Yeah, marrying the miller's daughter would do a lot for him," Yz said bitterly, "when the mill's cursed,

there's no grain, and the mice have eaten everything."

"They don't ever...run over you, in the night, do they?" The bear's fur rippled as he shuddered. He stared at Yz with soft eyes. He was clearly in love with her.

"No. they run all around at night, but they don't bother us." Yz sat up, pulled up her knees, then laid her head on them, looking at Cobb. "I hadn't thought of that, but it is strange, isn't it?"

Maven slipped up closer. How would the bear react to her? Would he see her true self, and if so, how would he react? She wasn't a threat to Yz, though she might make a bit of a snack for the bear if he caught her. Only one way to find out.

CHAPTER 24 CAT MEETS BEAR

Maven focused on her human mind, resisting the cat's instinct to run away from a superior predator. She'd seen cats attack larger animals, but the cat wasn't having any. She made herself walk toward them, approaching Yz, rather than the bear. She tried to look nonchalant as if they were not in her path.

Cobb sniffed. He didn't growl or threaten her. He focused his black eyes on hers, a predatory stare designed to frighten any prey into freezing, unable to flee.

It worked. Maven was unable to move, except to fluff out her fur to twice her size, lay her ears back, arch her spine, and yowl some cat obscenities.

The bear tilted his head, still staring at her. "That's no ordinary cat."

Yz picked up a stone with her foot and aimed it at Maven. "Scat," she yelled. "Go away."

Maven dodged the stone and moved a step closer. She forced herself to calm down, imagining lying in the sun on a porch with a bowl of milk nearby. Each step took almost all her willpower.

The bear seemed completely uninterested.

Yz had another rock ready to go, but she dropped it in mid-throw. "Looks like a cat to me."

Maven sat on her haunches, keeping the bear in her peripheral vision, but staring off at an angle as if

they were not there. She could not keep the tip of her tail from flapping against her front paws, but otherwise she pretended to ignore them.

"She's like Ma," Cobb said, sniffing. "Only her person is not inside her. It's somewhere else connected by a thread."

"Talk to me, Cat," Yz said. She leaned back and crossed her legs under her. "Tell me who you are and what you want."

Maven faced Yz. She mewed with a bit of a growl. "Merrrr...prrrrt."

"Why can't she talk?" Yz said. "You and your mom can talk."

"I don't know." Cobb shrugged. "Maybe it's different with cats. But she's not just a cat."

"Maybe you're right. She did show me where Da fell into the pond." She shifted position. "Da used to tell me the story of his brother getting rich from a talking cat," Yz said, "so maybe this cat can help him."

Yz told the bear about finding her dad half immersed in the water above the mill pond, soaking wet and insensible. "Maybe she is magic," Yz said. "She figured out how to ring the bell, and she literally dragged me by my skirt to find Da."

"Let's take it to Ma. She'll know what to do." The bear got up and stretched.

Yz scooted her feet into her clogs and stood up. She squatted and wriggled into the straps on the carry basket. She swung her leg over the bear's back and balanced herself. "Jump up here, cat, and go for a ride."

Maven walked over and sniffed the bear, clearly seeing the man inside. She leapt up in front of Yz and settled between the bear's shoulder blades. At least she wouldn't have to walk, and she had time to half-snooze a bit and try to listen to her companions' thoughts.

They went through the woods, away from the mill, and in a different direction from what the miller had taken. Where was he? If they'd been in Fiction or Mundane, he'd be headed for a beer joint. But this was Faery, complete with Mama Bear and Baby Bear. Whoever Mama Bear was, she was definitely magic and maybe knew a way to get Maven's powers back. Could she be a rogue fairy godmother?

What did Mama Bears wish for? Was that what had started the problems here?

CHAPTER 25 MAMA BEAR

After a long walk and a short snooze for Maven, the bear brought them to a small cottage with wooden walls and a thatched roof. It had a definite aura of magic, with a small, neat garden for a front yard. There were curtains at the window and a rock fireplace to the left of the front door, which opened onto a low porch.

"Get off now," Yz said, nudging Maven with her foot.

Maven jumped down, listening and taking in whatever information she could sense.

Yz shrugged out of the basket, and Cobb stood up, shaking leaves and dirt from his fur.

"Ma," the bear said, "We have a surprise for you." He held the door open for Yz and Maven.

The cottage seemed larger on the inside, with at least one room above the front room, and another room behind, a kitchen or pantry. There were three chairs, large, medium, and small, arranged facing the fireplace, each with an appropriately sized side table. Yz sat in the smallest one, Cobb in the largest, and then right on cue, a medium-sized brown bear, wearing a mob cap and apron, carried in a tray: a pot of tea, three cups, and a plate of cookies. There was clearly a fairy godmother inside the bear. That reminded Maven of her first day on the job—only a week and an eternity ago

Why was she here, and why was Bump of Direction unhappy about it?

Maven parked herself in front of the hearth, which had only a few embers, but was warm on her back. She groomed her whiskers, pausing only to watch the bear pour tea and serve it. There was no cup for her, tea or otherwise.

Mama Bear sat in her soft, padded wing chair and sipped her tea. "Did you have a nice walk?" She ignored the cat, making polite conversation.

"Yes, the woods are nice today. First warm day of spring," Yz said. She held the small cup, the right size for an espresso.

Maven would kill for a cup of coffee, but in Faery, everyone drank tea. She had to get her powers back.

After munching on a cookie, Mama Bear asked about Yz's father and made a few more polite noises, much to Cobb's restless irritation. However, after a sidewise glance from his mother, Cobb sat still, holding his teacup with one claw extended.

Finally Mama Bear turned to her son. "And what have you brought me?" She had avoided looking at Maven until now, although Maven was quite aware of some magical sensor readings. "A cat. How nice. I'd love to have a pet to keep me company." The tone of voice was insinuating, pointed, and not aimed at Maven but at Cobb.

Maven almost expected her to say "You never call, you never write...."

The bear set down her cup and patted her lap. "Come, Kitty. Let's have a look at you."

Maybe not, Maven thought. She clung to her cat

suspicious of stranger, pausing with a paw in the air and her tongue halfway out of her mouth. She stared at the bear as if daring her to come over and pick her up.

"You children run along outside," Mama Bear said, "and I'll have a little chat with our new friend."

Disgust rippled across Yz's face, but she said nothing. She set the teacup on the small side table. "Thank you for the tea and cookies. They were delicious." She unfolded herself from the small chair to stand, stretching out her knees.

"Thanks, Ma," Cobb said. He made no pretense of more politeness, but just opened the door, and followed Yz out.

Maven and Mama Bear stared at each other in silence for a few minutes until Yz and Cobb were off the porch and back into the woods.

"They make a cute couple, don't you think?" Mama Bear picked up her tea cup and saucer daintily in her paws. "When he's older, I'll teach him to shift. His father was an ensorcelled prince, one who couldn't appreciate a quiet forest life."

Involuntarily, Maven looked around. Three bears would be more than she could handle at once

This one might be more than enough. For now, she could only listen.

CHAPTER 26 ROGUE FAIRY GODMOTHER

Mama Bear laughed. "Not to worry. The prince left us long ago for a redhead in another village. No accounting for taste."

Maven answered with a brief meow. While she could pick up the thoughts of several animals out in the forest, Mama Bear's thoughts were like whispers in another room. Another trick she hadn't learned, how to mask her thoughts. Maven's whole lifetime seemed encapsulated in her second week on the job—knowing what she needed to do but not knowing how to do it.

"I need to know that Cobb is adult enough to take care of Yz, and never hurt her." Mama Bear continued, punctuating her sentences with sips of tea. "I've never heard her make a single wish. You'd think she would complain at least now and then."

Maven swiveled her ears toward the bear and noted the scent of truth in what she said. The tip of her tail kept twitching, out of her control.

Mama Bear pointed her snout toward the window where they could see Cobb and Yz. "As you can see, we've made our Goldilocks a family friend. Peaceful. Quiet."

Not being able to ask questions irritated Maven even more. The unreachable spot between her shoulder blades itched, and her tail swept across the rag rug on the floor beside the rocker. Bump of

Direction was trying to tell her something, but she couldn't hear that either.

"That poor girl wandered in here one day, crying and hungry." Mama Bear leaned back in her rocker to spin the tale. "I knew it would happen, with all the poor thing has been through."

Maven settled down and folded her paws. She'd listen until she got enough of the story from the bear to decide what to do next. What did fairy bears wish for?

"It's not her fault she was hurt," Mama Bear started, "or even her father's. There's bad luck all over their family." Her tone was gossipy rather than pitying. You cats all know about the Puss in Boots, I suppose?"

Maven nodded. The end of her tail twitched again, brushing against her front paws.

"When the old miller died, the youngest brother got the cat—another fairy godmother as it turned out—and he became the Marquis of Cabbages."

Mama Bear propped a paw on her knee, setting her teacup on a side table on a doily beside a candle. "Another brother got the donkey, but the eldest got the mill. He got the worst of the deal because there is a nix living in the mill-pond, a nasty jenny-green-teeth."

Several expressions crossed the bear's face, but the main one was disgust. "The nix lured the girl into the water, and she got caught in the mill wheel. How Yz didn't drown I don't know, but she lost her arms, and she's been a cripple ever since."

"Merouuut?" Maven tried to ask about the nix,

but Mama Bear did not understand. Maybe she had lost that telepathic link that other animals seemed to have, or maybe she was ignoring the question.

The bear nodded to herself. "I know you can understand me, even if you can't talk yet. Have you tried?" She pointed her snout in Maven's direction, looking as cute as a teddy bear.

Maven pushed herself up on her back legs and mewed with a bit of spit and a slight purr. Her mouth couldn't make those sounds. But then Mama Bear's mouth was no closer to being human. How did she do it?

Did it matter that the one fairy godmother was all inside the bear, but the other was mostly outside the cat?

"It will come to you, one day, and you'll be able to chat away, partly with sound and partly with your mind." She reached over to pet Maven with her huge paw.

While the gesture was gentle, the bear could've sliced her into deli meat with one swipe. "It'd be nice to have some companionship out here in the forest."

Maven half closed her eyes to focus on her inner ears as well as the outer ones, listening for any clues. The person inside the bear looked a lot like a fairy godmother in persona.

Mama Bear nodded. "Yes, I was a fairy godmother once. This was my way out."

So this was a rogue fairy godmother. Could she grant a wish for Maven?

Maven tried to ask.

"You know I can't do that. I plan to stay here with

no interference.” Mama Bear poured more tea for herself, and then splashed a bit into a saucer for Maven. “I picked out the life I wanted and made it happen. You do still have choices even if you can’t talk yet.”

CHAPTER 27 OPTIONS

Maven cocked her ears toward the bear and noted the scent of truth in what the bear said. *Why had the bear chosen this story? Who was she?*

"Family values. Quiet. No kingdoms hanging in the balance." She patted the arm of the chair.

It was all Maven could do to keep from jumping into her lap. Resisting the cat body was getting more difficult every day. Maven's tail thumped the floor, angry. She could easily see the fairy in the bear.

Faery was like a small town after all, and getting smaller all the time. She needed to find those wishes and get them granted, so she could get back to help Fiona.

"Word gets around, even this far out. I can see you didn't choose to be in this form." Mama Bear chuckled. "The only reason I haven't gone completely feral is that I picked a story where the bears lived in a house, wore clothing, and talked. You didn't pick that kind of story." The bear smoothed her apron. "I do change back occasionally to keep in practice."

At that, Maven did lick her shoulder, as much to hide any expression she might portray as for any real need to slick down her fur. It did seem to need a good grooming, but Maven still felt the need to take a bath in privacy. Real cats didn't have those scruples. They were in charge wherever they were. Maven hoped that part of the body would kick in soon.

She was torn between the cat body and the woman-mind, but right now, she just couldn't stick her leg in the air and lick her butt. Not with someone looking.

Mama Bear took another sip of tea. "When Yz came wandering in all those years ago, I talked to her. Mostly I told her to knock first, be polite, that kind of thing, but I scolded her instead of eating her." Big Mama rocked back in her chair, smiling. "That took a bit of doing. Cobb was still a baby, but Papa Bear was upset."

Maven stared, her tongue still halfway out of her mouth.

Mama Bear munched on a cookie. "If you want to go back to your human form, you'd better find a way to accomplish your task quickly. Or you could stay here with me. I'd enjoy the company."

She could hear whispers of thoughts Mama Bear didn't share, but they were not clear. She arched her neck as the bear petted her.

The voice of her familiar, The Serpent, hissed into Maven's ear. "How domes-s-stic! How long do you want to be a cat?"

The Serpent's whisper sent a shiver down Maven's back, making her tail spread itself wide.

"Isn't this nice?" Mama Bear said, delicately scratching behind Maven's ears. "Having you around would make this a perfect place, very homey. I hope you will stay here."

The ear scratching seemed so pleasant that Maven bumped her head against the bear's paw, feeling the slightest touch of the huge claws on her

back.

"Forever," The Serpent whispered.

Maven spun around, looking for the image of her familiar, but it had vanished, just when she could have used some answers.

That was one option, if Maven couldn't figure out how to grant wishes. Being a cat might not be so bad, especially if there were someone to feed her instead of having to kill mice.

Maven trembled. She reached up with a hind leg to scratch behind her ear, but that didn't ease the itch from Bump of Direction. She knew how much a persona affected the person inside, and while her cat body was happy with the thought of a warm hearth and the hope food, Bump of Direction wanted to escape now.

Mama Bear had not offered to feed her.

Why not? Would Maven dare accept what the fairy might offer?

CHAPTER 28 CONFRONTATION

Maven stretched, her tail straight up and her chin on her paws. The itch from Bump of Direction sparked from the tip of her tail to her brain, just as if she were listening to her wand. This time, she could hear the whispers of stories that surrounded Mama Bear. Some of what she'd been told was true, and some not.

The true part was that the bear was hiding from Fiona in her own story, having taken on a new persona, but Maven couldn't tell why Mama Bear felt the need to hide.

Maven heard footsteps on the porch when Yz and Cobb returned from their walk. Maven could see the longing in the boy inside the bear, but Yz was oblivious, wrapped in her own concerns. What would the woman do if the man emerged from the bear?

Yz came in. "Thank you for the tea and cookies," she said, making a small curtsy.

"You are welcome, child," Mama Bear said. "Let me send a few things home with you for your Da." She got up and bustled to the kitchen. In a few minutes she returned with a burlap sack, which she handed to Cobb. "Carry this for her, back to the mill."

"Thank you again," Yz said. "You are too kind."

"Nonsense. Come back any time." Mama Bear smiled a toothy smile. "Be good, now."

Maven slipped out the door while they said goodbye. She ran down the path back toward the road until the tingle from the magic of the house disappeared from her fur. Then she ran a bit further. She could hear Mama Bear calling, "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." She could feel a tentacle of a spell reaching out for her, trying to pull her back to the cottage.

Again she heard the hiss of her familiar, "Forever."

She ran further, not glancing back even when the path disappeared, leaving her in the woods. She could smell that Cobb and Yz had come that way, and even found her own scent still lingering faintly in the air. She waited for the woman and the bear to catch up with her, aware that she did not know where she was, and that they would not go back by the road to the mill.

This would be a good time for Bump of Direction to actually give me directions, she thought. When in doubt, wash.

She groomed herself, letting the cat body do what it would while she tried to sort out what she had seen at Mama Bear's cottage.

Around her were snickers of insectile amusement. "Crazy cat fairy," one voice said chuckling. "Lick it, lick it," said another.

With as much cat grace as she could manage, she stretched again and got back to her feet. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show." She mewed, sure that they could understand her. "Which way back to the mill?"

Off to the left, bushes and undergrowth opened

up a narrow way, not a path but a passage like a leafy tunnel.

"Thank you," she mewed with as much dignity as she could muster, and then she trotted off in that direction, hoping that they were not sending her into some kind of a trap. She'd never known the sprites to be more than adolescent in their humor, but then she'd only been in Faery for a week, and this clan might have a different sense of humor than the others she had met.

When the last branch of undergrowth snapped back in place behind her, smacking against her butt, she jumped forward, almost over the edge of the river where she had first seen the water creature. It did not seem to be hunting in the daytime, so Maven followed the river downstream as much as possible, skirting the trees that leaned over the edge on their washed-out roots. It was past noon, and the woods were taking on an early evening cast, with only light dapples of sunlight peeking through to the ground.

Few birds made any noise, not like the first night she arrived. Then ahead of her, she heard an ear-splitting yowl of challenge from another cat.

"This is my territory, female," the other cat yowled. "Leave here now."

Maven's fur stood on end, and she crouched, yowling back. She did not speak to the cat but answered in kind. She moved very slowly, trying to edge around the other cat, not wanting to get into a scrap. "I'm just going to the mill," she said, "I want nothing of yours." It sounded a lot worse with spitting and screaming.

"Prepare to die, then, foolish cat," the other said, adding a hiss for punctuation. He backed off two steps, letting her move on, but staying ready to pounce at any moment. "The Queen of the Mice has the place well secured. You won't survive the night."

Maven backed away, always moving further downstream. "I'll take my chances."

"Being a shape-shifter won't help you there," the cat said, sitting on his haunches. "Best keep moving, but stay out of my woods."

"I'll keep that in mind," Maven said. She ran off as fast as she could, trying to remember a story about the Queen of the Mice, but she didn't remember any that suggested any kind of help to a cat.

CHAPTER 29 NEW MOON

Mama Bear said she wanted a happy family—a bear son, a girl child, and maybe a right-hand cat to help her with her magic, if Maven could sort herself out.

No wishes in that story, but neither Yz nor Cobb wanted to be there, and only came under some kind of polite duress. Some kind of secret was hidden there, and Maven was not sure she wanted to risk being a cat forever to find out what it might be.

Tired and footsore, she heard someone whistling ahead of her. In a few minutes, she was at the mill, and the farm boy, Ward, sat on the steps waiting for Yz. He was whistling a sad tune, as he whittled.

What would he wish for?

The miller must not be back yet, Maven thought, or he would have run Ward off.

She ambled up to him, staring into his face.

He smiled, set down his knife, and held out his hand. “Here’s a nice puss. Want your ears scratched?”

She allowed him to scratch behind her ears without benefit of warnings from her familiar or Bump of Direction. She twined around his legs, trying to listen to him, but got only a faint whisper as he scratched the spot on the end of her back, sending her tail upright.

“So how are you doing here, Cat? Have you tried

to kill the mice?” He picked up the knife and resumed whittling.

Maven meowed a negative.

“There’s too many of them for one cat anyway,” he said. “You’d need every cat in the country to clean up that mess.” He sighed. “They dismantled my mousetrap. Ordinary mice can’t do that. Something else is going on here.”

Maven chirped in agreement.

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen Yz around?” He made fine marks on the twig, taking care with each stroke. “I hoped I could talk to her for a few minutes today, but I guess she’s out foraging.”

They heard a big splash in the millpond. Maven stood on her back feet to try to see what was going on, but Ward went back to whittling.

“I guess the nix is frisky today.” He did glance behind him at the path across the dam where someone was coming. “That sounds like Da. I’d better move on.” He reached down and petted Maven again. “Don’t let him get hold of you. I don’t know why he hates cats so much.” Ward sauntered off, and into the woods beside the path so as not to be seen.

The miller’s heavy steps rattled the path over the dam. Maven hid under the steps where the farm boy had been sitting. She could see a little between the boards of the walkway.

The miller walked heavily as if he were tired or maybe drunk, but he looked exhausted. His face was drawn, his skin gray. He tossed a bag of something into the kitchen, and then went to his room and slammed the door.

Maybe he'd done some work for someone for some food? Maybe he had killed a rabbit or two despite ignoring them this morning. She hoped Yz would get home soon. Maven might be able to get into the kitchen to learn more.

The miller posed more questions to be answered, but she still felt that all the answers were in the mill. Who or what was the Queen of the Mice, and how had she managed to take over and ruin the mill? Why?

Everything in all these stories smelled like magic gone rotten. The smell reminded her of the witch who held Fiona captive and threatened all of Maven's clients.

As the sun set, Maven saw the faintest sliver of the new moon. She had to find answers soon, in the next 27 days until the moon turned again.

Maven stayed under the steps until Yz came home.

Cobb had let her off back in the woods, out of sight. She clumped up the steps just as it was getting dark. She went into the kitchen to make dinner, shrugging off the collecting basket inside.

Her father came out on the porch muttering about the mice, the mill, and the farm boy, in a singsong way that showed he explored these subjects regularly, talking aloud to himself. He leaned against the wall, staring out at the millpond and the sunset until the blue of twilight faded into darkness.

"You stay away from that farm boy," Da said, raising his voice and turning to face the kitchen. "He'll get you in trouble, and we don't need any more

mouths to feed." He scrambled up and stuck his head in the window. "You answer me when I talk to you."

"Yes, Da," came Yz's quiet answer. "Thank you for the rabbit. I'm going to stew it up."

He went inside, stretching as if his muscles were stiff. "Where did you get these potatoes and carrots? What did you do for them?" His voice rang out and echoed faintly against the woods

Maven saw the Nix raise her head, just her eyes, and the tips of her ferny ears above the surface. Her large eyes drooped. Her ears rose as if to hear better.

"I traded some roots to a woman who lives in a cottage outside the village."

Not exactly a lie, but not the truth either.

Maven heard plates being set on the table.

"You weren't begging. I won't have charity." A chair scraped against the floor, and a thump sounded as Da sat down.

"No, Da. I traded for it. Fair and square."

Maven slipped up to the door to listen further. She'd never been fond of vegetables as a human, but the cat body smelled rabbit. Both were hungry.

"Does that farm boy go with you when you are gathering?"

"No, I told you," Yz said, her voice soft. "I don't ever see him except in the village, unless he comes by with some contraption he has made." She sighed. "I always tell him to go away."

Stew splashed quietly onto the plates. Maven's stomach growled.

Da continued his tirade. "He's a bad lot, lazy as

his father and as useless as his mother." Slurping and chewing sounds punctuated the tirade. "You stay away from him. He's worse than my brother with his old donkey."

"Yes, Da." Yz pushed her stool to the table so she could eat. She cleared her throat, asking softly, "How is Uncle? Did you see him when you went hunting?"

The change of subject brought on silence.

Then Da said, with just as much bitterness, "Oh, yes, he's fine and fat, as is the old donkey. They sit in the village green and put on a show." Da warmed to his subject, raising his voice. "The old jackass knows a few tricks, and people pay hard money to see him. Some will even argue with him." More slurping. "It's hard to tell which is the jackass."

The smell of the meat made Maven ravenous. She jumped up to the window sill. She opened her eyes wide to look adorable and hungry.

Yz looked up, shook her head slightly, and then stared back at the stew.

Unable to help stop the cat body, Maven mewed.

"That damned cat is still here!" Da roared. He jumped up and slammed the door open, rattling the window. He stomped out, making the walkway shake. "If I see you again, you mangy beggar, we'll have you for supper!"

Maven dashed across the walkway into the woods. She wondered if she could catch a rabbit, and what she'd have to do to eat it. She hunkered under the brush, out of sight.

Da yelled at Yz, "You'd best not be feeding the beast or it'll be the worse for you."

Maven had saved the man's life, but he didn't know it. Yz would not tell him, not with his temper, so she'd get no help there. It might be time to find the Mouse Queen and ask her what was what.

CHAPTER 30 DA AND YZ

Maven rubbed against the door, marking it with her scent and fur. With so many mice in the mill, why were the people and their food not overrun? It made no sense, no more than any of the rest of Yz's story. Her stomach growled.

There was food enough for her in there, and if the door was open, she could get in and out, taking a few carcasses with her. She'd learn more about the Queen of the Mice after she'd eaten a few of her subjects.

The stink of the mice overpowered her human mind. She went to the door of the milling room and stretched up to pull the latch string. Her weight on the door made it swing open. She jumped down and sauntered in. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the dark.

Across one corner she saw a parade of mice in uniforms, marching upright, like some Victorian honor guard in red jackets. Each mouse had a long stick, twice its own length, not counting its tail. A drum line followed the red jackets, keeping time and marching along into an opening too small for Maven to consider crawling through, given the circumstances.

She didn't know what might be on the other side, but there were plenty of choices here.

She crouched and aimed for the group of mice following the drum line, the ones who weren't

marching, but seemed compelled to follow anyway. She leaped and pounced on one, killing it, and then another. The other mice scattered, except for the ones who were armed.

They leveled their pointed sticks at her and ran toward her, emitting a high-pitched scream almost above what she could hear.

She sprang high in the air, still holding a mouse in her mouth, and landed on her feet, running for the door.

Just as she reached the door, it slammed shut, with a curse from Da.

She sprang up again, aiming for the latch, but missed. She clung to the door, scrambling with her claws to move higher and farther over to open the latch again.

Some of the mice dropped their sticks and came after her, while others threw them like javelins.

She had to move higher, to get out of range and to get the door open. She fought to keep control of the cat's body, to try to dodge the pointed sticks, some of which stuck into her legs and tail.

Inch by inch she moved sideways to get to the latch. She couldn't get it to move with her front paws, which held much of her weight, so she scratched at it with her back leg.

One swipe, two, and third-time charm, the door opened. She rode the door as it swung out, and then leaped to get away from the mice. She missed the railing on the walkway, and landed feet first into the pond, a spread-eagled belly flop that knocked the wind out of her.

In their frenzy, the mice followed her, some falling into the pond, and others going over the side with the waterfall.

Around Maven, large mouths opened and gulped down the mice...mouths with long whiskers and wide jaws almost big enough to swallow her.

The water stung her new wounds as she floated on the surface. Something nudged her belly, causing her to suck in air. She swam to the bank, bedraggled, but alive.

On the walkway, Da stood, staring at the water. He shook his head, muttering again to himself. "Stupid cat," he said. "Stupid mice."

He stopped for a moment, seeing Maven soaked and shaking her fur as much as possible. He laughed, a release that seemed on the edge of hysteria. "They'll get you next time, stupid cat."

Maven glared at him and then began to wash, ignoring him with one eye open to see what happened.

Yz came outside, but by then the man had slumped back into his depression and walked on into the woods.

Yz scooted a bowl of broth along the walkway and set it down on the next step. She nodded to the cat.

Maven glanced over her shoulder at Da and then trotted up to Yz. She purred and tried to rub her head on Yz's leg.

"Stop that!" Yz whispered, pushing Maven away with her foot. "Eat quickly so I can wash the bowl and put it up."

This was no time to be finicky about food. Maven

licked the bowl clean and almost off the step.

"Don't you dare," Yz said. "I know you understand me. Now get out of here before Da comes back. You wouldn't be the first cat he killed."

CHAPTER 31 MAVEN VS. MICE

Maven was snoozing the next morning, lying in the sun on the third step down, where Da would be unlikely to see her. Yz had given her a bite to eat, only a bit of porridge, but it was better than hunting mice. She woke up when Ward approached the mill. Over his shoulder was a lumpy sack, another mouse trap, perhaps.

He whistled a bird call, softly.

Yz came out her feet damp in her clogs from washing in the pan beside the stove. She held a basket under her chin. She set it down on the walkway.

"Is your Da up yet?" Ward whispered.

"He's still asleep. Sleep-walking again last night. The cat's good for nothing except waking me up to find him."

Yz reached into the basket to get a needle from a pincushion and a skein of thread. "What did you bring this time?" Her voice stayed even, but it held an edge of impatience and irritation, as she threaded the needle.

Maven had never realized how much she saw body language until she didn't have spoken language to work with, not to mention smells. She'd thought only dogs had the kind of sense of smell that came in colors and images, but cats too, apparently, as well as good enough hearing to separate Ward's heartbeat

from Yz, the former being much faster than exercise would suggest.

The contraption he showed her looked like a torture device made of wood, wire, and leather straps, with pinching hooks made of metal at the ends. He held them up and swung them to show how they moved.

"Don't I look enough like a freak now?" Yz glared at Ward. She bit off the thread. Then she picked up the shirt and began mending a tear.

Ward stood, helplessly holding out the rig he had built, the wood polished to a shine, the metal bright and well-oiled. He didn't make a sound, his face sagging with disappointment.

"Oh, all right," Yz said, setting the sewing back in the basket. "How do I put it on?" She was not going to let him help her, but he was ready for that.

"It'll hang from this hook so you can slide into it, and then tighten the straps." He held the thing up and laid it on her shoulder.

She wriggled into the harness. Once she had it on, he came around the front and showed her where the straps tightened around her waist and chest, and how to pull the quick release to loosen them.

Maven was impressed. She had no idea that seat belts had been invented almost before seats.

"Now what?" Yz finished the mend and leaned over to bite the thread. The left arm reached out and grabbed the shirt from her knee, snatching the needle from her toes. She glared at Ward. "If that thing loses my needle, I'll break your neck."

Ward scratched his head. "I thought you'd let me

show you how to work it first."

He reached for the shirt, but as Yz turned her head to watch, the arm pulled away from Ward. He reached for the shirt, but the claw did not want to let go.

"I've just mended that. Don't tear it," Yz cried. The needle dangled below the shirt, where it could easily be caught in the rough boards of the porch.

Maven trotted over and bit the shirt, pulling it against the claw back to the basket.

Yz shifted again, and the claw turned loose.

Maven bit the shirt and dragged it to Yz's lap, needle and all.

"Now what do I do?" Yz stood there, spots of red on her pale cheeks, choking back tears of rage. Her voice shook a little and her wooden arms swung slightly back and forth, like broken branches in a windstorm, ready to fall at any moment.

Ward took a deep breath to begin explaining his wonderful design, smiling and excited, until he saw her face. He hung his head.

"Well?" Yz said, her patience at the breaking point. "How do I work it?"

"R-Roll your shoulder forward," Ward said.

Yz did, and the arm reached forward, straightening at the elbow.

"Now raise your shoulder up."

When she followed his directions, the claw on the end opened up.

"Now move your shoulder down to close the clamp." He held out his hand, palm up, holding a pebble. "Use the claw to pick this up."

Yz was a quick learner. With five or six tries, she managed to move the arm to Ward's hand, clamp the claw on the rock, and pick it up. She set it on the porch and let the arm drop

"That was fantastic!" Ward said. He was all smiles. He reached out toward her.

In reply, Yz stood up, picked up the rock with her foot, and slung it out the open door to the millpond where it skipped twice before sinking.

She stared away from him, perfectly still so as not to make the arms or claws move. She reached up with a foot to release the straps. "Take it off me."

He lifted the contraption from her shoulders. Whatever Yz might wish for, it wouldn't be arms.

She pushed it aside and then stood.

"Thank you for your efforts." She sighed again, turning to face him. "This is quite well made, the best yet. Maybe I will wear it the next time we go to town. Maybe it will help."

Though her face was without expression, a tear made a wet streak down her face. She pressed her lips together and swallowed hard. "Take the cat and go home. Maybe it'll be some use to you." Yz put the shirt in the sewing basket and went inside, closing the door behind her.

Ward picked Maven up, cradling her comfortably in his arms. "C'mon with me, kitty. Maybe Bessie will make one more bowl of milk before she goes completely dry." As he stepped down the stairs, they heard several splintering crashes.

Ward stopped, absently scratching Maven's ears. He shook his head, sighing. Then he walked on,

whistling a sad tune.

Behind them, a soft splash rippled the surface of the pond. The nix popped her head out of the water to listen as Ward whistled.

CHAPTER 32 ARMS UNMAKE THE MAN

Once Ward was gone, Yz brought her mending back outside where the light was better.

Da woke up, stumbling about as he dressed himself and came to the kitchen.

"Breakfast is in the pot," Yz said, deftly sewing with one foot while holding the shirt with the other. "There's tea."

"That useless farm boy was here again, wasn't he?" Da said, standing over Yz.

She didn't look up, but kept her head down, her face invisible. "Yes, Da. He brought some arms that he made for me." She held up the needle with her foot so that she could bite the thread to cut it loose.

Da looked around. "Where are they? Did they work?"

The look on his face hurt her. Even her father thought she wasn't good enough.

"They broke. I put them in the kindling." Yz did not look up, but just let her father rant until he ran out of steam.

He leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets. "If he'd work that farm instead of always tinkering with something, he might make something of himself." The miller stared out at the slight ripples in the millpond. "Just like his father, lazy and willing to steal to get what he wants. Always depending on magic. Magic will kill you in the end."

"Yes, Da." Yz gathered her things in her sewing basket to go back inside.

"I don't want him hanging around here." Her father moved again, to stand over her, his fists clenched.

"No, Da. I made him leave." She stood up, still not looking at her father. "He took the cat back to the farm. You won't be seeing it anymore."

"Good riddance. Damn useless layabouts, cats." He relaxed a bit and let out a sigh. "I don't want him sniffing around here, bothering you."

"No, Da. I won't let him." She went into the kitchen. She pretended she could not hear him from inside.

"Stay away from him. You can't fight back if he comes at you." Da ate his breakfast without another word.

But Da didn't know that she had better protection than she ever needed, and anyway, Ward never looked at her like that. No boy ever did.

She was just a project, someone to be nice to, to feel sorry for. Or to tease and laugh at. That was all. It didn't matter what she could do, only that she didn't have those extra appendages to get in her way.

Da stomped off down the walkway to the woods. She didn't know where he went, and it didn't matter anyway. Maybe he'd take a nap in a quiet spot. Maybe he did set rabbit snares. He wouldn't beg, but he might steal a rabbit or chicken from some unsuspecting neighbor. He might even do some work for Uncle or someone else. He was always gone all day.

If something didn't change, he'd fall in the pond one night, and the Nix would finally kill him too.

What would she do then? Where could she go? Mama Bear would take her in. But she'd still be little "Goldilocks" with the two bears.

Ward's mom would likely let her stay, but she'd just be a servant there, and they were nearly as poor as she was. And Ward would always be trying to fix her— to help the poor cripple. He would probably want to fix the mill somehow, as if marrying the miller's daughter would help any of them.

She put that thought out of her mind. She had plenty of time to go foraging. She put on a shawl and a heavier petticoat. It was still early spring and cold under the trees. She got her foraging basket, a few rags, and a small knife, though with Cobb's claws, she'd likely not need it. What would Da think of Cobb? She didn't want to know.

CHAPTER 33 DA WAKES UP

Yz went down to the creek below the mill to meet Cobb. She wanted to dig up more of the sassafras roots they had found earlier, and to look for valerian roots. It was too early in the year for lavender, but Mama Bear might have some. She wanted her dad to get some sleep finally.

She walked a long way along the creek, never too close to the bank, as the Nix could get to her even from very shallow water. She waited until the mill was out of sight before she whistled the bird call that let Cobb know she was waiting for him.

Cobb came lumbering out of the woods, his mouth smeared with the leavings of some grubs he'd been eating.

Yz decided not to clean him up, not yet. She wanted to get away into the woods, free from the mill and the pity of people with arms.

"Ward's been here again," Cobb said, sniffing her and blowing his nose. "What did he bring you this time?" He crouched on the ground for her to climb on.

"Arms. They didn't work." She threw a leg over his back and balanced herself just behind his shoulders. "I thought we'd dig for sassafras, unless you know of something better."

"No, I've been grubbing this morning." Cobb lifted her up and ambled off into the forest. "Early spring is

not a great time for decent foraging. Are you warm enough?"

"It's a bit chilly, but I can't stay at the mill today." She snuggled down into his fur, the basket balanced on her back between her shoulders. "Da is wound up. He's not sleeping, and he gets more confused every day."

Cobb shuffled on, bringing Yz to a sheltered grove where he had made a nest of dried grass and leaves piled up on the north side to block any wind and open to the south where any sun might warm them a little

Yz saw how much work had gone into the little place. "This is really nice. Are you sleeping out here now? Don't you go home at night?"

"Ma gets on my nerves. She treats me like a cub, so I need a place to get away." He stopped to let her get off and then walked around her a few times to make the leaves and grass smooth for her to sit on. Finally, he curled up, while she shrugged out of the straps that held the basket.

She curled up too, laying her head on his big paw, and scooting her back against his belly. "It does feel good to be warm. I guess we need to gather some firewood while we are out. Da won't think of it."

"All right," Cobb said. "But just stay here with me for a little while first. I'll find some wood for you later."

"Yes," Yz said. She felt warm and safe. She hadn't realized how tired she was, and in a moment, she was asleep.

* * *

Cobb shifted his hind leg slightly to cuddle against her, to keep her warm, to touch her without risking hurting her. His claws were sharp, but his belly was soft and warm, safe for the woman he loved. Ma had asked her to stay with them, but he didn't want to share, not even with Ma. She had once slept in his bed, when he was just a cub, and the smell of her made him long to be human. He knew he wasn't a real bear, just as he knew his mother wasn't, but he did not know how or if she changed form. He asked her once, and she swatted him across the room. He was a bear, she had said, and he would like it.

The sad thing was, he did like roaming the forest, eating and sleeping when he wanted. He hadn't gone looking for other bears, because they had no speech, no understanding, only the urge to eat, mate and fight. He'd marked his part of the wood, not taking too much space, but making sure that Yz could get what she needed. He'd look for anything outside his range and bring it back, if he could. He couldn't work for her, but he could provide, and if they someday just lived together, woman and bear, he could be satisfied with that. He loved her strength, her ingenuity, her stubborn pride in doing for herself, no matter how hard it was, but he could not be what she wanted, a human who loved her without pity. But she might pity him, if he were not her bear.

CHAPTER 34 FORAGING

Ward set Maven on the road, and she trotted along beside him. The road to Ward's home was not well traveled, more of a path with only a few indications of wagon ruts. He hung his head, his hands in his pockets. He sighed instead of whistling.

Once they reached the farm, it looked much the same as the path. The house, though once quite fine, was now as overgrown with weeds. Some of the yard had been scythed in a wider swath from the path to the door, out to the edges of what might have been a formal garden on either side, but now was just a more exotic wilderness of shrubs and saplings.

An aura of magic gone wrong lay around the place like the smell of mildew, though enough of that was present as well.

Ward turned from the front of the house to follow another path through the overgrown gardens to the barn. It was in better repair, though Maven could not see much farming going on or implements for doing it. One cow grazed in the weeds, but she saw no vegetable garden, no bees, rabbits, or chickens...how did these people survive?

Magic gone bad?

Ward rummaged in the barn to find a bowl, then he dipped water from a trough for Maven to drink. "You'll have to feed yourself, cat," he said, setting the bowl on the floor. "There should be plenty of mice

and birds around." He went into the work area and sorted the mouse trap parts. He clicked his tongue a few times and shook his head. "It's not broken. Someone took it apart."

Maven hopped up on the workbench. She could see tiny tooth marks in the wooden pieces, but they weren't gnawed. Her human mind was smarter than a mouse's, but she could not see how it fit together. It would be easier to dismantle than to build, but how did they do it?

Why would the mice bother? Who told them how to do it?

A slight rustle caught her attention. She jumped from the workbench, landing just in front of the mouse she had heard. She bit through its neck without a thought, ready to gobble it down. Her human mind kicked in, so she took it to the workbench. She leapt up and placed the mouse in the middle of the parts.

Ward jumped back, dropping the screwdriver he was holding.

"Yes, kitty, that's what it's for." He stared at her, then the mouse. "How did you know that? Or do you just think I'm a poor hunter?"

Maven meowed. She patted the mouse then pushed it toward him. She knew he wouldn't understand, but if she did something unusual, maybe he would at least pay attention.

Ward picked up the mouse by its tail and set it in front of her. "Thank you, but you can have it. I'm not hungry right now."

Maven bit the mouse again and jumped down

into the straw-strewn floor. She turned her human mind away and let the cat body feed. When the mouse was consumed, and the fur licked, she jumped back up on the table. Ward still stared at the pieces, or at least in their direction, but he seemed very far away.

Maven jumped down and trotted to the house. If there was truly magic there, and so far in Faery, every building she had visited was be-spelled, maybe she could use some of that magic to get her own powers back.

What would Ward wish for?

What would his mother wish for?

She wished she had her wand!

CHAPTER 35 THE FARM

At the back of the house was a broken window which gave her access to the kitchen. A pot of pease porridge hung from the hearth over the embers of a fire. No one was around, and no one other than Ward had been in the kitchen for some time, though it was clean and tidy.

She'd spent a good bit of time during her first week on the job in a castle kitchen, and it too had a good bit of magical help. But at the castle, some people chopped vegetables and prepared things to be cooked. Her friend Calliope oversaw the cooking.

Not here.

At the castle, she could ask the hearth for whatever she might want to eat or drink. She decided to try it here. She sat in front of the hearth and thought about a cup of coffee with lots of half and half...coffee for her and milk for the cat.

She meowed as politely as she was able, but nothing appeared. This hearth might have a magical fire, but it was cooking the porridge. She didn't take time to try to open the cupboards, but suspected they were bare.

She wandered around the house. Many rooms were covered in cloth and spiderwebs, but one sunny doorway led to a sitting room where a woman perched in a rocking chair, holding a cup and saucer. She didn't sip from it, or do anything else, as

if she were listening to someone else talking. No one else was in the room.

Maven looked for a good spot to rest, not wanting to startle the woman, who might rock back and squash her tail under the chair. She would not risk going between the chair and the fireplace, as the chair was practically on the hearth.

Finally she chose a spot on the rug near the chair that seemed to be where the invisible speaker sat. Maven settled down, keeping one slit of an eye open. She watched the woman breathe, blink her eyes, and otherwise appear to be alive, except for her stillness.

Maven wondered if she were an automaton, and if Ward had built her. Maybe she too was enchanted, though she had a faint aura and no machine or magical smell.

Just as Maven was getting comfortable, except for the need to groom, Ward came in with two bowls of green pea porridge. He set his bowl down on the chair beside where Maven sat, and took the other to the woman.

Carefully he took the cup and saucer from her, placing them on a small side table, and put the bowl in her hands. "It's time to eat, Mother," he said softly, "I'll get you some more tea." He filled her cup with water from the kettle. There was no tea that Maven could see or smell, only hot water.

Ward sat in the chair across from his mother. "I see you've met our new cat."

His mother turned her head and looked down for the first time. "My father had a talking cat. This cat does not talk. It is stupid." She ate a spoonful of

soup. "If it weren't for that cat, I'd never have married your useless father."

Ward did not answer. Another family that didn't talk about things.

"I guess it's time now to sell the cow." Ward's mother said. "You'd probably trade it for useless beans. Then you could stop your useless tinkering, and go up and steal from the giants. Oh, if we only had the golden goose back, but your father took her long ago." Her voice took on the tone of an often repeated recitation. She talked about a harp, about how its singing lulled her to sleep, but now she only tossed and turned, getting gas from eating porridge.

Ward looked down at Maven, who purred a bit for him. She'd heard many of the same kinds of ranting growing up.

Surely Ward had a wish to make. He got up and took his mother's bowl, handing his mother the cup and saucer.

His mother took a sip though the water must be cold by now. "Why don't you tinker with the harp? I wish you would fix it so I could get some sleep."

"I'll try to fix it tomorrow." He took the bowls back to the kitchen.

Maven followed him, hoping there might be a bit for her to lick out, anything with no bones and fur in it.

He did give her a ladle of soup, and she lapped it up as if it were tasty. "How are you at fixing magical things, Cat? I've tried and tried, but I can't get the harp to sing again."

Maven rubbed against his legs and purred to

reassure him. She had a mission now. Getting one wish granted, even if the woman didn't know she did it, was one less to do.

She only needed to find out how to use her magic again.

CHAPTER 36 PEASE PORRIDGE

Early the next morning, Maven went out to the workbench in the barn. She hoped to try to communicate with the cow, thinking that she might be able to talk to other animals. The cow was gone, possibly out in the weeds. Surely Ward hadn't already taken her to sell for magic beans? She didn't think there needed to be any more broken magic here anyway.

If the cow was here, and she could talk, what would she wish for?

Ward had already put the broken pieces of the harp on the workbench. She curled up beside it, seeing the fading aura around it. She studied it, tried to talk to it or purr to it. While some of it vibrated in return, it made no sound that she could hear, other than echoes of her yowls and mewing.

The strings were of catgut—some of it had been a cat once. The realization hit her like a backhanded swipe, and she fell from the workbench. She landed in a pile of old straw, disturbing a snake sleeping there. Again she levitated as only a cat can, but the snake did not strike at her, only raised its head to look her over.

"You should know better than to be afraid of a black snake." Her familiar, The Serpent, had appeared in a small version of itself, or it had possessed the body of a snake that was already

there. Maven didn't know which. "But then, you haven't figured out what you want or how to use your power."

"I know what I want, thank you very much," Maven said, plainly, without a hint of mew or purr. "A few hints about how to work this body would be helpful." She stopped again, listening. "I can talk."

"Yes, and you have all your tools at hand...or paw." The Serpent slithered over to her. "Did Fiona take your wings or wand? No? Then you still have them." It sighed...a strange hissing sound. "I know being a cat can be irritating..." It shifted form into a large ginger tabby, then stretched with its tail erect and its paws far forward. "If I can manage it, you can." The Serpent/Cat began to fade from view.

"Wait, tell me what to do." Maven balanced on her haunches, holding up her front paws in supplication.

"No," said the Serpent/Cat. It winked at her and disappeared, leaving its cat smile for last.

"What does that mean?" Maven said aloud, but only mews came from her mouth. It might have been a typical thing for the adept's familiar to be smarter than the adept, but she thought they were supposed to be more helpful. She thought about how she used her wings. She would poof herself tiny, and then they worked...she just flew. She'd tried using a stick for a wand, but it hadn't had any magic. The closest to a magic stick was the broken pieces of the harp on the workbench. Maven scrambled back up, nudging the pieces of the harp with her nose.

It stung, a spark of magic jumping across her whiskers. This time she patted the stick with her

paw, pushing the pieces closer together, still a spark but not so painful. "I want to fix you," she meowed.

A singing vibration echoed her, out of tune, too high for human ears, discordant, *Fix you.*

"That's what I'm trying to do." She pushed the nearest piece closer to the other, the one that still had some strings, but she could see that the broken edges did not fit together, and the shape did not look right. It was a small harp, not one of the big concert types. She couldn't remember what they were supposed to look like.

Try to do.

"Don't spark me" she said, but when she tried to bite the stick to move it, it sparked again.

Spark me.

CHAPTER 37 THE MAGIC HARP

She dragged the piece away with a claw, and then using both paws, flipped it over on the other side. The pieces still didn't fit. Something was missing, but she could tell the shape was better.

She patted it again, this time getting a claw stuck in a string, which yowled like a cat whose tail had been stepped on.

Maven jerked her paw back, dragging the yowling piece with her.

"No, Cat! Don't do that!" Ward rushed in, yelling at her. "No. No. Bad Cat!"

Tangled in the strings of the piece of the harp, Maven crouched, as any move make the harp sting her more sharply. She resisted the urge to run from Ward, which would likely damage the harp even more. She hunkered down with her paw sticking out, her ears laid back, and her tail thumping the table. The other part of the harp twanged the slightest sound with every thump.

"Don't bite me, Cat," Ward said, approaching slowly. He pulled on her paw gently and eased her claw from the limp string. "Let me get you untangled."

You untangled, the harp repeated, too softly and high-pitched for human ears.

Maven licked her paw then curled it with the other, relaxing her ears. The tip of her tail still

twitched, as if it wanted to tell her something. She decided to try talking to Ward. "It was upside down," she mewed, "and a piece at the top is missing."

"I know you are trying to help, Cat," Ward said, puzzling over the two pieces and finally moving the lower parts together.

Maven's tail thumped the table, and the two pieces fit together smoothly.

Help cat, vibrated the strings, a bit louder this time.

Ward went to a cupboard to fetch something.

While he was gone, Maven had a sudden maddening itch. She spun around and scratched the back of her shoulder with a back paw, hoping that whatever was biting her would be destroyed. Bits of fur settled on the harp, disappearing into it where ever they touched wood or string. She twisted her head as far as it would go to bite whatever caused the itch and lick the spot.

Ward returned with an evil-smelling concoction, like the worst sour milk ever. He set it down and then reached over to pick Maven up and put her on the ground. "Stay there, Cat, for a few minutes." He petted her, which made the itch disappear, and went back to work.

While she was on the ground, she sniffed under the workbench to find whatever might be there. Her cat eyes found a piece of wood with a slight aura of magic. She bit it, despite the electrical sting, not so much as the larger piece, and jumped up on the workbench. She dropped the piece where the top of the harp had been.

"That's the last piece." She meowed. She didn't care if he didn't understand. Maybe he would just look for once.

Last piece the strings repeated.

Ward looked up from gluing the bottoms of the pieces. It was clear he could feel the vibrations, even if he couldn't hear them. He set the glued side down and picked up the new piece. It was just the right size to complete the top.

"Thank you," he said. He put the glue on the new piece and then bound the harp with strips of rags to hold all the pieces together while the glue set.

Thank you sang the strings, this time loud and clear enough for anyone to hear and understand.

Ward set the harp down gently. "You are welcome. I hope you can sing again soon."

Fiona wasn't here to say that the client didn't know magic had been done, but Maven knew. One wish granted, and perhaps with a good night's sleep, Ward's mother would likely be more informative in her complaining.

What do harps wish for?

Why could she talk to the Serpent but not to people?

It said she had her wand, her wings, even her gossamer. Were they connected to her like her human mind, or could the cat get to them somehow?

CHAPTER 38 SPARKS AND REPAIRS

In the evening, Maven returned to the barn. She watched as Ward unwrapped the rags holding the pieces of the harp together. All the strings were in place, though he had not strung them. The joins were invisible, not even a crack to show where they had been. He plucked the strings, but a spark made him jerk back his hand and put his finger in his mouth.

"I never tried to play it before." He said. "There was a command to make it sing. It was such a long time ago. If I could only remember..."

He found a clean rag and wrapped the harp in it. "Mother may remember." He strode back to the house, harp under his arm, whistling a tune.

Maven trotted along behind, hearing the faint harmony of the strings with the man's whistle, muffled by the rags.

Ward stopped in the kitchen to feed Maven more pea soup, and to fix a bowl for his mother. He carried the bowl to her, filled her teacup, and then went back for the harp.

He placed it on a table across the hearth from his mother, polishing it a bit with the rag. It shone in the firelight, glowing softly. "I fixed the harp, Mother. Can you make it sing?"

His mother set the bowl in her lap. She clapped her hands. "Sing, Harp!" she commanded.

Maven and Ward perched on their seats. In a few moments, a sad melody flowed from the harp, music with such a plaintive note that Maven thought she might cry—something she had never seen a cat do.

You broke me, arguing and fighting, sang the harp, *about what I was reciting, but now I am mended. My songs for you are ended.*

The old woman stood up, knocking the harp to the floor. "Yes, I remember, you nasty thing, never a happy song, once the old man left." She raised her cane to hit the harp, but Maven jumped up on the table, knocking the harp over, and startling the woman. "Scat, stupid cat." She drew back to hit Maven, who crouched and yowled.

"Mother, it will be all right, Ward said. He turned her toward him, flinching to one side to escape the blow from the cane. He guided her back to her chair. "Let me pour you some tea."

"There's no tea. Not for years now." The old woman's voice was clear, and her face animated. "You just give me water, and you think I don't know the difference."

The harp had touched a nerve, but it brought her back from wherever she was hiding in her mind.

"Please play something for me. Something soothing, please Harp," Maven mewed.

The harp's strings vibrated back to her repeating *soothing harp*, and made a softer melody, like moonlight on a slow river, subdued and sparkling. It was probably too high-pitched and soft for the man and his mom to hear, but the mother sat in her chair, leaned back, and nodded off to sleep. Ward

cleaned up the dishes and came back to the room and sat in the other chair. He too fell asleep in moments.

The harp's music ended. It rattled, trying to move around.

"Do you want me to set you upright?" Maven asked, wondering how to do that.

You upright, the strings said. They must not be able to talk unless the harp was sitting up.

"You will spark me if I touch you."

The strings said nothing.

Maven set one paw on the edge of the bottom of the harp, but she could not put enough weight on it to lever it up. It was taller than she was, and she really missed her opposable thumbs.

There wasn't much room on the small table for the two of them as it was, and the harp took up most of it.

With much misgiving, she sat on her haunches and reached with her paws to the top of the harp, pulling it to her. The strings twanged against her belly fur, as if it wanted her cat guts for new strings.

Once it was upright and steady, she let it go, and it let her go, albeit with a fair amount of her fur stuck to the strings. As she watched, the fur melted into the strings, making them thicker. What did that mean?

I sing you a song of a time long ago, the harp sang, *of a once happy duchess and her beau*.

Maven heard the story of the not-so-happily ever after when the younger sister of the wife of the Marquis of Cabbages married Jack of Beanstalk

fame. Things went well for a while, but Jack was still lazy, and the duchess was unprepared to be a farm wife, even a rich one.

The bag of gold didn't last long, and the duchess was soon bored with Jack. One day the goose that laid the golden eggs disappeared with Jack, and things fell apart.

Ward tried to keep things together, but he was only a lad at the time with no training either in royal duties or in farming. The magical home that Jack had conjured barely kept them fed, and then only from a pot of porridge Ward had taken from someone in the village.

No one had seen or heard of Jack again, nor any magic bean salesmen. The money was gone, and therefore, the workers, leaving Ward alone and unprepared to take care of his mom.

Maven's tail suddenly twitched, pointing at Ward, and then she could hear his story, just as if she had her wand. He wanted to clean up the mill and get it going again, marry Yz, so his mom could live there too, and maybe marry the miller.

It was a good plan, except that he could not see how strong and proud Yz was of what she managed to do. Another unhappy ending was in store for everyone if his plan worked.

Ward hadn't stated that as his wish, but his mother got what she asked for, both the harp and some sleep, even if it had cost Maven a bit of fur she would be shedding anyway.

She began to purr, finding that more soothing than the music.

The harp began another soft tune, vibrating with the rhythm of Maven's purring, and in moments, Maven too was asleep

When she woke up, both Ward and the harp were gone.

CHAPTER 39 THE HARP SINGS

Yz rose at daybreak to go into the village of Spoons to barter with the herbs and roots she and Cobb had gathered. They needed supplies, and this time, Da had not brought in any meat or other food. When she got to the cache, Cobb had already started filling the two baskets that hung from the yoke that Da made for her. The yoke was propped on a couple of roots so that it was easy for her to slide under it and balance it around her neck.

"I just thought we'd get an early start." He put a last bundle of roots in one basket. "Less chance of someone seeing me."

"Thank you," she said. He was the one friend in her life who didn't make her feel like she couldn't do for herself. "The sooner we start, the better. Da may not even wake up before we get back, if things go well." *It must be time for something to go well.*

She carried out the baskets while Cobb covered up the cache.

"We will need to look for other things soon," Cobb said. "Season's changing, and the full of the moon is a good time to pick."

"Yes, next week. It's not like we have to wait for anything else to do." With that, she climbed onto his back, and he began the trek through the woods toward the village.

Yz couldn't find anything to talk about, and Cobb had nothing to say. She dreaded being around people, even though they knew who she was, she was different, a freak, one who was not afraid to go into the woods by herself.

She lived in a cursed mill with a mad miller, more than reason enough to make the villagers suspicious. So far there had not been any real trouble, but there were sideways glances and averted faces. The women who bought from her would hardly look her in the eye, and they tended to throw their side of the bargain into the basket rather than risk seeing her pick something up with her foot.

She did her best to smile and thank them, always feeling both pitied and cheated.

Cobb took her to a narrow path that led to the wider road, one with hardly any grass between the ruts made by carts and wagons. "I would go with you if I could," Cobb said, "But I know you will be all right. If someone bothers you, just yell 'Bear! Bear!' and I'll come. "

"If I need you, I'll call," Yz said, knowing that she wouldn't.

Someone would hurt Cobb, and she couldn't stand it if he were hurt. She scratched behind his ears with her foot, and then slid off his back. "I'll stay until noon or so, unless everything sells. See you then."

She padded off to the road, aware he was watching her. Maybe she should go live with him, but who would take care of Da? Another night in the creek might take Da away from her, and then she'd

have nowhere else to go. No reason to stay in the place that had tried to kill her.

Could they manage in the forest alone?

She put that thought out of her mind, and trudged toward the commons where the villagers held the market. She was early, as no one passed her along the way. She hoped enough people would be there. She could smell smoke from breakfast cooking even before she reached the village proper. She was so hungry, as they had eaten the last of Mama Bear's food for supper, and she kept the last of the porridge for Da.

Just then a young boy, maybe ten or eleven, came up behind her and jerked the yoke that held the baskets. She stumbled. He kicked the baskets, knocking the bundles in the dirt. She picked up a rock with her foot and slung it at him, catching him in the back of the head. The rock hit him hard enough that he stumbled, falling to his knees in the dust. Rubbing the back of his head, he stuck out his tongue at her and ran on.

The bundles she had so carefully gathered and dried were covered with dust, some of them trampled by the boy. She could draw water from the public well to wash them, but it was difficult, and she didn't want people laughing at her.

She retrieved what she could and put the bundles back in her basket. She propped up one end of the yoke with one foot, until she got it settled on her neck, and then scooped up the baskets. At least they weren't broken, just dirty.

Just then Ward appeared. He didn't have the cat

tagging along, so it must have been happier at the farm.

"What happened? Did you fall? Are you all right?" He picked up the last of the scattered bundles.

"I'm fine. A boy grabbed my yoke," Yz shrugged, settling the yoke more firmly on her shoulders. "If I'd been paying better attention, he'd not have come up behind me. But I was busy feeling sorry for myself, and he took his chances." She sighed, but then gave him half a smile. "He's got a knot on his head for his trouble. I've been practicing."

"Good for you." He touched his knuckles to her cheek. "But I wish I'd been here to help."

She turned away and pointed with her chin in the direction where the boy had run. "You might get your wish sooner than you think."

CHAPTER 40 THE VILLAGE OF SPOONS

A group of men approached them, followed by their women and children

"You're not welcome here, wench," one of the women yelled. "Our children aren't safe with you around." Under her arm was the boy with a rag tied around his head. When he saw her, he stuck out his tongue again.

Ward moved in front of her. "I think you need to hear her side of this."

"We don't need to hear anything," one of the men said. "She threw a rock at my boy and cracked his skull. It could have killed him. She ain't natural."

"Tell your boy to behave himself," Yz said, stepping around Ward, "and he won't be hurt. He..."

The crowd shouted her down.

One of the men held up a stick. "We don't need your kind here, so go back to your father and tend to him." He took a step forward, frowning.

A yowl came from behind Yz. A gray streak of fur passed her and scrambled right up the legs of the man with the stick, hissing and making the raucous noises that only angry felines can make.

The man dropped the stick and grabbed the cat by the back of its neck, trying to avoid her teeth. Maven latched on to his arm, leaving welts of blood. He let go, trying to shake her loose.

Ward went to help the man.

"Come on, let go now, Cat," Ward crooned, taking the back of her neck firmly and gripping her back paws in his other hand. "The man isn't going to hurt anyone."

Maven let Ward take her loose from the man's tunic. The man stared at Yz, and then at the cat in Ward's arms.

"She's a witch," someone shouted over Maven's warning yowls.

"You'd best not come back to the village," he said, rubbing the scratches on his arm. "Your cat's uncanny, and both of you are likely to be hurt if you come again."

"It's no cat of mine," Yz said. "I can't help if it follows me around. I have good herbs and roots to trade for food for me and Da."

A muffled sound came from the bag on Ward's back. *Take the baskets and make her trades or spend the night with cat tirades.*

"What did you say?" The man turned to Ward, who backed up a step, struggling to keep Maven in his arms.

"I c-could make her trades for her," Ward stammered.

Maven growled, her ears back, her claws ready to shred the man.

"Yes, that's what you ought to do," Yz said, anger rising to make her face hot and her eyes sting with tears. "Since your boy attacked me, and you won't let me come into the village, you trade my things for food and bring it back to me." She walked right up to the man and stared up at his face. "Do you really

want to find out if I am a witch?"

The crowd took a step back, some of them making the sign against evil, but the man stared down at her.

"I'll not touch anything of yours," the man said. "If this lad can make trades, that's fine. Don't you come back here, you mangled wench." The man turned to stride away, leaving them on the edge of the village green alone.

Ward set Maven down, still holding her neck. "Now you stay with me. Leave the villagers alone." He took the yoke from Yz's neck and settled it on his own. He turned to Yz, "Will you be all right?"

"Yes, I'll be fine." Yz glanced back at the woods. "I'll go back home and wait for you there, if that is all right."

Ward nodded. "What do you need in trade?"

"Flour, potatoes, beans, dry food that I can't forage." Yz shrugged. "Let them take a bit of advantage. I always have to."

She walked toward the woods, the matter settled.

"We'll see about that," Ward muttered. "They'll pay."

CHAPTER 41 THE CHALLENGE

Cobb crept closer to the road through the underbrush so he could observe Yz unseen. He felt so helpless, knowing that if he roared out of the forest, the people would be even more scared of Yz.

The farm boy showed up with some kind of magic trick, saving the day with some dumb luck and that weird cat person. It would be so easy to kill him with a couple of swipes, but Yz would never understand. She could never love a killer.

Most people would not hunt a bear unless it was a man-killer, but then they would chase it down. He'd seen it happen to old bears that could no longer hunt and went after the easier prey of a small child.

How he wished he could be a real man, could take care of Yz and protect her, let her live in the village if she wanted to, work for her, and let people get to know how wonderful she was. As a bear, he could only protect her in the woods. His mother would take them both in as they were, but that would only serve her needs, not theirs.

She wanted Yz to be a doll for her to play with, and himself, just a bigger cub. Ma was happy being a bear, but he wasn't.

The cat sniffed around and looked at him, but showed no sign of fear. She sat and washed herself, oblivious to the people.

After the villagers left and the farm boy picked up

Yz's yoke, a muffled sound came from the bag the boy carried.

Look around you. Be aware, the harp sang. In the bushes is a bear.

Yz turned and faced him. "Come on out, nobody will see you."

Cobb stood up, knowing that he was both more humanoid and scarier that way. He lumbered over to them.

Ward stepped in front of Yz, smelling of terror, but still trying to protect her. "Run away," he said, waving his arms.

She shouldered Ward out of the way and walked up to the bear. "I knew you were there. I was safe. Don't worry about me."

The cat stared at Cobb with one eye and then continued grooming.

Yz turned to face Ward. "You might as well know each other. Ward, this is my friend, Cobb."

"Hello," Cobb said, trying to keep from growling in case Ward didn't understand his speech. "Yz has told me about you."

Ward stood motionless, his mouth open, and his arms still spread wide as the bag slid off his shoulder.

Pick me back up, you clumsy fool, the harp sang, Close your mouth before you drool.

Ward looked at his hand as if surprised to see the bag with the harp there. He slipped the ties over his shoulder, under the yoke. With visible effort, he swallowed, and then moved closer to the bear. He offered to shake hands. "G-glad to meet you."

Cobb looked at the hand. He held out his paw, three times its size. "I greet you," he said, letting the boy touch it, and then dropping his paw to his side. "I help Yz gather her plants to sell. She is safe with me."

Ward nodded. "I see that. She has not told me about you, but I have heard stories of talking bears in these woods."

"They are true." Cobb sat on his haunches. Standing up was tiring, even though it made him taller than Ward. He wasn't built for it. Here was the boy who would take Yz from him. There was nothing he could do about it except keep Yz safe. He could certainly do that, but only if she let him stay with her.

CHAPTER 42 COBB MEETS WARD

The man and the bear stared at each other, wondering what to do next.

Cobb said, "I understand your father was Jack who climbed the giant beanstalk."

Ward hung his head. "Yes. He's been gone from here a long time. "

"You have his harp." Cobb nodded at the sack. "That's something."

"Yes, I found the pieces and put them back together." Ward shrugged. "I can't say that I fixed it, as it mostly fixed itself. It can play and sing beautifully when it wants to."

"Were you going to sell it in the village?" Yz asked. "I can't imagine how much something like that is worth or who could afford it."

"I was going to see my aunt, Lady Marilyn, my mother's sister." Ward said. "They are not close, but the harp and my mother don't get along." He scuffed the dirt with his foot. "I thought they might allow my mother to come and live with them. Or maybe they would buy the harp."

If you offer my song for sale, came the muffled voice of the harp, your quest for life away will fail.

"What does that mean?" Yz asked. "Does it always talk in rhyme?"

Ward nodded. "It's quite blunt about what it thinks. Could be how it got broken. I don't know."

Cobb listened to them, wanting nothing more than to carry Yz away from this man. How could he get her to leave with him? He looked down to see the cat rubbing her scent on his feet. She lifted herself up, balancing on her haunches, and looked at him, her paws held up in an odd gesture. She mewed, but he heard what she said in his mind: *She doesn't like him. Don't be jealous.*

He stared back at her, thinking *He does not love her either, but he is a man, and I am a bear.*

Only on the outside. The cat mewed back. She dropped to her feet and wandered off a little way

"You go into the village," Cobb said to Ward, "and get the food for her. I will see that she gets back to the mill safely."

Ward turned to Yz. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," she said. "I hoped to sell everything quickly and get back home to look after Da. It's already later than I wanted to be here."

"All right," Ward said. "I'll do the trading. I know what you want. I'll bring it all back to the mill this evening." His face sagged as he shrugged. "The harp can keep me company. Maybe it will play for Mother tonight."

"Let's go," Yz said.

Cobb hunched down to let Yz straddle his back. He turned to Ward, "Thank you for trying to help with the mice at the mill. They are magical. Maybe you could ask the harp how to get rid of them."

"Thank you," Ward said. "It's a thought.

The harp was silent.

Cobb ambled off into the woods with Yz, leaving

Ward along with his cat on the road. He would take her back to his woodland nest and spend what time he could with her. She could rest, knowing she was safe and warm.

What if the harp were able to gather all the mice and somehow get rid of them? Then Yz might fall in love with Ward after all, and invite him and his mother to live in the mill.

Cobb shook his head. *I'm a fool*, he thought. *I am a bear. Mice can't hurt me. I could fish her dad from the pond. I'm not afraid of the Nix. I will be her hero.*

CHAPTER 43 RIVALS

Ward sighed as he watched Yz ride off on the back of the bear. No wonder she was so fearless. She had a pet bear, while he only had a non-talking cat.

"Come along, then, Cat," he said, hanging his head and dragging his feet through the dirt. "I can go into the village and get some food, and he can't do that."

The cat mewed back, apparently in agreement.

"I'd planned to sell the harp, but that's not going to work." He stared back into the woods. "Maybe I could give it to Yz."

The cat paid him no attention, but trotted ahead, listening to something he could not hear, and then waiting for him to catch up.

As they walked through the village green at the various people displaying their wares, he saw the stares and whispers among the villagers.

Frowns appeared on those who had come from the countryside to sell and barter. Everyone turned away as he passed. They would not trade with him or even speak to him. Several people tried to kick the cat.

The big man came out to him carrying two sacks balanced on his shoulder. "Show me what she brought."

Ward sorted out the roots and herbs. "These were clean and not bruised before your boy knocked the

yoke from her neck and trod on her things.”

The man snorted, but rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Tell the witch not to come back here. We kept our part." He put the vegetables and grain sack in Ward's baskets, a heavier load than what she brought. "You'd best not be back either, at least not empty-handed."

"I'm just trying to do right by my friend," Ward said. "She's got a hard road."

"So do we all, Boy," the man said. "Keep her out of the village. If you want to trade for her, I guess we can work with that."

Ward bit his tongue. Nothing he could say would change anything, and if Yz could put a hex on them all, they would deserve it. He merely nodded to the man, turned on his heel, and strode back toward the mill.

He felt the stares of everyone in the village, but when he looked back, only one old woman met his glance, one he had not noticed before. She made no pretense of ignoring him, peering at him as if he were some new kind of bug or humorous vegetable.

Again he shrugged and moved on.

Yz and the bear were not at the mill when he got there. He wondered if the miller knew about the bear. Probably not, as much as the miller didn't like a man, he would surely not tolerate a bear, especially one that talked.

Yz had said how much the miller railed against

magic, but he didn't like Ward's attempts at making practical things to help.

He'd made a winch for her to get water from the creek below the dam, and some tools designed for her feet.

He didn't understand why she didn't know how he felt about her.

He decided to wait for Yz to come back as he did not want to leave food where the mice could get at it. His thoughts wandered to the mousetrap that had worked perfectly in his barn, but had been disassembled in the mill.

He had left the cat in the mill, but it somehow got out. The miller didn't abide cats either, but his cat was still following him, and now sat on the lowest step of the porch, staring at him as if expecting him to talk.

Something splashed in the mill pond, a fish perhaps, or maybe a big frog. The cat mewed and then sat up, its front paws in the air, doing making-biscuits motion.

"Talk to me, Cat," he said, resting his head on one arm, braced on his knee. "I wish you could tell me what I need to do."

He heard a twanging sound from the harp in his sack. He took it out and set it on the step between him and the cat. "At least I can understand you," he said to the harp. "I'm happy to listen to whatever wisdom you have to share."

The cat looked at the harp and made a short purring sound.

I'm a fairy and I'll grant your wish, the harp said,

But first I must chat with the fish.

"What does that mean?" Ward shook his head.

How should I know? asked the harp. *The cat just said so.*

CHAPTER 44 RETURN TO THE MILL

Ward watched the cat jump up the next two steps and move out to the middle of the walkway. She looked over the edge, mewling. The water monster came to the surface. He'd never really believed that it lived there, although he'd heard the stories about it.

No wonder Yz was afraid of it. It was as big as a human, but green and slimy, scaly with leafy ears that connected to its shoulders, and long, clawed fore paws, much like hands. The creature disappeared under the water for a few moments and then reappeared with a tube that it tossed to the cat.

The cat picked up the tube in her mouth and brought it to Ward, setting it by his hand. It was some kind of flute, slimy with pond water, but Ward dried it off with a corner of the bag. Gingerly, he put it in his mouth and blew into it. No sound came out, just muddy water, except for the cat's yowl and the harp's howl.

The flute is magic, said the harp, but your playing is tragic. Practice every day, and soon things will go your way.

The cat chimed in with a purr, and settled down, curling her paws and tail around her.

Ward looked at the flute, wondering how he could learn to play it when he couldn't hear it.

Put it away and me too, said the harp. That is all you now can do.

As soon as the harp and flute were stashed in his bag, Yz walked up, alone, as if she had just been out for a stroll.

"I brought you the food," Ward said, standing up. "I thought..."

"Did Da see you?" Yz whispered. "He'll be mad if you are here. Thanks for bringing the food." She looked at the baskets, frowning over what she saw. "This is much more than I usually get. Take some of it. You brought it all this way, and you didn't have anything to trade."

"No, we'll be all right," Ward said. "Can I do anything for you before I go home?"

Yz drew her eyebrows together as if her head hurt. "No. Thank you," she finally said. "You really must go now." She let him put the yoke on her neck.

Behind them came the sound of the miller moving about. Yz jerked her head toward the road, saying nothing.

Ward sprinted away, not wanting Yz in trouble with her Da. What was he going to do with two instruments, one he couldn't play and the other that wouldn't let him play it? He was almost home when he realized the cat had stayed behind

By the time Ward reached his mother's house, it was late. The quarter moon was high in the sky. Ward trudged back to his mother's house, harp still in the bag. He went into the barn, unslung the bag, and risking its painful sparks, set the harp on the

workbench.

"Please, Harp," he said, "Sing. What should I do now?"

As you have asked nicely, I'll answer precisely. A melody floated from the strings, soothing Ward's mind. Befriend the girl's brute; learn to play the flute. When the mice hit the pond, you three will bond.

Ward's head nodded. As the harp played a soft melody, he slipped into a dream state, watching himself sitting in a boat, playing a flute he could not hear.

Mice streamed from the mill, jumping into the millpond. Then he rowed himself to shore, where he got out and greeted the bear. The three of them talked, though he could not hear what they said. The three of them walked off into the woods away from the mill.

When he woke up, his head lying on his arms and a puddle of spit under his cheek, the barn was dark, and the harp, silent. He reached for the harp to take it back into the house, but a spark leaped to sting his hand before he touched it.

First, a lesson before you are done. The harp glowed in the dark. Then you can be your poor mother's son.

Ward took the flute out and cleaned it as well as he could. It still made no noise when he blew into it, but the harp shrieked.

Play softly. Do not be loud. When you learn, you will draw a crowd.

Ward tried again, this time barely moving air through the tube. He put all his fingers over the

holes, hoping the notes might be low enough to hear, and tried again. Still no sound.

The harp glowed again. One string vibrated. *Lift one finger at a time. When it's right, I will chime.*

Ward tried again, and while he still couldn't hear anything, a faint vibration touched his fingers. A note sounded from the harp.

Over and over, he tried different notes, sometimes getting a chime of approval, others a rhymed snort

"Why could you not do this?" he finally asked the harp. "You already know what needs to be done, and how to do it."

I fail to see what's in it for me. The harp sounded a sharp chord. *I am no tool to rescue a fool.*

"What do you want?" Ward could not think of anything he could offer. He did think a bit of appreciation for repairing the harp was in order but thought better of saying so.

I desire appropriate appreciation for the effort of my creation. The harp stopped glowing, leaving the barn dark.

"I think your music is beautiful, amazing even."

You know neither scale nor arpeggio. You're just a baffled Romeo.

CHAPTER 45 THE FLUTE

Ward threw his sack over the harp, and took it back into the house, intending to put it back in the sitting room where it might play his mom back to sleep. When he went in the back door, his mom sat at the kitchen table with a plate of porridge and a cup of water. He could not remember when he'd seen her in the kitchen.

"You're late. I had to get my own supper," his mother said, spooning up the last of her porridge. "Were you courting that crippled creature at the mill again?"

"I did see her in the village," Ward said. "I helped her do some trading." He didn't mention the food, as his cooking skills rivaled his mother's.

"You didn't bring me anything?" His mother pushed her plate away. "I am so bored with this porridge."

Ward picked up the plate to wash. "I had nothing to trade with," he said, filling the cleaned plate with the last of the porridge. "I'd planned to play the harp to make a few coins, but it would not play for me."

"No surprise there." His mother sniffed and sipped at her cup of water. "None of the villagers have any taste for music other than rude songs and dances."

"Perhaps if you were nicer to it, it would play for you." Ward hoped he could find a way to keep his

mother in her right mind and happy. If the harp could be appreciated, things would be different with his mom. "You have the most refined taste of anyone around here."

"True, but you can't trust magical things." She sat staring into the distance for a moment. "They let you down when you need them most." She got up. "That crippled girl will just tie you down more. You should leave her alone, find some nice, strong girl who can take care of us."

Ward's temper flared. What right had his mother to question him after all this time? "If I had anything to offer anyone, what would that be? A broken-down farm? A dry cow? You think maybe I sell her for some magical beans?" He threw the porridge back into the pot. "If I could get the mill working, I could learn that trade and support all of us."

"Yes, that's been so profitable for that sad, pining miller, even though my brother-in-law lets him keep that derelict place." She turned her back and went to her bedroom, ending the conversation.

He'd probably have to sell the cow soon anyway. At least she could eat the weeds that grew around the barn, so she wouldn't starve this summer, but no money for... anything else. He ate quickly, then said the magic words that filled the pot again. He never trusted his mother to use the pot. He had only been able to get it when it had scalded a whole village because its owner forgot how to turn it off.

He took the harp to the sitting room and set it up again. "Where can I take you so that you will be appreciated?"

*Once you clear out the mill,
My wish can then be fulfilled.*

"I will do my best. Thank you for your help." He left the harp and went to bed, where his thoughts kept him awake.

Magic lets you down. Magic gone bad. Magic got his parents together, but then it broke. Broken magic, broken marriage, broken farm. He would do better with his own skills, if he only knew what to do.

Maybe the harp would help him find someone to take care of his mom, to marry her or somehow take her in so that he could go away where he might find his life and his fortune. He was too old to be an apprentice, but he was not too proud to ask. He might work as a tinker, fixing things for people, carrying gossip and news around the villages. He might even learn the milling trade, even if he had to work for Yz and her bear. Surely a bear could not handle the grains and keep the mill in good order...not that the miller had been able to.

The flute was clearly magical, as was the harp, and the porridge pot. What would it take to break the spells on them, and what would happen if he did? He'd gotten used to pease porridge, never having to wonder where his next meal was coming from or what it would be. That was what was bad about magic. It let you stop thinking about what you needed to do next.

But he needed to find out how to get out of the mess they all were in. Could he do like his father and just walk away? No, unless Yz would go with him. Even if they had to take the bear along too.

CHAPTER 46 WARD CONSIDERS MAGIC

In the space between the walls of the main floor of the mill, Queen Zaria took off her state robes, which had once been the Nix's hat but tailored to fit her and adorned with buttons and jewels. She settled into her soft nest of cat fur with a bit of bacon in one paw brought by one of her servants.

"If I may speak, Your Majesty?" the servant said, bowing so low that his nose was between his back feet.

"Certainly, Whiskers," she said. "I am aware that there is a cat here in our mill, that she is unwelcome, and that she is a fairy godmother, just as I am. What else would you like to tell me?"

"Only that if you granted her wish, she would go away, and stop meddling." His words were muffled.

"That is a good thought, Whiskers. She does want very much to go back to Fiona. I might even go with her." She watched the body language of her servant. He did not so much as quiver a whisker or twitch an ear. "I see you have also thought of this option." She licked her paw to get the last taste of the grease from the bacon. "Don't wring your paws over who shall be queen when I am gone. Put yourself on guard duty tonight."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Whiskers backed out of the chamber. She could hear him scurrying away on all four paws as soon as he was out of sight.

"I'll need a new chamberlain," the queen said aloud to herself. "I don't expect to see Whiskers again." Those who were listening would see to Whiskers, whether he made it to guard duty or not.

Granting the cat fairy godmother's wish was a good idea, but the queen did not want her subjects to know that she could not reverse a spell cast by Fiona, and in truth, her magic was waning almost by the hour, especially since it took so much of it to make men out of her mice.

What she could do was to see if the cat could be tricked into changing herself into something less formidable—another mouse perhaps, or a cockroach. Or if she just kept her here long enough, Maven would forget everything about how to be a fairy godmother.

From experience, the Queen reminded herself that she had a reason for wanting the rest of her body back. Taking the cat's magic might give her enough to return to her human shape. If she could fool the stupid cat part, she might rid herself of the fairy godmother as well.

She stretched out on the cat skin fur that made her nest. Cats she could deal with. Come the next new moon, she would have a new cat skin bed to lie on. Or she might have what she wanted for such a long time now. Her human body and her magic with nobody the wiser.

Maven lay on the walkway over the dam watching

the gibbous moon rise. Yz and Da had gone to bed, leaving only the sounds of the water and night creatures. A skittering sound caught her ear.

A spokesmouse came up to Maven. "We want to make a wish. Release us from our queen and let us go back to the forest."

"You are safe here. Why not stay?" Maven licked her paw and groomed her whiskers to distract herself from pouncing on the mouse.

"You are no more a cat than she is a mouse," the mouse said, quivering from its effort not to be dinner. "We are not safe from her or you."

"I'll do what I can," Maven said. "I would like to take her back with me."

"Kill her," the mouse said, standing up on its back feet. "No one will miss her. There is nothing here for us but each other. Kill her or we will all die."

CHAPTER 47 MOUSE QUEEN

As the mouse scampered away, the moon stared back at Maven through the stark tree branches, only a couple nights before full. After nearly two weeks, she hadn't found a way to grant a single wish. Fiona would not count the donation of fur to the harp as a wish. It was not magic.

Two more weeks and it would be out of her hands. She'd live out her life as a cat.

If she were a cat, she'd never have to be told that she was not doing it right. She could do as she pleased, eat, sleep, and play, all with no responsibilities, not even to clear the mill of the mice. There were too many of them anyway, and they were clearly used to overwhelming a lone cat, with the magical help of their queen. Now they wanted her to kill the queen. Could she do that?

She did an inventory of the places the mice had bitten her, licking each one clean. Did her cat spit have built-in antibiotics? She hoped so. The mouse queen had not killed her, only made a show of her power. That was a clue.

She began to see why Mama Bear and Queen Zaria might live their lives as fairies in disguise, but they had chosen to live in their own stories, while Maven had been put here as punishment. Or maybe it was a test. Or maybe it was just to get her out of the way in hopes that she would fail and be stuck

there.

She licked her paw, wiping it across her face, which helped her clear her mind

Maven had often given up or given in to authority, under silent protest, before she came to Faery. She had wished, even demanded, to be a fairy godmother doing things her own way, and that wish had been granted. She hadn't given up her wings, her wand, or even her gossamer, though she could not figure out how to use them.

One thing for sure, the witch who controlled Fiona knew where she was, and was probably cackling to herself even at this moment, watching through the all-seeing crystal ball.

Behind her heavy footsteps approached.

"I'll not have a mangy cat that won't kill the mice!" The miller grabbed Maven by the skin at the back of her neck and shoved her into a flour sack with a rock in the bottom.

Near paralyzed until the Miller let her go, Maven slashed at the heavy sacking to rip a hole in it. Too late! The sack swung into the air and splashed into the mill pond.

Weightless as she fell into the dark water, the cat could only grab the cloth and try to pull it apart. Even when she landed on the bottom, every move she made spun her in a different direction.

Maven tried to keep her wits and hold her breath, but her cat body was in a panic. She bit the bag to rip it apart, but it was too strong. She pushed with her paws and pulled with her teeth, but only got more stuck. She curled up, her feet together, claws

embedded in the cloth. She kicked her strong back legs against the cloth caught in her front claws, but the bag was too large for her to get leverage. She curled and stretched again, floundering between the rock and the squishy bottom. The bag would not tear. Her lungs burned with old air, and she felt herself losing consciousness with the terrible need to breathe. She put one more effort, biting the bag and pulling against her teeth with all her paws.

At last, something tore, but as the cloth gave way, her breath released and bubbled up out of the rip in the bag.

If only I could poof, she thought. She felt her tail snap straight behind her just as her world went black.

CHAPTER 48 MAVEN DROWNED

Maven awoke, wet and shivering, but breathing. She sprawled, limp and exhausted, on the rock wall beside the millrace. Maybe she had learned to poof?

Before she could clear her mind enough to remember, or even contemplate licking herself dry (ewww!), the Nix's green face rose from the water: humanoid, green-skinned and slimy, like a frog, with bulbous eyes, a wide mouth, and fins beside her head where ears would be but no nostrils for breathing air. The Nix squatted in the millrace, as it was not deep enough for her to stand and stay submerged

The Nix did not come within arm's reach, but brought her webbed hands out of the water and made a large bubble. She pointed to Maven, and then to bubble, and pushed the bubble down into the water. The bubble didn't pop—the Nix used water magic.

When Maven didn't stir, still getting her bearings, the Nix ducked under the water again, and this time came back up standing, so that Maven could see her gills, red and flapping behind her ear fins against the air. The Nix pointed to where her nose would be, if she had one, and then to her gills.

Maven scrambled up to sit on her back feet, wobbling a little. She repeated the Nix's gesture, moving her paw from her neck to her nose. The Nix

nodded. Then she disappeared again for a few moments and returned with the flour sack. She held it up and pulled it open where Maven had tried to tear it. She pointed inside, then reached in, took out the rock, and set it on the other side of the millrace.

The Nix pointed to the rock and then to Maven, and pantomimed the whole thing again, reaching into the back, bringing out a fist, then spreading her fingers over the wall and rubbing the wall.

Maven stared at the Nix. *She rescued me*, Maven thought. *I didn't poof at all*. She nodded at the Nix and tried to make a bit of a bow.

The Nix splashed under the water for a few seconds. When she came back up, she made another bubble, pointed at it and then at Maven.

Maven didn't understand, but she nodded at the Nix anyway. Inch by inch, the Nix came closer to Maven, pushing the bubble ahead of her until it surrounded Maven. The air inside was damp but breathable. The Nix held out her hands. Maven stuck out a paw to touch the webbed hands, and the bubble stretched but did not pop. The Nix scooped her hands under Maven and lowered the bubble with Maven inside into the water, supporting Maven's weight in her hands.

Once they were under the water, a few inches over her head, the Nix spoke.

"I cannot speak in the air. You can hear me now, I think," she said in a musical lilt that made the air bubble vibrate. "I saved you from drowning." She smiled with her lips closed against the teeth that easily shredded fish or meat. "Now tell me why you

have come here? Why are you in this form that is not your own?"

Maven reminded herself that she had once agreed to believe six impossible things before breakfast. Her current situation pretty well covered that. She opened her mouth, expecting to hear herself mew and yowl again, but she said, "I'm a fairy godmother sent here to grant three wishes." She looked into the Nix's large eyes, focusing as much as she could to try to read her expression. "My boss turned me into a cat to make my task more difficult."

"Then I have a wish for you." The nix showed her sharp teeth, her webbed hands trembling. "I wish I had my red hat, so I can return to my husband, the miller, and my daughter. Then I can kill the meddling fairy godmother that took my daughter's hands."

"Where is the hat?"

"The Queen of the Mice has it. Get it back for me."

The Nix pushed Maven back out of the water, where the bubble of air popped and splattered her fur.

The Nix disappeared again under the water, but in a few minutes, she reappeared with a handful of minnows, which she laid, flopping, by Maven's side.

"Mer...err-oorrow," Maven said, meaning to thank the Nix.

The Nix touched Maven's head and then Maven could hear her speak. "You've never killed your own food."

"Not before I became a cat," Maven admitted, thinking her answer, and remembering the crunch of

tiny bones.

"Then you don't understand the meaning of life," the Nix said. "How dare you presume to grant a wish to someone else?"

Maven had no answer for that question.

"Bring me my hat," the Nix said, "then kill the Mouse Queen."

CHAPTER 49 NIX MAKES A WISH

Two days later, the full moon reflected in the mill pond. Maven let the cat side of herself take over, seeking the other cats she'd seen in the village. She needed help, information, and anything that would let her get some leverage on her situation. She found herself running through the dark woods with nothing but instinct guiding her. She hoped the cat body would know how to get home since she was lost.

Leaps and bounds later, she came to a clearing, bright with moonlight on many furry bodies lounging, stretching, yowling, wrestling, and swapping scents. She stopped at the edge of the clearing, awaiting some signal that she was welcome, or at least tolerated. She didn't have any idea of cat protocols, and so let the cat body lead in, deferring to any cat who thought itself better or higher on the pecking order. She knew they could see her human self, just as she had seen the real woman inside Big Mama.

What would they do about it? She allowed herself to be sniffed and sniffed back, finally reaching the edge of what appeared to be an inner circle. She sat, tail around her feet, waiting, observing and listening. She saw the queen and a couple of toms making their way through the gathering, speaking to each member, intimidating some, and grooming others. Cats did not seem to have social classes, but this one

cat attracted everyone's attention, definitely an alpha. The toms looked like bodyguards or the brute squad, staying at the queen's side but occasionally batting some cat to the side with a single swipe of the paw.

As she watched, the moon darkened. Eclipse. As the queen approached, the moon glowed dull red.

All the cats turned in her direction, watchful, tense, their eyes glowing in the darkness with no light to reflect.

When it came Maven's turn to be greeted, the queen cat stopped and stared, intentionally rude by both cat and human standards.

"Why are you here, fairy godmother?" the queen's tail flicked, and her ears lay flat. "Go back and play with your friends, the bear and the mouse."

"That's why I came," Maven said, "I want to go back to being human, and perhaps take them back with me."

"A pretty speech from a cat who can't talk." The queen sat, tail erect and curled at the tip. The toms moved a little closer, threatening, still on all fours. "We are not stopping you. Take them and be gone. You don't need our help."

Maven leaned back on her haunches, showing some submission. "I need information. Nothing here makes any sense. I don't know how to do my magic without my wand."

A general chorus of mocking rose around them.

"I suppose you can't see yourself as others see you," the queen said, with a bit of pitying chirrup. "There is nothing you can do for us. No reason for us

to help you."

"The mouse keeps the village clean," one of the toms growled. "No work for us, but all the trimmings, just the same. You leave her be."

"Hush," the queen hissed. "Take your wand, your wings, and your gossamer, and leave this place. It's for cats only."

Now the other cats crouched on all fours, awaiting a signal to attack. They growled, staring at Maven with eyes that reflected in the moonlight.

Time to go before any fur flew, especially hers. Maven turned her back to the queen, tail down and ears flat.

"You have everything you need," the queen said, staring off into the distance, ignoring such an insignificant specimen. "But your time is running out. You should not have been able to find us. Next full moon, we'll welcome you as a cat, for then you will be one."

Two toms issued warning yowls. Several more advanced, fluffed out and hissing.

Maven padded away as if bored with the whole thing, back the way she came. Most of the other cats ignored her, but a few made a hiss or growl to move her along. Once she escaped the gathering into the dark woods again, she stared at the full moon overhead, now fading from red to white, wondering which way to go.

A path opened slightly before her, branches being pulled away for her to pass. Sprites again, she thought. Of course, they let go of the branches in a way to smack her behind as she went past, giggling

in the darkness.

"Stupid cat!" They snickered. "Stupid kitty, kitty, kitty, stupid fairy." Sharp voices called out from either side of her, but all she could see, even with her night vision was the reflection of their eyes, as catlike and menacing as her own.

She stopped, crouching under a branch that swung her way. "What do you suggest I do?"

"Use brain, stupid cat." One of them pulled at her tail, making a spark that stung both of them.

She squat, prepared to pounce. Surely she could get at least one of them, despite their sharp mandibles and claws.

Two claws touched her hip bones, startling her into a back flip. She resisted the urge to run when she landed on her feet, knowing that while they might occasionally be helpful, the sprites weren't friendly.

What do sprites wish for?

"Cat got tongue, stupid fairy?" One voice rose among many giggles.

"What do you want?" Maven said, surprised to hear her own voice as speech. She pulled herself together, wrapping her tail around her feet.

"You grant wish, Gossafur Tailwand?" The sprite's voice was snide, mocking. "We see you, do YOU see you?"

"Do you have a wish or not?" Maven laid back her ears, thumping her tail.

"We wish you go away. Take fairy friends. Now."

"I'm working on it." Maven added a hiss. "I'd appreciate any suggestions you might have as both

of them are pretty well dug in."

"Work faster. Take magic.

The sprites disappeared into the forest, leaving her alone, but at least she had one wish to grant, and now she could talk.

Fiona had certainly granted her wish to be a fairy godmother on her own terms. Now she needed to figure out how she "damn well pleased" to do it.

CHAPTER 50 FULL MOON ECLIPSE

Cobb shambled through the open forest; Yz on his back, along the trails that he kept cleared and marked. Not a single green shoot brightened the forest floor, yet it glowed with weak sunshine in shades of amber, sienna, and ochre. Cobb's rough fur was nearly the same color as Yz's hair, brown with highlights of red sunlight. They climbed a bluff overlooking the river, high enough so that the Nix could not reach them, even if she could see them. The bluff was clear of trees, a bare rock thrust into the sky, but the sunny side was downwind, and the gray tree branches reached for the sun.

"At least you do talk, not like Da." Yz leaned down, bending to touch her head to her knees. "Days go by without a word from him, and the night-walking is getting worse." Yz sat up and scooted a little way away from Cobb. She spread her legs and rolled into a split, bending forward to touch her head to her knee, and then arching her back to lean back as far as she could, her hair brushing her calf.

His heart melted for the beauty of her, like a shining fish jumping from the water. He knew that she had to stretch to be able to do what she did without arms, but the effort of it made him want to wrap his paws around her and protect her from the world. If he could turn into a man, he could work for her, be her man, and love her.

She shifted her weight, turning her back to him, and spread her legs. She leaned down, nearly touching her face to the ground.

But she never thought of him that way, only as a big pet, a stuffed toy that walked and talked, not as a real person. He got up and shook his body all over to shake off the lust he felt for her. That could never happen—it would kill her, and he couldn't live with that.

He had thought of asking his mother to turn her into a bear, but he didn't think an armless bear could protect herself, and she still might not love him then. She might hate him even. Who would want to scrounge for food all the time and sleep through the winter? Not that he minded, but she was different, special.

Cobb's ears twitched. He heard something shuffling around below them, something large and clumsy, like himself. He lifted his nose and snuffled.

He said. "Another bear is out there, not a magical bear, but the normal kind."

She crossed her legs and then stood up, leaning back against the rock.

Cobb stood on his hind legs and stretched up, the better to see out over the river and the forest. He had that itchy feeling he got whenever some new creature entered his territory, and this bear was male, hungry and mean, well aware of trespassing. Cobb felt the other bear's animosity as a challenge, one he could not let go unanswered if Yz and the others in this part of the forest were to be safe.

"Stay here." He turned his head to her, now

towering over her. "I'll try to scare him off, but you could get hurt if you follow." He sniffed the air again. "You're not safe here, either, but I'll distract him, and you can run back to Ma's."

Yz nodded. As stubborn as she was, she didn't take unnecessary chances.

"When I holler, you get down quick." He lumbered down the rocky slope on all fours, making no effort to be quiet.

He wasn't sure where the other bear was, and he wanted to scare him off or lure him away from the outcropping. The sheer side was impassible, so the only way Yz could get down was the way he was going. He'd been in a few confrontations but had always been able to make a bigger noise and scare others away

He hoped it would go that way now.

No such luck.

CHAPTER 51 YZ AND COBB IN THE FOREST

At the end of the path, he saw the other bear, black with reddish markings, scratching at a dead tree, making his own marks, defying Cobb's scat and scratches, even this far into Cobb's forest.

Something was wrong with this bear, desperation, or madness. What had driven him into these woods? If he didn't get rid of him, he wouldn't hesitate to kill Yz or anyone else in his path. Cobb galloped toward him.

Cobb rose up on his hind legs and pushed the other bear, knocking him over. He roared, showing his teeth and stretching his neck to threaten and bite the other bear as he came down on his front paws.

The black bear rolled over to get his footing and snapped at him. He was older than Cobb with gray fur on his muzzle and scars on his face from other battles. A chunk had been torn from one of his ears.

Cobb stood and roared, making himself as large as he could. The other stood as well, taller but thinner, slavering. They grabbed each other, wrestling for a place to bite, their claws reaching deep into fur to cut.

Cobb, being shorter, butted the other's head up to get a better bite on his neck. The fur was thick, and he could not bite through from that angle, but his own neck was protected.

The black bear swung him around, toppling them

both, with Cobb underneath. Cobb bunched his hind legs as he fell, thrusting his paws against the other's belly. The black bear roared, trying to shake Cobb loose. They rolled over again, each trying to reach back to smack the other, but unable to get back to their feet for leverage.

Cobb thrust again with his paws, claws extended as much as possible. The black bear rolled away, getting back to his feet. The black bear charged again, head first, bellowing.

Rolling to his feet, Cobb lowered his head and crashed his shoulder into the other bear. Again they rolled, clenched, getting closer to the river and further from the rock where Yz was hiding.

Cobb swung back with one front paw to clout the black bear's head. The black bear let go enough for Cobb to stand and howl again. It stood, and Cobb took a step forward and pushed the black bear into the river. But the black bear pierced Cobb's left foreleg with his claws and pulled him into the deep water. They flailed, fighting each other and trying to stay afloat against the current.

The last thing he heard as he fell into the water was Yz's scream.

They were being pulled deeper into the undercut where the current ran deep. The black bear struggled, letting go of him, but thrashing the water. Still, they sank; the current and something else pulled them under the bank.

Cobb struggled to hold his breath but kicked his way free of the black bear. He swept his paws against the water, trying to pull himself up toward the light.

He could not get loose. He shook himself, rolling and twisting his body. He kicked out, finding nothing to push against but water. He rolled his head to find what held him under the water. The green face of the nix stared at him, her fern-like tentacles streaming back from her face and her gills pumping water through her ribs. She grimaced with the effort of holding him, her pointed teeth as long and sharp as his own.

The last thing he saw before the dark water took him was a smile on that terrible face.

CHAPTER 52 COBB IS KILLED

Yz crept to the edge of the high bluff. She watched Cobb stand and threaten the black bear. The bears grappled, growling and trying to bite each other's throats, slashing with their claws. Rolling on the ground, they fell into the water.

The water churned as first brown fur, and then black rolled up from the depths. They slipped out of sight under the overhanging river bank. The Nix raised its ugly head from the far shore.

"Noooooooo!" Yz screamed.

The green monster slipped through the water as the bears disappeared from view, swimming toward them as they sank into the shadow.

Yz saw the green body slide through the water, a snake-like shape.

Yz could still hear splashing and growls, but then all was silent, even the birds and the breeze.

She leaned over the edge, staring down into the shadows. She could not see anything in the water. No sign of struggle, no bubbles, nothing.

No sign of either of them except for a trickle of blood in the brown water. Cobb's? The other bear's? Were they pulled under in the deep current? Did the monster have them caught in the rocks under the bank?

She ran down the path from the cliff, as close as she dared to the river, looking for some sign of

them—a paw, a snout, bubbles in the water. The nix had tried to snatch her before, and now she had Cobb. He was so big and strong. Surely he could fight her off. He had the other bear to fight too, and neither of them could breathe water.

Minutes passed. Yz could not breathe. She knew Cobb was still under the water, still fighting somewhere. She waited, looking for any sign of struggle. The water ran fast and deep here, but shallower further on. She had to know. She kept moving, keeping as quiet not to attract the Nix's attention. She slipped down the steep bank to a sandy shoal where the water was shallow.

Then she saw it, a large, black head, its fur slicked down like satin, red threads of blood flowing from his wounds. The eyes were open but unseeing, its tongue lolling from a slack jaw. The other bear. Cobb's fur was brown, not black. If it were not dead, if it were only unconscious, she was in danger. She glanced back up the slope, but it was covered with weeds and brush, nothing she could pull herself up against, nothing to grab between her neck and her head or to push against with her feet.

The black bear rolled over. Yz stood perfectly still, not even breathing. If the bear were coming to, it would smell her and come after her as easy prey, all the more dangerous for being wounded. She could not outrun it if there were anywhere to go. She might crawl up the bank, but he would catch her with one swipe of his paw.

Yz sat back against the bank and pushed herself up like an inchworm, arching her back and pushing

with her feet. She watched the black bear roll again, pushed by the current, his head going under the water this time. He didn't sputter or shake his muzzle but came to rest on a tree branch washed into the current. Cobb had still not floated down the river. If the black bear was dead, so was Cobb.

Cobb could have killed her any time they were together, but he was so gentle, she forgot that he was a bear, a predator that killed his food. Why had she let him bring her so far out into the forest? He was dead, all her fault, and she could not even say goodbye.

But where was the Nix? Why wouldn't the Nix come after her too, take her away as she had tried to do so many times before?

Losing all hope, she let herself slide back to the shoal. She screamed, "Come get me, you green, slimy monster!" Her words echoed in the woods, but no answer came, no splash or gurgle or ripples in the water other than those caused by the rocks below. All was silent, not even the sound of the air through the tree branches.

She was alone. Unprotected. But not helpless.

CHAPTER 53 YZ SEARCHES

Mama Bear took off her apron and shook it out to begin the shift into her human form, which was more difficult every time, painful and exhausting. She needed to find a way to make the bear persona a skin that she could just take off, not a real transformation. It wasn't like some man would find it and keep it to trap her as the crone she had become. But that would be magic for another day. The cat could help with that, and it would be her turn, soon enough, to be a member of the cottage.

People sometimes saw her as the crone in the woods. She didn't approach them, but they stayed away from her anyway. She sometimes came close to town, and then they would see a shuffling old woman leaning on a cane. But she paid in gold and she did not bargain closely. Clearly, she was a witch, and no one wanted to get close to her. So she got better than her money's worth, and the merchants were glad to see her go. They'd bite the gold and do their best to trade it for something else before it disappeared.

Then sometimes while the gold stayed, something else disappeared... a pig or dog, an elderly person, a sickly child. Mama Bear removed the burden of the old and weak to maintain her strength, but this time, she needed more vitality. The baker's daughter had a secret, one that the crone would help her escape. Permanently.

Mama Bear dressed in the mundane clothes she kept for these occasions, wearing them over the gossamer, which lay soft against her skin, protecting her. She took up the small bag of gold pieces, slices of the golden eggs laid by the goose. It wasn't laying so much as it used to, getting old too, so she'd had been storing up the eggs, using fewer and fewer of them. She'd have a legacy for Cobb when she felt that he was mature enough to manage.

She'd thought Yz would come to live with them, to escape her father's rages and despair, but ever the father's daughter, she stayed with him. Maybe it was time to do something about him, to convince Yz to stay with them, and train her to obey and serve as she did her father. The plan to do away with the mouse had not worked out, but that was not her problem.

She shuffled into the edge of town on market day.

"Good morning, Mother," said a girl in one of the stalls that had been set up on the green. "Have an apple?" She held out a bright specimen, red and yellow, shiny and firm.

"Yes, I will. You are so very kind." The woman took a small piece of gold out of her bag and held it for a moment. "I'll want a bushel of them, but please keep them here for me until I get back." She handed the gold coin to the girl.

The girl's face smiled, but she stared at the golden disk. "Of course, ma'am, I'll pick out the best ones for you." She put the coin in her pocket and started filling the basket.

"Thank you, Dearie," Mama Bear said, "Now can

you tell me where the baker sells his wares?" She could see that the girl wanted her to turn away so that she could bite the coin to see if it were really gold.

The girl nodded across the village green. "In his shop, the one with the pretzel sign."

Mama Bear shuffled off, leaning on her cane. She could almost hear the girl's thoughts, wondering how such an old woman might carry off a bushel of apples. *That's for me to know, and you to find out, Little One.*

Mama Bear made her way slowly to the baker's shop, finding the baker's daughter inside. She had a bun in the oven as well as the ones on the counter, and it would soon be too late to hide it.

One or both? Just the one. No point in being too greedy, and there'd likely be another one soon enough. Young girls just couldn't help themselves when they thought someone loved them.

Mama Bear asked for two loaves of bread and a basket of scones. She handed over one of the smaller gold discs, which the baker's daughter made no pretense of trusting. She bit it and looked at it before wrapping up the order. "Thank you," she said.

Mama Bear made a show of being weak, leaning on the counter, and asking for a cup of tea.

The baker's daughter put the golden disc away and went to the back room. When she returned, Mama Bear accepted the cup with a show of gratitude.

"Thank you so much, Dearie. I'll just rest here a bit."

When the girl turned to go back to the other side of the counter, Mama Bear tapped her with her wand.

The girl collapsed without a sound. Blood and water gushed from her, along with a damp, shriveled mass. Mama Bear swirled her wand, collecting the mess into a bloody bubble, and then transforming the bubble into dark, swirling energy. She pulled the energy into her own body, taking on a youthful glow.

She used her wand to disguise herself again and dragged the girl behind the counter, where she lay pale and nearly as transparent as gossamer. Mama Bear gave back just enough energy to keep the girl from dying, and left her there.

She did leave the golden disc there, as payment, the least she could do. The very least. Another burden released. The next time, the girl would pay her. If Yz could not be persuaded to be her daughter-in-law, maybe this girl would see the benefit, especially if she got pregnant again.

MB went to a different part of the village to return to the woods, skirting the edges under the trees so that she would not be seen. Along the way, she poofed the bushel of apples to her cottage and snagged the gold coin from the apple girl's pocket. Such piddling use of magic kept her hand in, and apples could be useful for many things besides pies.

CHAPTER 54 MAMA BEAR GOES TO THE VILLAGE

Yz stumbled through the woods, weeping, mindless of the branches that scratched her face. The Nix had taken everyone that she loved, that loved her. She had no idea where she was going until she clambered up the steps to Mama Bear's cottage. She collapsed, shivering, gasping for breath between sobs.

The door opened. The bear peeked out.

"My dear child," Mama Bear said, "Come inside. Tell me what's wrong." She lifted Yz to her feet with her big arm and half-carried her to her chair. She wrapped a throw over the girl and went to the kettle to make tea.

Yz rocked back and forth in the soft, padded chair, unable to speak.

Mama Bear set her tea beside the chair and patted the girl on the shoulder with a paw as big as her head. "Calm yourself. It's all right now."

"He..." Yz gasped again, trying to get a breath. "He's...dead. She...killed...him." She wailed, tears streaming down her muddy cheeks.

"Who's dead? Your Da?" Mama Bear pulled Yz's head closer to her furry body like a rag dolly. "Poor child. There, there. Tell me."

"No... Cobb." The woman snuggled into Mama Bear's belly. "The Nix killed him."

"What?" Mama Bear stiffened, nearly crushing Yz

against her. "No, it can't be. He...he knows to stay out of the water where she goes." She pushed Yz away from her to look into her pale, dirty face. Her claws squeezed Yz's shoulders. "What happened?"

Yz told her about the other bear, the fight, and then finding the bloody corpse of the black bear rolling in the water.

"I screamed for her to come take me too." Yz's face turned red with anger as her breath came back. "She might as well kill me too, and Da as well. Then she'll be happy, I guess."

"She'll not get you," Mama Bear said, growling. "I've stayed out of her way, but now she's trespassed into mine. You'll not have to worry about her anymore, Girl." Mama Bear took off her mob cap and apron, and then loped out the door, knocking it shut behind her.

Yz scooted out of the chair and steadied herself on her feet, which now she realized were bruised and scratched. She'd lost her clogs somewhere. Still, she must see the end of that evil fairy.

Gingerly, she reached for the latch, but the door would not open. She tried nudging with her shoulder, to no effect. The shutters on the windows would not open either. She hadn't noticed if they were closed when she got there. The back door was closed, though she could see no latch. Even the upstairs windows were shuttered, no way for her to get out.

Pain and exhaustion hit her. She sank to the floor, wondering what to do next. Gingerly, feeling each step this time, she made her way back

downstairs.

She could at least look after her feet. Mama Bear did not have bowls on the floor for her to wash her feet, but a wooden bucket sat on the counter. She found a ragged towel to wash them, not wanting to dirty anything nice. She wriggled out her shift and shook it out as much as possible, noting new rips and stains, as bits of leaves and twigs fell to the floor.

Yz scooted up on the counter to ladle water over her feet into the sink.

She heard small sounds around the cottage, a faraway squawk, from a goose, perhaps. All houses in the forest made small sounds, various creatures moving around, breezes moving leaves and branches, but this was somehow different. She'd never noticed it before, but she'd never been in the cottage alone, not since that first time. Then she'd been so hungry and tired, she paid no notice.

Her feet washed, she rinsed out the rag and laid it out to dry. She slipped down to the floor. She laid the shift on the counter so she could get back into it. She'd wash it once she was home.

Home. Da needed her. He'd starve if she didn't cook for him, even if it was only roots and old hardtack. Mama Bear had given them food many times. Surely she wouldn't mind if Yz had a snack before she left.

She slid down to the floor, but felt no debris under her feet. She'd planned to clean up after herself, sweeping the bits of the forest into the hearth, but the floor was clean. The rag she'd used

was dry and folded where she got it. Her shift was clean ...and mended! The bucket was full and the sink was dry.

Yz wriggled into the shift, dry and fresh as the day she got it. When she looked, there was bread and a bit of cheese on a shelf...no mice here to ruin any bit of food left. She ate, only a little, but if she was right, she could have eaten it all, and it would all have reappeared.

She knew Mama Bear was not a real bear, but this was something more. After her snack, she went to the overstuffed chair, wrapped herself in the throw, and drank the tea, still warm. As she sat back to plan what she would do when Mama Bear came home and let her out, she became sleepy. She didn't have the energy to climb the stairs again to the small bed that Cobb no longer used...would never use again.

No tears came. She was cried out, too tired even to feel anything.

Her last clear thought could not keep her awake even then. If Mama Bear's cottage cleaned itself, why couldn't Mama Bear do a spell to clean out the mice so that the mill could be clean and run again?

CHAPTER 55 MAMA BEAR HUNTS THE NIX

Her human mind focused on revenge, Mama Bear's body galloped through the forest toward the river following Yz's scent. She found the bluff where she could smell the scent of both the girl and Cobb, reeking of his desire for her. But he hadn't learned to shift yet, a good thing. At least he'd had a fighting chance against the water creature.

Mama Bear made her way down to the water, following the scent, and picked up the scent of the other bear, which she spotted down the river. Scavengers were already fighting over the corpse, its fur rent and flesh exposed. The scent of blood maddened her bear body, but her human mind barely kept her from leaping into the water, knowing she might meet the same fate as her child. Growling a challenge, she stood where the fight had begun, claw marks scratched on the bank, and fur left on tree bark.

The roar scared away the crows feeding on the bear, but the nix did not appear.

Mama Bear stepped into the water, only up to her hips at that point, and roared again. This time the nix surfaced but dived again, heading downstream. She had to dash out of the water at the shoal but dove in again as the water deepened.

Mama Bear fell on all fours and followed, swimming in deeper water, loping where the water

was shallow.

The nix stayed just ahead of her, not even stopping in the deeper water where she had the advantage, running scared.

Or maybe just tiring her out.

The long run from her cottage and the chase down the river took their toll on Mama Bear. She was panting, and her rage could only carry her so far.

The bear climbed back to the river bank where the going was not so hard. She kept loping along, energy draining, but she could not let that water monster get away. Soon she realized that the Nix was leading her to the mill pond, a deep, small reservoir, her lair.

With the weary bear body losing control, Mama Bear's human mind took over. She was still angry, craving revenge, but not at the cost of her own life. She could not defeat the Nix in deep water, so she needed another plan. The Mouse Queen might be persuaded to help, her enemy's enemy as her friend.

Only then did she realize she could not shift to her human form. Her magical tools were at her cottage. She'd have to enter the mill as a bear, which might be good at that...she was much bigger than a mouse.

She came closer, skirting the pond to reach the walkway. She could smell the Miller and hear him snoring—no problem there. Yz was locked safely in her cottage.

Mama Bear went to the door to the mill and opened it. The rotting remains of creatures the mice killed and eaten, along with their droppings, filled

the mill with a stench of decay, rot, and death.

Swarms of hungry mice ran up her fur, biting and scratching her. She stepped back closing the door, blocking her escape. She could not move enough to open it again, too busy scratching, biting, and stomping the long-tailed bits of furry bones.

Only one fat mouse, and a score of mice at least well-fed, watched as Mama Bear swatted the starving vermin from her body.

Queen Zaria lounged in her red robe surrounded by her guards, all armed with sharpened sticks, keeping away any of the mice who might stray in her direction.

"Get them off me!" Mama Bear shouted. She could see the fairy godmother behind the attack, tethered to the fat mouse, but draining their energy for herself and her magic.

"You come to me for help now?" Queen Zaria said, waving a scepter that increased the attack on the bear. "I've waged war on that slimy beast for years, and only now have you come here." The guards turned their attention and the spears toward the bear

"She killed my son." Mama Bear's rage came back, allowing her to send a pulse of magic to shake the mice from her body. The live ones attacked the corpses of the dead ones, adding to the stench.

"She's killed many of my children," Queen Zaria said, "and you've never lifted a finger...or a claw." She waved her scepter again, sending the hungry mice away when the bones of their mates were stripped bare. "Safe in your little cottage, you played

with your children. You could have at least kept the girl away, so the father could be mine at last. But no."

"I have her locked up now. I'll deal with her later, as she led my son to his death, foolish child." Mama Bear swept the guard away with one paw. "If you think you can ever have the miller, you'll take off that stupid hat and face the Nix as a human."

"It was your idea to steal the hat, to keep her away." The Mouse Queen pointed at the bear, and her mouse guards came rushing back, stabbing toward the bear with their sticks. "But she won't leave us alone. I need her magic."

Outside they heard the yowling of a cat and the curses of the miller.

"That darn cat!" the Mouse Queen said. "She always comes back."

"You'd be better off getting rid of the Nix than me," Mama Bear said. "Maybe give her what she wants. You'll never get the miller now."

They heard the clomping of the miller's heavy boots. Queen Zaria and her guards scattered.

Having no place to hide, Mama Bear went behind the door.

The door swung open, and Maven was thrown in, yowling all the way. Before the miller could pull the door shut, Mama Bear grabbed it with her claws. She stood on her hind legs, roaring. The startled miller backed up and fell, stunned.

Mama Bear huffed and roared, ready to savage the miller, when a knot of wood came flying through the air from the pond. It struck her shoulder, making

her take a step back. The Nix hurled a stone from the pond, hitting the bear's head.

The miller crawled back away toward his room and some safety.

More rocks flew at the bear, who loped for the woods. The Nix and the mouse had won this time, but she'd come back, bringing all her magic to bear.

CHAPTER 56 WANING GIBBOUS MOON

A banging door wakened Yz. She tossed the throw aside. The sound came from the back of the cottage, and as near as she could see, the front door and windows were still locked. As she tiptoed into the kitchen, the back door swung open wide, banging itself against the back wall. It made a lot more noise than she expected, only moving a few inches each time.

She peeked out, fearing the door would slam shut against her. Just outside were a set of clogs and a bag with a carrying loop, full of something lumpy. She took a chance, touching one toe outside the house.

The door banged against the siding even louder, as if it were struggling to stay open.

She might not have another chance. She backed up a few steps, ran, and leaped out beyond the swing of the door. No sooner than she touched the ground, landing in a roll, the door banged shut.

She went back to it, to see if it would open again, but it was as solid as if it were part of the wall.

On the breeze came a whisper: "Run."

She lifted the loop from the bag over her head, slipped into the clogs, and ran away from the cabin. She wanted to go home, but when she tried to go that way, branches and brambles blocked her way.

From a distance, she heard the crashing of

something heavy coming through the woods. Cobb sometimes made a sound like that if he were running. Another bear? Mama Bear?

"Run!" the breeze said again. An opening in the underbrush led away from the mill and away from the cottage.

Was the cottage trying to protect her? She ran down the open path, hoping it would lead her to safety, away from whatever was coming. Growls and curses sounded behind her.

Mama Bear yelled and growled, part human and part bear, all enraged.

Yz ran as fast as she could. When she glanced back, there was no break behind her, only thick bramble and dark tree shadows.

But if Mama Bear was coming for her, then she could smell her anywhere she went. Cobb had said she had a wonderful, personal smell and had once asked her to sleep with a small piece of cloth so he could keep it with him when she was not around.

Did Mama Bear think it was her fault Cobb had died? Was she coming back for her? Is that why the cottage released her?

It was getting dark in the woods, as always, long before sunset. Yz stopped to get her breath. The bag was heavier than she was used to carrying, but if the cottage thought she needed it, she'd keep it. The path was leading her uphill too, now steeper than before. Nothing looked familiar, but she had not always paid attention when she was riding Cobb to some place he liked. She reached an opening in the woods, a high meadow, still sunlit. She heard

nothing, not birds, breeze, or bears. She sat down to rest, hidden in the tall grass, and then opened the bag.

Food...cabbage, carrots, potatoes, onions. A tin of tea. A slab of side meat. Da would never believe that she could trade her herbs and roots for this. She would have to find some way to seal it up against the mice, but they would eat well. Would Mama Bear notice it was gone...or did she ever actually buy food? Too many questions, not enough answers.

She packed the sack, put her clogs back on, and got the loop around her shoulder. It was time to go home.

"I don't know who you are, but thank you," she said aloud to the air. The magic would keep helping her or it wouldn't, but she had to try. "Please show me how to get back to the mill."

A ray of late sunshine glowed golden down the edge of the meadow. She headed that way, picking her path carefully between scrub and brambles. The last rays of the sun faded into twilight, deep blue against the black of the shadows of the forest. As the stars came out, she could see only a little way, sliding her clogs a bit at a time into the leaf mold to keep from falling.

The waning moon rose, deep orange in the dark sky, leading her back down to the river, back to the mill. All was quiet, the forest creatures aware of her passing, not like when she rode with Cobb.

Her throat clenched with sobs. She was alone, even with Da. The villagers hated her, and Mama Bear locked her away, raging with anger. Maybe she

should be nicer to Ward, as he only wanted to help her, even if he just wanted to fix the mill. She could not expect the magic to take care of her all the time. She could not do everything herself. She needed help. There was no one to ask for help. Maybe she should let the Nix kill her and let that be the end of it.

Maven heard someone coming through the dark woods, sliding feet along the forest floor. She went to investigate and found Yz slogging along, avoiding the underbrush as best as she could. She carried a sack that smelled of meat and other food.

Small glittering eyes went ahead of the girl, the sprites leading her through. Maven followed along, as much to see where they were going as for any other reason, as she had no idea where they were.

As the path was opened ahead for them, Maven jumped ahead of Yz, trying to listen to her story through her tail, "Tailwand," the sprites had called her. The girl's thoughts were a jumble of memories and feelings, sadness, anger, confusion...and being locked into Mama Bear's cottage, then being released with her food bag.

Ahead they could hear the sound of the river and of Da calling "Isabella! Isabella!"

Yz was too tired to run, Maven could tell, and they slogged on. Maven ran ahead to see Da going up the hill on the far side of the pond, carrying a torch and looking for Yz.

When they reached the mill, Da was gone. Yz made her way to the kitchen and shrugged off the bag, too tired to do anything with it.

Maven swung her tail around and around and then sent a spell to turn the bag into a metal box, mouse-proof.

Yz sagged down to the rug by the hearth, not even washing her feet.

Maven snuggled up to her and purred softly. Yz hunched over, her head almost touching her crossed legs. It wasn't yoga or stretching. Yz was like a person who had cried herself out—there were no more tears to release her pain.

"I would like to be your fairy godmother," Maven said aloud. "If you had a wish, I would grant it. What would make you happy?" She projected an image of herself standing upright with a lavender dress, wings, and her own wand, all sparkle and glamour.

Yz began to rock, her head moving up and down as she breathed long, shuddering sobs. "My best friend was killed by that horrible monster—the only person who cared about me. Even his mother wants to hurt me."

Maven got up and stood in front of her, trying to balance on her back feet. She leaned over to butt heads with her, trying to console and comfort her.

When Yz looked up, Maven put her paw on the woman's face, staring into her eyes. "What can I do to help?" she said, surprising them both with real words coming from her cat mouth.

Yz stared back. "You might start by getting rid of all the mice. But I guess that's too boring for a

talking cat."

"I have tried talking to their queen," Maven said, drawing back her paw, but staying upright "But I can't kill them all. There are too many. She has them under a spell I can't break."

Yz jerked her head up and away from Maven. "So you want me to make a wish. What do you get out of that?"

"It's my job, but yes, I do have my reasons." Maven set her front feet back on the floor, a much more comfortable pose. "I want to get my human form back."

"So you pick on the poor, little crippled girl," Yz said, her voice low and bitter. "She's the victim here, and surely she wants something that no one else can give her."

Maven kept listening, hoping that the two words would slip out along with the anger, pain, rejection, and loneliness. She resisted licking her paw, as that might distract the woman, or make it look like she was not listening.

Yz started off softly, but her voice grew louder, building up to a scream. "What would I wish for? I suppose you think I should have arms like everyone else. Then I'd be normal and maybe even pretty and just have the kinds of problems other girls my age have." Yz leaned down again, level with Maven's eyes. "I'd be worrying about my Da trying to rape me or beat me half to death, like the beautiful boot maker's daughter, or I'd be hiding my pregnancy like the baker's daughter."

She took a breath but only to shout louder. "I'll

never be a wife. I'll never have any children. I can't marry a bear, and he's the only one who ever loved me for me, and never felt sorry for me." She rose from the floor, her crossed legs unfolding for her to stand.

Maven backed up a bit, wary of those feet that might lash out at her.

Yz bent over, her nose level with the cat's, muttering with all the venom she could muster, "If I wanted to be normal, I'd wish to go back in time and not lose my mother or my arms. I'd live in a clean house, do normal things, and be ready to be married in a year or two. I'd wish that Ward's father wouldn't have run away from the farm or lost all his money, and maybe my uncle's cat would never have learned to talk. If you can't fix everything, why bother with one little, useless wish?"

She straightened and watched as a mouse scampered boldly across the windowsill. She bit her lip and shook her head. "So, no thank you, fairy-godmother-puss-in-gossamer, I like my life just fine the way it is. Ask Da what he wishes for. Ask Mama Bear. Ask Ward or his mother, or anyone else, but just leave me alone." She opened the latch to the back door with her foot. "I wouldn't know what to do with the damned things if I had them. "

Yz stomped out, kicking the door shut behind her. The vibration of the slamming of the door shook the room.

Before the silence returned, Yz opened the door again, smacking it against the wall. "I wish you would bring my mother back from the dead. There.

You have a wish. I hope it makes you happy." She ran off down the path above the dam, and out into the woods.

Maven followed her, not knowing what to do, or how to tell her the thing she hated the most was her mother. Yet, now she had a third wish to grant, and the one would accomplish the other, she hoped.

But it was up to her to negotiate with the Mouse Queen, get the hat from her, get it to the Nix, and then help Yz reconcile with the one who killed her best friend, with only her tail and furry gossamer to help.

Right now she could use a bit of Fiona's scolding and advice, a pointer or two about how to fix this mess, but without the wishes, she could not get back to help Fiona against the ghost of the witch that controlled her. The waning moon shining over the mill pond took on Black Anise's gleeful grin.

CHAPTER 57 YZ MAKES HER WISH

On orders from the magic harp, Ward trudged toward the mill, carrying the flute and the harp in a sack on his back. He was glad of the exercise, as the cloudy day was chilly. He'd been practicing on the flute with the harp's help during the day, but it...or 'she' as he thought of the harp...gave him no more clues about what she wanted after he cleared the mill. Whatever was in it, in addition to the mice, was not just a creature, but something that smelled of magic gone wrong.

He knew that smell well from his own circumstances.

How the flute would help, he had no idea, and he was concerned that adding more magic would only make things worse.

Once he got to the millpond, he looked around to see if Da was around, not wanting another confrontation. Everything seemed quiet and still, as if no one were there. Just as well.

A boat had been pulled up into the reeds on the far side, hidden from view from the mill. He took off his shoes and put them and the harp on the bank. He waded in the clammy mud to get to the boat and gingerly climbed in. The boat seemed more mud than wood, but it floated by itself into the middle of the pond and didn't seem to leak.

The nix raised her head from the water and

nodded to him.

He began to play the silent tune taught to him by the harp. At first nothing happened, except that his fingers felt more and more vibration from the flute. Tiny ripples appeared on the surface of the pond, toward him. He could see the silvery backs of fish beginning to move toward the mill. He'd never noticed fish in the pond before, and certainly not this many of them.

The door to the mill quivered and rattled, then opened with a bang. Da and Yz rushed out to see what was happening. The cat sneaked into the mill.

A torrent of gray bodies poured from the mill, like a furry flood, into the water. A flurry of feasting stirred up the water, as the fish swarmed around their fresh meal. The muddy water bubbled and gurgled, sometimes spilling a fish or two over the dam.

Ward kept playing. The Nix raised herself from the water and nodded to him, diving back in after a moment, to herd the fish toward the walkway where the mice continued to run to their deaths.

So many mice jumped into the water that Ward thought the pond would overflow its banks, that the fish swallowing them would displace the water, or be themselves swept away into the creek below the pond. Ward played until the last of the creatures came out.

The Nix raised her head above the water near the walkway. She gestured for him to keep playing as if she were waiting for something else to come out.

Yz ran down the walkway to the bank, stopping

just short of where the harp and his shoes lay, just above the marshy reeds.

"Ward," she called, "Be careful. The Nix is here. She could drown you!"

He nodded to her, but kept playing until the Nix waved him off. He put the flute in his shirt for safekeeping. He'd give it back to the Nix now, as his job was done.

The Nix made a sign and the boat moved itself to the bank where Yz stood. It didn't quite get all the way up the bank as it had been before. Ward had to jump out, in the water up to his knees. Walking carefully on the slippery bottom and between the reeds, he lost his balance, falling face-first into the muddy water.

"No," Yz screamed. "No, no, nooooo!" She squatted, her face buried in her shift. "Not him too!"

Ward got himself up, shaking the mud from his hands and wiping his face against his sleeve. He'd have a devil of a time getting his clothes washed, but no help for it. He made his way to Yz.

"I'm all right," he said, "Stop crying. She didn't hurt me." He patted Yz's shoulder, leaving a muddy mark. "Really, it's all right. Come back to the mill with me. Your da can't be angry with me now."

The sun came out then, warming them and making the whole place feel like spring.

Yz stood, staring at him, outlined by the sunshine behind her. "You are sparkling," she said. "You look like diamonds with all that mica in the mud."

Ward laughed. "In the rough maybe." He held out

his hands which gleamed with mica particles against his muddy skin. "Can I be your knight in shining mud?" He grinned, hoping he looked as silly as he felt.

Yz laughed. It was the first time he'd seen her laugh, or even smile, in months. He would have hugged her, but for getting her dirty too. She didn't need any more work to do.

"Come back to the kitchen with me," she said, and I'll help you clean up."

He picked up his shoes and the bag with the harp. He put the flute in the bag, and followed Yz back to the walkway. The harp should be satisfied now. Maybe it would sing for Yz. Maybe it could break the old, rotten magic.

CHAPTER 58 WARD PLAYS THE FLUTE

When Ward started playing that eerie tune, a squeaky sound with a bit of a dance beat, notes were so high that even Maven could not hear them all. The door to the mill crashed open, broken from its hinges from the tide of mice pressing against it. They stood and sniffed the air, and then scampered on, their backs rippling like flood water.

Maven jumped over the mice into the mill to see what was going on. The tune began to fade as if the piper were moving away. The mice followed, just few at first, but then more and more, like a stream of gray fur.

Maven tried to dodge them and then just hunkered down, letting the critters stream over and around her. They didn't try to bite or scratch, only scabbling and rushing out to the millpond.

As the flow began to ebb, Maven sat up, balancing herself on her back feet, and stretching her neck as far as it would go. She could hear a lot of splashing but also other sounds she could not describe.

Curious, she made her way to the door, where she could see the pond. Hundreds of open mouths gaped to catch the mice as they tried to swim to Ward, perched in a boat in the middle of the pond, playing his flute. A few of the mice may have drowned, but it looked like most of them were

swallowed, a new red-throated mouth appearing each time one ducked beneath the surface. Maven had no idea how deep the millpond might be, but she couldn't imagine that many fish living there all that time. She saw at least one mouth that could have swallowed her whole, and she made a mental note to stay away from the edge. She didn't want to be seen as a large, furry morsel.

Behind her, Queen Zaria held on to an oaken bucket with all her claws and her tail wrapped around the handle, to keep from rushing to her death.

Maven approached her, not sure what to do. The Nix wanted the Mouse Queen dead, but maybe she would be happy with her hat returned to her.

The mill could be cleaned up now and put back in service, perhaps with Ward's help, and the Nix would likely want to do a bit of nesting as soon as she could get her hat back.

That left only dealing with Queen Zaria, literally holding on to her human consciousness with all four paws and her tail stuck in a crack in the bucket.

The unearthly squeal of the flute stopped. Soon after, the churning and splashing from the pond died away to an eerie stillness.

"Isn't it time to give up the hat and go back to being yourself?" Maven said.

"That's easy for you to say. You still have your wings and your wand." The Mouse Queen slumped on her throne. "You even have two lives left, where I have barely one."

"Not even that," Maven said, "if you don't get back

to yourself soon." She stared into the darkness behind the throne, ignoring the mouse. "I can see the ghost of who you used to be...she's there waiting for you, but she's fading fast. When she's gone, you'll be just another mouse."

"Why should I believe a cat? You'd rather lie than sleep in the sun. You'll just kill me and then all my subjects, and then go purring back to Fiona like a good little kitten for your plate of tuna and a scratch behind your ears."

"Your subject plotted to kill you, but now even they are gone." Maven licked her paw. "You can't steal their energy anymore."

"If I had my wings, I'd grant you a wish," Queen Zaria hissed, "your very last one!"

"To do that, you'd have to return to your true self." Maven stood on her hind legs and clapped her front paws together. A small package appeared holding tiny gossamer wings, and a toothpick sized wand.

Maven pushed it toward the queen. "What does a mouse wish for?"

Behind Queen Zaria, Maven saw the ghost of the fairy godmother stoop down and try to grasp the package.

Queen Zaria gripped the armrests of her throne, fighting the urge to grab the wand. The ghost reached through her, like a hand through a puppet, forcing her to move forward, millimeter by millimeter.

For her part, Maven sat still, not allowing herself to crouch. She was already fighting the temptation to spring on the mouse, crunch the tiny neck bones,

and shake her limp body. Some part of her said the queen deserved it, but it wasn't Maven's call to deliver justice, not if she were ever to return to her true self.

The Queen Zaria snatched up the package with her teeth and scampered past Maven to the open space of the mill. Unable to resist, Maven ran after her, until she felt a cold, bony hand grab the scruff of her neck and pull her back.

Hissing, she fought to get free, twisting her head to bite whoever held her. She saw her own ghostly face staring at her. She went limp and the hand set her back on her feet. All around her were the last of the guard mice, come to see the end of their queen.

None of them wore the robes of state or walked upright. They scuttled past, more and more of them joining the flood of gray fur, beady eyes, and scrabbling claws. More of them than any one cat could manage. Many more than one mouse could handle.

Maven sprang into the midst of them and ran to Queen Zaria. Maven crouched and bawled her challenge, a barrier between the queen and her rebellious minions.

"Do it now, or we are both dead!" Maven hissed. "You granted your own wish. Only you can change it." Maven laid her ears back, arched her spine, fluffed her fur to twice its normal size, and caterwauled. The sound reverberated up through the open mill.

The tide of mice paused, shaken by the sound, but then they surged ahead, pushed by the hordes

behind them and crawling over them.

Maven batted one away, and then another and another. She screeched again, but the mice did not even twitch.

"I can't get it to work," the Queen Zaria said. "I can't feel the energy!"

Maven had crossed wands before, and it had given Fiona power over her. Time to take that power back.

"Stand still," Maven said. She raced around the queen, chasing her own tail until she felt the vortex of power building up. "Grab my tail," she said, "and hang on tight."

As soon as she felt the mouse grab, she skidded to a stop. The mouse was flung across the room, but by the time she hit the wall, she was a woman again, crumpled, naked and unconscious, her gray hair tangled and matted like a spider web drifting across her

Maven sniffed at the woman, to see if she was dead, but she was only unconscious, still breathing, if faintly.

Maven searched for the queen's robe and picked it up in her mouth. Stepping through the thinning tide of gray bodies, she took the red artifact to the water's edge where the Nix watched the mice drown in the millrace and be swallowed by catfish.

Maven carried Queen Zaria's robe to the water, as the last of the mice jumped in, following the high-pitched pipe Ward played as he sat in a boat in the middle of the mill pond.

The water churned as the huge catfish gulped the

still-wriggling vermin. Maven trotted down to the edge of the pond and yowled. A long, green-scaled arm reached out for the robe, stretching as far as possible, but the Nix had to climb out of the water to get the hat. She grabbed it.

"No! No," Yz screamed. "Run away, Cat!" She picked up a rock with her toes and threw it at the Nix.

The rock hit the Nix above her eye, knocking her forward onto the muddy bank. She gasped, unconscious, water streaming from her gills.

Yz ran toward Maven. "Move, you stupid cat. That thing killed my mother."

Maven laid the hat on the Nix's head and licked her face, finding it unconscionably delicious. She head-butted the Nix several times, meowing to her to wake up.

Yz picked up another rock to hit the Nix again, but Maven raised her back and yowled so that the pond echoed her warning.

She stayed between the Nix and her daughter, fluffing out her fur and acting as menacingly as possible.

How long did the transformation take? Did the Nix have to be conscious?

Would Yz give up or throw the rock at her?

Maven heard the Nix stir behind her and then felt drops of water on her fur.

Maven turned to see the Nix reach for the hat and put it on, fumbling with her webbed fingers to fit it between the laces of her facial fins.

As soon as it was secured, she sank beneath the

water, but then pulled herself up, a pale, dark-haired woman with large green eyes, a small red cut above her eye. She climbed out of the pond, naked and dripping.

Yz dropped the rock and stumbled back. Her eyes and mouth opened wide in horror.

CHAPTER 59 YZ MEETS HER MOTHER

Yz dropped the rock. She ran up the walkway to her father's room.

"Da, come now, come quick." Yz ran inside and in a few seconds pushed her father outside. He was still exhausted from sleepwalking. Yz picked up a piece of firewood and put it in his hands. "It's that water monster, Da. You have to kill it." She got behind him and shoved him down the walkway.

Finally, he looked up. He stared at the naked woman on the bank of the pond. He dropped the wood.

The woman looked up, pale, wet, but wearing the red hat. "Stephen," the woman called, "My darling Stephen, is that you?" She tottered, unsteady on two feet.

The miller staggered down the walkway of the mill to the edge of the pond, stepping on a straggling mouse, losing his balance. He leaned heavily against the railing as if he might fall in. He shook his head as if to clear it. Finally seeing the woman, gaining his balance, he ran to her, slipping along the wet bank.

He stared for a long moment and then wrapped his arms around her. The Nix woman embraced him and kissed him.

"My Estevia," he cried, tears and pond water dripping everywhere. "You came back to me." He kissed her again, holding her red hat on with one

hand and gripping her waist with his other. He looked back over his shoulder. "Yz, get a blanket for your mother."

Yz stood on the walkway, her jaw hanging open, her eyes staring at her parents.

The woman walked unsteadily up the bank as the miller held her shoulders. "Ysabella, my darling, you are so beautiful." Her voice croaked as if it hadn't been used in a long while. She reached out for Yz, who backed away from her.

Yz squatted on the walkway, staring, the whites of her eyes showing all around her irises. She trembled, sobbing, moaning. It sounded like "Maaaamaaaaa."

Ward came up from the bank of the pond. He put his arms around Yz's shoulders and pulled her to her feet. She hid her face in his shoulder and let him half-drag, half-carry her back inside to the kitchen. She moaned and staggered, so that Ward lifted her in his arms. She was limp, shivering.

Ward set Yz down on her pallet on the floor. He took another blanket from a shelf and wrapped it around her. He found another cloth and handed it to the Nix, who wrapped it around herself.

Da pulled Ward away from his daughter. "Best you go home now." He wrapped the blanket more closely around Yz and pushed Ward toward the door.

Ward opened his mouth to say something, but no words came, and Da frowned at him, pointing out the door.

Yz stared at her father and the fish woman who stood by his side, the red hat perched on her head

just like her mother's. So like her mother, and yet, a monster, a fish-eating, friend-drowning monster.

Yz stood, backed up to the wall, speechless with rage, confused with longing.

The nix held out her arms to embrace Yz. "Ysabella, my darling. I have watched over you all these years."

Yz could not back up any further. "You threw me into the water." Yz sobbed, hunched over the pain of unshed tears in her gut.

"I tried to save you," the Nix said. "I held your head above the water until Stephen could get you out. I tried to heal you, but there was too much damage." She reached out to touch Yz's shoulder, but Yz cringed away.

Yz's face flushed red as she screamed, "You dragged me down to kill me!" She turned away, hiding her face against the wall.

"Wasn't like that," Da said standing between Yz and the Nix. "You were asleep in your crib, just a tiny thing. But your ma, she couldn't breathe. Something happened to her hat, and she was drowning in the air. I carried her to the pond and threw her in so that she could breathe." He reached out to touch Yz, but Yz turned away, facing the wall. "But you woke up, screaming for her. You got out of your crib, somehow, and you fell in after, right onto the mill wheel. I could not catch you. I thought you were dead." He sobbed then too.

The Nix embraced him, patting his rough face with her still-webbed fingers. "But now we're all back together again, a family again."

"I don't know you!" Yz slid down to the floor, crying, squatting on her haunches like a frog. She could not bear the thought of the Nix's touch. She could not even touch her father. Wailing like a banshee, she rocked side to side in her distress. "You killed my only friend. You dragged him down and drowned him. Monster!"

The Nix and the miller stood helpless beside her. They sat at the rough table, holding hands and thinking what to do next.

The stupid cat came up to her and tried to sit in her lap, purring loudly, bumping her head against Yz's belly. It made her feel a little better, as if someone cared how she felt. Somehow the cat was involved in all this, but none of it made any sense.

"That darn cat!" Da bellowed. He grabbed the cat by the back of its neck and tossed out of the kitchen. He pulled the door shut.

He got the fire going on the hearth and put the kettle on. "Go to my room, Estevia. Some of your old clothes are in the bottom of my trunk, if the mice haven't eaten them."

Estevia looked over Yz, and back at her husband. She went out.

Yz fought to control her crying. Finally, Yz gasped in air and smothered her sobs, pulling herself together. She wiped her face against her shoulder, and with a shudder, forced herself to stand up, hunching her shoulders to keep the blanket around her.

She set a crock of dried peas on the table as if she were going to start supper. Da sat down, like

always, waiting for her to take care of him.

She put on her clogs, opened the door, and ran into the woods

Maven landed on her feet, her human mind scattered, but her cat body aware and crouched to run or attack.

The Nix followed her into the mill.

Zaria cowered in a corner, still wrapped in Maven's gossamer quilt, her gray hair stringy, barely less colorful than her ashen face.

"Give me one reason not to kill you," the Nix hissed at Zaria, ex-Mouse Queen. "You maimed my daughter, tortured my man, took his livelihood, and kept me away from them for all these years."

"Go ahead. I have nothing to live for." Zaria did not even lift an arm to ward off the blow the Nix raised her arm to give.

"Wait," Maven cried, her voice beginning to sound more like a wowl than words.

The Nix turned to her, "You did not do as I asked. You didn't kill her."

"I don't kill," Maven said. "But you got your hat and your family back. That's what you wanted."

"No, you expect others to kill for you, to provide for you when you are too fastidious to do for yourself."

"I need her," Maven said, trying to stand on her back feet. "I need her to go back with me. I don't want to be a cat for the rest of my life."

"I expect you'll take the bear with you too, then," the Nix said. "Is that where my daughter has run off

to hide from me?”

CHAPTER 60 THE FLUTE AND WARD

Ward trudged toward the farm, leaving Yz's family to work things out. The miller made it clear he wasn't welcome even though he was the one who cleared out the mice.

With his wife back, there was no help for getting his own mother settled there. It wasn't that he really wanted to be a miller, but it was a good trade, and it beat being a poor farm boy.

Yz never had any use for him anyway.

He'd thought she might like him better after that, but no such luck. Nothing made any sense.

Playing the silent flute had been so weird, watching the river of mice running into the mouths of the catfish he'd never seen in the pond before. There must not be a mouse left. Maybe the miller could get the mill working again, and they would all be all right, Yz, her da, and her ma.

Watching the water monster transform into a woman let him know that his ideas about stuck magic were right. That odd cat had carried the hat to the monster, and then the monster put it on.

What had the cat to do with anything?

He'd only been able to fix the harp after she came. She must not be just a cat, just as the Nix was not just a monster, and Yz's bear friend not just a bear. He knew the stories about his father climbing the beanstalk, bringing back the Giant's treasures,

and then the devastation of the fall of the beanstalk and the giant's corpse, all long before he was born, but legends among the local villages. He hardly remembered his father, who had run off, his mother told him, taking the magical goose with him after the harp was broken.

Maybe the harp could help. He'd promised to do as it asked, so he stopped and took it out of the sack on his back. "Please sing to me," he said, holding it by its straight back, "Please tell me what I need to know."

The harp vibrated, a discordant sound.

Set me down upon a stump,

And I'll sing a story to make you jump.

Ward looked along the road, and spotting a stump not too rotted and mostly dry, set the harp on it.

"I did as you asked. What do I need to do now to help my mother? Where do you want to go?"

I was stolen by a rogue named Jack, the harp sang, who brought me home in a burlap sack.

"I know that part," Ward said. "But what....?"

When your grandmother died,

Jack sought a wife,

But his path from then on

Was only strife.

He married the miller's brother's daughter,

But the woman had veins of clear ice water.

At first, everything was fine,

But when the gold ran out,

Your mother whined.

The harp paused.

*While he was able to work the magic,
All went well but then turned tragic.*

"Go on, tell me the rest." Ward sat on the ground, trying hard to believe what he heard.

*On a hot summer night when you were a child,
Your parents did fight, and the words were wild.
The gold was gone, except for the goose.
Your father threatened to turn it loose
He ran outside to set it free
When a bear jumped on him from a tree.
Nothing was left, not even a smear,
And the bear and the goose then disappeared.
The goose still lives in the bear's house,
And the bear's in cahoots with the Queen Mouse.*

"The Mouse and Cobb's mother?" Ward shook his head, confused and bewildered. "They are behind all this?"

*"The Queen Mouse was defeated this day,
And now you must be on your way.
Take your mother back to her home,
And after that anywhere you can roam.*

"But Mother won't go with me." Ward stood, pacing in front of the stump. "I've tried to convince her to go back."

*I'll teach you a new song on your flute,
And she will follow wherever you toot.*

"But will they take her in? It's been years..." Ward had never visited the palace of the Marquis, even though he was Ward's uncle. He knew where it was, but had no reason to expect them to allow in him inside.

That is where I want to go.

You'll bring me along to make it so.

"But what of Yz? Will she be all right?" Ward slumped, feeling completely defeated.

She's your first cousin, as you should know.

To marry her will bring you woe.

But be you three of a feather,

You can travel with her and the bear together.

Ward packed the harp back into his sack. He made his way home in the twilight, thinking about what to pack for the journey to the Marquis of Cabbages, wondering if the pease pot would make soup over a campfire, and how he would keep his mother reasonably calm along the way.

CHAPTER 61 YZ IN THE WOODS

RUN! Yz's only thought was to get away. She didn't know or care if anyone followed her. She didn't hear anything but her own ragged breath and the sticks breaking beneath her clogs. She didn't follow a path but plunged further and further into the darkening woods. She ran like the wind, like a deer running from a wolf.

Once she started screaming, she could not stop. The sound poured from her like the water down the sluice that turned the mill. Roaring, her throat soon raw, she ran into the forest, lashed by branches that expressed her pain.

When she could no longer breathe, she coughed and sank to the ground, sobbing with the hiccups, wishing for once that she had arms and fists to beat against something, anything. She kicked her heels against the ground until she heard people calling her name and beating the bushes to find her.

She would not go back. She'd live in the woods and let a bear kill her or go into the village and ...what? They would not even talk to her. She could just die out here and then they'd all be happy without their little cripple to worry about. If only Cobb were here to protect and hide her...but *her mother*...had taken him from her too.

If that damned cat showed up, she'd find a way to wring its neck.

Yz got back up and ran, dodging trees and staggering through underbrush. She lost both of her clogs and then fell when a broken branch stabbed into her foot.

The late afternoon was dark under the trees. She wriggled around to find a place to sit where she could lean against a tree trunk. She needed to stop the bleeding. She tried to tear her shift, but could not get a grip on the rough cloth. In desperation, she packed dead leaves against the sole of her foot, and pushed her heel hard against it to staunch the blood.

How stupid she had been to run away like that. All those years the fish woman only wanted to see her, not to drown her. Why could she come up from the water now, and not before?

What did the cat have to do with that? She thought back to the night the cat showed up, hanging by one claw from the bell. Da had fallen in the pond. Suddenly she knew that the Nix hadn't pulled him in, but had pushed him out of the pond. His sleepwalking had been about his wife, trying to get back to her. He must love her very much.

No matter now. The Nix had taken Cobb from her, her best friend, drowning him in the river. She would not forgive her for that, even if it was revenge against Big Mama, or even if she didn't know who Cobb was.

She sagged back against the tree. She was beginning to get a cramp from holding pressure on her foot, but she couldn't let go, and she couldn't tell in the dark if she was still bleeding. Maybe she should just let it bleed and die out here. No one

would be concerned about her and she wouldn't be in the way anymore.

She took another long, sobbing breath. Trying to get hold of herself, she considered what to do next. No one in the village would take her in. She could go to Mama Bear, but she'd likely never be able to leave.

As the evening grew colder and darker, her stomach growled. It made a loud noise in the silent forest. That's when she noticed that there were no sounds—no insects, no birds, nothing moving at all.

She tried to cover herself with leaves to maybe get warm, to try to sleep.

She was cold and alone, more than ever before.

CHAPTER 62 MAVEN & ZARIA

Landing safely on her feet from Da's flying lesson, Maven returned to Zaria, lying naked, maybe dying. Yz was safe for the moment, but Zaria wasn't.

Satisfied that the man and wife had found each other, Maven went back to the unconscious fairy godmother lying inside. She didn't want Zaria to die, and she did want to take her back to Fiona. She needed at least one fairy godmother on her side if she could convince Zaria to go with her.

Maven couldn't move the woman. Her only option was to poof them both somewhere—perhaps to Mama Bear's cottage, but Bump of Direction didn't like that. Maybe just into the woods, but the queen would likely die of exposure, which hardly seemed right. She sat staring at nothing, trying to think past the cat's fatigue and hunger, and the ever-more distant human mind that seemed to slip further away each day.

When was the dark moon? She didn't remember. Was it so important after all? Yes, she must get her human body back, and then...then she'd see what was next.

Suddenly, Maven felt nauseous, hacking and coughing as if she would retch her guts onto the floor. Her stomach writhed, and she tried to swallow, to catch her breath, but the force of the spasms would not calm down. Another cough. Another retch.

A hairball ejected from her mouth.

If her stomach hadn't been empty, she would have vomited up whatever was left in it. She wrapped her tail around her and settled down on her paws to rest, trying to purr to soothe herself. The cat brain seemed at peace, ready to sleep, now that the irritation was gone, but the human brain saw something in the mass of fibers that looked familiar, especially as it untangled itself and spread out flat on the floor. Maven sat there and watched through the nearly closed slits of her eyes as the hairball turned into a scrap of gossamer.

Gossamer. Stretchy, magical fabric that would take on any form—satin, lace, quilt....fur.

The witch had not taken her wand, wings, and gossamer, and that gossamer now covered Maven's cat body in soft, gray stripes, except for the piece that returned to its original shape. All that licking had been for some good after all.

Maven heard the voices of the nix and the miller. She didn't have much time. She bit the gossamer and stretched it with her paws, remembering to make it into what she wanted, in this case, a warm sleeping bag for her and Zaria. She stretched the gossamer scraps over the unconscious fairy godmother. In a few moments, a down sleeping bag covered the old body.

Maven bit the cloth and dug her claws in tight. She waved her tail around and around like a fan blade until she felt the energy build up. Then she poofed them both out into the forest where she hoped they would be safe.

She did what she could to cover the bag with leaves, hoping that the gossamer ripstop would still smell something like hairball to any passersby. That might not be the best choice, but it shouldn't attract a predator who might be interested in human...or feline flesh.

The cat's body was very hungry, but the human mind was too tired to hunt and too afraid to abandon itself to the cat's body.

Maven climbed into the bag with Zaria and snuggled up behind her to help them both get warm again. She purred softly, hoping to ease her own hunger and to ease Zaria's mind, as they would have to come up with some kind of plan for the morning, and at some point, Maven had to try to get Mama Bear to go back with her as well. In any case, Zaria might be able to make a bit of magic, and maybe together they could persuade her.

She was missing some part of the story, even yet, but she had one wish granted, two if she counted the mice wanting to be rid of the Mouse Queen, and technically, three, as she had restored Yz's mother. It wasn't what Yz wanted, and it had nothing to do with arms, at least not Yz's arms. Granting her true wish would be the hardest of all, but it was key to all these stories—no one could create love with magic.

She was running out of time.

The sounds she heard around her reminded her that food was at hand, and cats were nocturnal. She might not be able to feed Zaria, or even know what Zaria would eat now that she was back in her body.

She finally fell asleep, but not to a peaceful

snooze. She dreamed of being in a junkyard, waking up in her stripped-out minivan with mice running over her. The radio was playing, someone singing, and she managed to open the door of the van to escape. But outside the van, she was a cat again.

That woke her up in her warm, dark sleeping bag. She tried to remember the words of the song, why they seemed so important, but even the dream images were fading against the insistent hunger of the cat.

Granting one's own wish was strictly forbidden to fairy godmothers, and the results were clear with the Mouse Queen and Mama Bear. But Maven wondered if poofing some food from somewhere else would count as self-granting, especially since she would feed both of them.

Bump of Direction counseled against that. The Serpent had already refused to help her that way. She would have to hunt.

She set a sleeping spell on the other fairy godmother and sneaked into the forest to catch and eat some hapless creature. And failing that, to steal something from some poor cottager.

Or maybe she'd visit Mama Bear. Always food there. It might be a step toward bringing Mama Bear back to Fiona with her...three against two, much better odds.

CHAPTER 63 A REAL BOY

When Cobb came back to his senses, he sprawled on the river bank, wet and confused. He got to his feet and shook the river mud from his fur. He was still sore from the fight, more than he had realized until he started moving. He clambered up to dry ground and sniffed the air. No danger was near, but the scent of death lingered. He lumbered toward it. Just across the way, a few yards down the river, the carcass of an old black bear lay on the bank, much the worse for scavengers. It was the same bear he'd fought, but it had been there for several days.

He had no memory of where he'd been all that time, only a vague image of a green scaly face with many teeth. He didn't know if he had fought the creature, or if it had saved him. More images came to mind...suffocating water above his head, scraping claws on his belly, rolling weightless in the water, being pulled under... how had he survived and not the black bear?

Yz! Where was she? Cobb sniffed the air again, finding no lingering scent. He went back to the bluff where he'd last seen her. Her smell had faded. She hadn't been there for a long time, at least as long as his missing memory.

Where would she go? Back to the mill? All she'd have to do was go downstream, but she was afraid of the nix. The nix may have followed her. Rage filled

his mind. If that creature harmed her...

The faint scent of another bear was there, raging but somehow familiar. His mother.

He felt dizzy and hunkered down, snuffling, shaking his big snout until he could think again.

To the village? She likely couldn't find her way there from here. To his mother's cottage? She might have gone to tell his mother. He'd try there first.

He lifted himself to his back feet to sniff the air again and to get his bearings. Still a bit woozy, he found the direction and shuffled onto the dim trail toward his mother. He thought he smelled Yz, but it could have been only his memory.

He remembered the day she'd wandered into their house, a tiny girl, lost, cold, clumsy. She'd eaten his porridge, broken his chair, and finally climbed up to sleep in his bed...he'd been so little then, no bigger than she was. That smell came back to him, as he had stood there watching her sleep, not wanting his parents to come up as they might eat her. They hadn't, though, and his mom had cared for her, talked to her, and finally showed her the way back to the mill.

How many times he had stayed at the mill overnight, despite the stink of the mice and the magic he could feel around them? He was afraid he might hurt her. If he only knew how to shift, she could be with him. He wanted her so much. He wanted to be her man

The dizziness hit him again. He stumbled, falling on his nose, unable to move. His body seized with pain, as if every bone in his body was broken, every

inch of his skin shredded. He writhed in the dust, howling. He was blind and deaf, but his body itched and scraped against the forest floor. He could not smell, but his body reacted to any movement of air, and for the first time in his life, he felt cold. He tried to roll into a ball, but something sharp scratched his sides, increasing the pain, but not making him warmer. Wrapping his paws around himself, he realized that he had no fur. He tried to listen, and there were sounds, but they didn't make any sense...someone giggling. He knew he should recognize the sound, but he didn't.

He opened his eyes, overwhelmed with colors, so different from how things should look. He struggled to his feet, finding them soft and tender, and at the wrong length for him to walk, his back legs much too long, and the front, too short. His skin was bare except for the finest of hairs, too thin for protection. He sat back on his haunches, staring at the paws that had become fingers, nails instead of claws. He crawled to the nearest tree, twigs, and stones bruising his knees, and pushed himself to his feet, holding on in case the dizziness returned.

He had become a man, naked and vulnerable, lost in the woods. Cold, disoriented, and suddenly aware of possible dangers he could not yet sense, he scanned the woods for any familiar sign of where he was.

Just then the fairy cat came sauntering up to him. She didn't offer to rub against him but just sat, looking at him.

He felt naked for the first time in his life, his bare

skin pricking in the damp forest air.

"What do you want?" he said to the cat, wrapping his bare arms around his body and squatting for warmth. "Did you do this to me, fairy cat?"

"No, you did it yourself." She licked her shoulder as if she did not care one way or the other. "Isn't this just what you wanted?"

"Yes, but..." He shivered. "I don't know how to be a man."

"I expect you can still change back if you want to," Maven said, "Once you learn how you did it, you can do it again."

"Then why don't you change yourself back?"

"I didn't choose this form," Maven said. "It is a spell put on me by someone else, someone whose magic I have to break." She stared into the distance and yawned. "You were born this way."

Rage filled him with warmth. "You did this to me," He yelled and grabbed for the cat. "Change me back now!"

The cat darted up a tree and paused on a branch ten feet above his head. He grabbed the tree and started up after her, but he had no claws, and his arms and legs were different lengths than he was used to. He could not coordinate to get his weight balanced to climb as he always had, and he struggled, scratching himself up on the tree bark.

The cat climbed higher where the top of the tree swayed quite a lot. She hung on with her claws, fluffed out and hissing at him, not like a person at all. He couldn't see the person attached to the cat any more. Nothing looked the same.

Cobb scrambled up the tree high enough to grab a branch. He was getting the hang of opposable thumbs, but the branch was old—he hadn't been able to see it in the same way—and it broke off as he put his weight on it. He dropped to the ground growling and stomping his feet, forgetting that he did not have heavy calloused pads anymore, but relatively tender feet that could be punctured by rocks and sharp sticks.

"Why do you all want to be animals?" he said. "All I have ever wanted since the day I met Yz, is to be human and to be her man." He shook his fists at the cat. "Now I am a man, but I am too clumsy as a man to help her, and I have no clothes." He wrapped his arms around himself and squatted. "Why won't you help me?"

CHAPTER 64 THE SPRITES

From her perch high in the tree, Maven felt sorry for the werebear. She had to do something for him, help him get what he wanted. What he needed now was clothing. She'd thrown up a hairball for the Mouse Queen, but there didn't seem to be anymore. Her stomach was empty too.

There were the remains of a spider web near her in the tree. She turned carefully, her balance precarious in the short branches. She flicked her tail at the web, hoping that a bit of her fur would fall with it and that she could make the web and a bit of gossamer become clothing and shoes for Cobb. The web floated to the top of Cobb's unruly mop of hair.

Maven tried to climb down, hoping that she'd be able to keep out of Cobb's clutches. When she jumped down to the next branch, she missed, and fell, spreading out like a furry parachute to land on her paws and belly. She lay there stunned for a moment.

Cobb came up to her and leaned over, not making a move to touch her. "Are you all right, cat?"

Getting her breath back, she muttered a spell. She flicked her tail at the cobwebby mess on Cobb's head. It stretched over him, becoming a tunic with rough breeches and leather shoes. "My name is Maven. And yes. I am all right."

He stood and stretched, taking a few steps to get

used to having foot coverings. They were not heavy-soled, so that the sharp points of forest debris still poked at his feet, but much less painfully.

"I hope that helps. But you need to find other clothes that won't disappear at midnight," Maven said. You might check at the mill, as Yz's parents went to the village looking for her. She ran away yesterday."

"Why did she run?"

"She found out that the nix is her mother. She thinks the nix killed you

"No, it saved me from the other bear. The old one would have killed me."

"You've been gone for over a week."

"She won't recognize me. She won't like me like this," Cobb said. "I won't be her bear anymore." He turned around and around, trying to pick a direction to go. "She won't know who I am."

"Right now, she doesn't like anybody," Maven said, lying down in fatigue. "I found you while hunting for food. You can tell her, explain to her when she is found."

"My father's clothes, what little he wore, are still at the cottage. YZ may have gone there too." Cobb looked around again, clearly still disoriented in his human form.

Maven stood and faced away from the river. "That way. You may be right. Remember, the magic ends at midnight. You'll be naked then if you don't change back." She didn't think that was his best plan, but it wasn't worth it to argue. She still had to find Yz, bring her home, and then find one more wish to

grant. Her time was running out. Cobb had his wish, but he'd granted it himself.

Magic does not make people love each other. She could not give him that, not even if she wanted to. Only Yz could do that and whether she would was moot at this point.

Cobb wandered off in the general direction of his mother's cottage, still limping a bit over twigs, stones, and acorns on the forest floor. Maven hoped there'd be food for him as he would likely be very hungry, having used all that energy to shift. He'd also find it much worse going through the woods late at night bare-skinned.

She was hungry, too, as she walked off in a different direction, not following a scent, but moving down whatever path she could see ahead. The sprites had led her to the river and the mill, but they didn't seem to be helping now. Maybe they knew where Yz was.

Her cat senses grew stronger as the evening grew near. The shadows under the trees moved in strange ways that weren't the breeze.

She waited for Bump of Direction to give her some kind of clue. It usually kicked in about the time it looked like she was going to die, but she must be safe for the moment.

The shadows moved around her, neither blocking her way nor suggesting a direction, as they closed in on her.

"What you do about bear?" a scratchy voice asked. The sprites surrounded her, not giggling or making fun now, very serious. "You got mouse. Now

what?"

Maven leaned on her cat persona, staying bored with the whole thing. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Kill her." A chorus of voices screeched together, making Maven's fur stand on end.

"Can a cat kill a bear?" Maven said, staying as calm as she could, knowing that there were too many of the critters for her to get away from in their neck of the woods. "Not very likely. I'd hoped to take her back with me, to be fairy godmothers again."

"You fairy. We wish. Kill bear." Many voices sounded, each more insistent.

"I can't do that. It's against the fairy godmother code." The response was not favorable. "Those are the rules. Some rules bend. That one doesn't."

An older-looking sprite came out of the crowd. "You take magic. We do rest."

"How would I do that?" Maven had not seen a wand, wings, or gossamer, although as a fairy godmother, Mama Bear surely had them.

"She wears magic. Like you." The sprite made motions with the top two legs, shaking them up and down. "Take magic off. Not like you."

Maven visualized the mob cap and apron, which she'd thought was just part of the Mama Bear story persona. "Why are you helping me?"

"Want you leave. Take others too." Murmurs of assent rose around her. "No fairy here."

"All right. I'll do what I can," Maven said. "Do you know where Yz is? Is she all right."

"She good." The older sprite said. "We watch. Go now."

A path opened for Maven to follow, away from the mill and away from MB's cottage." She set out in that direction, wondering where she was being led, and what she should do about it.

CHAPTER 65 MAMA BEAR REVEALED

Cobb tiptoed back to his mother's cottage, trying to spare his soft feet even in their leather coverings. She was not paying attention, as he hardly ever came home this time of day, usually being out sleeping or grubbing.

He did not want to call her attention to his gossamer clothing or to his human state. He heard her muttering, followed by a snapping sound. He peeked in through an open window and saw her shake out her apron three times, snapping it loudly. On the third snap, he saw her shrink down from her comfortably furry and chubby self to a shriveled but spry crone.

He ducked out of sight, shaken by the sight of her changing. He knew that she was not really a bear, but seeing her change was a shock to him. She wore a bright headscarf, a long, green homespun dress, and a fringed shawl, with clogs, like any woman from the village. She was so tiny, so fragile looking, and so brightly colored, not at all like the brown on brown of his mama.

He was a werebear, and so was she, and she had always been such. He had heard that sound before but did not connect it with shape-shifting. He didn't have an apron or any other thing to use that way. He would ask the cat about that, as she didn't have any clothing either.

He ducked out of sight, hoping her hearing and other senses were as limited as his were in this form. He waited a few yards away to see where she would go since it seemed silly to think she would stay at the cottage after going through the shift.

Shortly she came out, basket on one arm and a walking stick in her hand. She was wearing a different outfit, one he hadn't seen before, dull and dark, rusty black and faded gray. Now she looked unremarkable, like some granny living deep in the woods. He followed her from a distance, right into the village of Spoons.

He didn't stay long, once he saw that she was talking up some of the vendors and paying them with bits of gold. He ran home and went through everything in the house to see where she had the money hidden.

He would not have to steal to have clothing, and he would not worry about the clothes disappearing or turning back into spider webs.

He'd heard Ward tell a story about once having a goose that laid golden eggs, but it was gone, like all the other things his father had stolen from the giant. He stopped searching and started listening more carefully, trying to smell something other than his mother in the room.

He didn't want to change back just to use his nose. He tapped on the walls to see if they were solid, or if they might hide another room, and sure enough, he heard a bit of a squawk. When he removed the panel, the goose nipped at him, looking for something to eat.

He put the panel back and went to the kitchen for some bread or oatmeal. What did birds eat? He came back with a piece of bread, and that seemed to satisfy the goose long enough for him to get inside her pen to where shelves of golden eggs gleamed softly in the half-light.

Some of them had been sliced into coins, piled in shimmering stacks, and others perched in their ovoid perfection in nests of straw. He grabbed a stack, carefully so as not to make a mess, though he was sure his mom knew exactly how many she had. But he'd be gone by the time she returned. He packed the goose back into her pen and closed up the panel in the wall. How had he never heard it before nor smelled it?

He tied the gold pieces in a bit of rag from the kitchen, not trusting his spider web garments. He went upstairs to see if any of his father's clothing was still there. What he found was not suitable for the woods, being fine blue silk and bright metal trim, the garb of a prince. There was a pair of boots, which fit him well. He put on the new clothes, wondering if Yz would like him better if he looked like a prince.

His mom was not who she said she was, and now it didn't really matter anymore. He'd find Yz and convince her to go away with him. Surely Yz would like him, once she recognized her friend, and would go away with him.

Now maybe he could fish in peace, and not worry about the Nix trying to drag him under and drown him. His life would be so different now, and he hoped Yz would be by his side. He could protect her and

make her his wife, and not worry about keeping her safe while he was hibernating.

When he got to the mill, it was empty—no mice, no miller, no Nix, no Yz, not even the cat. It was a spooky place, even though he had spent many nights there guarding Yz from whatever might hurt her, especially when her dad was sleepwalking.

Now to find Yz, make her safe, and find somewhere else to live.

CHAPTER 66 COBB SAVES THE MILL

Cobb felt a chill between his shoulder blades. Something was not right. The cat came in behind him.

"Looking good." she meowed. "But you might want to take them off now. Half the village is coming this way, fired up about something."

He listened and sniffed the air. She was right. Smoke and loud grumbling wafted across the evening breeze, not a happy sound.

"Maybe they aren't even coming here," he said. "Ward's farm is only a way down the road from here. Maybe I need to go there." He put the rest of the gold into the pockets of the prince's breeches. "Where is Yz? They might hurt her."

"She found out that the nix is her mother," Maven said. "She ran away. No one has seen her since."

"I have to find her." A dozen images came into his mind at once, all of them showing Yz dead or injured. How could he find her as a man? With no sense of smell or woodcraft? He wavered, turning first one way and then another.

"I can't find her. She's not with her parents." Maven said. She stretched out her paws in front of her, sticking her hindquarters and tail up as high as she could. She could hear her wand better that way. No hint of where Yz might be.

"Maybe you'd better make sure she has a home to come back to," Maven said. She hopped into an open window and stretched her neck to sniff the air. "Torches, I'd guess. Probably with pitchforks and rakes.

"Torches? Why? "

"The miller and his wife went into the village to look for Yz. They weren't well received." Maven stood on her hind legs and swatted at his pants. "I suspect the villagers are going to burn down the mill. Are you going to stop them?"

Cobb removed the clothes quickly, stuffing them into a bag he found in Da's room. How had he shifted before? He'd thought of Yz, longing for her, wanting her. And now people were coming to burn her home. He could not stop them as a man, but he could as a bear.

He huffed and puffed, getting down on his hands and feet. He imagined his claws scraping into the floor. He growled, feeling again the stretching, tearing, and breaking of bones that brought back the bear. He writhed and shook himself, roaring and making the floor shake. He fumbled with the latch to get the door open and squeezed himself out of it, a much smaller opening than he remembered. He stood on his back feet and growled a warning, making himself as large as possible, and the better to scare the mob.

He roared again, lumbering toward the people across the walkway to the riverbank. He let his anger fill his mind, chasing away his natural fear of fire, knowing that he could make ribbons of at least the

first two or three people in front.

"Send out the witch," people cried, "Or we will burn the mill."

The men in front stabbed their torches at him, which he swatted away with a swipe of his paws, knocking them into the mill pond.

He didn't want to kill the people, as they would come back better prepared, so he targeted their weapons...torches, pitchforks, and even a knife. They could not get behind him on the narrow walkway without going back upstream and coming down the other side, a treacherous path.

The stupid fairy cat lay behind him, purring loudly enough to rattle the walkway.

"Why don't you help?" he roared. "I'm only one bear."

"I am helping," she said clearly, in human speech. "Go forward, they are terrified of you."

The villagers in front were backing up, and the ones in back were crowding forward to see what was happening. The ones in the middle were getting squeezed, trying to move to the sides, pushing them into the woods...or the pond.

Again and again, he swiped at them, aiming for torches, knocking them down. He hit a few people on the backswing, knocking them down, but not killing them. He pushed them away and swiped again. Soon everyone was running away, shrieking and stumbling over each other. Those he had knocked down were being dragged away by their neighbors.

After only a few minutes it was over, and he chased them, slower than he could have, as far up

the path as the edge of the pond. When he could not see anyone lagging, he went back to the mill and hunkered down, exhausted.

The cat came up to him and rubbed against his side.

"Where is Yz?" he said.

"I have not been able to find her." The cat said, then licked a paw and slicked down her whiskers. "She ran into the woods when she learned that her mother is the Nix." She made a few more grooming swipes. "She thinks the Nix killed you."

The words fell on Cobb's consciousness like rotten tree branches in a storm, hitting hard, and breaking over his thoughts. If Yz went to his mother's, she'd likely be dead, or worse, finally become the girl child his mother wanted for a companion. He had never built a good hiding place for them, one where she'd be safe from other things in the woods.

"Which way did Yz go?" Cobb asked, not able to smell her at all against the roiling fear of the mob and the smoke of their torches.

The cat pointed with her nose toward the other end of the walkway. "That way I think, yesterday."

Sore in every muscle, Cobb shifted again so that he could put on the prince's clothing. He trudged back across the walkway and into the brush, thinking of her and hoping to find her with his mind.

* * *

The miller and the nix met the villagers running

away from the mill, flowing around them like water around a rock in a stream.

One man stopped, breathing heavily. "What kind of animal do you keep at that mill?" he gasped.

"Just a mangy cat," the miller said. "Can't get rid of the damn thing, and she's no good as a mouser."

"I wouldn't think a cat that size would bother with a mouse."

"That's for sure," says the miller.

The man went on his way, but none of the other villagers wanted to talk to them, looking away and running past as far as possible.

CHAPTER 67 AN APRON DESTROYED

Leaving Cobb to look for Yz, Maven made her way to Mama Bear's cottage. At least she wanted to steal some food for Zaria, but now she would have to deal with the bear. The sprites had made that clear. If she could cross the bear's magic, she might come out ahead. She might survive.

The cottage door was open, scratched, and battered by bear claws. Maven sneaked in, hoping she could find some food and sneak out again. Then she saw the bear.

Always before, Maven could see the woman inside the bear, but now Mama Bear was all bear, all massive, ursine fury, hell-hath-no-fury-like-a-mama-bear-scorned

All this time Maven had been trying to get her human powers back, but now she needed to be all cat.

Maven stalked soundlessly, the slight ripple of her fur dampening whatever sound she might make. Her pupils opened to take in every detail, and she twitched her ears to gather any sound, like the thunderous thuds that the heavy pads of Mama Bear made lumbering behind her

Pretending she had heard nothing, she crouched ready to spring as if she were chasing a mouse. But just as Mama Bear's great paw swiped at her, she levitated as only a cat can, straight up. Making her

body do the falling half-twist, she sank her claws into Mama Bear's chair and rebounded against the wall, jumping to the floor and dashing to the door.

But now the outside door and windows were closed up tight. She had no place to go, and while she could move faster than the bear, it would be all over if she were caught. One swipe of those large claws would turn her into kitty burger.

Maven zipped back across the room and up the steep stairs, hoping that an upstairs window would be open or that she could hide under a bed. Mama Bear's lumbering paws were close behind her, though the stairs had slowed her some. All the windows were closed and shuttered. No way out. Maven turned to face the snarling bear.

Mama Bear held her apron in front of her. She dropped it over Maven, and it immediately bound the cat tightly. Maven felt the magical power of the apron...it was Mama Bear's wand, just as her tail was hers.

Maven's tail was not able to move. She could not poof or fight the magic with magic. But her teeth and claws still worked. She bit the cloth, much finer and more delicate than the miller's rough burlap bag. She extended her claws and ripped the fabric.

She knew her claws would do nothing against the bear unless she could rake the bear's nose, but she could destroy this magical apron. She bit and tugged and ripped. Her back feet made a tear along one side, freeing her tail.

"Never Cross Wands with another adept" Fiona had told her. But Fiona hadn't said what to do when

attacked by another adept.

Maven thrashed her tail against the magical fabric as the bear tried to pick her up in her claws. At that moment she lost all human consciousness. She hissed and spat, biting and clawing anything that gave her purchase. The apron ripped open releasing her. She attacked the bear, climbing the massive arms to the bear's face. She yowled from the depths of her being. Reaching the bear's head, she swiped across the bear's muzzle, raking the eyes and popping her claws into the black nose.

The bear howled, swiping at her head, knocking off her mob cap. Maven jumped down and grabbed the cap in her teeth. She sped down the stairs.

Her human mind came back online. She dropped the mob cap and kicked it into the fire on the hearth.

Growling in rage, the bear loped down the stairs on all fours, dragging the shreds of the apron in a back claw. Maven hid under the big, too-soft chair, awaiting her chance.

As the bear knocked the furniture around and clawed at the walls, all the little homey touches were shattered or turned to dust.

When the bear toppled the chair, Maven grabbed the apron and thumping her tail on the floor, poofed out of the cottage into the woods. Behind her, the cottage shook as the bear tried to get out. Maven scrambled up the nearest small tree, dragging the apron behind her.

With a great crash, the front window exploded as the bear forced her way past the glass and shutters. She headed directly for the tree where Maven

perched, scratching at the bark, shaking the tree with her great bulk.

The tree leaned away from the house, with Maven hanging on to the highest branches. The bear slipped, her claws stripping the bark from the young tree. The weight released, the tree sprung back, slinging Maven toward the cottage, apron and all.

The cat jumped through the shattered window, but the apron caught on the broken glass. Maven yanked the apron. Maven tugged harder, needing to get the apron in the fire with the mob cap to destroy its magic. She pulled against the glass, ripping a piece of the fabric loose. She pushed the fabric into the hearth, scorching the fur on her front paws.

She went back for the rest, perching on the window sill, pawing at the dangling apron string. Whatever had happened to Mama Bear would soon happen to her, and she did not want any crossed-wands interference with what she had to do. She bit down on the apron string and pulled as hard as she could.

Outside the bear returned, lumbering onto the porch to get back through the window. She clawed against the broken glass and wood splinters, breaking out more of the window.

Just then the apron came loose. Maven rolled across the floor with the force of it, nearly into the hearth itself. A tongue of flame reached out from the apron and pulled into the fire, dragging Maven along. She fought with her claws to get free of the burning cloth, scorching away her whiskers. It clung to her as if it wanted to strangle her. Crossed wands. Power

over another person. She rolled away from the hearth kicking and scratching until she was able to fight her way free.

She thumped her tail for a spell, transforming the apron back into a wooden wand. She kicked the wand back into the hearth where it caught fire. Everything else in the cottage disappeared: furniture, knick-knacks, curtains, any semblance of human inhabitant.

She tried the latch to open the door, but it was still stuck, too heavy for her to move.

As the bear crashed back through the shattered window, Maven remembered she could poof.

Maven thumped her tail on the floor and vanished just as four large claws raked the space where she had been.

She spent a moment or two in the zilchzeit space, a long time subjectively, but when the space-time-continuum turned back on...

CHAPTER 68 A NOT-SO-CUTE-MEET

Cold and shivering, Yz woke to the sounds of birds, a cool morning breeze, and a cat purring—that darn cat. It wiped its face with a paw.

It did not crack a smile or act in any way different from an ordinary cat, except that it moved its mouth and human speech came out. "Maybe now you'd consider going home?"

Yz sat up, staring. "What do you want? I guess you granted my wish. Are you happy?" She looked down to see a shawl lying across her legs. "I can't go back there." She shuddered with disgust. "I can't face Da. He...doesn't need me anymore."

"Suits me. I have my own problems," Maven said. "I still need to grant a wish before the end of the week."

"Not my problem." Yz shrugged. "Did Mama Bear put you up to this?"

Maven stretched, pushing her paws far forward and sticking her tail straight up in the air. The girl wanted to be loved and accepted. But that's the kind of wish that magic doesn't make come true.

"Mama Bear is no longer involved." Maven stretched out her back feet one by one and then sat with her tail around her paws. "But I am a fairy godmother, just as she was. The difference between us is that I want to get back to my job, and she will stay a bear. "

Yz frowned and stuck out her chin. "How can you be a fairy godmother? Don't you need wings and a wand, and I don't know, some kind of costume?"

Maven stood up on her hind feet. "Do I need to get pimped like a drag queen to make you believe me?" She made her tail do a flick and swish.

When the sparkles settled on the forest floor, Maven peered down from her platform shoes—much easier to wear when her foot was the length of half her leg. She stuck out her hip—not that she had any—and struck a pose, a feather boa round her neck, wings fluttering, and the tip of her tail between her fingers like a cigarette holder. She wore a dress of purple slink that was cut to her waistline in front, and up to her hip on one side, where her tail peeked out. Tim Curry would be impressed.

"Do you need arms to be a real girl?" Maven swung the wand, just an extension of her gossamer, but for the effect. *What could she offer the girl? Arms and hands? A ride to the ball?* "Your parents love you. I think they'd understand."

"My parents!" YZ sat up straight and crossed her legs into a lotus position. "Da never talks to me. That...that fish woman, my mother, has tried to kill me every time she's seen me for the last fifteen years. Yes, they'd understand all right. They should understand why I ran away. They're so happy to be back together that there's no place left for poor, crippled Yz. Maybe I should just drown myself for everyone else's sake, and quit taking up so much space."

Maven restrained the urge to slap her client.

Maybe a bit of self-pity was in order, a little drama. But she wasn't feeling up to reprising *It's a Wonderful Life* on this occasion. She flicked her tail again and made her finery disappear.

Being a cat was more comfortable...no. She must not think that way. She was already fighting the urge to just saunter off and take a nap.

"Fine. If you have nothing to live for, then making a wish for something useful would be a waste of your time." Maven dropped back down on all fours.

Yz hung her head, muttering. "Even fairy godmothers can't bring people back to life. If Cobb were here, I'd wish you to make him into a man."

A voice came from behind her. "She doesn't have to grant that wish, but I can." Cobb the man stepped out from behind a tree. His hair was every which way like his fur used to be. He wore his father's clothing, a prince in royal blue silk with silver trim. He was awkward and shy, still unused to standing upright and walking in boots.

He squatted beside her, to look her in the eye. His dark brown eyes were hopeful, wistful, and a little sad. "I'm sorry my mother lied to you. I didn't know."

Yz stared at him. "When did this happen?" She glared at Maven. "A prince? Really? Do you think I need a prince?"

"He did it all by himself." Maven said. She curled up, tucking in her paws. "You could have the best of both worlds, a super-size teddy bear and your very own pet prince."

"How do I know you're Cobb? You could be

anybody." Yz turned her face away from the man.

"The last time I saw you, there was another bear," the prince said. "He attacked me, and we fell into the river. He bit me and clawed me pretty badly. I lost consciousness and went under. I saw every moment of my life, and you were in each scene. You are my life, Yz."

Yz stood up, turning away from him. "I saw the Nix come out of the water and pull the other bear under. Why didn't she get you?" She spun back, screaming. "I searched for hours, everywhere, both sides of the river. Where were you?"

"She saved me," the man started, "She made some kind of air bubble so I could breathe under the water, and she stitched me back up." He opened his vest and pulled up his shirt to show her the still-red scars where the black bear's claws had raked his ribs. "If I'd been a man then, he would have killed me, but the Nix saved my life."

Yz turned back to Maven. "Did you put him up to this?" She lifted her foot as if to kick Maven, but the cat leaped away.

"No, but you might want to hear the rest of the story." Maven restrained herself again, this time from turning Yz into a frog. She'd make a great frog with her strong legs and ability to jump to conclusions.

"Come back with me," Cobb said. "I'll tell you everything, but please come back. Even if it's just to say goodbye."

The cat part of Maven was bored and wanted to take a nap. *Let the humans work it out, or not. Snack time soon. Nap now.*

Maven shook her head. No. She was a fairy godmother, in persona, and she would not give in to that darn cat.

Yz nodded, her head down. She sighed and let Cobb put his arm around her to take her back to the mill.

CHAPTER 69 ON THE ROAD

Although it had only been a few leagues, a long day's walk for him, the road to the Castle of the Marquis of Cabbages had been hard. Ward's mother had complained constantly, always wanting to rest, always wanting a carriage, always wanting to stop and eat.

The harp would not play for her, and Ward had been afraid to take it out for fear his mother might break it. So they had slogged on, huddled in blankets overnight, as they made slow progress.

At least the pease pot did work over a campfire. Ward didn't have to carry food in addition to the blankets, some clothing for his mother, and eating utensils.

Their reception at the Castle had been cool, barely accepting Ward's mother as a long-lost poor relation. Once the harp started playing for them, however, during the evening meal, the mood lightened, and the Marquis agreed to house his daughter as long as the harp stayed too. The harp accepted the bargain.

Ward made his way back from the Marquis's castle toward the mill. The harp had taught him a new tune on the way to take his mother back to her home. He could hear this tune, and so could other people. The harp had warned against playing that tune except as a performance. It would cause people

to throw money his way, so it should not be wasted. Ward found that he could learn other tunes too, songs he had heard in the village, even a few his mother used to sing before his father left.

Now that all the mice were gone from the mill, and the miller's wife was back, he hoped Yz would go with him, even if the bear had to go along too. Ward knew the bear's mother had killed his father and taken the golden goose, but there was no reason to hold that against the bear. The bear had always been good to Yz, protecting her.

Whatever happened, Ward would deal with that when it came. At the very least, he wanted to say goodbye. He knew Yz did not care for him, but he cared for her. They might travel together anyway, three friends. The bear would protect them both, Ward would make the music, and Yz could ...sing, dance, or do whatever she liked, not some freak show, only their companion, if she and the bear would agree.

He never wanted to be at the farm or in this wood ever again. He still had the pease pot in a sack, and so could go anywhere, and make his way as a musician or a tinkerer even if he had to go on alone.

Yz would not have to go to the village by herself anymore, as her mother could go.

He turned to go to the mill, if nothing else, to say goodbye. He saw Yz, a young man in princely clothing, and that darn cat walking from the other direction. A prince? Was this some kind of ridiculous fairy tale? A bear he could accept, but if Yz wanted a prince... he couldn't do anything about that either.

He could still say goodbye. He trudged on.

The miller and his wife came out of the mill, running to hug Yz. She just stood there, while the princely man stood back, waiting.

There were cries of welcome and rejoicing, but Yz hung her head, crying. The prince put his arm around her.

Ward bristled. It was just not fair. But he had never had a chance, and he wanted Yz to be happy.

CHAPTER 70 REUNION

Maven slinked her way over to Ward as he stood watching the reunion. She twined around his ankles.

“So you have your music now, what are your plans?” she said.

Ward stared for a moment, pausing to lean down to pet her. “I am going to ask her...them...to leave with me. To leave this forest, to find somewhere new, to start over.”

“Where does this road go beyond the village?” Maven asked. All she had seen in any direction was just more woods. She knew that most small towns in the Real World were five miles or so apart, but many people didn’t travel that far if they had to go on foot.

“I don’t really know, but it has to be somewhere other than this. I can’t stay here.” Ward looked at Yz and the prince. He sighed and hung his head.

“He’s not a prince,” Maven said. “Well, his father was, but he’s long gone. There’s no kingdom for Cobb to inherit. He’s just the man inside the bear.”

“When did you learn to talk?” Ward said. “I knew there was something different about you. What do you suggest then?”

“Let Yz talk to her parents, see how that goes.”

He nodded, only moving close enough to hear what might be said. So far, nobody else paid him any attention.

Maven strode back to Estevia now in her human

form. The parents stood looking at Yz and Cobb, trying to come up with something to say to bring Yz back into the family.

“Talk to her,” Estevia hissed. “Tell her who I am.”

“She knows,” Maven said. She sat by the woman and began washing her face. “Try to find out what *she* wants for once.”

In the long silence, the sun began to set.

“Let’s eat,” Da said. “It’s been a long day for all of us.”

Yz nodded. She started walking outwards the kitchen, but her mother stopped her before she reached the stairs. “I can cook for you.”

“You don’t even need me to do that, then.” Yz clomped up the stairs. She sat on the walkway just past the door to the kitchen, her feet folded under her.

When Cobb went to join her, Da stopped him. “Where do you think you are going...Sir?”

“I am going to comfort my friend,” Cobb said. He pushed past the miller to sit beside Yz, pulling her close to him with an arm around her shoulders.

The woman put a hand on Da’s arm and held him back. “She’s safe with him. Help me with the cooking, and maybe we can straighten out all that has happened.” She walked up the steps.

When Da turned to follow his wife, he saw Ward. “I supposed you are going to “comfort your friend” as well?”

“No, Sir,” Ward said. “I came to say goodbye.”

Maven dashed up the steps and jumped on the rail, the better to see and hear what went on. She

would have to find Zaria soon, but she wanted to see how things would play out before she left.

Did her clients not see that they got what they asked for? She flicked her tail to return to her human form. Nothing happened. She tried making herself tiny so that whatever was left of her wings might allow her to fly. She wondered why she could not change into her human form after granting so many wishes.

After the parents went inside, Ward came up the steps. "I'm leaving," he said. "My mother is with her family, and there's nothing more for me to do here."

"I will not go home either," Cobb said. "I don't have a plan yet, but I thought we might clean the mill now that the mice are gone. It would give the miller a chance to get started again."

"I'd be happy to help with that," Ward said. "Yz knows what needs to be done, and maybe Da will be able to get it working again."

The door to the millworks hung off one hinge. The inside was filthy, but the open door had let it air out some. The three young people looked into the dark room.

"I could clean up a space for you to sleep in tonight," Yz said, "I got food from Cobb's cabin when it let me go, so there is plenty for you to eat."

A broom appeared just inside the door.

CHAPTER 71 PLANS, CHOICES

During supper, Da agreed that the mill might be usable and repaired if it were cleaned. Estevia approved, and they made a comfortable space in the millworks for the young men to sleep.

Da propped a chair against the outside of the door to keep them inside, and away from Yz, as she slept in the kitchen.

In the millworks, Cobb spoke. “Do you mind if I shift back? It is much more comfortable to sleep as a bear.”

“Why not?” Ward shook his head. *Prince Bear.*

Cobb turned to take off his clothing.

Ward looked away, waiting until the strange sounds stopped. The large bear was curled up on the floor when he turned back.

“You can sleep next to me if it will help you keep warm.” Cobb turned his back.

The mill was cold, the floor hard, and even the extra blanket Yz’s mother gave him was not much comfort. He scooted up behind the bear, back to back. If the bear hadn’t hurt Yz, he wouldn’t likely hurt him.

“You have been friends with Yz for a long time,” Ward said.

“Yes, she came to our house when she was a little girl.” Cobb sighed. “My mother wanted her to stay with us, keep us all as her little pets.”

“Was she a shape-shifter too?”

“Yes, but the cat did something that won’t let her shift anymore,” Cobb said. “She is all bear now, and dangerous.”

“What will you do after we clean up the mill?” Ward said.

“I don’t know. We can’t go back to the cottage. I don’t think much of it is left.”

“My mother’s house is not in good repair, but you could live there.”

“You would give us your house?” Cobb asked, astonished. “We could all live there?”

“I can’t stay here.” Ward pulled his blankets closer around him. “You could maybe fix things up, at least be together.”

Cobb lay silent for a while. “I’m good as a bear, but I don’t have any skills as a man. I’m still learning how to walk and wear clothes.”

“Neither of us has any money either,” Ward said. “Fixing things takes materials.”

“I know where there is gold,” Cobb said, “If my mother didn’t take it all. Or destroy it.”

“She has the goose, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, I just found it yesterday.” He remembered the coins in his clothing. Maybe Ward could use them. “She has saved it up, some sliced into coins, some still in egg shapes.”

“With that, you could hire people to do the work,” Ward said. “I never learned much about how to take care of the farm after my dad left.” Ward didn’t tell him how his father left the family. It wasn’t Cobb’s fault.

“Where will you go then?” Cobb said.

“I don’t know, but away from here.” Ward “I can fix things, sometimes, when they are broken, and I’ve learned some songs on my flute. I can be a traveling minstrel.”

“Of course, it doesn’t matter what we decide,” Cobb said. “It’s up to Yz to choose what she wants. I’ll stay here if she does.”

In the kitchen, Yz sobbed into her blanket. She felt so unwanted, so misunderstood. She didn’t even know what she wanted, and her world made no sense at all.

It was all that darn cat’s fault. She should have thrown it in the millpond that first night. But then Da would have died of the cold. She’d gotten her wish, such as it was. Maybe she should have wished for arms, to be normal, ordinary. She could have wished to be pretty. Too late now, and nothing else she could do made any sense. Nobody needed her now

Early in the morning, an hour before dawn, Maven saw the crescent moon rise. One more night at most.

She had watched over the people in the mill. Maven had listened in on all the conversations. At some point, people had to work it out for themselves.

She still fought the urge to nap, hunt a mouse, or

dash madly through the woods for fun. She was still a cat, and the spell was not broken no matter what she tried. She'd poofed, frizzed her tail, changed her gossamer, and even tried to make herself small so she could fly. Something was missing, something the witch hadn't told her.

It was time to find Zaria and figure out how to get back to Fiona and her human body.

CHAPTER 72 AWAKENING

Zaria lay still sleeping in the woods when Maven poofed back to her. She would be hungry and dehydrated when she woke up, and there was neither water nor any recognizable food nearby for her.

There'd been food at Mama Bear's cottage, but Mama Bear was likely there too and might have eaten it if she hadn't destroyed it all.

Taking Zaria back to the mill would upset Estevia, and nobody there needed any more upset today.

Could Mama Bear still do magic without her apron-wand and mob cap? She was trapped in her bear body, unable to shift, much as Maven was. How long would it be before she went completely bear?

Mama Bear had been here for years, long enough for Yz and Cobb to grow up. Like Zaria, she'd put the spell on herself. But Maven had broken Zaria's spell by crossing wands with her. She had only destroyed Mama Bear's wand. Destroying the witch's wand would not free Fiona.

She would have to cross wands with her—and Fiona.

Zaria was in no shape to help her, and she didn't know if she could find Calliope or Tulip, or if they would be willing to face the witch's wrath.

She tried again to change back to her human self. No luck.

What was she missing?

Happily Ever After.

Yz was miserable. Ward was lonely and unrequited. Cobb could shift now but did not know how to be a man. Even the miller and the Nix would have to recreate their marriage.

Whatever Zaria had wanted, she hadn't gotten.

Mama Bear was now only a bear, trapped in her own spell.

The only one who seemed satisfied was the harp, who she could not even ask for help.

She had today and tonight, but then she'd be a cat forever.

Cat life tempted her. Days of napping, killing something every day or so, maybe even hooking up with a tom. The other cats said she could join them on the next full moon, though she suspected it was not that simple.

But then the witch would own Fiona and Faery, and all the magic would be like it was here, soured and moldy.

What could one cat do in one day?

Get some help.

Maven bit the gossamer sleeping bag and pulled it away from Zaria. She thumped it with her tail. It transformed back to a scrap of gossamer.

She patted Zaria's face with her paw. "Wake up."

Zaria stirred but didn't wake.

Maven patted her again, but when she got no result, she jumped on Zaria's stomach. Zaria shook her off, wrapping her naked arms around her body, curling up as much as she could to get warm.

Maven yowled a menacing screech. “Get up now or you will die of hypothermia!”

Zaria opened one eye, shivering, her lips blue.

Maven made the gossamer scrap into some clothes and shoes. “I know you are cold and hungry. We can’t stay here. Get dressed.”

The old fairy godmother put on the gossamer. After a few moments, she changed it to fit her better and make her warmer. Her magic had not been completely used up.

“Let’s get this mess cleaned up,” she said, her face still pale, her body slumped by fatigue.

“About time,” Maven agreed. “The bear first, then the kids.”

“Mama Bear?” Zaria backed away from her, trembling. She leaned against a tree to steady herself. “Have you any idea how powerful she is?”

“I do,” the cat said. “I also know she is without her wand, and that limits her magic.”

“She will go mad,” Zaria said.

“She’s already there.” Maven resisted the urge to wash. “We don’t want her hurting anyone else.”

Zaria shook her head. “I don’t have my wand anymore either.”

“Check your pocket,” Maven said.

CHAPTER 73 CAT & MOUSE

Zaria stumbled behind Maven as they made their way through the woods. “Why don’t you just poof us there?”

“I’m hungry and tired,” Maven said, her voice sounding like a meow. “If I tried it, we might not make it. And I don’t know where she is.” She stopped and sat, waiting for Zaria to catch up. “I don’t want to surprise her into an attack with neither of us up to our strength.”

“We aren’t getting any rest or food traipsing out here.” Zaria was whining. “I have used what’s left of my little magic to be warm.”

“Would the Nix recognize you in your human form?” Maven licked her paw and swiped it across her face. “We could try to poof to the mill if we worked together. They might feed us or you might try to catch one of the catfish who ate your minions.”

Zaria shuddered.

Maven stared at her. “We will have to deal with the bear in any case, now or later.”

“She will kill us.”

Again Maven fought against the cat’s usual unconcern. “You granted your own wish, or Mama Bear did it for you. I have only this day left to get back to Fiona, so I am out of time.”

She clawed her way up Zaria’s skirt. “What do you wish for now?”

Zaria stared at the cat, tears running down her cheeks. “I don’t know. Nothing ever works out for me.”

Maven pawed at the pocket of the skirt, pulling it open to reach for Zaria’s wand. “If you won’t help me, I’ll help myself.”

The cat stretched up as far as her body would go to bite the wand and drag it out of the woman’s skirt. She curled her tail around her feet and then touched the wand to her tail.

She swirled the wand as best she could and both of them poofed to Mama Bear’s cottage.

While it still stood, the windows were broken, the walls showed deep clawed scratches, and the door lay broken in the yard.

Maven could see the magic aura of the cottage, different from before when it looked like white-painted clapboards, curtains, and a rug on the porch.

She listened with both wands. She sensed no one, only one animal, and that one was hungry and thirsty.

Still holding the wand in her mouth, she climbed the steps to the porch and went inside. The shreds of her last encounter with the bear were still scattered everywhere.

The fire had gone out, but the wand still lay on the hearth. The bear had not realized that it was there—her mind might be stuck in the bear brain.

Maven now had some power over Zaria. She was able to use some of Zaria’s magic to reinforce her own. Could she influence both her and the bear?

A last spark from an ember popped out onto the hearth.

Maven's human cussedness connected with the cat's assurance of her superiority over any other being. She was tired of rules and restrictions. She was tired of trying to please everyone. Nobody ever really got a happily-ever-after delivered on a silver platter.

If anyone was going to take control of the three of them, she would.

She used Zaria's wand to move the still-smoldering stick from the hearth and made a triangle of it, Zaria's wand, and her own tail. A spark traveled the edges of the wands, linking them and singeing the end of Maven's tail.

She let go of the wand, nudging it beside the bear's wand. She licked her tail, singed fur sticking to her mouth. She scratched her back and licked more fur from her back paw. She scraped the fur onto the two wooden wands and stretched the gossamer strands into ribbons that wove themselves around the wands, binding them together.

Not sure how to wield them all at the same time, Maven considered. She walked in a circle three times and then thumped her tail on top of the other wands. Her tail fluffed out and restored its missing fur.

"Come in here and find us some food," Maven said. She might have the power, but Zaria had hands and could carry stuff.

As Zaria came in, they heard a powerful roar outside.

CHAPTER 74 WORSE WITH BEARS

The growling continued as the bear lumbered toward the cottage.

Maven listened to the bear through the triple wands.

Mama Bear was hungry, tired, and confused. The battle between fairy mind and bear body swayed to the bear side. The bear was used to being big and powerful without having to think much to go after what she wanted. The fairy was used to using her magic the same way, and now it didn't work.

That didn't make the bear any less dangerous.

What to do?

Another old fairy tale came to Maven's mind, one connected to Yz's uncle and his Puss in Boots. Puss confronted an ogre, way out of his league in size and strength, but not cunning.

Maven let the bear lumber into the doorway. She turned her tail and snapped it toward the bear.

"Take that, bitch."

The huge beast shrank into a small shape, brown and fluffy...a puppy of indeterminate parentage.

The puppy whined. She wet the floor. She crawled slowly in a submissive posture over to Maven. She looked up with big puppy eyes.

Maven resisted both urges to swat the puppy or to groom it.

"Zaria," Maven said, "can you find a basket or a

bucket back there? We need two.”

“We’ll need more than that,” Zaria said. She held a handful of golden eggs. “The goose is back here too.” Then she saw the puppy. “Awwww! How cute!” She dumped the golden eggs into her pocket and reached out to pet the puppy.

“That’s one reason we need a carrier. That’s Mama Bear.”

Zaria backed up, her mouth open. She snatched back her hands and hugged herself. When she could breathe, she said, “You wouldn’t do that to me, would you?”

Maven waited a minute to answer. “No, I need you to carry things. I can poof us together with what we have, but it needs to be connected to us. Did you find some food?”

Zaria nodded. “But there’s gold...”

“We can’t eat gold.” Maven cocked her head at the woman. “Get a dish of water for the pup and another one for me. Drink some yourself. Then bring out whatever you can find for us to eat.”

She lay down, her legs stretched out and the end of her tail twitching. “I think the house will provide whatever you ask for. Then we’ll see about whatever else we can use.” She gave Zaria a cat stare. “Do it now.”

The problem with controlling people is that you have to tell them to inhale, exhale, and blink their eyes so they don’t suffocate or go blind, Maven thought.

In a few minutes, Zaria brought out two dishes of water, some small bits of meat for the pup, and some

small fish for Maven. She had crumbs around her mouth. They all had to eat.

But no rest for the weary, at least not yet.

With some help from Maven and interference from the pup, Zaria managed a big basket for the goose, putting the pup in with it to keep warm. She had a sack for the fresh food and a smaller one filled with gold eggs and egg slices.

Zaria wanted to keep all the gold, but Maven explained, with not-quite-extreme prejudice, that it would be better distributed to the three young people and the miller.

Gold would be useless where they were going, and it added to the weight they would have to carry.

Maven realized that Zaria had no intention of going back to Fiona. She'd have to explain that part of the plan to the woman too, to as her grandmother might have said, 'to understand it to her.'

CHAPTER 75 PUPPIES

Once everything was packed and loaded onto Zaria's basket and bags, Maven poofed them to the mill. It was mid-afternoon, and everyone was there, taking a lunch break. The feeling around the mill was different, not so depressed and moldy. Ward and Cobb sat on the walkway with the miller.

Yz sat by herself, and the Nix brought out food and drink for them from the kitchen.

No yelling, no obvious animosity could Maven hear as she listened with her wand. The young men had been cleaning the mill, hauling out the detritus of the damage done by the mice. Piles of the mess heaped on the far side of the pond. They had been busy.

Maven disguised Zaria as a woman from the village. Zaria put the puppy in a pocket of her skirt, as they would not leave the old fairy there to cause any more mischief. The cat instructed the woman as to what to say, threatening to use her as a puppet if she did not go along with the plan.

"Greetings, Miller," Zaria said. "I have brought gifts to recompense you for the damage to your mill and your reputation." She carried the basket with the goose to the steps.

Maven glared at her with a low yowl.

She set the basket down reluctantly. Maven thought she might have to intervene, but Zaria finally

turned loose and backed away.

The Nix came out. She stared at the woman with a scowl, paying the goose no mind. Zaria backed up behind the cat.

Ward and Cobb came up to the basket.

“My mother must be dead if they found the goose,” Cobb said. He looked at Zaria. “Is there anything left of the cottage? And the...bear?”

Zaria glanced at Maven. “The cottage still stands, but I don’t think it is safe,” she said. “The bear will not be a problem for anyone here anymore.”

Maven pawed at Zaria’s skirt. Zaria pulled away, but the cat made a warning yowl, her tail fluffed out as large as her body.

“Give it to Ward now,” Maven said, loudly and clearly enough for everyone to hear. “He can decide how to manage it.”

Da stood and pointed at the cat, his face red and his hand shaking. “Get that damned animal away from here.” He looked for something to throw at Maven.

His wife took his arm.

“Calm yourself, Husband,” Estevia said. “The cat has done us more than one kindness.” She kissed him, and he relaxed, sitting again on his box, though he shook his head and grumbled to himself.

She glared at Zaria, her head cocked under her red hat. Despite the disguise, she recognized the fairy.

“I believe what you are holding belongs to Jack’s son,” she said. “Give it to me, leave here, and all will be forgiven.” She came down the steps to face Zaria

and held out her hand.

Zaria backed away. "No, I have nothing left."

"You have your life," the Nix said, her grimace exposing sharp teeth. "You have taken much of mine and that of my family. Leave now, and I will not kill you." She glared at Maven.

Maven leaped up and grabbed the edge of the pocket with her claws. It ripped, showing the strings of the pouch that held the golden eggs. Maven bit down on the strings, but the bag was too heavy for her to move. Pulling on it ripped the skirt further, but Zaria grabbed the bag and pulled it away.

She ran.

Maven flicked her tail at Zaria, turning her, too, into a young puppy, fuzzy and gray. The two puppies thumped to the ground along with the bag of gold. They whined as the clothing turned into a scrap of gossamer.

"Yz," Maven called. "I need you here now."

Yz slid her feet into her clogs and clomped down to the cat. "You want me to make another wish, I suppose?" She looked at the puppies. "What do you think I will do with these?"

"That is what I want to know," Maven said. "These are the two fairy godmothers who have brought you to this place in your life. Do you want to drown them? Raise them as dogs, knowing that they may find their magic again? Leave them here for some predator to find?"

CHAPTER 76 SITTING AND THINKING

Yz stared at the puppies, their big eyes the definition of adorable. She squatted to get a better look at them. The brown one crawled toward her, whining. “Which one is that?” she asked.

“Mama Bear.”

“And the other?” Yz frowned at the puppies.

“The Mouse Queen.”

“What will happen if I don’t take them?” Yz looked at the cat.

Maven could hear the whining puppies, but she also heard the angry words that the puppies could not make. “I had planned to take them with me, but I need a way to carry them. Could you make something for that? You see what happened to the magic cloth I had.”

Yz nodded. “Why ask me?”

“You are the center of this story,” Maven said. “These two have manipulated all of your life. It’s your turn.” She swiped a paw across her face and again across her whiskers. She had to find a way to give Yz some agency, some kind of power in her life.

“You’d let me drown them?” Yz’s eyebrows rose high on her face.

“Yes, if *YOU* would let yourself do that.”

“Cats are mean.” Yz frowned, her mouth set in a hard line.

Maven licked her shoulder—a cat shrug.

“If you don’t want them,” Maven said, “I’ll take them back to my boss so that we can all be human again.”

Yz stood, considering the cat, and how things might work out if it left. “I think I have something that would work.”

Yz went back into the room where she slept. In the bottom of her chest was a small box, a gift from an unthinking relative that she’d kept both for its beauty and uselessness. She propped the box under her chin and brought it back out.

Her family and friends on the walkway had not missed her. They speculated about the goose, where it had come from, and if it still laid golden eggs. She was used to that. They did not need her anymore.

She dropped the box in front of the cat. She opened it to reveal a pair of dancing slippers, satiny pink, with long ribbons to tie onto her feet. “You can have these.”

Maven gave her a long gaze. “Someone gave these to you?” Maven’s tail twitched in irritation.

Yz nodded. She sat in the dirt, picked up one shoe, and shook the ribbons loose. She set it down, and then reached her foot over to the gray pup, picking it up by the scruff of its neck and setting it down in the shoe.

The pup did not cooperate, trying to get away and scrambling out of the shoe before Yz could tie the ribbons around it.

Maven let her struggle with it for a few minutes. Then she thumped her tail, making the pup lie still.

With exquisite coordination, Yz wrapped the

ribbons around the pup and the shoe, keeping it confined and leaving enough ribbon to tie the two shoes together.

Shortly she had both pups enclosed and had tied the strings to make a sling Maven could carry.

“Take me with you,” Yz said. “Nobody will miss me here.”

“That’s not true. Both the boys are in love with you.”

“You think I should choose between them then?”

“Again, up to you.” Maven stretched, her tail raised high to listen to the people on the walkway. “No reason you could not be a fairy godmother. Or a wife. Or a traveling circus act with a musician and a dancing bear prince.” Maven walked over and rubbed her face against Yz’s knee. “You have always done what needed to be done to get by. What do you *want* to do?”

CHAPTER 77 DECISION

Yz gazed at the puppies. They wriggled and gnawed at the ribbons that held them snug in the dancing shoes. As angry as she was about everything that had happened, she could not see a way to stay home, facing her returned mother, deciding between Cobb and Ward or going away with both of them, or even learning whether she could do magic. She would not drown the puppies, even if they had been the ones to make her life what it was.

No, Yz thought, I'm the one who made me what I am.

One thing was clear. The cat could not carry the puppies, but she could. She sat, ducked her head low to the ground, and slipped the ribbon around her neck.

“All right, Fairy Catmother, now what?” she said.

“Put your clogs back on and sit cross-legged,” Maven said. “I’m going to climb into your lap, and we will all go back to my boss to see what we can do.”

The cat climbed into the woman’s lap, settling herself on her back feet, with a paw on each puppy. She swirled her tail, pulling energy from the earth, from the fairy puppy mothers, and from Yz.

“Hang on,” Maven meowed, and they all slipped into the dark *zilchzeit*.

When the others looked for Yz, she and the cat were gone. Ward and Cobb ran to the opposite sides of the millpond, calling her name, but the Nix just shook her head.

“She is gone somewhere else,” the Nix said. “She’s not where you can find her.”

“That damned cat took her,” the miller said. “I should have drowned it.”

“You did,” the Nix said, taking his hand. “But I rescued her. And now we are together again. The boys will get the mill workable, and we will rebuild our marriage. We can make all the magic we need, now that the bad fairies are gone.” She kissed him. “Yz will be fine, and she may be back. She has to find her own way.”

The miller nodded. “She has looked after me for many years. But she is...”

“She is with her fairy godmother. She will be fine.”

The Nix called the boys back to the mill and asked them to complete the cleaning up. She explained that Yz would not be back for a long while and that she was fine.

Cobb hung his head. His princely clothing was quite dirty, and he had not been able to be the man that Yz would choose. Then again, she had not chosen Ward either.

“If we go back to my house,” Ward said, “I have another set of clothes you might be able to wear, and we could wash those.”

Cobb nodded. “What will you do when we finish here?”

“I’m going out in the world to work as a traveling musician, maybe find a larger village, and learn a trade. Or just travel.” Ward patted his pocket. “I have a bit of magic myself.”

Cobb sighed. “Could you use a dancing bear? I would not have to be very good at it.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Not for you. For myself. You will teach me how to be a man, and we will make our way.” Cobb picked up a shovel to scoop another load of detritus onto a sack to be pulled away.

The miller walked up. “You boys are doing a great job. Could you dig a big hole to put all this stuff in? That would let it compost into good garden dirt. We could have a garden.”

“Of course,” Cobb said. “Show me where you want it.”

The Nix came over to Ward. “Thank you for your help in clearing the mill. There is another woman for you. You’ll know her when you see her—a woman in red rags who lives in the wild with a serpent and a wolf.”

“And Cobb?”

“I have not seen his future,” the Nix said. “He has many things to learn and many decisions to make before his path will appear. Help him be the man he wishes to be, and let him be the bear he knows well.”

“I can do that.” Ward smiled.

CHAPTER 78 TWILIGHT LOUNGE

The long trip through the no-space-no-time ended with a thump on a path in front of Fairy Godmother Headquarters. Late afternoon sun beamed sideways through the shrubbery.

Maven climbed out of Yz's lap, stretching all her limbs and back to get the kinks out. The cat body had gotten stronger, and Maven fought for control of the mind, to remember she was human. She was tired, but it was the last hour of the last day, with no moon in the night.

Maven sent a call through her wand to Calliope and Tulip to come and help her. She'd cross wands with them if necessary to defeat the witch and free Fiona.

Then she'd deal with the aftermath.

"I'm taking you to meet the Fairy Godmother Superior," Maven told Yz.

The puppies whined and struggled to get free of their bindings.

"Does she decide if I can be a fairy godmother?"

"Yes, but she's been...under the weather for a while. That has to be remedied first."

Maven sent out another call for her fairy godmother friends. She had some control over the puppies, but none over Calliope and Tulip. She'd have to explain her plan to them. She might need more help than that.

Instead of going to Fiona's office, she took Yz to the Twilight Lounge. Standing in the entry, Maven explained about personas, and how each patron took on a different appearance until midnight.

"I'm going to change how you look. It's a rule here," Maven said. An image of her familiar flashed in her mind. She turned Yz into a large serpent. The puppies hung from a loop in the serpent's neck.

She didn't bother with the puppies or herself.

"Very funny," Yz hissed.

The Twilight Lounge looked like a large tavern with wooden booths for patrons along the sides, most of which were empty. A wolf and a sheep sat in one, and another held a couple of hobbits.

At one end, a marble slab the color of swamp water was supported by two large, living trees. A big woman with brown skin, bright red hair, and a green sarong stood behind the bar—the barmaid Belle.

They went to the bar, where a box appeared on a table for Maven to sit in, and a coiled basket for Yz. Maven jumped up and settled herself. Yz coiled in the basket.

Belle gave Maven the stink-eye, but she reached under the bar and brought out a tall pink beverage with a long straw for Yz. Maven got a dish of cream, and two treats appeared for the puppies.

Yz uncoiled her tail and delicately picked up a treat, feeding it to a puppy. She gave Maven a sideways look and then smiled, fangs and all, as she fed the other puppy its treat.

"So what do you want, Cat?" Belle asked. "You ain't been around here for a while."

“R&R,” Maven said. “Have you talked to Fiona lately?”

Belle nodded. “Can’t help you with that one. You got some insane scheme to fix her?”

“Either that or be full-on cat,” Maven said. “This is a client, Yz, who’s considering becoming a fairy godmother.”

“My sympathies,” Belle said to Yz. She nodded at Maven. “Not all poof and sparkles, is it?” She took a closer look at the puppies and shook her head. She picked a rag from under the counter and started polishing the dark stone slab of the bar.

“You already know what it’s going to take,” Belle said. “Not safe for any of you, even if the others show up.”

Two more creatures approached the bar, a small dragon and a large butterfly. They didn’t ask for drinks but stood by Maven’s box.

Another cat appeared on the bar, a big ginger.

“Get off!” Belle cried, snapping the cat with her rag.

The cat jumped to the floor, transforming into the Serpent, the same size as Yz. “We’re all here. What are you planning to do?”

“Now you want to help?” Maven said, glaring at the Serpent. “Fine.”

She outlined her plan to Calliope the butterfly and Tulip the dragon. “We will have to cross our wands,” Maven said. “If we just break the witch’s wand, she will possess Fiona completely.”

CHAPTER 79 CROSSED WANDS

After some discussion of what happens when wands are crossed, when the adepts may struggle to have power over the others, Belle finally spoke up.

“Fairy Godmothers do not kill.” She went back to polishing the bar, scrying into its depths as she did. “There’s a lot of very dark magic here. Do you think you can handle it?”

What the Nix had told Maven came into her mind: *Why do you think you can grant a wish when you have never killed for your food?*

“Witches kill.” Maven nodded at the puppies. “Bears and mice kill.” She glanced over to her familiar, the Serpent. “Snakes kill. And so do cats.” She lapped up the last of the cream in her saucer. Then she faced Calliope and Tulip.

“If either of you wants to take the lead, I’ll back you up.”

Both fairy godmothers shook their heads. The puppies whined, struggling again to get out of their dance shoes.

“Then if the witch takes me over, can you kill me?” Maven stared at them with that penetrating gaze all cats have. Everyone, including Belle, looked away.

“I will,” the Serpent said. “Always-s-s an option. Not one I prefer, but I am prepared.”

“Let’s do this,” Maven said. “I’m running out of

time.”

She poofed everyone but Belle into Fiona’s office.

The small toadstool seats skittered back against the wall, and the jars of fairy dust rattled and shifted on their shelves. Fiona did not even look up from where she gazed into her crystal.

The ghost of Black Anise the witch, now completely surrounding Fiona, smirked at them. “Brought reinforcements did you? It’s too late.”

Maven said nothing but leaped onto the old desk, butting her head against the crystal. It fell from its stand and rolled over against the big ledger Fiona kept. That was not her prize though. She knocked the wand off the desk. She jumped down before Fiona or Anise could swipe at her and grabbed the wand with all her claws, pulling it tight. She rolled onto her back and laid her tail along the length of it.

“Now” she yelled, human voice and cat yowl sounding together.

Tulip and Calliope touched their wands to Maven, and Yz dropped the puppies on top of her, still tied together.

Several of the jars of fairy dust fell from the shelves, their corks unstoppered, and the fairy dust inside flowed out to sparkle over them all.

Maven was cast into a maelstrom in the zilchzeit along with the many souls Anise had taken to maintain her life. Mama Bear’s kills were there too, as well as the souls of the fairies from Fiona’s shelves.

They swirled around her, their faces screaming soundlessly, except for Anise, whose yellow eyes cast

a gleam over her gray, cadaverous face.

Maven felt the great power that could be hers, the power of all those trapped souls as well as the shining lights of Tulip and Calliope. Fiona's soul flickered like a guttering candle, as Anise had not completely overcome her will.

Thoughts of all the wishes she could grant, the wrongs she could right, the riches that she could control and bestow on whomever she pleased...or whoever pleased her. She would not have to answer to anyone anymore, be scolded for breaking protocol, or be told she was too fat, too loud, or too different. She could do as she damn well pleased, and no one could stop her.

"Yes-s-s, the power of the dark s-s-ide," whispered a voice in her ear, the serpent wearing a dark, angular mask and a cloak for the wide shoulders it did not have. "Complete freedom to do whatever you like, and no one to s-s-say no."

Maven wanted that. She was so tired of always being wrong, always being the odd one out, always the one not chosen. Now she could be The One.

She could give Yz arms and let her be the woman she could have been.

Then at the edge of the confusion, she saw Yz, pale, her mouth open to wail, her eyes open wide in horror, tears running down her face, her head shaking.

"NO!" Yz screamed, the sound coming from beyond the darkness.

CHAPTER 80 FAIRY GODMOTHERS AND CATS

Fairy godmothers do not kill. The thought floated through Maven's mind. She would have to give up being a fairy godmother then. It wasn't as though she had been good at it.

She brought herself out of the zilchzeit back to Fiona's office, still in her cat form. She would never be The One, but she was the one who put a stop to this madness, no matter the cost.

The empty jar that had held fairy dust was beside her. She pushed her will into Anise's wand, transforming it into a roach that ran for the jar and disappeared inside.

Maven stoppered the jar, thumping her tail to seal with jar with magic.

Again she fell into the zilchzeit, but all the other souls had vanished, except Anise.

"You think you have won, little kitten?" Anise laughed.

She reached out to pick Maven up, but Maven transformed herself into a panther, dark and deadly. She did not mock or stalk Anise, but pounced on her, biting through her neck and crushing her skull.

Anise disappeared, leaving nothing behind, not even fairy dust.

"Fairy godmothers do not kill, but witches and cats do," Maven said. She had killed, with extreme prejudice and malice aforethought. She expected to

fill one of those fairy dust jars herself when she rematerialized. If she did.

The Serpent had promised. She deserved no better.

Had those other souls escaped or were they still trapped in Anise's wand? She had no way to know, and could not do anything about it here.

What would she be when she returned to Faery? A cat? A panther? A woman? Did it matter if she were dead?

Maven swished her tail to bring herself back to the office. Nothing happened. She was alone in the no-space-no-time between dimensions.

She guessed the Serpent had done as it promised. She was tired. She relaxed into nothingness.

It had been a long night with no moonlight, cloudy with no stars. Even the magical light, which usually kept Fiona's office comfortably illuminated, faded into gloom.

Yet long nights end.

Belle opened the office door and let in the early morning sunlight.

Fiona lay slumped across her desk, asleep or unconscious. Tulip and Calliope sat on the toadstools, leaning on each other for comfort, dozing. The puppies lay sleeping, exhausted from trying to escape.

Yz had propped herself in a corner, her head on

her knees.

Neither Maven nor her erstwhile familiar was present.

Belle snapped her fingers. A trolley appeared with pastries, steaming coffee, cream, sugar, and appropriate crockery.

She woke up Tulip and Calliope first, offering them strong, sweet coffee made the way Maven liked it.

Each of them stretched and then cradled the mugs in their hands, smelling the magical aroma and warming their hands.

A pan of warm water appeared beside Yz, along with a towel. Belle woke her gently, setting a plate of pastry and another mug beside her on a low table.

“Ask the mug for what you want...coffee, tea, cocoa, milk,” Belle told her.

For Fiona, Belle made strong, black coffee. She called one of the toadstools over to her so she could sit beside Fiona, supporting her as she woke.

The witch had not allowed Fiona to leave the office, nor Belle to come in. She didn't know if Fiona had eaten or drunk anything that whole month, or how much of her life force was left now that the witch was with Maven. She held Fiona's head against her shoulder and passed the cup of coffee under her nose to wake her up. She set the cup on the desk as Fiona stirred, her eyes fluttering open.

“Belle,” Fiona whispered. She leaned against Belle's broad bosom, relaxing as if to go back to sleep.

Then she jerked awake, sitting up in her usual

erect posture, nearly knocking over the coffee. She stared around her office, wide-eyed and mouth opened.

“Where is Maven?” she demanded.

“Calm yourself and drink your coffee,” Belle said. “We aren’t sure where she is. Or if she still exists.”

She shivered from what she had seen when all of them had touched their wands together. She’d seen the struggle of the cat and the witch, had seen them vanish, along with the other fairy godmothers’ wands.

CHAPTER 84 ANOTHER CHOICE

In the dark no-thing-ness of zilchzeit, Maven stirred. She rolled over, pulling at her gossamer to cover her like an old, soft quilt. Something kept tickling her ear, so she pulled the gossamer quilt over her head.

“Wake up, S-s-sleepyhead,” hissed a soft voice that her quilt did not block. It seemed to be beside her, under the quilt with her. Something tickled her ear again.

She brushed her hand against her ear and felt a hard nose beside her head. The warm quilt over her body started to squeeze her just a bit. She stiffened, her arms pinned by the Serpent’s sinuous curves.

“S-s-so what do you want, Maven? Do you want to be a witch, or do you want to be a fairy godmother?” The Serpent’s tongue tickled her ear again.

She struggled but the curves tightened on her.

“You have killed. Do you want to die? I can help with that.” The Serpent tightened a bit more. “Or do you want another day to grant a wis-s-sh?”

“Do I really have a choice?” Maven relaxed as much as she could, trying not to struggle against the serpentine bonds.

“S-s-silly woman. There is-s-s always-s-s a choic-s-se.” The Serpent tightened around her just a bit more.

She could still breathe, but just.

“What do you do not have is-s-s time.” The Serpent squeezed tighter and licked her, letting a fang graze her cheek. “Choos-s-se now.”

“I...want...to...be...a...fairy...god...mo...ther,” Maven said, gasping for breath.

The Serpent uncoiled itself, tail first, bringing its head around to face Maven. “If you ever change your mind, you know who to call.”

For a moment Maven saw a fanged smile fade into the darkness.

Then she landed with a thump on the floor of Fiona’s office. She was herself again, a chubby, middle-aged woman wearing tattered gossamer, holding a slightly bent wand. She pushed herself up to sit cross-legged and get her Bump of Direction back online.

Everyone stared at her except for the puppies who whimpered. They were hungry, thirsty, and needed to be washed.

“What happens now?” Belle asked. She nodded at Maven’s wand, the only one that survived.

“That depends on Yz,” Maven said. “If those two are to remain as dogs, someone needs to look after them, feed, walk and wash them...soon. If not, then what to do with them?”

Fiona consulted her ledger. “One is Calysta, a.k.a. Mama Bear, and the other Panya, a.k.a. Queen of the Mice. Both disappeared into their own stories some 20 cycles ago. It’s your spell, Maven. Only you can undo it.”

Maven scooted around to look at Yz. “You are in

the middle of their stories—each of them made choices that affected your life. You had a chance to drown them once. They are literally in your shoes now. What shall we do?”

“Why is it up to me? I don’t know.” She reached out her foot and picked up her mug of cocoa. She sipped and stared at the puppies, unable to take on anything else. “I don’t need anything else to take care of. Change them back to whatever they really are.”

Maven tore off a couple more pieces of her gossamer and placed one on each puppy. The puppies swelled into human form, each wearing one ballet shoe. Maven doused them with warm water to wash away the puppy mess and wrapped them in the gossamer, which turned into large, fluffy towels.

Belle brought them coffee and pastry. Two more toadstools moved over to them so that they could sit. While they sucked down the coffee and gobbled the pastry, Maven stood and faced them.

“Your lives have been saved twice by Yz,” Maven said. “The least you could do is apologize to her.”

When the two fairies continued eating, Maven flicked her wand and put them both on their knees.

Careful, hissed a voice near her ear.

“Sorry,” both fairies mumbled. They sounded more tired than regretful.

Maven let them get up and finish their meal. She went to Fiona’s desk to ask what kinds of Restraint and Re-education might be available for them.

“It’s ironic you would ask, having just come back yourself,” Fiona said. She flipped through an appendix at the back of her large ledger. She ran her

finger down the page. “Here we go. A child needs a teddy bear for emotional support.” She nodded to Maven, who swished her wand, at once transforming Panya into a teddy bear and then making her disappear.

Fiona continued to search, making a humming noise occasionally.

“What will happen when the child grows up?” Yz asked.

“The bear will be forgotten,” Fiona said, “and will eventually come back here. As for this one, I think she can be a helper for one of our Cinderellas.”

Calysta turned into a mouse, dressed as a peasant, and disappeared.

“Now that is taken care of,” Fiona said, turning to Yz. “I understand you want to be a fairy godmother. Have you any magical talent?”

“I don’t know,” Yz said. “I can do a lot of things with my feet, but that’s not magic.”

“True,” Fiona said. She sighed. “Perhaps we can sleep on it and decide another day.”

“I would like that,” Yz said.

“I think we all need some rest,” Fiona said, “and tomorrow we can see what else needs to be managed. If it is all right with you, Maven?”

Maven startled. “Yes, of course. May we go now? Are there still pods for everyone?”

“Yes,” Fiona said. “Tulip, show Yz where she can stay while she is here. Belle, help me to my room.” Belle stood, helping Fiona to stand, and then supported her to walk to a door that appeared at the back of her office.

Maven and Calliope were left alone.

“Without my wand,” Calliope said, “I can’t go back to the Palace. What do you plan to do?”

“I’m going to sleep as long as I can, and then see what tomorrow brings. This story isn’t finished yet.”

CHAPTER 85 WHO'S IN CHARGE

After many hours of sleep, Maven, Yz, Calliope, and Tulip met in the Twilight Lounge. Maven gave them all personas of butterflies, lightening the mood from the previous day.

Belle was staying with Fiona, so her dour Owl managed the bar. It gave no advice and did not polish the bar or scry into its depths. It merely extended a foot with the appropriate beverage, nectar in fluted glassware. When everyone was served, it closed its large eyes and pretended to sleep.

Yz had a bit of an issue having six feet instead of two and wings as well. After trying to flutter around or use her front legs, she just perched on her flower stool, as the others did, and drank the nectar. She found it strange to be able to talk even when she did not have the right kind of mouth for it.

“We will have to get new wands,” Tulip said. “Maven, can you take us to the place where we went before?” Her wings faded from a bright pink to a pale cream color.

“I’m pretty sure, and I have a guide,” Maven said, thinking of her familiar, the Serpent from the Garden. “Fiona will also need one, but Belle will know when it’s time. The old witch spirit did a lot of damage to her.”

“That puts you in charge,” Calliope said, “at least for now.” She lifted her glass. “Congratulations.”

“I don’t want the job,” Maven protested. Her wings flapped, lifting her off the flower. “I don’t know enough. I don’t have the experience.”

“Neither do I,” Tulip said, “I’ve been a fairy godmother less time than you have.” She had spent a long while in Mundane before Maven brought her back to Faery.

“I don’t want it either,” Calliope said. “I’ve had a lot of experience, and supervision of you lot is certainly not on my agenda.” She took a long sip of her nectar, emptying the glass. “And I don’t have a wand. It’s on you, Maven.”

Maven sighed. She still had a client with an unspoken wish, no happily-ever-after or even happy-for-now. “Faery can wait one more day. I don’t even know how to use the ledger and the crystal ball.”

Nobody had anything else to say. Tulip and Calliope left, and the Owl flew into a space that appeared in the back wall.

Just Maven and Yz perched at the bar, slowly flapping their wings in silence.

Although it was not near midnight, Maven changed them back to their usual selves. She thought they’d be more comfortable that way, and they needed to talk.

“You are my client,” Maven said. “But here’s the rule about wishing. I can only grant what you ask for, not what you want.”

Yz nodded, her mouth drooping, her eyes lowered. “I did ask you to bring my mother back. And you did.” She slumped, draped over the flower stool. “Are you saying you’d give me a second wish?”

“Yes, if you know what you want.” Maven flicked her wand several times, creating little action figures on the bar...a fairy godmother, a peasant wife, a dancer, and a seller of herbs and tinctures. None of the figures had arms, and all of them looked like Yz. “These aren’t your only options, of course.” Maven made them disappear. “Cobb learned how to shift to be a man. Ward took his mother back home where the harp could soothe her. Your father got your mother and the mill back. Their wishes were granted.”

Yz didn’t respond.

“They didn’t all get what they wanted though,” Maven said. “But magic can’t make people fall in love. It’s not even good at showing you who you really are.”

“What if I don’t have any magic?” Yz pulled her knees up to meet her chin. “How could I grant wishes for other people without magic?”

“Everybody has some kind of magic.” Maven shrugged. “Maybe yours is figuring out how to do things other people can’t do.”

“But that’s always so hard.”

“You said the girls in the village didn’t have it so easy either,” Maven said, “even with their arms. That’s just life.”

“What if I don’t like being a fairy godmother? Can I just quit?”

“As long as I am in charge, you can. But here’s another rule.” Maven stood up, taking on her best authoritative teacher stance. “If you decide to quit, you give up your magic. That’s what Mama Bear and

the Mouse Queen didn't do. They granted their own wishes, made up their own stories, and forced other people do to what they wanted. You saw how that turned out."

Yz shuddered. She remembered all too well. Her whole life had been an illusion, a lie.

"So what do you wish for?" Maven held up her wand, ready to swish and flick it. "When are you going to stop being afraid that you will get it?"

CHAPTER 86 WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT?

In the silence of the Twilight Lounge, Yz said nothing, still curled up as tightly as she could on her perch.

Maven held up a finger. “Cobb loves you, and would do anything for you, but while he’s a great bear, he knows nothing of being a man, especially in society. You don’t know that much either.”

She raised another finger. “Ward cares for you, but he wants to make things, to make music, and by doing so, to take care of you.”

Another finger rose. “Your parents want you to be happy, but they don’t need you to look after them.”

With the fourth finger, Maven said. “You have to decide what you want. No path will be easy. Magic is always a bitch. Always unintended consequences that you can’t predict—guess how I know.”

After a few moments of silence, Maven started tapping her foot. “Stand up, woman, and use that backbone you have spent so many years developing. What do you want?”

Yz slipped off the flower, which disappeared. She frowned, her eyes narrowed to slits with anger. “What do you want, Fairy Godmother? You don’t want to be the boss, but you destroyed all the wands. You are the one with the magic. What do *YOU* want? What is *YOUR* wish?”

Maven smiled. At least the woman was standing

up to her, challenging her. “I want to help people get what they want. I want to help people know what they want, but I’m not allowed to tell them. But I don’t want to escape into my own story, not when I’ve just gotten myself back.”

“So what are you going to do when they come back?” Her stance moved to a crouch as if she would butt her head into Maven’s solar plexus.

“I’ll take them to make their wands,” Maven said, meeting her stare. “Then we’ll see what needs to happen next. Much like you, I do what I think needs to be done. Even if it’s hard. Even if I don’t like it.”

But you do it as you damn well pleas-s-se, whispered the Serpent.

Maven propped her hands on her hips. “I do what I damn well please the best I know how, even when that’s not good enough.”

“Then I’ll go with you to make a wand.” Yz straightened her back and held up her head. “I’ll be a fairy godmother, and I’ll see if I can make some people’s wishes come true.”

“Good enough.” Maven flicked her wand and sent Yz back to her pod.

She stood there alone, feeling the weight of her decisions. She almost wished she could have stayed a cat, but unless she had someone to feed her and keep a nice rug by a fireplace for her to sleep, that could be a hard life too.

What I wouldn’t do for a beer right now, she thought. Surely there was some way to step across the Veil just long enough for a cold one.

A frosty mug appeared on the bar, untouched by

human hand or owl claw. Glistening white foam sat an inch thick at the top of a sparkling gold liquid.

Maven's mouth watered as she anticipated the reward for the ordeal she had come through. She reached for the mug, feeling the heft of it, the cold seeping into her fingers.

She lifted it to take a long swig.

Near beer. Not even that.

There's-s-s no beer in Faery, whispered her familiar, the weight of its chin on her shoulder.

She quaffed it anyway. It would not do to grant her own wish.

THE END

Thank you for reading Fairy Catmother.

If you've enjoyed Maven's second month on the job,
please write a short review.

Maven's adventures continue when she is
the New Wand in Town later in 2023.

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the Maven touch.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing healing fiction that makes people laugh while they are changing their lives.

Charlotte Babb began writing when she could hold a piece of chalk and scribble her name—although she sometimes mistook "Chocolate" for "Charlotte" on the sign at the drug store ice cream counter.

When her third-grade teacher allowed her access to the fiction room at the school library, Charlotte discovered Louisa Alcott and Robert Heinlein, an odd marriage of the minds. These two authors have had the most influence on her desire to share her point of view with the world and to explore how the world might be made better.

She brings to any project varied experiences, including work as a technical writer, gasket inspector, cloth store associate, girl Friday, and telephone psychic.

She has studied the folk stories of many cultures and wonders what happened to ours.

Where are the stories for people who have survived marriage, divorce, child-rearing, education, bankruptcy, and widowhood? She writes them.

Read more about her:

<https://linktr.ee/charlottehenleybabb>

Email her at charlotte.babb@gmail.com