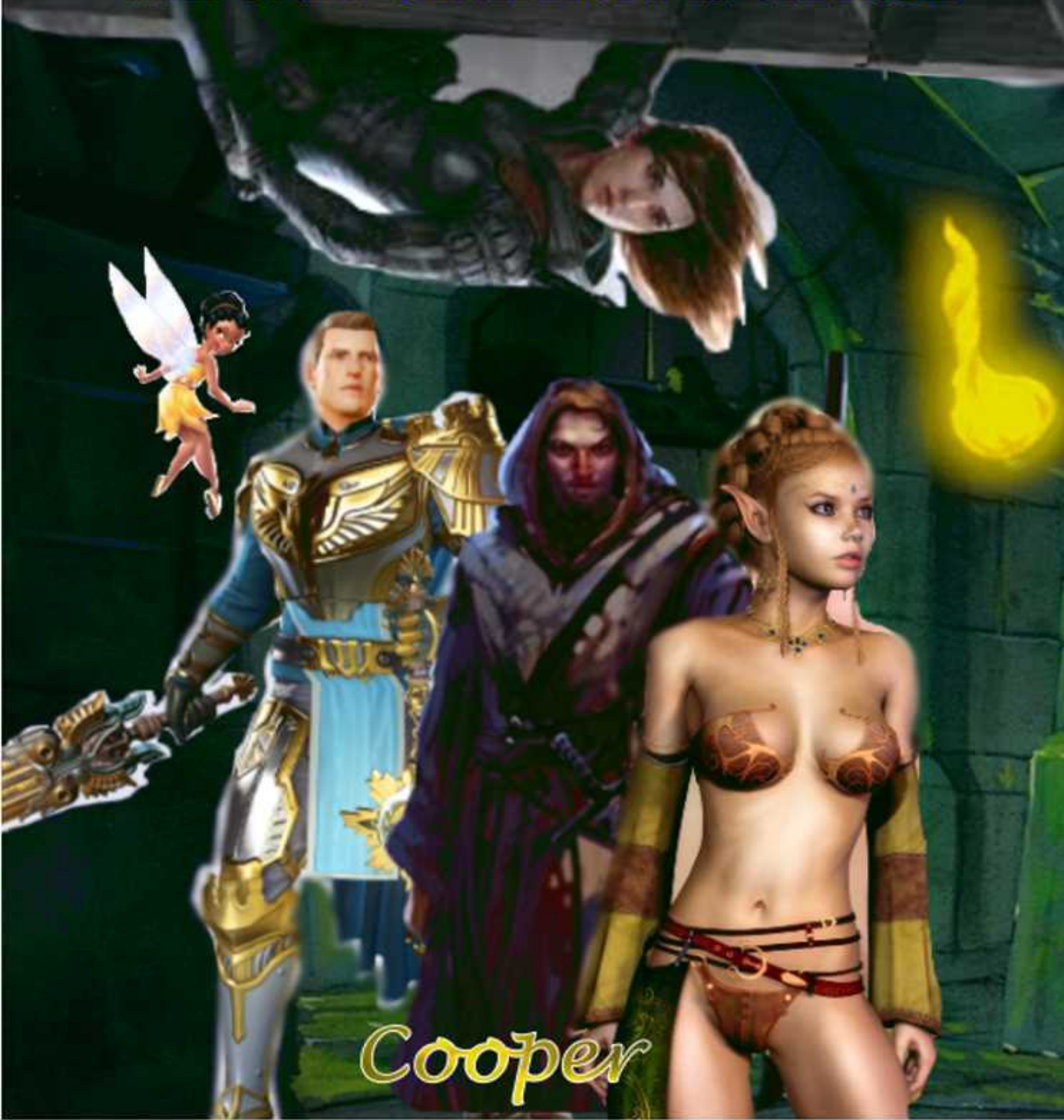


Allmyth

THE ONLY CERTAINTY IS CHANGE



Cooper

Allmyth

by Cooper

"This is your big surprise?" Nari asked, crinkling her nose in disgust.

"Yeah," Ravi said, putting his hand on the small of her back and pushing her into the room.

"Welcome to the world of Allmyth," a shaggy headed man with a huge red beard shouted, raising two meaty arms in the air. "I am the one called Big Beard."

Ravi leaned closer to Nari as he led her around a large, wooden table to an open spot in the middle of a wooden bench. She glanced toward the door, wishing they could at least sit closer to the exit. A skinny kid with long, greasy black hair smiled at her as she sat down and mumbled something, quickly looking away in order to avoid eye contact.

"What?" Nari asked.

He mumbled again.

"He said his name is Kent," Ravi answered, starting to sit down, but Nari put a hand on his shoulder and hissed, "Can I have a word?"

"Let's settle in first and..."

Nari dug her nails into his shoulder and said, "Now."

"Ow! Be right back, everyone."

"We'll just be a second," Nari said, forcing a smile.

As they started to leave, the big beard said, "I think he is having trouble with his wench."

As soon as they were in the hall and the door closed, Nari said, "What the fuck?"

"Come on," Ravi said. Nari was Korean, with curly black hair and brown, almond eyes. She was really cute, a member of Theta Tau Alpha, and she'd helped him move into the college's more cool social set in part by forcing him to stop being such a geek, but he was determined to get her to at least try role-playing once.

"You told me this was going to be a party. You dragged me through a storm for a real party!"

"It is. It's a role-playing party."

"I told you I'm not interested in that nerdy shit."

"Just try it. You'll like it."

"What the fuck are you doing with people like them, anyway? The only thing worse than their hair is their skin."

"Hey. Those are my old friends from high-school."

"I can't even believe it," Nari said, looking up at the tall, handsome man in front of her.

"I was one of the only Indian kids at that school, and we were in Latin and Math club together. Who else was I gonna hang out with? Besides, they always had really good weed."

"We can get good weed someplace else. Let's get out of here."

"One night. Just one. Then never again. This way you'll know me better, know something about how I used to be, and that will deepen our relationship, right?"

Nari squinted. Like she always did when she was starting to give in to him.

Ravi stepped forward and gathered her into his arms. "You'll see part of my old life. It's bonding."

"Ugh. You are the worst."

Ravi pulled Nari close, tilted her head back, kissed her, then, keeping her close said, "Just this once."

"You have to see Magic Mike XXL with me..."

Ravi frowned.

"...and my girlfriends."

"Never mind. Let's just leave."

"Oh no. I'm all into this now." Nari turned and opened the door.

"Welcome to Allmyth," she said sarcastically.

Ravi smiled and walked back into the room.

"Excellent," Big Beard said. "Let's commence the revels." With that, he reached back and snagged a glittering hookah from the counter behind him and, lighting a lighter and holding it in the air, said, "With this sacred herb we summon forth the god and goddess of magic, Transfacca and Transfine, and ask them to bless this sacred gathering with their presence."

"Grantus," the group chanted in response as he lit up.

Nari covered her mouth to hide her smile.

Swirling tendrils of cool, gray smoke filled the room, and soon Nari felt pleasantly stoned and happy to have a chance to say something nice.

"This is really good weed."

"No one grows better," Ravi said, nodding toward Big Beard.

"You grew this?"

Big Beard nodded, smiling blissfully. "Yes. And thank you, Ravi. Now, you have met Kent and myself. The other members of this band are Olaf, who we all think is a Russian spy, but who believes himself to be a rapper, and Esther."

"Oh, you're a...?"

"Girl?" Esther spat. "Yeah. That's right. I am." She had a short, boyish haircut and a square jaw, and looked actually like a preppy frat boy.

"I didn't mean..."

"Yes, you did."

Nari paused, realizing that Esther was getting the upper hand, and then she let her hard, shark smile spread across her face and said in a calm, flat voice, "Don't act all offended when you are clearly trying to look like a dude."

"And who are you to impose your gender normative standards on me, princess?"

"Fuck you," Nari said.

"Okay. Okay," Ravi said. "Let it drop. We are here to have fun."

Nari and Esther stared at each other for a minute, then they both

smiled and shrugged, almost like mirror images.

"This will be fun..." Big Beard said. Just then, a massive thunderclap shook the room, rattling the windows, and the lights flickered.

"What the fuck?" Ravi said.

"Shit."

"The storm is getting worse," Olaf said.

"Thanks for the newsflash," Esther said.

Big Beard slid a yellow sheet of paper across the table to Nari.

"That's your character sheet," Ravi said. "It tells your race, class, skills and that kind of stuff."

"What's a priestess do?" Nari said, skimming over the sheet and focusing on the part that actually made some sense to her.

"Heal and protect," Ravi said.

"Very feminine," Esther said.

"That is boring," Nari said. "And it says I'm an elven princess? Can't I be a warrior? I want to kick ass!"

"I'm a knight," Ravi said, "and Esther is a Berserker. Kent a burglar and Olaf is our wizard. The party needs a healer, and anyway there isn't time

to make a whole new character," Ravi said.

"Can I at least have a crossbow?"

"You have a mace."

"Mace? They have that in the middle ages?"

"Not mace," Big Beard said. "A mace. It's like a club, but your character only resorts to violence as a last resort."

"I get to heal and protect people!" Nari said, giving Ravi a dark look. "That's your idea of a fantasy for me? Let's switch characters. You be the healing princess elf chick."

"Nah. This knight is my character," Ravi said. "I built him up from first level."

"Well, don't expect me to heal you," Nari said.

"Get a room," Esther said.

"Well, don't worry," Big Beard said, "because one thing about Allmyth is that it has a way of finding the truth about people. I am sure you will thrive in this adventure, Princess."

Again, the room was shook by a massive shockwave of thunder, and then again, and again. Everyone started looking around nervously, except for Big Beard who laughed and said, "This building is made of steel and granite.

It won't fall."

"I'm not going out in that anyway," Olaf said, taking a long toke from the hookah.

"Then close your eyes, everyone, and let's begin."

Nari took Ravi's hand in hers, feeling a little scared at the terrible storm and the way it was shaking the building, but glad to be inside with her boyfriend, and she closed her eyes, feeling ridiculous, and then Big Beard spoke:

"You are gathered in a clearing of the Tiresian Wood, next to the Fawn's Fountain, and you have to make a choice..."

As he spoke, lightning flashed, thunder once again shook the building, the lights went out casting the group into total darkness, and the adventure began.

Part II

Nari opened her eyes and saw the clear, blue sky above her. Where am I? What happened? She'd been in the apartment of the weird beard guy, right? Then how? The storm. The lightning. Am I dead? She wondered.

Ravi?

She sat up and immediately looked down. Her breasts were huge, swelling out of some kind of tight, leather top. Her boobs had never been so big, and where had all of these bracelets and bangles come from? Getting to her feet she felt dizzy as she took in the scene-- huge, ancient trees crowding over some kind of clearing, an ancient looking fountain with a statue of some kind of goat man, and all around the clearing people-- strange people, unconscious, and all dressed in costumes like some kind of cosplay nerd fest.

Or...

No. Nari looked at the people. She'd seen enough movies to recognize the types-- what looked like a young Dumbledore, and would obviously be a wizard, two burly armored warrior looking dudes, a skinny little runty dude that would then be the thief and... she walked cautiously over to the last of the sleepers-- little winged woman that looked like a black Tinker Bell.

Who could that be? She didn't remember anyone being a tinker bell or a pixie or whatever, but the rest were just like the characters that had been described to her and she.... Nari reached up and felt her ears to find that they were, indeed, pointed. She walked over to the fountain and looked down to see a stunningly beautiful woman looking back at her-- the fact that this

woman was prettier than she'd been made her feel strangely jealous of herself even as she took in her full lips and wide, pretty eyes.

Am I dead?" She wondered, again. Dreaming?

People don't turn into fantasy characters. It doesn't happen. So, I am either dead or dreaming. She ran her hands over the rough stone of the fountain. Took in the deep breath of the musky smell of the forest, looked at the twisted branches of the ancient trees, and, listening, heard the gentle insect hum and the occasional rustling coming from the shadowy depths of the wood. It all seemed real to her, more real than real, though, too real.

Dead or asleep, what the hell do I do now?

She looked at the warriors-- one looked like a knight from a fairytale, with shining silver armor and long, lustrous blonde hair, a neatly trimmed beard. The other was bigger with a wild beard that hung down to his belly and a shaggy mass of hair into which had been woven feathers and beads. If they were their characters, then the put together one had to be Ravi, she figured. Maybe she should wake him up?

There was a grunting sound from someone behind her, and she spun. Then, she heard another, and a growl. Nari felt her heart start to race, even as she chanted to herself-- this isn't real. This isn't real.

"The elf bitch is awake," a foul voice hissed from somewhere in the

darkness of the forest.

"Mistress said they would be sleeping," another answered. Hissing and murmurs followed.

Nari backed to the fountain and started to move toward the sleeping knight.

There was rustling and movement in the forest, and then Nari saw them-- tiny red eyes staring at her from the shadows. She started toward the knight again, and one of the voices shrieked, "Don't move! Stand still!"

Nari stopped.

"You just stay there and don't move a muscle," the voice said. "We won't hurt you..."

The creatures began to move, creeping forward until they emerged from the edge of the forest, creeping forward, creeping, sniffing the air with their wet, pink noses, their whiskers twitching. Emerging into the light, the creatures looked like giant rats walking on their hind legs and wearing rag-tag suits of mismatched armor.

"Put up your hands now," the lead rat said. "My name is Bauble, and I am a friend." As Nari raised her hands, Bauble pulled a pair of rusty iron handcuffs from his belt and twirled them around.

At the sight of the iron cuffs, Nari felt terror seize her, and instantly and without even thinking, mysterious words sprung to her lips and light began to shine from her hands.

The rats howled and jabbered, some fleeing back into the forest, but Bauble grabbed a knife from his belt and charged toward Nari, who unleashed the light power within her and then barely managed to side step the lunging Bauble. Falling into a crouch, remembering all of her martial arts training, Nari spun, realizing that three of the creatures were closing in-- but she also saw that the sleeping bodies behind her were stirring, so she yelled, "Come and get me, rat!"

Bauble hissed. "We are not rats!"

"Filthy, dirty rats!"

"I'll make you pay for that, elf whore."

The rats scurried forward, closing in, knives flashing in their hands, and Nari felt her heart racing as she searched within herself for more of the strange magic that had come earlier. She didn't have time to wonder anymore if it was real or a dream or something else-- she'd gone into full on survival mode, and as the first of the rats lunged forward she grabbed its arm and executed a perfect throw, sending the rat tumbling even as she dropped and rolled away before Bauble could strike.

Nari laughed as she bounced to her feet. What the fuck? She thought. This martial arts shit actually does work! "I'm going to kick your ass!" She said, her fists raised as the rats formed a triangle.

And then the net fell over her. "Oh, shit," she said, finding herself tangled in the thick rope, and suddenly she felt very afraid and twisted and tried to crawl, but the rats were on her and she found herself pinned to the ground, staring up at Bauble as he waved his knife in her face. "I have orders to bring you in alive," he said, drool from his mouth dripping down onto Nari's neck. "But they never said nothing about unscarred."

"No," Nari said, turning her head away as Bauble reached the knife toward her face.

"A nice big scar right down the side of your cheek," Bauble said. "Mark up that pretty elf face of yours." He grabbed her chin and yanked her head back to face him. "Beg!"

Nari squirmed helplessly, the knife moving closer until she felt the cold steel of the side of the blade pressed against her skin.

"Beg."

Nari closed her eyes. "Never."

And then she felt something warm and wet splash across her

forehead. Opening her eyes, she saw a bright steel blade stabbing through the throat of one of Bauble's henchmen even as a pair of thick, mighty arms wrapped themselves around Bauble's midsection, lifted him toward the sky and then hurled him across the clearing.

The third rat stood, frozen like a statue-- until the huge barbarian swung his ax and lopped the head off, the body collapsing to the ground.

The group got the net off Nari and helped her to her feet. The knight handed her a cloth, and she wiped the blood off her forehead, and then the group stood there awkwardly looking around, checking each other out, no one sure what to do or say. Nari finally decided to try something and just said, "My name is Nari?"

"Oh my God," the knight said, rushing forward and giving her a hug. "So that is you."

"And you're Ravi?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "Right. Sorry about that. I'm Ravi."

"You turned white," Nari said.

Ravi looked down at his pale skin. "Oh, yeah. Shit."

"I'm Olaf," the wizard said.

"Esther," the berserker said.

They all looked at the fluttering pixie, who was hovering, arms crossed under her breasts.

"So who the hell are you?"

"Isn't it obvious?" She said in her little pixie voice. "I'm... the only one left."

"Big Beard?" Ravi said.

He nodded. "I can't even say it!"

Just then there was a rustling in the woods and they all spun to see the slender, leather clad-- and Nari now saw that it was a young woman-- emerge from the woods. "The rats have all fled back that way," she said.

"You're Kent?" Nari said.

"Yeah," she said looking down, her cheeks blushing.

"You're a girl," Olaf said.

Kent mumbled something.

"So what the hell is going on?" Nari said.

"What does it seem like?" Esther said. "We're in the game."

"That isn't possible," Nari answered.

"Said the elf girl."

"I'm not a fucking elf."

"Look like one to..."

"Shut up!" Ravi said. "Look. I don't know what's happening or why or if this is real or what the fuck, but I do know that I don't want to be here when those rat things come back here in a fucking swarm of 500, so I say let's get out of here and get someplace safe."

"What makes you think they're coming back?" Esther said.

"Reinforcements," Kent mumbled. "Heard 'em say it."

"And it will be more like 5000," Big Beard said. "Mus Nest Mountain is not far from here."

"How do you know?" Nari said.

"I'm the Game Master," Big Beard said. "I created this world."

"So what's the shortest path to safety?"

"East," Big Beard said. "Germaine."

"It'll do," Ravi said, scratching at his beard.

"Yeah," Esther said. "Good enough."

"Wait," Nari said. "What's Germaine?"

"It's a city where the Mus are not welcome," Ravi said. "And where

we might be able to find a wizard to help us with this problem."

"We can find her," Olaf said. "But whether she'll help or not is a bigger question."

"Let's gather our gear and move out," Ravi said. Then, to Nari, "I'll answer all of your questions later, but for right now we need to move."

"Okay," she said.

Nari stuck close to Ravi as they gathered up back packs and gear. As the adrenalin wore off from the fight, she found herself feeling a little shaky, her hands trembling, and he noticed and took them in his. "It's going to be okay," he said, kissing her wrist.

Nari looked up at the strange white face, the golden hair. "Is that really you, Ravi?"

"Yes," he said. "And I know. It's kind of freaking me out, too."

"It's all just... and did we kill those things?" She glanced over at the dead bodies of the Mus.

"I think so," Ravi said. "But try to remember they aren't people."

"They could talk."

"Try not to think about it. Let's get to the town."

"And then what?"

"Maybe once we sleep, we'll wake up back home?"

"Fuckshit!" Big Beard squealed.

Ravi instinctively drew his sword and spun to see Big Beard on his knees, staring down at himself in the fountain. He was holding his long hair back, checking out his pretty face and breasts that, proportionate to his tiny body, were impressive. "I look like a Barbie doll!" Big Beard shrieked.

"Yes, you do," Esther said. "A really hot one."

"My boobs are huge!"

"Mine, too," Nari said.

"But I'm a dude!"

"I think you're actually a pixie now," Olaf said.

"Thanks for the newsflash."

They all gathered around, looking down at their new faces. They were all attractive now-- good looking men and women--- but none of them recognized themselves, the people they'd become, and they didn't recognize each other. It was a confused and alienated group of faces reflecting back from the cool waters of the pool, and they stared in wonder until the piercing howl of a bird broke the spell. Looking up, they saw the dark shape of a huge

bird circling above them.

"One of Gallathea's Spies," Big Beard said.

"You sure?" Ravi asked.

"Yes."

"We need to move," Ravi said. "Fall in line behind me. Esther at the rear, Kent with me, the rest in between."

"Who's Gallathea?" Nari asked.

"A witch who wants to enslave us," Ravi said. "Don't worry about it."

"She is so powerful," Big Beard said excitedly, "She even once defeated a demi-god..."

"Okay. Wait. What?" Nari said.

"I'll fill you in later," Ravi said, casting a warning glance at Big Beard. "We really need to move and soon. It looks like it is already past noon and I don't want that witch on our tail when the sun goes down."

The group started forward and followed behind as Ravi led them onto a narrow path that twisted off into the deep, dark woods. Big Beard flew up and landed on Ravi's shoulder. "You're heading north," he whispered.

"Throwing the witch off," he said.

"Good."

"What can you tell me about the path ahead?"

"The path is clear. Lots of stuff off the side paths. But, if the rules of the game hold, we do have to worry about random encounters."

"Shelter?"

Big Beard frowned prettily. "Rafe's Lair in a pinch. You cleared it out awhile back. Could still be empty."

"We'll see. In the meantime, keep your eyes open."

"Yup."

"You want me watching for traps?" Kent said in his soft, woman's voice.

"Yes. Of course."

"Okay," Kent said. He felt all tingly being this close to Ravi, and it made him happy that he got to talk to him and that Ravi wanted his help. As he focused, allowing the instincts of his character to take over, scanning the path ahead for any signs of danger, he started to become more aware of his new body. He did feel—weird-- in this new shape. He could sense the weight of his breasts, but unlike Nari or Big Beard his weren't bouncing out

there for the whole world to see, but his walk also felt funny, like his legs were too long. He had resisted the urge to really check out his body, and he didn't even want to think about what his boobs might look like naked.. It seemed pervy and wrong somehow to look or think about her naked even if she was him. It was okay to look at her face, though and he'd been surprised and actually pleased at how pretty his face was, and his shoulder length black hair was now shiny and bouncy instead of all greasy like when he'd been a boy. Maybe being a girl wouldn't be so bad? Maybe he wouldn't be such a loser now?

"Focus," Ravi said, putting a hand on Kent's shoulder.

"Sorry," Kent said, blushing, fluttery new feelings roiling in his tummy.

"Keep your eyes on the path. We don't want to get caught in a trap."

"Okay!" Kent said, and then giggled when Ravi gave him a playful slap on the ass.

Nari saw it. Slit her eyes. Don't you even think about stealing my boyfriend you little slut, she thought. Don't even think about it.

With the danger passed, the group walked along the trail, at first gawking in amazement at the ancient fantasy world forest, with the huge, gnarled trees drenched in moss and with leaves so thick they made the whole

forest seem more like a cavern of green. Little creatures like chipmunks scurried along the trail, and squirrels leapt among the branches. But soon, the strange novelty of their transformed world started to give way as a source of fascination to the novelty of their bodies.

Nari pulled at the tight leather vest she wore and which crushed her newly larger breasts, trying to get more comfortable with the new weight, and then glancing up she saw Esther looking down at her with a crooked smile on her rugged face.

“Too bad there are no sports bras in Allmyth,” Esther said, her voice a deep, melodic baritone.

Nari rolled her eyes. “I can’t even believe these are real—that any of this is real.”

“Yeah. Try waking up as a guy with a beard that hangs down to your belly button,” Esther said, tugging on her long, shaggy beard.

“But, didn’t you? I mean, that is your character? I thought—“

“That I wanted to be a guy? Hardly. Just thought it would be fun to play one in the game, not be one in real life. And this stupid beard itches like mad.”

“Let’s move quick and quiet, people,” Ravi called back. “Keep your

eyes open for random encounters.”

Nari liked the way Ravi had just taken command. He'd been a guy and had taken the lead in their relationship- most of the time, but there had also still been something of a boy about him, and now he seemed so sure and serious. Nari smiled, glad that he was her boyfriend. Looking ahead, though, and seeing the tall, blonde man in his glittering armor, she suddenly wondered. He is still my boyfriend, right? Or did that change with everything else?

Then, it happened. The air suddenly seemed to tremble and a hissing sound grew louder. The party dove for cover as a huge ball of fire shot down the path and then crashed into a huge stone boulder ahead of them, exploding in flames and sending cinders flying in every direction as a thick cloud of black smoke boiled up and gathered in the canopy of the thick trees.

Ravi drew his sword and leapt to his feet, spinning to find Olaf standing in the middle of the path, staring down at his smoking hands, his mouth gaping open in shock and surprise. “Ooops,” Olaf said.

“Ooops?” Ravi said. “Ooops?”

“What the hell?” Esther said, gripping her ax so tightly the veins in her face bulged as she struggled against her growing berserker rage.

“I didn't think it would really work,” Olaf said. “The spell kind of

came to me as I was walking and...”

“Guys?” Kent said. “Guys? The forest is burning.”

The turned and saw that the bushes along the path had ignited, as had the lower branches of the canopy. “Fuck,” Olaf said.

“Do you have a spell for this?” Big Beard asked.

“I don’t know...”

“Do you have a spell?” Ravi said.

“I can’t... remember.”

Big Beard found himself fluttering about like a hyperactive child, racing up and around to see what was happening in the forest, then flying back screaming, tears flowing from his eyes. “The trees! We have to save the trees!”

“I think I can do it,” Nari said, striding toward the inferno.

“Nari!” Ravi said, grabbing her arm.

“Let me go,” Nari said calmly, white light radiating from her, and she smiled, her smile full of calm and peace, and Ravi let her arm go.

Nari walked forward, raising her arms, and she began chanting a prayer that sprung to her lips, her voice growing louder and louder until

suddenly rain began to fall, at first a gentle rain, and then a sudden, torrential downpour that smothered the flames, thick black smoke roiling through the trees and completely surrounding Nari, whose body glowed with a soft, pure light within the darkness.

“That was cool,” Kent said.

“Did I just do that?” Nari said, walking from out of the cloud of smoke, feeling like she’d just woken from a trance.

“Thanks,” Olaf said. “Guys, I am so sorry.”

“So much for keeping low profile,” Esther said.

“Well, Nari said, “it could have been...”

A loud roar shook the forest.

“...worse....”

“Beard?” Ravi said.

Big Beard hovered, biting his lip. “Oh yeah. Um, when I put him here I really didn’t mean for the party to find him until you were a higher level and stuff, so it’s kinda of my bad...”

“What is it?” Ravi said.

“I’m sorry guys,” Beard said, smiling prettily. “It’s sort of...like... a

dragon or whatever.”

“Dragon?” Ravi said.

“Not a big one, but, yeah. Yikes. I put him out here for some reason. He was... sleeping, but then kaboom.”

The creature roared again, closer.

“What should we do?” Nari said.

And everyone else said, “RUN!”

“Go! Go! Ravi said, waving them off the path and away from the roar. “Esther! Take lead!”

Esther grunted and ran off the path, hurrying as fast as possible though the brush over the thick roots of the trees, fallen trunks. The rest hurried behind, Ravi until everyone else had started running. A great wind started to blow through the forest, shaking the trees, and Ravi heard a great flapping of wings as he turned and followed behind the others, struggling against a desperate urge to stand and face the great beast.

Esther stomped ahead, taking great strides with her thick, powerful legs. The forest rose along a steep ridge ahead, and she looked quickly side to side, wanting to avoid higher ground, but the ridge stretched off into the distance on either side of them. Beard flitted past, shrieking, “I’ll scout

ahead!”

Behind, Nari and Kent struggled to keep up on their shorter legs, and Olaf hiked up his wizard’s robes with one hand, trailing behind as well.

They could hear the mighty beating of the dragon’s wings now, and the great gusts of air, and Ravi watched as the gusts changed direction, the beast rising into the air. “Stop! Stop!” He yelled, but Esther couldn’t hear him and continued doggedly climbing the ridge, the others following.

Ravi, cursing the weight of his plate mail armor, hurried after, hoping to close ground, get close enough to warn them to stop, the forest growing darker around him as the great beast flew overhead.

Esther, half way up the ridge, felt the forest shake, looked back and saw the dark shadow gliding among the trees, the party scattered below. Ravi was waving, shouting something, and Esther, thinking he was urging her onward turned and started to climb once more. Her thighs were burning, lungs aching as she gasped for breath, but she put all the pain aside and battled toward the top of the ridge.

The other three, hearing Ravi shouting “Stop!” stopped, each of them gasping for breath as well, but Nari, hands on her knees, saw Esther still climbing. “Esther!” She gasped.

The others looked up and saw Esther still climbing, racing toward

the top of the ridge.

“Shit,” Ravi said, finally catching up. “Shit. Let’s keep going, then. We can’t leave her alone up there.”

The other three nodded, sucked in as much air as they could,, and started climbing again, racing as hard as they could against their tired legs, thinking only of catching up to Esther so she wouldn’t be left to face a dragon alone.

Esther reached the top of the ridge, which was bare, and blinked in the sun at the same time the dragon swooped into view. Esther froze, stunned. The dragon was as big as a 747, covered in glistening scales of liquid black, and it’s great leathery wings stretched out twice the size of its body. With each flap of its wings a blast of wind nearly knocked Esther off her feet, and as Esther looked into its huge, green eyes, she felt she was facing not a creature, but a force of nature. The dragon howled, not the roar it had issued before, but a blood curdling scream that summoned deep, primordial terrors from Esther’s heart, and—almost—sent her crying to her knees.

But instead, she set her will, stood firm against the fear, and raised her ax, speaking the words of a new, powerful urge that rose up within her: "A noble death!"

The dragon hovered, darting its head forward on its long, sleek neck, toying the tiny creature, but Esther didn't flinch or show the least sign of panic, but stood there, glaring at the dragon, ax ready for the moment when the dragon struck for real. Esther felt a sense of calm settle over her as she watched the creature, felt the great gusts of wind blasting against her, sending her beard flying back over her shoulder, watched as dark clouds gathered and swirled behind the creature, forming a blue black funnel, and then the dragon opened its mouth revealing three rows of jagged teeth, and it folded it's wings and dove toward Esther, that great black mouth and those jagged teeth growing larger and larger and larger...

At the last second, Esther leapt forward and jammed her ax between the upper and lower rows of teeth, the dragon's jaw slamming down on the enchanted weapon and lodged it between its teeth. Esther was half in, half out of the dragon's mouth, and she felt its slimy mucus covering her body even as it roared, the tongue slapping at Esther's face.

The party broke into the clearing that ran along the rocky spine of the ridge just as Esther leapt into the dragon's mouth, and after a moment of terror, they saw her legs sticking out of the creature which was now on the ground, waving its head around in rage and panic, the ax jammed in its teeth. Olaf hurled a fireball against its body even as the storm he'd summoned began to rain tendrils of white hot lightning against the dragon's armored

hide, and the whole area became mired in smoke as the great beast began to beat its head against the ground, trying to dislodge Esther's ax. Ravi drew his sword and strode right into the maelstrom, leaping onto the dragon's neck right behind the head and then stabbing his sword under the beast's eyelid, sending a gusher of dragon blood shooting into the air as the dragon howled, whiplashing its head against the ground once more and sending Ravi tumbling to slam against a tree and look on, stunned, as Esther and her ax also came flying out of the dragon's mouth.

The dragon rose and rose into the stormy sky, and then screaming it opened its mouth and vomited a stream of flame at the party, but Nari raised her arms and a mighty shield of white light appeared, deflecting the flames. The dragon roared with rage as the winds began to swirl around it, the lightning intensifying, and finally it flew up and away, roaring with pain and anger as it disappeared from sight. Nari ran to Ravi. "Omigod! Are you okay?"

Ravi sat up, lifted his helmet from his head, and, taking a quick inventory of his body, said, "a little sore, but I think I am fine. Am I bleeding?"

"I don't see any blood."

"Nari!" Kent yelled. "Esther!"

Nari turned and hurried over to where Esther lay on the grass, Kent leaning over her, holding her hand. "What?" Nari asked, but before Kent could even answer she saw the blood flowing from Esther's leg, where one of the dragon's teeth had cut deep and severed an artery.

"Oh, shit."

"A glorious death," Esther murmured. "Promise you will tell the world of my legendary stand against the dragon."

"Yes," Kent said. "Of course," but he gave a pleading look to Esther. "Heal her."

"I don't know how," Nari said.

"Just try," Olaf said, finally catching up. "Let it come to you. Just like the protection spell."

"You have to try," Kent said.

"Let me die," Esther said. "Let my life end in glory."

Nari closed her eyes. Put her hands on Esther. "Let her be healed!"

Nothing happened.

"It's not working!" Nari said.

"Heal her!" Kent yelled.

"I can't!"

Beard, who'd come fluttering back from his scouting, flew down to Nari and whispered in her ear. "I believe in you," he said in his pretty voice, and then a song sprung to his lips, and he sang out in his tiny voice:

When things are tough and life gets hard
You fall down and skin your knee
Wipe away the tears and just remember me
Because I believe I know you can
Do whatever you have planned
I love you more than honey
And I will always be your friend

Beard smiled and pixie dust seemed to spring out from air around him, and he gushed, "I know you can do it!"

Nari nodded and smiled.

The world had faded from Esther's vision, and she found herself staring up at a beautiful maiden with long, blonde hair, wearing armor and leaning on a spear. "Valkyrie," Esther said, her heart full of joy.

"I have come to bring you to the Hall of Heroes to drink and revel among your mighty fellows," the Valkyrie said, smiling, and her voice was cool and sweet as mead.

"Then let me..."

The Valkyrie began to fade, Esther felt herself growing sad and cold as the smiling face faded to be replaced by Nari and the whole team, staring down at her. "Shitballs," Esther said.

"What?" Nari said.

"Shit," Esther said. "I was almost free." Tears sprung to Esther's eyes as she felt herself again in the cold gray world, a world that seemed all the more harsh and lonely after her brief taste of heaven. "I was halfway to heaven," Esther mumbled. "Why did we bring me back to-- *this*?"

Nari shook her head, not sure what she could possibly say, but Ravi stepped forward and reached out a hand, "Your work here isn't done. This world still needs you, warrior."

Esther took his hand, and got back on her feet, even while Olaf and Nari sank to the ground, each feeling light-headed after all the running and their magic exertions. "Up," Ravi said. "Up! We have to move!"

"I can't" Nari answered. "I need a minute. Some water? Do we have water?"

"Later," Ravi said. "Right now... where's my sword?"

"Here," Kent said, running over to grab the sword and then eagerly

carrying it over to Ravi, using both hands. "It's so heavy!"

"Thanks," Ravi said, giving Kent a squeeze on the shoulder that sent Kent to furious blushing.

Nari again found herself feeling threatened, but when she tried to get to her feet, her head spun and she collapsed back to the ground. "I think I might puke."

"Shit," Ravi said. "Okay. Let's get some water. Fly up high and see what's what, Tinker Bell." Ravi said to Beard.

"Don't call me Tinker Bell."

"Just go." Ravi said.

Beard harrumphed and then flitted off. Kent and Ravi found the water skins in their packs. The group sat down in a ragged circular shape and passed the skins around, catching their breath, checking their bodies for any wounds.

It was quiet for a time, everyone catching their breath, calming down, but then Olaf started to laugh. "Did we just stand off a dragon?"

"Yeah. We did." Ravi said, as the realization actually sank in, and then he started laughing as well.

"That was insane," Kent said, joining the laughter. "Terrifying, but

cool as hell."

Esther laughed, too, and then Nari. "That lightning storm was badass," she said to Olaf. "Fireballs and lightning storms. You're like our Gandoolf."

"Gandoolf?" Olaf said, laughing. "Gee, thanks."

"What?" Nari said.

"It's Gandalf," Ravi said. "Not Gandoolf."

"Well, I don't know anything about Harry Potter," Nari said, shrugging.

"Oh my God," Kent said. "You really are in the wrong world, aren't you Nari?"

"Leave her alone," Ravi said. "She not a gamer."

The group quiet again for a time, and then Esther suddenly sat up. "Holy crap. I was dead for a minute."

"How do you feel now?" Nari said. "There's not even a scar."

"I feel like me again." She ran her hand over the torn area of her leggings where the smooth skin now showed through. "I mean, for a bit there, it was like I was Hrothgar. I thought like him. I wanted to die a glorious death. It was... different. But now I am more me again."

"I think we are all becoming our characters a little, especially when danger strikes," Olaf said.

"And the newsflashes continue," Esther said with a grin.

"Don't make me unleash a fireball on your ass."

Esther reached out and put a hand on Nari's knee, looking her right in the eye. "Thanks for saving my life," she said.

Nari smiled, suddenly feeling flustered. "Oh. Of course. I guess that's my thing."

"I owe you my life," Esther said, still staring right into Nari's eyes. "And I will do anything for you. Anything."

Nari blushed and looked away, and it was Ravi's turn to feel jealous. What had Nari said to him when they first found themselves in this strange place? You turned white? Did she have a problem with him now?

"Bad news, bad news, bad news!" Beard chattered as he flew back down to the group. "The Mus are moving, and the dragon is flying over toward Whitestone Mountain."

"It's flying to Gallathea?"

"Yes. I think she summoned it! We have to run! Get out of here!" Beard said.

"Let's make a run for Germaine."

"Noooooooo!" Beard shrieked. "We can't. Because the Mus, well, see, they have gone like-- wonk-- and also here, so if we try and get to the, the thing is, the paths are all like gurge, and..."

"What the hell?" Ravi said angrily. "You don't make any sense!"

"I'm trying my best!" Beard said, starting to hyper-ventilate.

"Take a breath. Calm down," Nari said. "Here. Sit on my shoulder and relax for a second."

Beard sat down on Nari's shoulder, crossing his long slender legs, breathing deeply, his breasts heaving. Then, he finally said, "I don't know what got into me!"

"Just tell us what you saw."

Beard, now calmed, explained all. The Mus had formed two groups. One had moved to cut off their route to the East, making the run to Germaine much more dangerous. The other group was coming toward their current position. "Probably at least two thousand or maybe a million," Beard said, when asked how many.

"So we do what?" Kent said, and the whole group looked at Ravi.

"Rafe's Lair," Ravi said. "It's hard to find, defensible. Has fresh

water. We cleared it out-- in game time, what? A year ago?"

"Something like that," Beard said. "I never put anything new in there if that holds in the world."

"And we can be there before nightfall," Ravi said.

"Is it dragon proof?" Nari asked, getting up on her already tired legs.

"Actually, yes," Ravi said. "Let's go."

"Do you mind if I ride on your shoulder for awhile?" Beard asked Nari. "My wings are killing me!"

"Sure thing, cutie," Nari said. "Rest your weary wings."

Beard almost objected to being called a cutie, but then he giggled instead, feeling both giggly and horrified at the same time. He realized he was already starting to talk and act like an air-headed little scatter-brained pixie, and he didn't like it at all. He felt like he was losing himself, and losing himself faster than any of the others. He'd barely had a chance to process the fact that he was now a pretty little kewpie doll, and as unnerving as that may have been, it was far worse to realize how rapidly his personality was turning into that of a giggling little dingbat from Fairy Hollow. He adjusted his dress, pulling the top of to more fully cover his full, soft brown

breasts, tugging at the hem that came down to just above mid-thigh.

Everyone else gets cool powers, he thought as they moved off toward Rafe's Lair. Swords and axes and spells, and what do I get to be? Pretty? It's so not fair! He thought, folding his slender arms under his breasts and pouting. And I'm too tiny to ever even have a boyfriend!

Wait. That's not really a thing for me, he thought. Or is it? Gross!

Chapter III

The party made it to Rafe's Lair in the thickening gloom of dusk, the sun's last rays angling through the trees and lighting up the granite cliff face, the opening barely visible about 200 feet up the surface at the top of a set of zigzag stairs cut into the face of the stone. "They're so narrow," Nari said, her palms on the cold stone as she made her way up the narrow stair.

"Rafe didn't want it to be easy for people to get up here," Beard said. "Much smarter than the typical brigand, he was the son of..."

"Okay. Okay," Nari said. I don't want to be distracted.

Ravi and Kent entered the rectangular opening first, while the rest of the party hung back, and then when they were sure the foyer area was at least

safe, they all climbed in, and Nari gasped as she immediately saw four skeletons prone along the floor, the tattered remains of clothes still clinging to their old bones.

"I did this one," Esther said, squatting down over one with a cloven skull.

"Right before he could sound the alarm," Olaf said, reaching toward a pull rope attached to a large bell.

"Don't," Kent said. "We don't know the rest of the lair is empty."

"We need to scout," Ravi said.

They did a quick run through. The cave had clearly seen traffic-- evidence of looting, a small fire in recent months, some graffiti-- but there were no signs of danger, and most of the group sank wearily down in the main cave, which was several chambers inside the caverns, while Kent went out and quickly rigged up some traps and tripwires on the stairs and at the entrance.

When Kent came back, Nari took him by the hand and said, "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"The springs for a good bath."

Kent froze, digging his heels into the ground and trying to pull his hand free from Nari's grip. "I can't go with you," he said, flushing. "You're a chick."

"So are you."

"Not really. I mean, not inside."

But then Kent felt himself being lifted off his feet and tossed over Esther's shoulder. "No!" He shouted, slapping Esther on the back. "It's not proper!"

Esther laughed, a great, booming laugh that echoed off the cavern walls, and Nari and Beard followed behind, their own soft laughter echoing around the cavern. "Stop being such a little boy and start acting like a woman," Esther said, yanking Kent's top off.

Kent squealed and threw his slender arms over his bare breasts, and then he backed away from Esther screaming, "Don't look at me!" But there was something playful and girly in his voice.

"You don't have anything I haven't seen before!" Esther said, running an appreciative eye over Kent standing there prettily hiding his full, white breasts. "Let's get those pants off of you," Esther said, though she was surprised herself to suddenly feel a strange new stiffening in her own pants.

"Okay, big guy," Nari said, stepping in front of Esther. "We'll take it from here. You go back with the boys now and give us some privacy."

"Oh. But I want to see you naked."

"I know," Nari said. "I guess you'll just have to use your imagination, sweetie."

Esther left, feeling a little embarrassed as the losing war she was fighting against her new male body's showing how it felt, and Kent backed away from Nari and Beard, who were approaching him with sneaky little smiles on their faces. "Okay... okay...." Kent said. "I'll undress, but don't watch me!"

Nari grabbed his top. "Okay. Be all shy if you want, but undress and get in the water."

Nari and beard looked away, and Kent slipped out of the rest of his clothes and then, hissing at the coldness of the water, lowered himself into the cool water of the spring, going in to find a deep spot where it came up almost to his shoulders and hid his body. He dropped his arms from his breasts, then, feeling almost creepy at the idea that he'd been touching her boobs-- his boobs. "Okay," he said, and when Nari started to strip, he looked away, bashfully.

Beard slipped out of his dress, feeling unself-conscious in the room

full of female, and he let himself down into the cool water, dove under and swam toward Kent, who shrieked when Beard came up and squirted a stream of water at him. Meanwhile, Nari was now in the pool as well, the water coming up to just below her shoulders. "It feels so good," Nari said, rubbing her arms.

Kent had a pained smile plastered on his face, his cheeks and nose bright red, and his mind was completely and totally blank. He could think of anything to say. He'd never seen a real girl naked, had never had a girlfriend or kissed a girl, had barely even had the courage to speak to girls he found pretty, and now here he was skinny dipping with two stunning, naked females-- the fact that he was also now a girl just made it worse.

"I don't know if this will help, but you are really pretty," Nari said, looking at Kent's long, graceful neck and small, round shoulders, his big, bright eyes.

"I am?" Kent said, flattered and embarrassed and confused.

"Yeah," Beard said. "You are."

"Well, I'm a guy anyway, so it doesn't matter to me."

Nari smiled. "It's so weird to hear you say that."

"What?"

"That you're a guy. I mean, I know who you were, but all I see now is a really pretty girl who seems all shy and bashful, and it's hard for me to connect what I know and what I see. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Kent said. "Yeah, I do. I feel the same way about... everything."

Nari started wading toward Kent, who backed nervously away until his back hit up against the slick wall of the cavern. "What are you doing?"

"Don't worry," Nari said. "I'm not going to try and look at your boobs. But, would you do something for me?"

"M..... maybe?"

"Let me do your hair?"

"What?"

"I want to do your hair."

"Why?"

"It's a way girls make friends with each other." Nari smiled. "Pretty please? It would mean a lot to me?"

Kent smiled back, and still blushing, said, "Okay."

"Oh good. Now turn around."

The three of them chatted while Nari fussed with Kent's hair. Beard filled Nari in on some of the details of the world, and all three talked a little bit about their lives, their real lives-- the usual stuff about where they were from, their majors. Nari was glad for the chance to get to know them, especially Kent, who she'd started having some nasty feelings toward, and so the whole thing had been a chance for her to try and get past her own feelings of jealousy.

Finally, Kent looked down at his reflection and put his hands to his cheeks. "I am pretty," he said, wide eyed at even the imperfect image he saw in the waters. Nari had put his hair up, with bangs and little tendrils on the sides of his face, and she'd woven some delicate chains among his hair which flashed prettily in the flickering torch light.

"You look like a princess!" Beard said.

"Don't tell the guys I said this," Kent said, "but I like it!"

"I'm glad," Nari said, smiling as she watched Kent smiling down at his own pretty face. Well, I'm all pruneey," Nari said. "Guess we should get out and give the guys a chance."

"Yeah." Kent said. "Can you promise not to look?"

"You're such a prude!"

"Just shy."

"Fine."

Nari got out and started getting dressed, her back to Kent. Beard threw his dress on and turned away as well, though he was just waiting so he could take a peek at Kent's body. Beard had gotten a look from under water, and Kent was a hottie-- he had a lithe, athletic body, with large breasts, but otherwise the body of a soccer player or a gymnast-- long arms and legs.

Kent got out of the water, aware of the swaying of his breasts, his nipples hard from the cold water. He felt the water dripping down his belly, the insides of his thighs. It felt so strange to be a woman with a body that was so -- bouncy and swayey. As he started to get dressed, he heard a noise, and glancing up he saw all the men had snuck to the cave entrance and were gawking at he and Nari. "Get out!" Kent screamed, throwing one arm across his boobs and using the other to cover his vagina. "You assholes!"

"Ravi!" Nari screamed.

The men all ran off, laughing like little boys.

"Jerks!" Kent said, as he started to get dressed again, feeling embarrassed and violated.

"Get used to it, sister. That's just boys being boys," Nari said.

"Ugh!" Kent said.

"Just remember one thing, Kent. When you're a pretty girl, it's always about sex with guys. Always. They think with their dicks."

"I didn't," Kent said.

"I did," Beard answered, adjusting his breasts. "Boy was I ever a boy!" And then he giggled. "I mean, I'm still a boy, but not totally *a boy*!"

After everyone had cleaned up, Beard felt antsy and offered to take first watch. "I'm going to fly around a little and get a better sense of the area."

"Be careful," Nari said.

Ravi got a fire started, and the group gathered around and ate their rations, drank more water. With calm and time for reflection, the unreality of their situation once again struck them, the flickering fire, the cave, the strangers sitting around looking at them, who were people they knew and didn't know. "I hope we wake up back in the world," Nari said. "I hope this is all a dream."

"I hope we wake up home," Esther said, "and this was all real."

"You almost died."

"And I never felt more alive."

Ravi had been looking over Nari. She was so damn hot. Even hotter than she'd ever been. Exotic now, elfish, other-worldly in her beauty, and he faked a yawn and said, "I'm going to get some sleep. We need to be rested for tomorrow-- in case we wake up and we're still here."

The others nodded. But then Ravi looked at Nari and said, "Coming?"

Nari raised her eyebrows in surprise. It was Ravi, and they had been living together for almost six months. But looking up at the tall, blonde bearded man in front of her, who looked like a male shampoo model with that chiseled body and thick blonde hair, she felt nervous and uncomfortable, like a stranger had just propositioned her for sex. "Um..." she realized the whole group was watching, so she smiled and said, "yeah."

Ravi led her off to a small room, where she was surprised to find a king-sized bed with a brass frame, dressers and chests. "This was Rafe's room," Ravi said, lighting half-melted candles that stood in mirror wall sconces, and then closing the door. As soon as the door closed, he took Nari in his arms and kissed her, holding his body against hers. Ravi was much larger than Nari now, and stronger, and she felt powerless in his arms, and she pushed her hands against his chest and broke the kiss.

"What is it?"

Nari looked up into Ravi's icy, blue Nordic eyes. "It's just... it's is that really you? Are you really Ravi under that face?"

"Yes. Yes. Of course."

Nari touched his beard, let her hand caress his cheek. "I feel like I know you and don't know you. Don't you feel the same?"

"I don't doubt at all that it's you inside that body," Ravi said. "I know you Nari. I would recognize you even if you'd been turned into a toad."

"Can we talk a little? Get to know each other again? I just, I can't help but feel like I am with a stranger right now."

Ravi smiled. "Okay. Sure." He sat down on the bed. "What do you want to know about me?"

"Tell me something I already know. Tell me about you, but with this face, and that -- my God-- that body. "Let me get to know you again."

Females, Ravi thought. He just wanted to kiss Nari, hold her, make love to her. He wanted her so badly. But he also knew that she was different, had her own needs and fears, and he had to honor her feelings no matter whether it was typical female crap. "Okay. Well, I was born in Edison, New Jersey, but my parents are both from New Delhi..."

They sat and talked in the candlelight, staring into each other's eyes, getting to know each other again, talking about their childhoods and their families, eventually coming around to the present. "So, you okay?" Ravi asked. "You seem to be holding up okay."

"Yeah. It's funny, but everything already seems so natural here, so normal. It's like I've been here all my life, you know?"

"Yes. It seems more real to me than reality."

"You were such a badass today," Nari said, caressing Ravi's muscled shoulder, letting her fingers run down the ridges of his biceps. "The way you went after that dragon? Were you scared?"

Ravi grunted. "I felt no fear. I saw Esther in trouble, and I just did what I had to do."

"I wish I could have been a knight or a warrior," Nari said, staring into Ravi's eyes. "So much more exciting than just being healer-girl."

"You saved Esther's life."

"I know, and it was awesome, and I am so glad I did, but at the same time?" She put a hand on Ravi's chest. "I would like to have a chance to swing a sword and be a badass." Nari leaned in and kissed Ravi, and then they kissed some more, and he reached back and undid her top. Nari propped

herself on her arms, letting her full breasts sway free, and she smiled up at Ravi, biting her lip.

Ravi smiled, his eyes travelling up from her full breasts to meet her mischievous eyes, and then he climbed on top of her, pushing her down onto her back, and he began caressing one of her breasts while kissing her and letting his other hand slide down her smooth belly, under her pants until he found the warm, wet space between her legs. They kissed, and played with each other's bodies, and then Nari whispered, "I'm ready" as she grabbed Ravi's penis and guided it into her, and they began to move together, just as they had always done, and then came together, each one climaxing just as the other gasped with pleasure.

Nari lay on her side, Ravi cuddling her from behind. The candles still flickered. Sex, like everything else, had been the same, but also different. Everything felt-- more-- and as she floated in the afterglow, she wondered if it had been the same for Ravi, but then she didn't want to ask, wasn't sure if it would be better or worse to know.

Out in the main cavern, the others had rolled out their bedrolls and found places to sleep around the fire. Esther, though, couldn't sleep, and lay on her side watching Kent sleeping. The sight of Kent's naked body was

burned into her mind-- the curve at the small of his back, his firm, high bottom, his full, white breasts-- and he'd been so cute and shy. Now, she watched him sleeping, his breasts rising and falling gently, and she found herself studying his pretty face, the curve of his long lashes. She wanted him. Badly. And it felt so right and yet so wrong. She'd always liked other women, but not as a man, and now her body's reactions to the sight of this girl seemed so gross, so wrong. It was gross to have a stupid penis sticking up like a flagpole at the sight of a slender, pretty girl's lithe body. It made no difference to her that Kent was or had been a male--- all Esther saw now was a pretty woman, but it made all the difference to her that she was now a guy.

I want her, Esther decided. I want her, and I can please her with my tongue, show her things she never imagined. She had a sudden urge to crawl over and climb onto Kent now, as she slept, start kissing her, see what happened. Maybe take her without giving her a chance to say stop. But no. That wasn't the way. Esther was no savage, and she liked the idea anyway of wooing sweet little Kent, of bringing the pretty girl he'd become gently and prettily into his womanhood as a lover.

And so she turned away with a sigh, closed her eyes, and dreamt of Kent's lean white body.

Ravi woke with a start, sat up, saw he was in some kind of cave, and panicked before the memories came back, the whole strange trip that he'd somehow become his character, and they all had found themselves in Allmyth, and now here he was. "It was real," he mumbled, scratching at his beard. He remembered the fight with the dragon, making love to Nari in her hot little elf body, the best sex he'd had in his whole life. "Fuck." Now, where was Nari? What time was it, anyway?

Wrapping a sheet around his waist, he stumbled blearily out into the main cave and found the crew gathered around the smoldering remains of the fire, munching. There was sunlight coming from the outer caves. "We're still here," he said.

"Now whose the one with the newsflash?" Olaf said.

Ravi sat down and grabbed some of the dry rations-- jerky of some kind, he couldn't remember. "Where's Beard?"

"She's still keeping watch," Esther said. "It seems she doesn't need to sleep."

"Hell. I feel like I'm hung-over," Ravi said, his head aching and cloudy.

"The dragon tossed you pretty hard," Esther said.

"Oh, yeah."

"Let me," Nari said, and coming over she lay her hands on Ravi and chanted. He felt the pain leave him and a sudden surge of vigor. "Better?" Nari asked.

"You're better than Red Bull," Ravi said, accepting her kiss.

Kent watched the two kiss, and felt a loneliness and a longing to be loved. To have someone care for him like that. He looked away, hoping no one had caught him looking, but Esther, of course, had seen the whole thing.

"So, what do we do now, fearless leader?" Olaf asked.

"That is a good question," Ravi said. "Yesterday, I was pretty much just focused on keeping us alive. Now? I'm I right in assuming we pretty much want to get out of here? Get back to our real world?"

Everyone nodded.

"Tinker Bell!" Ravi called. "Get your ass down here."

Beard came flittering into the cave. "Omigod! What is it?" He said, breathless with excitement.

"How the hell do we get out of here? Back to reality?"

Beard sat on Nari's shoulder, legs crossed prettily, and tugged at the hem on his dress. "Well, so, the thing is, when I made this world, which I

actually had the idea awhile ago one day when I was playing Ultima, but it took awhile for me to, like, sort of start? So..."

"Just tell us how to get home!" Esther yelled.

Beard's mouth fell open. His lip began to tremble. "You don't have to tell at me!" He said as tears filled his eyes.

"Oh, shit," Esther said. "No. Don't cry."

"I'm trying so hard to be helpful and make sure everyone is safe, and I know this is all a mess and it's all my fault and no one likes me and this dress is too small anyway..."

"I'm sorry," Esther said. "I just..."

"And when I created the world I didn't make a way for people to get to reality and I think I might have a crush on you and everything is so big, and I am so small, and...."

Nari took Beard's tiny little body in her hands and cradled him, kissing him on the cheek. "It's okay, sweetie. It's okay. I know you're doing your best."

Beard calmed down. Wiped his tears. "And that was embarrassing! Has anyone else noticed that I am starting to act like a silly little pixie?"

"No. Not all." Esther said, and everyone nodded.

Beard put his hands on his hips. "Well, you are all being very nice about it, but I know I am turning into my character, and so are the rest of you."

"What was that you said about no way back?" Ravi asked, trying to get the conversation back on track.

"I didn't create a portal to our world when I made Allmyth. I never considered it necessary."

"So, we're stuck here?" Kent said. "I'm stuck as a girl?"

"Maybe," Beard said. "But maybe not. Or something."

Everyone waited while Beard thought, and then he squealed and began zipping around the room. "Yes! I know! I know! I know!"

"What?"

"The Temple of Iphis! I put an artifact there-- it's called... what was it called? Oh, yes! Goodness! The Book of Worlds! Olaf can use it to transport us to any realm in the universe! I put it here for a future adventure in the depths of hell, but that's not far from our universe!"

"Great. Where is this temple?" Nari said.

"It's! In! Germaine!"

"Fuck," Esther said.

"So, if we want to get home we have to find a way to Germaine?"
Ravi said.

"It's the closest and probably best way," Beard said. "Sorry, guys, but the next best place I can think of is at least a three month journey."

"Well, we wanted to go to Germaine anyway, right?" Kent said.

"We just have to get past the Mus and the dragon and get into the temple," Beard said. "That's all! I just know we can do it if we believe!"

"And what do we have to do to get the book once we get in the temple? Kill three hundred zombie wizards?" Esther asked.

"Um, no. That's the best part. This is so, so, so cool! We just need to sneak past the priestesses, and then we'll use the book and be gone!"
Beard giggled, twirling around, glittering pixie dust flying everywhere.

"So, as long as we can avoid getting caught by the 3000 rats patrolling the forest and the angry dragon that almost killed me, and avoid a 3000 year old undead witch that hates us, we shouldn't have any problems at all," Esther said. "Simple as can be."

"Agreed," Ravi said.

"I was being sarcastic."

"I know. But it is our path, so our only choice is to love it, Gallathea

be damned."

"Why does this Gallathea have it out for us anyway?" Nari asked.

"Well," Beard started, always excited to share the back story of Allmyth, but Ravi cut him off.

"I'll fill you in later. It's just something from a past adventure," Ravi said. "Olaf."

"Yeah?"

"You have silence and invisibility spells, right?"

"Yeah. I think. Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"So, maybe we can just walk right past the rats, then? Maybe it can be that easy?"

They all looked at each other. "You are the leader for a reason," Esther said.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Olaf said.

"For the same reason I didn't until just now. We aren't thinking about this as if we were in the game. As if our magic and powers are real. Let's gear up and go."

"Let me help you with your pack," Esther said, lifting Kent's pack

and holding it while Kent slipped his slender arms through the straps.

"Thanks," Kent said.

"Of course," Esther said, giving Kent a playful chuck on the chin.

"You were amazing yesterday during the battle, by the way."

"Oh, gosh, I just did what I could," Kent said. "Not like getting half eaten by a dragon or anything."

"You were amazing, Kent. And no one else might have seen it, but I did." And then Esther pulled him in for a burly hug. "I'm glad you're on our team."

"Thanks!" Kent said. "Thanks so much!"

As the group assembled and started to march toward the entrance, Beard found himself once again springing into song:

Life is a joy and all journeys blessed
When you face all your trials
With the friends who are best
So let's share our smiles
Our hugs and our tears
And know that together
We can pass any test!

"I know we can do it!" Beard squealed.

"Do you have to be so damn cheerful?" Esther said.

"Yes, Grumpy Gus, I do," Beard said. "It's my nature. Or something."

Chapter Four

The party moved slowly, carefully, staying always beneath the cover of the trees, while also remaining silent, choosing their steps carefully. Beard fluttered ahead, darting from tree to tree, making sure the path was clear. The forest seemed peaceful and calm, but they all knew that thousands of the rat creatures were out there, looking for them, and that the slightest mistake could bring a swarm of the beasts washing over them like a tidal wave. The quiet and the tension grew with every minute as they moved further and further East, getting closer to the lines, and finally around midday Ravi signaled for the group to stop. As soon as they had all halted, he crept back, and the group crouched in a tight circle. "Beard spotted a line of rats

about 100 yards from here just on the other side of that slight ridge. They are strung out along the road. Now, rats see better in the dark. My thought is that we create a distraction now. Send them running off to the north, and then with silence and invisibility on our side, we get behind them and head over to Germaine."

Everyone nodded.

"So, here's how it will work. Olaf-- you magnificent bastard-- you toss a fireball down to-- see that tree?"

"Wait," Nari said. "Won't that start the forest on fire again?"

"Yeah, but that's just the way it is, so..."

"I'm not good with that," Nari said.

"Me, neither," Beard added. "These trees are pretty."

"What? You're fantasy world environmentalists all of a sudden?"

"It's not that. Something deeper," Nari said, not understanding it herself. "But I'm just telling you I can't stand by and let this forest burn."

"She's a wood elf," Kent said softly, "and a priestess of the nature goddess, Pare. So?"

"Yes," Nari said. "Yes. It's my nature as this character."

"You'll get over it," Ravi said, dismissively.

Nari put her hands on her hips and tilted her head back defiantly.

"May I have a word, sweetie?"

Ravi felt his head start to ache. He couldn't believe she was going to make an issue of this shit now and started to tell her so, but he knew that look, and so he closed his eyes and started counting backward from 10 before speaking. However, when he was at 2, Kent spoke instead.

"I'll sneak over and set something up to distract them. Then, I can sneak across and meet you all on the other side."

"Too dangerous," Ravi said.

"Let her do it," Nari said. "Just because she's a girl doesn't mean she has to be on the sidelines all the time."

"I'm not really a girl," Kent said.

Esther put her hands on Kent's shoulders. "She can do it," Esther said. "I know she can."

Kent glanced back gratefully, actually surprised that he liked having Esther refer to him as a she.

Ravi, seeing the will of the group, nodded. "Okay."

"Yes!" Kent whispered, pumping his little fist in the air.

Esther turned Kent around and gave him a huge bear hug, lifting him off his feet. Kent looked up, smiling into Esther's face, and found himself placing a palm on her hard chest. "You just do your thing, badass."

"Be careful," Ravi said. "I just don't want anyone getting hurt."

"I will."

"Do your sneaky thing," Esther said, giving Kent a pat on the butt.

"I believe in you," Beard said, prettily.

"We all do," Nari added.

Kent smiled and disappeared into the woods, while Olaf prepared his spells.

"I can't see her at all," Nari said.

"She's a really good thief," Olaf said. "Stealthy like a ninja. She could be right next to you, and you couldn't even see her if she didn't want you to."

"I wonder what she's going to do for a distraction?"

"Probably some kind of timed mechanism that will make a disturbance once she is clear of the area," Ravi said. "Maybe using some fallen branches."

Then they saw Kent suddenly stand up right, appearing from beneath some undergrowth, and jumping up and down he shouted, "Hey, idiots! I'm right here, you smelly rats! Come and get me!"

"Or, he might just do that," Beard said.

"Fuck," Olaf said. "Should we save her?"

"Stick to the plan," Ravi said, going with his gut. "He knows what he's doing."

Olaf cast the spells, and the world around the group began to shimmer as the magic surrounded them. They moved, careful not to create too much of a disturbance among the plant life, even as they could see the rats running and crashing into the forest and heading up and away from them. They heard a horn sound, and then another, as the alarm was sent along the lines.

No one could see Kent, and when they got to the road they found that the rats had all run off leaving not one person back to keep watch, and so they marched across the road into the woods on the other side and then headed north 200 paces and east, parallel to the road 200 paces before hunkering down behind a huge willow tree.

Esther had taken up the rear, using a pine branch to sweep the road and obscure any tracks and doing her best to make sure they left minimal

evidence of their passing. All there was to do was sit down and wait, and they all leaned against the great tree, watching eagerly for any signs of Kent. Minutes passed. Hours. The sun had shifted far to the East-- where it set in the world of Allmyth.

"Maybe someone should go and look for her?" Olaf finally said.

"She's a he," Ravi said.

"I don't think it's good idea," Beard said, hovering, his wings making a bright humming noise.

"Why not?"

"Because you know how when you go to the mall and someone isn't there when you're ready to leave, and as soon as someone goes to find them they show up? And then you're like-- I can't believe you came back and now we're waiting for Olaf, but then you totally like send someone to find Olaf, and as soon as Esther leaves to find you, then you come back and everyone is like-- womp... womp?"

"Okay," Olaf said. "That does make sense."

"Really?" Beard said, smiling brightly. "Because I thought it seemed a little scatter-brained?"

"It was a little wordy, but the reasoning was sound."

"Cool," Beard said. "But maybe I should go and look for her?"

"Sit down and rest, Girly-Girl," Nari said, smiling. "You don't need to worry about Kent."

"Why not?"

"Because she's right above you."

"Whaaaaaaat?" Beard spun around and rushed forward to kiss Kent on the cheek. "You made it!"

Kent dropped from the branch he'd been clinging to, and the whole group greeted Kent with hugs, high-fives and a few slaps on the ass-- all as quiet as could be, and then they started marching toward Germaine, eager to more distance between themselves and the rats before dark. Once they were far enough away they felt safe, Kent told them all about how he's led the rats away from the road, how there had seemingly been hundreds, and they'd come in a long, long line, so he'd led them deeper and deeper away back towards Rafe's Lair, and then he'd slipped over them by moving along the tops of the trees while they had stormed the Lair, thinking the group had taken shelter there.

"Clever girl," Nari said.

"Um, guys, about that? I kind of prefer you don't refer to me as a

girl cause I still kinda think of myself as a guy," Kent said, though he cast a quick, longing glance at Esther that suggested otherwise.

"Oh. Cool," Nari said. "I didn't mean to offend you or anything."

"No. Not at all," Kent said. "It's not like I don't think girls are cool and stuff, but I just don't think I am one, really?"

"Great."

"How about you, Beard?" Esther said. "Do you have a problem with us referring to you as a female."

Beard put his fingers to his lips as he deeply pondered the question. "Kinda, sorta? Yes, maybe? I do think the name Beard doesn't make much sense for me, especially when we get into town, but then again I am not sure what my name should be, and since I'm not a character I didn't have a name yet and..."

"We'll call you whatever you want," Ravi said. "How about that?"

"Great. And once I decide, I'll let you know. Wait, what were we talking about again?"

"The moon," Ravi said. "We were talking about the moon."

The Red Moon had risen, and it looked huge, almost like a sister planet, and, indeed, it was orbited by its own moon, which glittered in the

night sky like a tiny star. "It's so pretty," Nari said, staring up in wonder.

"Thanks," Beard said. "I made that, you know."

"Great work."

"You did come up with some amazing shit," Olaf said.

"I did?" Beard said. "Didn't I?"

The Mus, meanwhile, trudged back from Rafe's Lair, frustrated and tired. There was little talk. Most of the creatures clung to scraps of cloth, pieces of wood, shiny stones-- anything from the cave that had caught their interest. But one was moving low to the ground, sniffing, sniffing and sniffing some more. Bauble had smelled the bed at the lair, and he was sure he'd picked up the scent of that she-elf. If only he could find it again, find it and catch them for his mistress, he could redeem himself, regain his lost command.

But nothing. Nothing. Until, once they returned to the picket line and began to reform to keep watch through the night, he smelled her-- just the faintest trace of her, but he smelled her, and getting down on all fours he skittered across the road until he found himself on the Eastern side, looking

into the woods.

"Get back in line," Crisper, the new commander of their Mischief., hissed.

"Of course," Bauble said. "Of course." He got in line, trying to hide his smile, clutching a ball of string he'd found at the cave. Once darkness fell, he slipped off into the night, slithering through the woods. He would find them. He would get the credit. Bauble snickered, then covered his mouth, looking around to make sure no one and nothing heard him. Careful, he reminded himself. I must be very careful. And when I bring them to justice, Gallathea will give me all the pretty, shiny things I could ever hope for!

After dark, the party camped in the woods, far off from the Eastern road. No fire. No lights. Everyone slept while Beard kept watch. He didn't seem to need sleep, and in fact found it fairly impossible to sit still for very long. Sometime deep in the night, Esther woke to find Kent gently nudging her.

"What?" Esther said.

"I'm cold," Kent whispered.

Esther opened her bedroll. "Climb in with me. I'll keep you warm."

"Thanks," Kent said, snuggling up against Esther, laying his head upon her chest, the smell of her masculine musk intoxicating.

Esther put an arm protectively over Kent's shoulder and pulled her bedroll over their bodies. She could feel Kent's soft breasts pressing against her ribcage, even through his leather armor, and she felt good having a woman in her arms. Kent snuggled closer, sighing with pleasure, and Esther kissed him on the head, pushing some inventive carnal thoughts out of her mind. Patience, she said. Patience. We'll be in town tomorrow, and there will be plenty of time for ... romance.

Beard roused the group just before sun up, and the party members took care of their morning business. Then, slowly and quietly, they made their way East. The stress and tension from the previous day remained, but with every step east they felt it lighten as they drew closer and closer to Germaine, a city state where Gallathea's rat army would be slaughtered on sight. Kent was the first to hear the river, and he lost discipline and eagerly shouted back to the group-- "I hear the river ahead! We are almost there!"

The group shouted, and Ravi let it go, knowing that it would be futile and probably pointless to try and stifle their celebration. Instead, he

joined them in their cheers. Tired legs suddenly found new life, and the group quickened their pace, reaching the edge of the forest and hurrying out into a bright, sunny day. They stood on top of the great white cliffs the river had created over the centuries, and looked down at the ancient city of Germaine, its towers and shrines and mighty battlements all made of a slick, black marble that reflected the clouds and the running waters of the river, making it appear the buildings were made of sky and water, and which had earned the city the nickname of "The Elemental City."

"It's beautiful," Nari said, clinging to Ravi. "Like something from a dream."

"Thank you," Beard said.

"I feel like I am living in a dream," Olaf said. "We've been here so many times in the game, and now here I am, standing right here looking down on the fabled Elemental City? It isn't possible."

"What's that?" Nari said, pointing.

Three great bridges stretched out from the city-- one to the East, one to the West, and a third to a smaller island, which was the one Nari pointed to. "That's Genesis, sometimes called First Island," Beard said, falling into Game Master mode. "The royal residence. That is where the city-state of Germaine was born in the War of the Founding, where the last surviving

members of the Mainen people made their stand against Lord Shatter and his Broken Narions, a mere five hundred against 20,000, and yet..."

"Beard? Maybe save that story for another time," Ravi said.

"I kind of want to hear it," Nari said.

"And you will," Ravi said. "I am sure. But I am hungry, and I would love a bottle of wine and a smoke, and besides all that we are still not entirely safe out here standing on the edge of a cliff with the witch wanting us."

"He makes a good point," Esther said. "Especially about the wine." She was standing behind Kent, her hands on his shoulders, and she gave him a squeeze.

"And besides, the rest of us are kind of sick of hearing about it," Kent said.

"I'll tell you later," Beard said.

"How do we get down?"

"Follow me!" They made their way back to the road, back tracking to where it began its steep decline to the level of the bridge. The guards recognized them immediately and hailed them, and some of the folk they passed as they marched their way into the city waved and cheered them on.

A mother brought her sickly child forward to Nari and asked for a blessing, and Nari lay her hands on the baby and chanted, and immediately the pox vanished from its skin, the fever left and the baby began to kick and cry as health returned to its tiny limbs.

"Bless you! Bless you!" The woman said, weeping.

"You'll make a great mother," Ravi said, putting his arm around Nari's waist.

"Yeah, using my special ability to make babies cry," Nari said, but she felt so--- special and amazing-- and wondered if this was what it was like to be a rock star?

They made their way to a large Inn at the center of Old Town- all sleek black marble, with brightly colored flags and a great, mosaic sign that read "Milre's" and had a picture of the city in the middle of the river from a bird's eye view. Ravi pulled open the heavy, wood and iron bound door, and Nari walked in and then froze. "It looks like a production of Cats," she whispered to Ravi as he joined her.

Behind the desk was what looked like a human-sized Persian cat in a tweed suit, and scurrying about the Inn were all manner of walking cats-- some resembled Angora, Tabby, Siamese. "They are The Silvestris," Ravi said.

"And we have excellent hearing," Milre, himself, bellowed from behind the desk. "And we do not like being called cats."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"We are very forgiving. Once," Milre said. The old cat smiled, showing his fangs. "I did not expect you back so soon, Ravi."

"Plans got changed," Ravi answered. "Can we head on up?"

"Of course. I'll have hot baths prepared. Unless," and he turned to Nari, "you would like one of my staff to come up and lick you clean?"

"Oh, um, well..." Nari started.

"He's kidding," Ravi said, steering her toward the stairs.

"I do have a sense of humor," Milre said, chuckling to himself.

"Stairs," Nari said. "Ugh."

"Welcome to the world of Allmyth!" Ravi said. "It actually never mattered when we were just pretending, but suddenly renting out the top floor doesn't seem like such a good idea."

"How far is the top here?" Nari asked, her legs aching.

"Six floors."

"When we build our keep, let's make sure that it has an elevator,"

Esther said.

"Or just one story," Kent said. "My legs hurt like hell."

"Say no more," Esther said, sweeping Kent off his feet and cradling him in her arms. "I will carry you the rest of the way."

"Put me down!" Kent said, giggling. "Let me go!"

"No way," Esther said. "You're getting carried!"

"Ugh!" Kent said, playful slapping Esther's shoulder, and then letting his head rest against her chest. "You're such a ... jerk!"

Ravi looked down at Nari, who rolled her eyes. It was obvious to everyone where this was headed-- everyone except maybe Kent. She wondered if she should talk to him, a little woman to woman chat, warn him about where this was going. But then she remembered the shy, introverted boy he'd been who could barely look her in the eyes. Maybe it would be good for him? See what it was like for a girl? Maybe it would make him a better man when they got back to reality? Meanwhile, she couldn't help but notice her man hadn't even offered to carry her.

When Ravi led her into their room, she stopped and gasped. "It's like the cutest bed and breakfast ever!" There was a huge old oaken poster bed, polished and glistening, and piled high with the softest looking quilts

and masses of pillows. Silver plates and bowls shone in the sunlight pouring in the big, lead windows, and there were oil paintings and upholstered chairs and everything as if they were going to be sleeping in a museum. She tossed herself onto the bed, and was not disappointing as she sank into the glorious down feather mattress, which seemed to drain the aches and pains right from her body. "It's a dream!"

"Wait until the bath," Ravi said. "They use minerals from the Lost Sea, and herbs and stuff from the Cloud Forest. It's like some kind of crack bath-- or at least that's how Beard always described it. So far, everything has been even more amazing than he said it would be."

"I can't wait!"

"And after that-- feasting and booze!"

"Should we really drink?" Nari said, kicking off her boots and looking at her little elfish feet for the first time. "My feet are tiny!"

"Why not?"

"Aren't we in danger?"

"We're as safe here as we would be sitting in Beard's living room back home," Ravi said. "Besides, I can't miss up a chance to at least taste some elfish brandy. And some dwarfish ale. And a few other things I've

been hearing about for the last year." He went over to the bed, sidled up next to Nari, and gave her a kiss. "I'll control myself when it comes to the booze," he said. "But I can't promise to control myself in bed after."

"You better not. Once we've had some dinner, I want you to fuck me silly in this crazy ass bed," Nari said.

"Why wait?" He reached down and started undoing her top, but Nari put her hand on his chest.

"Hold your horses, stud."

"Why?"

She untangled herself, got up and slipped out her pants, giving him a nice view of her perfect, round ass. "Cause I'm all stinky and tired," she said. Then, looking back over her shoulder and shaking her sweet ass, she added, "And I like making you wait."

"You wicked little witch."

Nari finished undressing, slipped into a robe and headed off to the baths. Ravi lay back for a moment pondering his halfway to a hard-on, thought about finishing himself, but decided to save it for Nari. It's the thing a noble knight would do, he said, chuckling to himself. And besides, he really wanted her bad, and he didn't want to risk rolling ones in bed that

night. So, he got up and headed to the baths as well.

Bauble waited by the side of the road on the western shore overlooking the city. Finally, a farmer came by with a large wagon pulled by a pair of huge blue oxen. A burlap cloth had been pulled over his produce to protect it from the sun. Bauble slipped in the back and under the cover, and rode safely across the bridge, through the gate and into the city.

The party feasted on all the foods and drank all the exotic and intoxicating liquors of this strange new world, all promises of restraint forgotten as they regaled Milre and others gathered in the dining hall with the story of their encounter with the dragon. As Ravi had guessed, everything tasted and smelled even more amazing than Beard's rhapsodic descriptions could have suggested, and none of them was prepared for life in the flickering world of firelight-- candles and fire pits being their only source of lighting, their lives reflected in the polished wood and silver of the room and in every wide eye. It was life in a romance.

Esther took center stage, describing what it was like in the very mouth of the beast and growing teary-eyed when she remember the vision of the valkyrie which had appeared to her on death's door. New stories told, they all began to reminisce about the old times, and Milre regaled them with his own tales of adventure from his days as a soldier in the Germaine army. "And so what brings you back to the city so soon?" Milre asked.

"We need the Book of Worlds!" Beard said, excitedly, wanting to have a chance to join in the fun. The room grew suddenly quiet. All eyes turned to the little pixie, waiting for her to elaborate.

"The Book of Worlds?" Milre said. "Why that is most interesting."

"I will tell you more of our mission later," Ravi said.

"I am most intrigued right now," a stranger who'd been listening intently all night said.

"Why not sing us one of your beautiful songs?" Ravi shouted to Beard.

"Yes! Yes!" The crowd immediately took up the call, and Beard bowed, and came up smiling, his brightest prettiest smile.

"I shall sing for you all. It's a very song. The Taking of Sir Roland."

The crowd cheered.

Sir Roland was the bravest knight in the service of the queen
His hard steel blade, Vitality, did burn with a passionate flame
"Go forth," the queen commanded, on the new year's
first sweet day, and do not return until you bring to me
the Ring of Loyalty.

Stay you truly on this path, do not permit delay
the queen from her throne did say
And if you are true, I will wed one year from today!

So rode forth Roland on his steed
The Warhorse Chivalry
And through dark swamps and haunted tombs
he traveled through the days
through all the trials and all the tests
Sir Roland remained true and strong
And flaming Vitality did he wield
As he slew the wicked throng

Ah! But one sweet morning weary and worn
as he rode through the murky mists
A sweet voice he heard that settled on him like a kiss
He stopped and listened and turned toward the voice

and to it soon joined his, and he pulled at the
reigns and sang and sought the tempting voice of bliss
Chivalry refused to turn, but remained steadfast to his task
And so Roland leapt of his horse and ran toward the voice at last

He ran and sang, and with each step deeper into the mist
His voice rose higher and softer and sweeter, yes!
Soon he sang with the soft voice of a maiden, it is true
And as he ran he grew smaller and shorter, and more youthful, too
Curly hair spilled over his shoulders, thick and golden as wheat
and now he had slender white arms to match his dainty feet
He ran into the glen, where an elfish witch did grin with glee
And as they sang together, she approached the man becoming she
The elfish witch with a cruel push sent Roland tumbling back
And she reached down and took his sword, Vitality, as Roland wept
"Give me back my sword," he cried in his girl's small, tearful voice
But the elfish maid only laughed and said, "You gave it to me by
choice!"

"Now," the elfish witch went on, "what must come to pass will pass.
"My spell now will fit you in the shape of a fine, pretty young lass."

"No," Roland cried in the voice of a girl as the magic changed his
shape

his chest blossomed full, heavy breasts as he cried out so irate

His waist like that of a wasp, and soft birthing hips of a mother to be

and he squeezed his legs together in shame as he gained his soft wet

V,

Then the elf did laugh, she now a man did stand, and she threw
Roland over her shoulder

And took the maiden he became.

The audience clapped at Beard's performance of the old song, his
voice so pretty like crystal, and it was a song most of them had known and
loved since they were children, and Beard bowed and laughed, then covered
his mouth with his tiny hands and blew them all kisses.

Outside, lingering by a window that ran along a narrow alley,
Bauble, now completely buried inside an oversized hooded robe, hissed with
excitement. The Book of Worlds? Yes. This Gallathea would want to
know. He snuck as the little Pixie began to sing, slithering off into the dark
night, winding his way down twisting alleyways, following signs that would

look like meaningless scratch marks to most eyes, but were actually the secret language of the Mus. Finally, he came to a sewer opening, and he slipped into the hole and down into the filth and darkness, and foul friends.

Finally, much later than was wise, drunk and buzzing with joy, they all made their way back to their rooms.

Esther once again carried a giggling Kent. He was just a wisp of a girl, but six floors is six floors, and it was all she could do to hide the aching in her muscles as she brought him into his room and tossed him squealing onto his bed. Esther jumped on after him. She grabbing Kent around his slender waist and, rolling on her back, held him above her, staring up into his pretty eyes, his hair falling all around his smooth, pretty face. Kent's eyes got soft and wet, he licked his lips. "You're a pretty girl," Esther said. "Oh, but you don't like being called a girl, do you?"

"I like it when call me a girl," Kent said.

Esther lowered him down toward her, still holding him by the waist, and brought him in for a kiss. The kiss was tentative at first, hesitant and full of curiosity and fear, and when it ended Kent whispered, "Oh, my god!"

Esther brought him down then, rolled over and got on top, his body against Kent's, and she brushed the bangs out of his eyes and said, "You are so beautiful."

"You, too," Kent said, running his dainty hand over Esther's bulging arm.

Esther kissed him again, and this time Kent welcomed it, needed it, answered her passion with his own. They kissed more, and then Esther began to undress Kent, gently and slowly, caressing his soft flesh as she removed one article after another, and then Kent sat there on the bed, his legs curled beneath him, his arms at his sides, looking down as Esther looked at him-- his slender shoulders, full, firm breasts. The long neck and round thighs.

"You're perfect," Esther said. "The most beautiful girl I have ever seen."

Kent smiled prettily, met Esther's eyes, and then just fell onto his back, his slender arms stretched out at his sides, and Esther climbed onto him and she put her hands on his breasts, and Kent gasped, "Oh my!"

Esther squeezed his breasts together, then began to kiss them, suck on them, then she came back up and kissed him some more, caressing his belly and his arms, running her fingertips gently along his skin. Kent trembled with pleasure, whispered and purred as Esther brought him wave after wave of pleasure, and when she put her head between his legs and

touched him with her tongue he gasped and moaned, shocked and terrified at the surge of pure, physical joy that surged through him, and Esther worked and played until her pretty little man screamed out, his first orgasm overtaking him, and Kent slammed his little fists into the mattress as tears trickled from his eyes and he screamed with the blushing pleasure of a young woman being awakened to herself for the first time.

Not far away, Ravi and Nari were in bed as well. "Just try it for me this once," Ravi said. "Come on."

Nari was drunk, laughing, playfully slapping at him. "No! It's gross."

They were naked, entwined in each other, the sheets. They'd been kissing and cuddling, and the room smelled like wine and sweat.

"It's not gross. Lots of people do it. Just try it. Come on."

Nari shook her head. "Nah. Not for me. I never have let any guy do me doggie-style."

Ravi, his head full of wine and fired by her earlier teasing, cast a charm spell. It was one of a few magic powers he had gained as a white knight, though he was supposed to use them only for good. "You want to try it," Ravi said. "Get on all fours and let me take you. You want to make me

happy, right?"

"Oh, god," Nari said, surprised as she suddenly realized that she did want to try it. She climbed onto all fours, shook her butt and looked back over her shoulder, her hair all in her face. "Hurry up before I change my mind."

Ravi gave her butt a squeeze, then grabbed her hips. He felt a rush of excitement that erased any sense of guilt. He'd wanted this so long, and she looked so damn fine from behind, and as he slipped into her vagina, he grunted, "Fuck, yes."

Nari arched her back, pushing her hips back to get him deeper into her. It felt good to have him inside her, but she didn't like the position, her breasts swaying down like utters, she staring at the mattress, him behind her. It just felt so impersonal getting fucked like this, and she felt a little resentment that Ravi had talked her into it. But then again, she had wanted to try it, and she did want to make him happy. So, could she really blame him?

Ravi was working himself up, sliding in and out harder and deeper and faster. He seemed really into it, but for Nari it was just bad sex-- she found herself thinking about the homework she wasn't doing, the texts she wasn't answering, the Facebook posts she wasn't seeing. What was going on in the real world? Had anyone noticed that they were even-- "ow!"

Ravi had slapped her on the ass, and now he did it again. "Shit!" Nari said.

"You like it," Ravi said. "You know you do."

Nari just rolled her eyes and waited for it to be over. What the hell had gotten into him? It was like doing it in a shitty porn movie all of a sudden. If this was a thing for him, Nari wondered if they could really be together, because she was sure she didn't like it, and when it ended and Ravi finally pulled out, she gratefully got on her back and sighed with relief.

"That was fucking amazing," Ravi said, giving her a quick kiss, his sweat dripping down on her face. "Wow."

Nari wiped the sweat from her face, doubly annoyed that he was so oblivious to her feelings. She had thought they were going to have a great night in bed, and instead only one of them had really gotten off. She hated having to ask for it. Hated it! He should know by now that she was upset, but Ravi had thrown himself onto his back and put an arm over his eyes. "How about you do something for me now?" Nari asked.

"What?" Ravi said.

Nari softened her voice, deciding to try a little sweet talk. Honey attracts more bees than vinegar, her mother had always said. "Let's do it again," Nari said. "You're so amazing."

"Yeah, sure," Ravi said. "Just let me catch my breath."

A minute later, he started snoring.

Shit, Nari thought, staring at the ceiling in frustration. The sex had been like getting fat free yogurt instead of Ben and Jerry's-- it was okay, but it just left her craving the real thing more than ever. What an asshole! She thought, looking at Ravi's stupid, snoring face. Well, this wasn't going to stand, she decided. They would sort things out in the morning. That was for sure.

In the meantime, her mind began to fill with worry. What about her parents? Were they in a panic? Shit. She had a big economics test coming up. How was she supposed to study? Tossing and turning, she found sleep impossible, and with each painfully slow hour, her anger at Ravi grew hotter. It was HIS fault she was trapped here! HIS fault she might fail out of college, and the selfish ass couldn't even take a minute to pay attention to HER feelings?

Asshole, she thought. Asshole. Asshole.

Chapter Five

Morning turned out to be afternoon. Hung-over, exhausted from their journey, still reeling from waking up in what they had believed to be an imaginary world, the group slept and slept and slept until finally one by one they started to get up and make their bleary way to the dining hall, looking for food to help blunt their hangovers.

Ravi woke to a hangover compounded by guilt and an empty bed. He looked around and saw that Nari's stuff was all gone. *Shit*, he thought, blurry recollections of the night before coming back to him. *The spell. Why the fuck had he cast that stupid spell on her?* *It was the wine*, he thought. *I was drunk.*

But he knew that was all bullshit. He'd been a selfish asshole, and now he was going to have to face up to it. He dressed in his regular clothes. Made his way downstairs. It seemed like everyone else was already up. Esther and Kent were nuzzling in a corner. Olaf and Nari and Beard were together at the great central table. He wandered in and sat down next to Nari, tried to put his arm around her, but she made a disgusted noise and got up, walking away without a word.

"Someone's in trouble," Beard said.

"She was colder than a frost giant's balls," Olaf said, chuckling.

"Fuck me," Ravi said.

Olaf pushed his half-eaten plate over. "Eat up. Good for the hangover."

"What is it?"

"Something like sauerkraut, potatoes and sausage."

Ravi ate. "Looks like Kent finally noticed that he's a girl."

"I believe we can safely say he's a woman now," Olaf said.

The two men chuckled.

"I think it's sweet," Beard said, his chin in his hands, watching the two of them sitting so close, staring into each other's eyes, whispering.

"To each his own," Olaf said.

"I'd never let another man take me," Ravi said.

"It's biology," Beard said. "If you were turned into a straight female, you'd want guys to make love to you."

"Never," Ravi said. "And even if my body wanted it, I would still say no."

"Why fight love?"

"Because. What would my parents think? How would I tell my father that his oldest son suddenly loves dick? And what would happen when

I got back to the real world? How could I face people knowing that I'd fucked dudes? Back me up, Olaf?"

Olaf just shrugged. "I don't know much of anything anymore."

"What? So, you would do a guy?"

"I don't know. That's what I am saying. I never thought I would be into furies, but I can't stop thinking about these Silvestre. They are hot as hell."

"Thanks," one of the serving girls said from across the room, and she smiled, showing her sharp little fangs.

The party assembled, geared up and headed over to the Temple of Iphis. Nari gave Ravi the silent treatment the whole time, refusing to even acknowledge him. He toyed with the idea of casting another charm spell on her and making her forgive him, but it was wrong on every level, had been the start of these problems, so instead he just suffered through it. She would talk when she was ready.

The temple was located near the bridge to Genesis, one of the oldest temples in the city, it was a fortress like structure with rows of pillars and a dome. "It looks kinda like the Pantheon," Kent said. Taking a moment to marvel at the building like tourists, the group turned to Ravi and waited to hear his plan. Ravi massaged his temples. "We should really start planning

before we leave, probably," Ravi said. "Beard? Where exactly is this book, anyway?"

"In a chamber beneath the temple."

"I don't suppose we can just turn invisible , walk down there and take it?"

"No. If it were that easy the book would have been stolen long ago. It is guarded by the Knights Priestess, and there are defenses magic and supernatural. Interesting thing about the Knights Priestess, in fact, that they..."

"Save it. Why not just hack and slash our way to the book, then?"

"We can't. The priestesses are allies, innocents," Kent said.

"You would all be pariahs in the city forevermore," Beard said, falling back into Game Master Mode.

"Who cares? None of this is real. It's a fantasy world. We're going back to the real world and nothing we do here will matter then."

"I'm not so sure," Esther said. "It all seems real to me."

"There's a difference between seeming and being."

"We might want to come back," Kent said, taking Esther's arm.

“What?”

“We like it here,” Esther admitted. “I’m not sure I would even want to leave at all but I don’t think it would be fair to my family if I just vanished.”

“Okay,” Ravi said. “Okay. Well, then, look. I know this sounds crazy, but I am just going to ask the high-priestess.”

"She'll say no." Beard said.

"Well, if she does, we'll try something else. But we're rock stars around here, and maybe the priestess will want to do us a favor."

“It’s worth a try,” Olaf said.

They walked into the temple. The center of the dome did have an oculus, much like the Pantheon, and a great tree grew in the center, surrounded by a fountain and a garden teeming with butterflies and bees. All around the room were statues of the goddess Iphis in her various forms-- some male, some female, some radiating beauty and love, others rage and destruction. There was no service, but townsfolk were milling about the place, offering prayers to different incarnations of the goddess depending on their needs, or simply meditating at the kneelers surrounding the garden.

As they entered, looking around in wonder, one of the young

priestesses hurried forward. "Hello! Hello! What an honor!"

"Yes," Ravi said. "Of course..."

But the acolyte hurried past and clasped Nari's hands. "Priestess Princess Ilanthe. Our most humble welcome to an honored servant of the goddess Pare."

Nari clasped the girl's hands back and smiled, not sure what to say, she just went with what seemed natural. "Thanks. You have a lovely temple."

"It is my privilege to serve here," the acolyte said. "I will tell the high-priestess you are here at once!"

"Thank you so much!"

As soon as the girl rushed off, Nari turned to the group and said, "Priestess Princess Ilanthe?"

"The gamer who played the character before you was a little fem," Beard said.

"Just a little," Nari said. "Yuck."

"It looks like you're the rock star here," Ravi said, trying to get something out of Nari, outing a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off.

Meanwhile, outside the temple, a Bauble was joined by a second cowed figure. “You’re certain they went inside?” Magis Yarn asked nervously, leaning on his gnarled ash staff.

“Yes. I followed them from the Inn. You will make sure I get my just reward?” He asked, worried the Mus wizard would get all the rewards.

Magis knocked him in the head with his staff. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t end up cat food, you ass. I should turn you into a turnip.”

“Why?” Bauble said, covering his head with his arms. “What are you saying? I handed you the party!”

“Our mission is The Book of Worlds, and this is probably a suicide mission,” Magis said, “but with failure death is certain, so let’s just be done with it.” He mumbled some incantations and threw some dust in the air, and Bauble watched as his image shimmered and was replaced by that of a young human female, dressed as an acolyte. Looking down at himself, he saw that he now also appeared to be a young human female. “I will do my best to keep us both alive,” Magis said, now with a young woman's voice that matched the illusion. “Just stay close to me and don’t do anything unless I ask you to.”

“I feel naked,” Bauble said, looking at the nearly hairless skin on his

arm.

“Shut up,” Magis said. “And stay shut up.”

“Okay,” Bauble said, getting a warning look from Magis, he added,
“Ooops. Sorry. I didn't mean...”

“Shut UP!”

The acolyte who first greeted them hurried back to inform Nari that the High Priestess would see her. “Only me?” Nari asked.

“Yes. She asked to see you in private.”

“Make sure to...” Ravi started.

“I’ll take care of it,” Nari said, turning away to follow the acolyte.

“At least she finally spoke to me,” Ravi said with a shrug.

“What did you do?” Esther said. “She is really pissed at you.”

“It’s private,” Ravi said. “Just something stupid.” Really stupid. They’d fought before, but this was the angriest he’d ever seen her, and now he began to realize just how much he cared for and needed her.

Beard, meanwhile, found himself drawn to the fluttering butterflies

in the garden, and he was fluttering with them, laughing and giggling as he realized he could actually talk to them. “Someone likes you!” One of the butterflies said. Then the rest all joined in the chant. “Someone likes you! Someone likes you!”

“What are you silly geese talking about?”

“Logo!” They pointed. Beard looked, and his mouth fell open. Standing on a toad stool, hands on hips, chest out, was the prettiest, most perfect thing she had ever seen-- he had golden skin, a shock of messy black hair, and the brightest smile he had ever seen, and he was staring boldly right at Beard, like he could see every inch of him. Beard bashful crossed his arms over his breasts, and fluttered, his knees together, feet sticking out.

“Um, hi?” Beard said.

Logo laughed. “You’re dumb!” He said.

“Dumb?” Beard squealed.

“Cause you’re a girl!” And with that Logo flapped his wings and flew off, laughing.

I’ll show him who’s a dumb girl, Beard thought, racing after Logo. Just wait until I catch him! I’ll punch him right in the nose!

The rest of the group had drifted around the temple, some looking at the statues and frescos, others the great tree. Kent and Esther still clung to each other like love struck teenagers, so Olaf and Ravi ended up wandering together. “The thought of staying here is tempting,” Olaf said.

“It’s not real,” Ravi said.

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know. A collective dream?”

“What is reality but a collective dream?”

Time passed. The sunlight streaming in through the oculus shifted further and further across the floor, leaving the garden in darkness. Kent and Esther got yelled at for making out in the temple. Olaf and Kent made it all the way around, looked at the tree, sat down and waited. “What could be taking so long?”

“I wish I could have gone in there,” Ravi said. “I could have talked her into it. Don’t you have some kind of scrying spell?”

“Let’s just be patient,” Olaf said. “From what Beard said, using magic here might not be the best idea.”

The sun began to set, the lights in the temple growing red as the room filled with cool shadows. The acolytes closed gates across the entrance

and began to sweep the temple floor, straighten the gifts that had been left by those seeking the goddess' intervention. Finally, an acolyte came out and gathered the group. "Follow me," she said.

They followed her to an antechamber, past a part of the Knights of Iphis in glittering armor of silvery glass. They were tall, broad shouldered women with cold, dangerous eyes, and Ravi thought a battle with a bunch of them was, indeed, to be avoided. They passed down into a cave with smooth, round walls, and then through a series of twists and turns until they came finally to the great hall lined with crystals that glowed with a soft, pink light, and many marvelous statues, all the high-priestesses going back to the temple's founder, Prelance Vaunted, who was said to be a demi-god, the daughter of the goddess herself and a mortal king.

At the end of the hall, the high-priestess waited. She stood six and a half feet tall with long lithe limbs that were hard with solid muscle, broad, smooth shoulders and radiant cinnamon skin. Her wide, green eyes shone with such radiance that it was impossible to look into them for more than a moment without looking away, overwhelmed by the vibrancy of her spirit. "Come," she called out in a cool, clear voice. "Nari has told me who you are and why you came seeking The Book of Worlds."

Bauble and Magis, still in the guise of acolytes, had trailed close

behind the group and, to their relief and amazement, had so far passed unnoticed. As Magis had hoped, wards had been lowered as the group passed, and so they had managed to pass with them, undetected. Now, unseen, Magis cloaked them in a spell of invisibility that allowed them to see each other, but no other eyes to detect their presence. Magis found himself growing a little gleeful. Maybe they would survive this after all.

“I have agreed to grant you access to the sacred chamber where the book is held, so that you may travel back to your world. The chamber is home to many wondrous treasures and great magic. You must not touch anything.”

“Okay. Great. Done,” they all agreed.

“Will it be possible for us to return here?” Kent said. “If we choose?”

“I don’t know,” the priestess answered. “I can’t let you take the book, so that will not serve as your passage back, but you found yourselves here once, so who can say if you will find your way back again?”

The priestess used her magic to open the great door, and the party walked into the sacred sanctum, followed closely by Magis and Bauble. The group moved to the center of the room, where a great book rested on a marble podium. “Gather round, and join hands,” the priestess said.

Magis crept forward, wanting to hear whatever chants the priestess used, hoping to learn some of its secret before turning it over to Gallathea. Too late, he looked back and saw that Bauble had stopped and was lingering by a row of bracelets that hung from pegs along the wall. They were shiny, sparkly bracelets that glowed from within with mysterious and alluring magic power.

No, Magis thought. No, you idiot, but even as he turned, planning to hurry back and stop the fool, Bauble grabbed the bracelet, and then screamed, and screamed, falling to the ground in spasms.

The high-priestess threw a spell over the room, shattering Magis' invisibility spell.

“Rats!” Esther shouted, raising her ax.

Magis immediately threw two handfuls of teeth on the ground and scurried for cover as the teeth morphed into skeletal Mus, armed with a scimitar in each hand. The skeleton army rushed forth, and the party gathered around the high-priestess, swords and axes flashing, spells exploding from Olaf's hands, shattering skeletons, while Nari instinctively raised shields around her friends, blunting scimitar blows and giving them greater strength and speed. The priestess kept her eye on Magis, and each time he tried to move out from his hiding place, she tossed a barrage of magic

bolts in his direction that kept him pinned in the corner like—a rat. The Knights Priestess charged in, then, and began to smash the skeletons to pieces.

Ravi charged toward Magis location, Nari close behind, and when Magis saw he coming he opened his palms and blue flame poured out. Ravi raised his shield, and Nari supported him with spell of protection, and he strode forward, the flames passing harmlessly around him and as he drew closer and closer to the terrified Mus wizard. Finally, eye to eye, he raised his sword. Magis saw death in Ravi's eyes, and desperately unleashed a mighty thunderclap that tossed Ravi backward, crashing in Nari and the two of them slamming against a cold, stone statue, knocking them unconscious.

Ravi drifted in a place of dark, disembodied emptiness. He didn't feel any pain, or any pleasure. He felt nothing. Just void. It was a timeless place, so he felt he was there for neither a long time nor a short time. He merely was, and then he saw a light in the distance, and he began swimming toward the light, moving toward it, and he heard a voice say, "I think she's coming to."

The voice. He knew that voice. It was Kent, but not the old Kent, the Kent from the other life. This was the girl Kent, and then he remembered the fight with the rat and the explosion, and Ravi opened his eyes and looked up to see the faces of his friends looking down at him, smiling. "You're awake," Kent said, crying, and taking Ravi's hand, and then Olaf said, "We thought we'd lost you, Nari."

"Nari?" Ravi said, and as soon as he heard his lilting voice, he felt a twinge of panic. "My... voice?" He looked down at his delicate, brown hand, his tiny little wrist, and sitting up he felt the weight of his breasts shifting beneath the gown he wore, saw them swelling beneath the thin material. "What the fuck?" Hair flopped into his face, and he pushed it back, looking around in shock at his friends' concerned faces, locking eyes with the High-Priestess. "What happened to me?"

The Priestess frowned. "You were knocked unconscious by the blast, and..."

"No!" Ravi shrieked. "Why am I a woman?"

"Oh, shit," Olaf said. "Oh, fuck. Ravi?"

"Yes!" He said.

Everyone's eyes got wide.

"She the knight," Olaf said to the High-Priestess. "She's a guy."

The High-Priestess nodded. "Of course," she said. "The statue. They were throw against the statue of Jaqueschalquer, the swapper. They switched bodies."

"Wait, so I'm in Nari's body?" Ravi said, looking down, shocked and confused, but too stunned to really process. "So, where is Nari?"

"He is in the next room, but you really should..."

Ravi threw aside the covers and rolled out of the bed, not accounting for his shorter legs he tumbled and fell right into Olaf's arms. Olaf caught him and effortlessly held him. Ravi awkwardly pushed away, and started toward the next room. His mind was flashing with confusion as it found all the sensory input coming in was wrong-- everyone was taller than him now, and his breasts swayed and his hair was heavy and fell over his shoulders, and his butt and hips felt too big, and his body didn't want to move the way he was used to moving, but he ignored it all and plunged into the next room and saw-- himself. Or the most recent version of himself.

Ravi had only seen this face through mirrors, and it was odd now to see himself as he looked to others, and also to not be that person anymore. The man stretched out on the pallet seemed looked huge-- with a thick mane of shining gold hair and neat golden beard, big hands, big shoulders, bulging

thighs-- a big, powerful, athletic man. "That was me?" Ravi said softly.

"And now Nari is in there?"

The whole group had followed behind. "It seems so."

"What's wrong with her?" Ravi said, looking over the man on the bed, not seeing any outward signs of injury.

"Head blow," The High-Priestess said. "She will be fine, but it will take time."

"Wait," Ravi said. "Now that I am her character, maybe I can heal her?"

"You don't..."

"Shush," he said. Then, he closed his eyes and tried to let it happen, but nothing happened. No power came to him. "What the hell?"

"I don't think you have her powers," Olaf said. "Her powers were all mental and spiritual, the results of years of training and religious practices."

"Meaning what?"

"Do you still remember how to do calculus?"

"Of course."

"Knowledge stays with the mind, not the body."

Ravi thought about it, looking away as the implications hit him. "So, I'm not a cleric? Then, what I am?"

"A princess," Esther said.

"Fuck you."

"Actually, she's right," The High-Priestess said. "Lineage stays with the body."

"Me? A Princess? This is too stupid." Ravi felt light-headed and stumbled, then leaned against the wall.

"You better get back to bed," Olaf said, moving to help Ravi, but Ravi waved him off.

"I'm fine," he said, one hand on the wall to steady himself, the other on his cheek. "Beard? Beard?" Ravi called, not wanting to even think about what they were telling him, wanting some information, some... distraction.

"Where the fuck is Tinker Bell?"

"Kidnapped," Kent said.

"Kidnapped?" Ravi said.

"By Gallathea."

"Oh!" Ravi said, and the shock overcame him and he fainted into Olaf's arms.

"Put her back to bed," The High-Priestess said. "And I'll investigate the statue and see what I can learn about its power."

Fever dreams clouded Ravi's mind. Senior prom. He stood on stage, everyone laughing, and looking down he saw he was wearing a blue and white dress like Cinderella, and he lifted his skirts and ran from the stage as the clock struck midnight, losing one of his glass slippers as he ran off into the darkness... which each strike of the bell, his clothes became a tuxedo, but he blossomed breasts, his hips rounded and widened, and soon he was a girl, running and running, her ponytail bobbing as she kicked the soccer ball and... his first date with Nari, and Nari held his chair as he hooked his purse over the back and sat down, then she smiled and said, "You look really pretty." He hooked his hair behind his ear and smiled, shyly, and when the waiter came to take their orders, Nari said, "She'll have the Caesar salad with chicken breast" and it thrilled him that she was so strong and decisive and then he was dressed in a metal bikini like Princess Leia, and he was chained to a wall on the side of a cliff, torches blazing to either side of him, and

below Nari battled with a great black serpent, slashing at it with her flaming blade, and Ravi cried out, Save me!"

Ravi woke back in his now empty room. He reached up and put his hands on his large, firm breasts. *So it's real*, he thought. *Or as real as any of this. Shit.* He slipped his hands under the covers and reached down, finding the hem on the hospital gown and he pulled it up over his hips. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he put his hands on the insides of his soft thighs, spreading his legs. *This is gross*, he thought. *I shouldn't even be thinking about it. It's not my body.*

Curiosity won out, and he slipped his hands up his thighs until he felt the stiff thatch. At first he just put the tips of his fingers on top of his mound, feeling the stiff hairs, the soft roundness of his sex. He could feel his mind, whatever that was a separate from his brain, light up with confusion. He was supposed to have something else down there, and he was now feeling his vaginal mound for the first time, both from the outside and the inside. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and used his fingers to spread the lips of his vagina, and then he let his fingers slide inside the slick, wet walls, and he just as quickly pulled them away as a rush of confusing, foreign pleasures rattled him, his mind screaming-- **you can't be feeling the insides of your vagina because you are a man. Or you are not a man.**

I have a vagina, he thought. I am a man with a cunt.

He looked at his finger tips, slick with his vaginal fluids, smelled them, and then wiped them disgustedly on the sheet. His mind was adjusting, recalibrating, incorporating the new information into its databanks. He pulled the sheet aside, and sat on the edge of the bed, his legs dangling, too short to reach the floor. He felt like a child. Carefully hopping off the bed, he managed not to fall, but was annoyed at how his boobs bounced at the landing and then jiggled and swayed with each step. *We have to get out of here*, he decided, putting his hands on his wide, round hips, wishing he could someone push them in, straighten them. *Jump back to Earth, where I am a business major and a dude and none of this ever happened.*

Ravi pulled a stool up next to Nari's bed and sat with her. He didn't have anything else to do, and he wanted to be with her when she woke up. Looking at her sleeping, her chest gently rising and falling, he knew he just wanted to be close to her right now more than ever. *That man is my girlfriend*, he thought, turning over the strangeness of it all in his mind. Why do I believe that? Accept it? Maybe in part because I am now her, but it's more than that, he thought. He knew it was her. Knew on a heart-deep level that was beyond words. He remembered telling her once that he would recognize her even if she were a toad, and he'd just said it then but now he realized it was true. "You are my soul mate," he whispered, covering one of

her hands with his, not caring how much like a teen-age girl he sounded as gentle tears started to pour down his smooth cheeks. "You are my everything, and I need you right now. I need you. So please... please... please wake up. For me? Because I love you?" And then he stood on his tippy toes, leaned over and, glancing back to make sure no one was watching, gently kissed Nari on the lips.

Nari stirred, made a soft moaning sound, and opened her eyes. Ravi looked down at her, his eyes wide, mouth open in surprise. "I love you, too," she said, reaching up both hands and cupping Ravi's face, and she brought her pretty, teary-eyed boyfriend down for a second, deeper and more lasting kiss. Ravi pulled away, flustered and embarrassed, self-consciously wiping away his girlish tears.

"You're me," Nari said baritone so loud and deep it scared her. She put her hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

"Yeah," Ravi said, sitting back. "We switched bodies."

"Why are you crying?" Nari asked, almost whispering for fear of her loud voice.

"I don't know," Ravi said, looking away. "I feel so stupid."

"It's okay," Nari answered, looking at the pretty little elven maid sitting before her, looking demurely away, her long hair flowing down over a

small, round shoulder. "You're a woman now." Nari said.

Ravi got up and hurried from the room, throwing himself face down on his own bed and burying his face in his pillow.

The High-Priestess came to them later with two acolytes in tow, slender little Silvestris girls who kept their eyes bashfully to the ground-- one with gray and white stripes that looked like a Siberian, and the other was spotted, like a leopard. The girls carried Ravi and Nari's things, and behind them two Knights of Iphis brought along Ravi sword and armor. "Your friends await you back at Milre's Inn."

"Shouldn't we switch back first?" Ravi said, holding Nari's leather bustier at arm's length, like it was a snake about to bite him.

"Oh, I want to see you in those leather pants," Nari said, teasingly, though she was finding herself just as awkward and uncomfortable in his big, bulky body.

"You can't change back," The High-Priestess said. "At least not for a year. The statue of Jaqueschalquer will only switch a pair's bodies once per year."

"A year? No," Ravi said. "Are you sure? Can't we at least try?"

"It won't work."

"Please?" Nari said. "I don't know how to do... this." She gestured down at her body.

They tried. Nothing happened.

"I wish I could kill those rats who did this," Ravi said, frustrated.

"If it any consolation, the Mus are atoning for their sins. Aren't you, ladies?"

The two Silvestris acolytes, formerly Magis and Bauble, seemed to blush-- if cats can do such a thing, and they curtsied and chimed, "Yes, mistress."

"Wait? These?"

"The newest young ladies to enter the nunnery at the Temple of Iphis. And the most obedient and helpful young ladies in the temple. Aren't you?"

"Yes, mistress," they chimed prettily again, with another curtsy.

Magis managed to sneak a scowl at Bauble. Nuns in the service of Iphis, and Silvestris girls at that? He would almost have preferred death. Almost.

And so Ravi found himself squeezing his boobs into the tiny little leather scrap, which only smooshed them together and made them feel bigger, and then he wiggled into the tiny little leather pants, tying them at the top and gasping with relief before slipping into the knee-high boots that hugged his shapely calves but, thank god, had flat, thick soles built for adventuring. *I feel like a sausage*, he thought, squirming against the too tight clothes. His belly was exposed, a pink belly ring flashing, and his boobs felt like they stuck out three feet in front of him, while the tight pants made him extra conscious of his wide hips and full, round behind. He remembered looking at Nari when she was in this body, in this outfit, so he knew how he looked now, and it made him feel sick to be showing all his curves like this. He was man, but now he looked like a prostitute with a leather fetish. The clothes unmanned him more than the body, but the only other option was to borrow a nun's gown, and that seemed even worse.

In the other room, the Knights helped Ravi into her armor. With each piece of cold, hard steel that was strapped to her hard, muscled body, she felt she was losing a part of her femininity, feeling stronger and more powerful, more butch, but it felt wrong, and she had always liked being a woman, and now she felt like she was losing her identity, being forced to become something she wasn't.

Ravi walked in as they fitted Nari into his old breastplate, and his

eyes again got a little damp as he saw how tall and powerful and how much a man she looked with her beard, and her big, powerful hands. That should be me, he thought bitterly. I'm supposed to be the knight in shining armor, not the... other one. He wouldn't even think the word "princess."

The Knights handed Nari her sword, and she raised it up as if in salute. "I feel like such a badass," she said looking at Ravi. He was standing with his hip out to the side, one hand on his hip while he ran the other through his long hair. "You..." she said, about to tell him how he looked, but she remembered how he'd reacted before.

"What?" Ravi said, suddenly becoming self-conscious and shifting out of his feminine stance.

"The sword's lighter than I thought," Nari said, sheathing it, awkwardly, as she couldn't find the opening in her sheath. "Guess I'm going to have to learn to handle a blade."

"I can help you with that," Ravi said softly. Forlornly. "Maybe I can still make myself useful somehow."

"Oh, Ravi," Nari said. "Don't feel that way. Just because you're a girl--"

"I am NOT a girl," he said.

"No, I didn't mean..."

"Let's just go and find the others so we can get out of here."

"Okay. Fine. I need to talk to the priestess for a sec."

"Just don't take forever this time." Ravi sat down, squirming, wondering if he would ever get comfortable in this body. Hoping he wouldn't be in it long enough. He idly started twisting a strand of his hair around his fingers, and when Nari walked in and saw him he flushed and stopped immediately.

"What did the priestess have to say?"

"I'll fill you in later," Nari said absently. "Let's get moving."

"Why not just tell me now?" Ravi asked as they walked up the stairs leading toward the surface.

"Don't worry about it," Nari said.

"Asshole," Ravi said, hurrying his pace with his little legs to get ahead.

Nari sighed.

They walked back in silence, both of them feeling self-conscious as they walked through town in their new bodies. Ravi felt even more like a child now, as it seemed like everyone was taller than him -- even some of the

children. And he found he had to duck and side-step and slip among all the big bodies. Nari had tried to walk ahead, but Ravi was determined to take the lead, so she trailed behind and she found that as big as she was and in her flashing armor, people moved out of her way. What's more-- for the first time in her adult life no one ogled her body. Some women met her eyes and smiled, sort of giving her a quick, appreciative look, but she got none of the blatant, rapey stares that Ravi was now getting as he walked, his butt wiggling in his tight leather pants. The only difference between here and New York was the lack of catcalls, but maybe that was even due to the big, burly sword wielding night walking behind him.

They got to Milre's. Ravi grabbed the big, iron bound wooden door and pulled. Nothing happened. He grabbed it with both his little hands and pulled, barely moving it. "Let me," Nari said.

"I got it!" Ravi said, leaning back and using his body weight to start dragging the door open.

Nari grabbed the handle with one hand and easily swung the door open, standing there and holding it for Ravi, who folded his arms under his breasts and frowned. Nari said, "I'm not trying to make you feel like a girl or anything, but the door is heavy and..."

"Fine," Ravi huffed, and walked into the Milre feeling small and

weak and-- girly, whether Nari meant it or not, he felt even more emasculated not because a man had held the door for him but because he'd needed a man to hold the door. He'd felt the eyes on his breasts and backside the whole way, guys checking him out, had darted out of the path of 13 year old boys who were taller than him, boys who looked him over, mentally undressing him with their eyes as if he were just a show pony, and now he couldn't even open a door?

They found the group gathered upstairs in Olaf's room. Ravi just let Nari get the door, and as soon as he walked in Esther said, "Princess."

"Fuck you," Ravi said.

"Sorry, but I have a girlfriend."

Ravi ignored it, sat down, tossed his long hair back and said, "So, I was thinking..."

"Actually," Nari interrupted in her booming voice. "I have a plan."

"Wait," Ravi said in his pretty, high-pitched voice. "I ..."

"Let's hear from Nari," Olaf said.

"Yeah. Let's hear him out," Esther added, nodding to Nari.

"You're going to be real important in this plan, Ravi, and so are the rest of you," Nari said.

"Um, okay," Ravi whispered, sitting back. Kent reached over and gave Ravi's hand a sisterly squeeze. and a look that somehow he recognized as meaning, "men."

Is that it? Ravi thought, idly playing with some strands of his hair as the men talked. *I'm out as leader just because I have a vagina now? Are people really that stupid? I'm the same man I always was just in a different body! My mind is the same! I'm the same man you used to turn to for guidance before you farted!* But he didn't say it, because he knew they wouldn't listen to him now, and he was pretty sure it was just because he had a vagina. And then he wondered-- or did they only used to listen to me because I had a penis?

He'd heard complain about lacking voice, about not being heard, especially in his English classes, where it seemed like the professors couldn't talk about corn flakes without turning it into a discussion about race and gender, and he'd always snickered and thought-- maybe you just don't have anything worthwhile to say? Maybe people don't listen because you're a bleach blonde Tri-Delt with more boobs than brains? He looked down at his own canyon of cleavage, and frowned. *His* breasts were bigger than his brains now-- literally-- and he felt like he had just been slapped in the face with what it meant to be judged by his bra-size.

It was a helluva a way finally understand what all those women had been trying to tell him when they kept clucking on about male privilege.

The men talked. Ravi barely listened. No one would listen to him anyway. The meeting ended with some sort of plan having been formulated to rescue Beard from Gallathea, get back here and get back to Earth. It seemed fine to Ravi, or not fine. What point was there in him getting all worked up about it?

Nari came over. "Coming back to our room?"

Ravi shook his head. "It just feels too weird right now," he said. "I better get my own room."

"You can sleep in mine," Kent said. "I'll be with Esther anyway."

"That works," Ravi said.

Nari was relieved. It would be too weird to be together in the same room, the same bed, now that they were in each other's bodies. She felt strange looking at herself-- the self she was-- and she didn't feel comfortable having Ravi look at her. Besides, she couldn't say anything right now without getting him angry. They both needed some space.

"If you want to talk about it, I'd be glad to," Kent said, hugging Ravi then holding his hands.

"Thanks," Ravi said, "maybe later." He gave Kent's hands a squeeze and said "thanks."

Nari watched, pained. No one offered to talk to her. Of course. Guys. And watching the two women together, she missed it. The closeness she'd had with her friends. Already, standing here in her armor, she felt the cold, masculine distance she'd seen in men growing in her life, taking over, and she very, very alone. So she went to her room, stripped out of her armor, dressed in regular clothes and decided to go down to the bar and have a drink or two, maybe smoke a cigar and see what the big male deal was with the things. She'd get to bed early, as they would ride south to rescue Beard in the morning. Reaching down, she adjusted her "junk." God, but it kept getting tangled up in her underpants. How did men walk around with these stupid things all the time?

Ravi, for his part, too ashamed to bring his soft curves and pretty face into public, put on one of the Milre's robes and curled up in bed with a book he found on the room neat little bookshelf. He read by candlelight, forgetting, for a time, that he was a woman and getting lost in the story of The Beggar King. He had no idea how late it was when someone began pounding on his door. He gasped prettily, instinctively reaching for his sword, and the shifting weight of his breasts brought him back to himself.

More pounding, and Ravi found himself glancing at the armoire, thinking about climbing into it and hiding. He was helpless now, and had no chance to defend himself if this were some sort of attack. The handle to his door began to shake and rattle as someone tried to force their way in, and just as Ravi was about to scream for help, a husky voice slurred out, "Ravi! Open up!"

Nari, Ravi thought angrily. "Go away!"

"I need ta talk ta yooooo," *Nari* slurred.

"No!"

Nari pounded some more. "Ravi!" She bellowed. "Let me in!"

Sighing, Ravi got up and, pulling his robe closed, he opened the door. *Nari* stumbled into the room and immediately threw her arms around Ravi, almost knocking him over as she stumbled and almost fell. Ravi struggled helplessly in her big, powerful arms, and said, "You're drunk."

"Hardly," *Nari* said. "Just a bit tipsy. Let's dance!" And she lifted Ravi off his feet and started to twirl him around. Ravi shrieked, terrified that *Nari* was going to drop him and also furious to be manhandled and just thrown around like a doll.

"Put me down!" He yelled.

Nari tossed him on the bed and tried to dive in on top of him, but Ravi rolled away, clutching the top of his robe closed. "Okay now. Just relax," he said. "You stay over there, and we can talk. Okay?"

"Oshay," Nari managed, looking at Ravi with glassy, moony eyes. "You're so good to me," she said. "You are so good to me, and I was such a bitch to you."

"No," Ravi said. "No. Really. I'm the one who was a jerk."

"I don't like being a man," Nari said. "I want to be a woman again." She scratched at her beard, and made an ugly face. "This beard is itchy and stupid."

"I know," Ravi said, edging further away from her grasp, glad she seemed to be calming down.

"I'm lonely, and I keep bumping my knees into things, and my junk keeps--- it keeps getting all twisted up in my pants, and I want to be able to see my mother!"

"There, there," Ravi said softly. "There, there."

"Can I have a hug?" Nari said.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Please? Just one hug. I need a hug, like a good Guuurrrl hug, ya

know how you need a hug from one of your girls sometimes?"

"I'm just not comfortable."

Nari got on her knees. "Just one," she begged. "Please?"

She looked so pathetic there on her knees, her blonde hair a mess, that Ravi finally nodded. "Just one, quick hug."

"Thanks, sis," Nari said, her mind a confused mess. Nari got up on the bed, and the two hugged. Nari buried her head in Ravi's hair and breathed in, deeply. "You're so lucky," she said. "So lucky you aren't stuck as a gross guy with hair on your back."

"I guess I am," Ravi said.

"I'd have sex with you right now," Nari said, sleepily, "but my boyfriend might get jealous. He's actually a chick."

"I bet he's really hot," Ravi said, rolling his eyes.

"He is just the most gorgeous little thing in the world, and he's really just the best guy, and I love him so much., and I am going to stop talking now because my tongue is too big for my mouth."

The hug went on, and Ravi began to feel uncomfortable, so he gently pushed Nari away, and she slumped snoring onto the bed. *Oh no*, Ravi thought. "Wake up!" He said, shaking her. "Wake up!" But she was gone.

There was nothing to do for it, so he just blew out his candles, curled up at the foot of the bed, and, as he drifted off to sleep, he whispered, "I love you, too."

The next morning, the staff came around to wake them up before dawn. "Oh, my fucking God," Nari said, rushing into the privy to vomit, and then stumbling back into Ravi's room, sitting down on the bed, head in her hands. "How did I get here?" She asked.

"Booze," Ravi said.

"Did we? You know?"

"No," Ravi said. "You mostly just kept telling me about how annoying you found it to have a penis."

"Sorry."

"Well, I feel the same about having tits."

"I don't know if I can make it with this hangover. I feel sick if I even move."

"Can't you heal yourself or something?"

Nari sat up. "That's an idea." A moment later, she sprang to her feet, laughing. "Hahahaha. Omigod! I can heal hangovers!"

Great, great, great, Ravi thought. She gets to drink all she wants,

fight dragons and have adventures. I get huge knockers. Life is fair. Sure it is. Squeezing himself into his tiny little leather pants, he cursed himself for not going out and getting some better clothes.

They ate quickly, and just as the first rays of the morning sun began to lighten up the city and the birds began to sing, Bauble arrived with their horses and provisions. "I am here as ordered, Milady," he said, curtsying to Nari.

"Excellent. My friends, this is the pretty young nun I told you about who will be joining us on our adventure."

"Wait, what?" Ravi said.

"Weren't you listening yesterday?"

"Not really, no."

"Well, I'll fill you in later. Right now, let's mount up and ride. We need to rescue Beard, and soon. No doubt, she is terrified right now, frightened, and we have to save her!"

Ravi started to object, but he was worried about Beard, and everyone else just started to mount, so he just swallowed his objections and... looking around saw only a pony. "A smaller ride for you given your small size," Bauble explained.

"Of course," Ravi said, sourly, climbing onto the pony and feeling, once again, like a child. He cantered up aside Nari, and said, "So what is the plan, anyway?"

"You should be back in the middle of the formation where it's safe," Nari said. "I'll tell you later when there's a chance."

"I'm perfectly safe."

"Later, Ravi," Nari said. "Later. Now, please, get back and stay close to Kent and Olaf. You don't have any powers, and I don't want you to get hurt."

"Nari..."

"This is not a girl thing, Ravi. You don't have any powers, and you are not a fighter. Those are just facts."

Ravi dropped back. He hated being kept in the dark about their plans, and he hated the fact that he had been reduced to a helpless, pretty princess. But for now, it seemed, there wasn't much he could do about it.

"I feel like we should have a song," Kent said. "At the start of a new adventure."

"No Beard, no song," Olaf said. "Tragedy."

"How about you, princess?" Esther called. "You have a bit of pixie

about you."

"No more than you, Esther," Ravi said.

"Come on, give us some Katy Perry."

Ravi flipped her off, and sang, "Ahh, ahh, ahh."

Everyone laughed. Everyone. And Ravi actually smiled, feeling proud of himself. *I'm not going to take shit from that bitch just because I'm an elf girl*, he decided. *Why the hell should I?*

Chapter Six

To the south lay Mus Mountain, and around the lands controlled by the witch, Gallathea. Aided by the spells of the High-Priestess, their horses travelled with great speed, and after one long day's riding, they reached the frontier, the unclaimed wild lands that divided the realm of the Mus from that of man. They made camp within the ruins of an ancient tower that stood crumbling along Palatine's Wall, which long ago had been built along the border, and had fallen into disrepair when the Palatine had been overrun by the Mus, and the witch had settled into rule the lands of the once great kingdom. They had met no resistance and seen none of the witch's spies. No dragons. No war birds. Not a single rat sneaking along in the fields and

meadows that stretched out toward the mountains.

"It has been far too easy," Esther said. "I do not like this at all." Kent was curled up against her, her arm around his shoulder. Bauble, meanwhile, had her head in Olaf's lap, and purred contentedly while Olaf scratched her behind her ears. Ravi and Nari sat on opposite sides of the fire.

"The witch holds the pixie prisoner. She knows you will come for her," Bauble said.

"So she is letting us just walk right into her lands, and when we are in deep enough, at some place of her choosing, she'll strike," Nari said.

"That is her way."

"Why should we trust you?" Esther said.

"Shut up. She's helping us," Kent said.

"Helping you get your rocks off," Esther answered.

"I serve Milady Knight," Bauble said, "as I have been commanded."

"She can be trusted. She is under a spell that makes her honest and true," Nari said. "The High-Priestess cast it herself."

"So, why are we just walking into a trap, then?" Ravi said. "I mean, am I missing something here?"

"We'll figure it out when we get there," Nari said. "Just like always."

"That's your plan? Figure it out when we get there?"

"That was always your plan," Nari said. "Like you ever really had a clue."

"Yeah, but that was all different. We weren't walking into a trap set by our deadliest enemy, and one who wants to enslave us and has been trying ever since we got into this game! This is bullshit!"

"Don't get all high and mighty on us now just because you're a princess," Esther said. "Keep your tiara in your purse, honey."

"Just cut it with all that princess crap," Ravi said.

"That princess crap is the only reason she wants us in the first place," Esther said.

"Wait, so you never told me. Why does she want us?"

"She doesn't want us. She wants HER!" Esther said, pointing at Ravi. "That's all she ever wanted."

"What's he talking about?"

"I didn't tell you before because I didn't want you to get worried," Ravi said. "But she mainly just wanted you-- I guess me, now-- to blackmail

the wood elves. It's because you're the king's only child."

"You're the king's only child," Olaf said.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious."

"So that's what this is all about?" Nari said. "I wish someone would have told me sooner because then I would have realized we can use Ravi as bait."

"What the hell?" Ravi said. "Are you kidding?"

"No," Nari said. "It makes sense, right? Turn the tables. Instead of walking into her trap, we set a trap for her."

"What happened to all that keeping me safe because I'm so helpless now?"

"Still the same. You'll be safe in the trap."

"I like this idea," Olaf said. "It sure beats walking right into a trap."

"Yeah. I'm in, too," Kent added.

"But how does this get Beard back?"

"I haven't worked that out yet, but don't you worry. These wheels are turning."

"First underwear, question mark, profit," Ravi said.

"Exactly," Nari said.

"Do I get a say in this?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. But for right now, can you just calm down and stop being so hysterical? You're going to be fine. I promise. Olaf? Esther? Let's figure this out."

The men went off, leaving Ravi, Kent and Bauble sitting by the fire. "You look really pretty," Bauble said, smiling.

"Thanks," Ravi said. "You do, too."

Bauble purred.

"Doesn't it piss any of you off that the guys keep leaving us out of the planning? And Esther and Nari aren't really even dudes."

Bauble dug his claws into the ground and arched his back, stretching. Kent shrugged. "We're chicks," Kent said.

"You're just going to put up with it?" Ravi said.

"I guess," Kent said. "Whatever. I don't want Esther to think I'm a bitch or something."

"So what are we supposed to do while they're all..." and now he dropped his voice down as low and flat as he could... "Girls are dumb and Ravi is a princess, so let's put him on a unicorn and wait for a dragon to eat

him?"

"I don't know. I could braid your hair, so it won't be flopping all over the place when the dragon eats you."

"You really are a girl, you know that?"

"Thanks."

It was quiet for a time. Just the popping and crackling of the fire. And then Ravi said, "Okay. Fine. Braid it."

"Yes!" Kent said, and grabbing Bauble's hand he said, "Come help!"

"Okay," Bauble said. "Is this something humans do for fun?"

"Lame humans," Ravi said.

"Oh stop being such a princess and just enjoy it," Kent said.

Great, Ravi thought. Now even Kent thinks I'm the feminine one.

While the two girls fussed with his hair, he looked up at the stars and sighed. He wondered where Beard was, and he hoped he was okay, that they could save him and get out of this place. Being an elfin princess bites the big one he thought. It's worse than being trapped inside *Krull*.

The men finished talking, and came swaggering back, laughing loudly. "We have a plan," Nari said.

"Does it end with me getting eaten by a chimera?" Ravi asked, rolling his eyes.

"Probably not," Olaf said. "But you will have to kiss a toad."

"Haha."

"Dazzle me," Ravi said.

They explained the plan. "What do you think?" Nari said, grinning, proud of herself.

"Not as dumb as I expected," Ravi said. "I guess it might work."

"Okay, then. High-five!" Nari reached and Ravi slapped her hand. He even managed to smile at her, but when she let her eyes drop down to his breasts he crossed his arms over them and said, "I'm up here."

"I know," Nari said, "but I'm looking at your boobs." And then she snickered, just like a teen-age boy.

Beard, meanwhile, was on his knees, sitting in the center of a gilded cage in the highest tower of the witch Gallathea. "... so then I thought that I would like to have a swamp kinda like the Dead Marshes, but ya know my own thang with my own little spin, so I was thinking, like, what could be a name for the marshes, and then I was, like, well, it can't be an obvious

Tolkien rip-off or anything, so... oh, did I ever tell you about my friend, Janice? She is actually the one who originally made the Priestess Princess character, and... what did you ask me again?"

Gallathea smiled, a cold smile, a smile that looked like it cost her a great deal of pain. She was beautiful, the witch Gallathea, with flawless white skin that look like alabaster, and big, curious black eyes. Her long silver hair hung down all the way to her waist, and the dress she wore hugged the firm, athletic figure of a 20 year old woman, though the witch was ancient and had kept herself alive with vital magics. She looked at the chattering little pixie, and questioned, again, whether this could truly be the creator, the one who had made the world and all its lands and waters. Listening to it babble, she could scarcely believe such a thing could have been her creator, but all the prophecies pointed to yes, and all her spells craft and sounding had confirmed again that this silly little female form now housed the mind of the one who had made her, and so she asked again, the question that consumed her: "Why am I doing this? Why do I want to conquer the elves? I have everything I need here, and yet I am obsessed with capturing the princess and using her to become the ruler of the Elvish lands. I can't stop thinking about it. Night and day. In my dreams. I hunger to rule the lands of the elves. It consumes me, but I don't know what I would do if I got them. I don't know why I want them. Can't you tell me?"

"Oh yeah," Beard said, his eyes wide. "You didn't ask me about the geography at all. I am so silly sometimes! So, well, what was I saying?"

"Tell me you twittering fool!" Gallathea said, shaking Beard's cage. "Tell me why you made me this way!"

The shaking terrified Beard, and he flew wildly around the cage. "Stop! Stop!"

Gallathea stopped. She stared with wild eyes at Beard. "Speak!"

The terror had temporarily shaken some of the pixie out of Beard, and he managed to get right down to a clear and simple explanation. "I needed a villain."

"What?"

"I needed a villain. You know? My world's Wicked Witch of the West. So, I made you up, and then I thought it would be cool if you wanted to conquer the elvish kingdoms because Jane was from there, and so that became your thing?"

"But why? WHY?"

"I never had time to work out your motivation. I was going to get to that, but actually, like, the answer is there is no reason. You just want to rule the elves because I thought it would be a fun game."

Gallathea stared at the little creature, acid in her throat as she struggled against her urge to grab it and rip its throat out. Fun? Game? Is that all I am? She walked away, drifting among the beakers and flasks in her conjuring room, and she ended up in the center of the space where her cauldron boiled and bubbled. Pointlessly. She'd never used it for anything. Just always felt she should have it. Now, she saw it for what it was: stage dressing. *I've met God*, Gallathea thought, staring down into the bubbling ooze. *And she is an idiot.*

It's all pointless, Gallathea thought. *And it always has been.* I may not really even exist except as the imaginary enemy of a scatter-brained pixie. Knowing that her insane drive to control the elves came from nowhere and meant nothing, however, did not cause the hunger to leave her. She wanted it just as badly as ever. Needed it. And so she would have it. And then? She looked back at Beard, who was now fluttering around in his cage, singing some song to himself. What if there were a way she could get her God to serve her?

She heard a knock. "Come in."

Nestor, her oldest and most loyal Mus servant entered. "New of the Princess Ilanthe. She is to be auctioned off tomorrow."

"Auctioned off?" Gallathea chuckled. "Your friends are too clever

for their own good," Gallathea called to Beard.

"Which friends?" Beard said, still humming and flying around his cage.

Gallathea just rolled her eyes.

Ravi, squeezed into a golden metal princess Leia bikini, climbed the steps of and took his place on the auction block. His face had been painted prettily, and his hair put up in a fancy hairdo, and he felt every bit the scared, humiliated girl he appeared to be as the crowd whooped and jeered and shouted out their appreciation for his nearly naked body. Tears ran freely down his cheeks, and to gain courage he looked out at the crowd, spotting Nari moving about the perimeter in a hooded cloak.

"The bidding for this ripe young female specimen begins at 50,000 gold coins," the auctioneer yelled. "She is not just beautiful and fertile, but she is a genuine princess, born to the royal house of Truewood." The crowd oohed and aaahed. Most spat in disgust, though they lingered to enjoy the view of the sweet young maid, as well as to see who would win her in the auction.

The bidders were few, and the bids came furiously, with the price rising to 100,000, 200,000 and right on up to 480,000 gold coins. Now the

crowd looked on in wonder as two final bidders pledged amounts of gold that seemed unthinkable to anyone but a king-- or a Witch Queen. One of the bidders was a Mus, and obviously an agent of the witch, but Nari and company had no clue as to the identity of the second man, and they worried that he might win the bidding and complicate their plan, but finally Gallathea's agent won with a final bid of 525,000 gold pieces, and he raised his hand and waved triumphantly as the crowd cheered. And then an arrow appeared in his neck, a jet of blood streaming forth, and a second pierced the heart of the auctioneer, and a wood elf came swinging down onto the stage, lifted Ravi up and said, Your majesty! You are saved!"

"No!" Ravi said. "You don't understand!" But his gallant rescuer grabbed the rope, and with Ravi helpless in his arms, he swung to freedom.

"Oh shit," Nari thought as she saw the wood elf swing down onto the stage and sweep Ravi off his feet. She drew her sword and tried to fight her way through the crowd. Ravi screamed as the wood elf carried him away, and Nari shouted, "No!" She charged after Ravi, determine to save her love, but then something hard and blunt struck her in the back of her head, and the world went black.

Ravi woke in the softest, warmest most comfortable bed he'd ever

known. Golden sunlight streamed in through tall, narrow windows, and he looked up at a pink canopy, and then over to see a room of white and pink marble. Where am I? He wondered. He was wearing a pink silk nightdress with lace sleeves, and on the table next to his bed stood a pitcher of water and a plate piled with fresh fruit. The air smelled of lilacs. It certainly didn't seem like prison, though the girliness of the room made him want to vomit.

A gentle knock on the door. "Milady?" A female voice called sweetly.

"Yes?" Ravi said.

"May I enter, Milady?"

"Sure," Ravi said.

A serving girl entered and curtsied.

"Who are you?" Ravi said.

"Your serving girl, Newberry," she answered, puzzled. "Don't you remember me?"

"Of course," Ravi lied, starting to put together who had taken him and where he was. "So, what do you need?"

"Her Highness The Queen Mother requests your presence at breakfast."

“My mother?”

“Yes. The Queen.”

“Oh!” Newberry eyed him curiously, and Ravi decided he had better play along. “The Queen. My mother. Of course.” He jumped out of bed and walked to the door. “Let’s go. I am hungry!”

“Milady. You can’t dine in your nightdress. It would make such a scandal.”

“Oh scandal schmandal,” Ravi said. “Who dresses for breakfast, anyway?”

“Everyone.”

“Well, I’m the princess,” Ravi said, “and I don’t.”

“Milady, please. I beg you. The Queen’s wrath will fall on both of us.”

“I’ll handle the Queen. Now, let me get my breakfast on.”

Trembling with stress, Newberry led Ravi to the Queen’s chambers. The people he passed in the hall looked away in shock at the sight of the royal princess walking along in her bare feet, dressed only in an evening gown, her hair braided up like some sort of common barmaid. Ravi saw the appalled looks and found it kind of funny, maybe the first good thing about

being a female and a princess. He sauntered into the Queen's quarters, plopped into a chair with one leg thrown boldly over the arm of the chair and said, "Good morning to you all!"

The Queen's expression did not change, though she did lower her chin slightly. "Young lady," she said coldly. "You are excused, and do not return until you are properly dressed."

Ravi felt the force of the queen's will, the steely strength of her displeasure. Surprised, he sat up in his chair, shoulders back, knees together. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean...."

"You are excused. Do not return until you are properly dressed. The Queen repeated.

Ravi rose and turned, hurrying from the room blushing. As soon as he was in the hall he said, "She is scary!"

"I did warn you," Newbery said, relieved that the Queen's wrath had no fallen on her.

"Oh, hell. So, where are my clothes anyway?"

"Your clothes are prepared. But first you must have a proper bath."

"Do I smell?" He said, raising his arm and smelling his armpit.

"Milady! Have to forgotten all your manners?" She grabbed his

arm and pulled it down. “And a princess never smells. She might only smell more pretty.”

“Oh, God,” Ravi said. “This can’t get any worse.”

But he was wrong, and it did. Newberry led him to steaming bath full of salts and perfumes. After, flushing and blushing and nude, he walked into the dressing room and immediately shook his head. “No!” He said, pointing at the pink and white corset, with all its lace and pearls. He had never seen anything more feminine, and he certainly wouldn’t be wearing it.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not wearing that thing.”

“Your mother insists you be properly dressed.”

“I heard her. Believe me. But not that.”

“Well, you have other corsets,” Newberry said.

“No. No corsets. No dresses.”

“What would you wear?”

“Pants.”

Newberry laughed. “You have spent too much time with the commoners, Princess. Your tastes and manners have grown vulgar.”

“It’s time for some women’s lib around here,” Ravi said, his arms over his breasts. “Go get me some pants.”

Newberry sighed.

A short time later, the Queen walked into the room. Ravi, sitting on a divan with his legs crossed, arms still covering his boobs, gulped.

“Stand up, Ilanthe,” she said coldly.

Ravi stood.

“Grab the pole.”

He nervously grabbed the pole, feeling vulnerable, exposed, his backside sticking out. He thought the Queen was going to spank him, but instead she did something just as humiliating; she wrapped the corset around his body. He blushed. She began to pull at the stays, the corset crushing his midsection, pushing his breasts up. She pulled tighter. He held his breath, but she waited patiently, and as soon as he breathed out, she pulled them tighter still. “I can’t breathe,” he gasped when she was finally done.

“Good,” the Queen said, taking him by the hand and leading him to a full length mirror.

Seeing himself in the corset, with its dainty lace and pink, his breasts pushed up and looking bigger than ever, his waist so tiny and his round,

womanly hips, Ravi felt like he'd been turned into a Playboy Centerfold. He glanced down at the dark patch between his legs, and felt like all traces of masculinity were being drained out of him. The Queen waited, forced him to look at himself, then led him by the hand to stand on a small stool, where he was dressed in a gown of pink embroidered with little roses, with princess sleeves and a wide, open top that revealed his collarbone and ample cleavage, while hugging his tiny waist and generous hips. Then, she set him on a chair, while Newberry painted his face, and another servant called Morning Dew did his hair. Finally, they fixed long earrings to his ears, that tugged at his earlobes and constantly brushed against his neck, and slipped bracelets on his wrists and a necklace with a diamond pendant that nestled in between his full, soft breasts. Lastly, they placed a sparkling diamond tiara in his hair.

Again, The Queen Mother led Ravi by the hand to stand in front of the mirror, and he stood there, eyes downcast, not daring to even look at the feminine creature they had made of him. His mother took him by the chin and lifted his head, and when he looked at himself it took what little manhood he had left to keep from crying. What he saw in the mirror, what he saw he'd become, was every bit the storybook princess. The make-up had enhanced his already feminine feature—the big, innocent eyes, with their long curly lashes, and plush, soft lips wet, full and inviting. Pink blush gave him a look

of constant feminine modesty, and let his eyes fall, he saw his full breasts, so soft and brown, and his tiny little waist and generous hips, his lithe, slender arms, flashing bracelets calling attention to his delicate wrists.

“What do you see?” The Queen Mother said, her hand still under his chin.

“I see a princess,” Ravi whispered.

“Very good.”

He stepped gingerly into a pair of glass slippers that pinched his toes and had enough of a heel that, with the tightness of her corset and dress, he now walked in a tentative, uncertain manner.

Ravi felt exposed, vulnerable, pretty and confused. “Now that you are a properly dressed young lady, perhaps we can have a civilized breakfast and discuss your future.”

“As you wish, Queen Mother” Ravi said, the words springing to his lips as if he’d been saying them all his life.

Queen Mother then took him by his soft little hand and lead him to her chambers. He followed along like an obedient child, unable to offer the least bit of resistance to his strange, unexpected fate.

Deep in the dark, dank dungeons below the castle, Nari found herself

in manacles, chained to a stone wall, thirsty and hungry. Her head still throbbed, and her wrists were bleeding from her futile attempts to tear the chains from the wall. She'd woken here after being knocked unconscious at the slave auction.

She heard clanking and the sound of keys being turned in a rusty old lock, and then a pair of armored guards marched into the room. Behind them strode an elf in regal garb, a glittering golden crown upon his head. The guards stepped aside and Truewood, the Lord of Wood Elves, stepped forward.

"Tell me," he said, his voice sharp with fury, "why you would sell my beloved daughter into slavery."

"It was just a ploy," Nari said. "A trap laid to catch the witch Gallathea. He agreed to it."

"He?"

"I mean she. Your daughter. Ask her."

My daughter is but a child and her judgment not yet sound.. You are a knight of renown, Sir Ankar, and I hold you responsible for the shame that has been brought on my family."

"We were trying to save our friend."

“My daughter, the royal princess, heiress to the throne of the Woodland realm was paraded around nearly naked and offered up for sale!” Truewood kicked Nari in the ribs, twice. “There is no excuse for that. No explanation I will ever accept!”

Nari hissed in pain. What the fuck am I supposed to say? She wondered because everything the man was saying rang true. Thinking of the whole thing as game, they had never worried about how this would go down in the royal household, how it might impact the reputation of the king. So, she said the only thing that made sense to her, “I am sorry, your highness. I am responsible, and there is no excuse for what I did, and I... throw myself on your mercy.”

“Better,” the king said. “I will leave you here to think about your stupidity, and then you will face a trial for your crimes against my people.”

The king turned to leave, and Nari, desperate to get out of the dungeon and get back home, said, “My Lord. Your daughter! I must tell you something about her safety.”

The King hesitated. “I am not going to bargain with you. Speak. Now.”

“Your highness,” Nari said, taking a deep breath, “Your beloved daughter sits right before your eyes, manacled both by these iron constraints

and by this man's body. I am Ilanthe, Priestess Princess of the Woodland Elves, your daughter, and I beg you to set me free.”

“You lie,” the king said.

“I am your daughter, my king.”

“I will have my wizard test your aura. If this is a lie, I will cut out your tongue.”

“Test my aura,” Nari said. “And you will have no doubt as to the truth of my words.”

Upstairs Ravi did his best to eat like a princess, hoping to avoid any additional scolding from The Queen Mother. Despite feeling ravenous, he took the tiniest portions of egg on his fork and chewed primly. Nibbled at his toast like a baby bird. Stuck his pinky finger out as he sipped his tea. They didn’t talk. The Queen seemed cold and distant, and Ravi had no idea what an elfin princess spoke about with her mother about. At one point, a little piece of toasts fell down and slipped in between his breasts. He looked down, chagrined, but no one else seemed to have noticed, so he kept eating as primly as he could manage.

“His highness the king,” a page announced, and the king strode into the room and stood at his wife’s side, looking at Ravi with a bemused smile on his face. “Mister Coldfalls. Please take all the servants and give us some

privacy.”

“As you wish, your majesty.”

When the servants had left, the King sat, smiling. “Well, you are blossoming into quite a lovely young woman,” the king said.

Ravi swallowed the piece of toast he’d been nibbling and said, “Thank you?”

“In fact, I am going to say that you are simply the prettiest knight in all the lands, Sir Ankar.”

"Oh!" Dev said, shocked the king knew. "How did you?"

“Sir Ankar?” The Queen said.

“Yes. The good knight managed to get himself swapped into our daughter’s body.”

"You scoundrel!" Queen Mother said.

Ravi smiled and shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and waved his little hands, completely at a loss for words.

“Thank goodness,” The Queen Mother said, laughing with relief. “That explains everything. I thought she’d gone mad.”

There was laughter, embarrassed and relieved.

“So where is our daughter?” The Queen said.

The King waved Nari into the room. She walked in and her eyes immediately went to Ravi, and she stared at him, stunned at how pretty he looked. “Please don’t make fun of me,” Ravi said, blushing, ashamed to have his girlfriend see him in his dress and makeup, his tiara and his jewelry. He knew he was a vision of feminine perfection, all soft curves, while she stood there tall and broad shouldered, with her bulging biceps and her shirt open, exposing some of her hard, flat chest, the opposite of his full, round breasts.

“You’re radiant,” Nari said. "The most beautiful girl I have even seen."

Ravi blushed and looked bashfully down, hiding his eyes beneath his long, thick lashes. He'd gotten all tingly at the compliment and-- the look in Nari’s eyes. The look of a man in love.

“Oh my,” The Queen said. “They’re in love.”

“Is it that obvious?” Nari said.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” The King said.

“Yes,” Nari said. “We do love each other.”

Ravi nodded, smiling.

"And you have been intimate," The Queen said. It was not a

question. Ravi and Nari looked away from each other. Neither spoke. Their silence settled the matter.

"This is troublesome," The King said. "It means the princess can never marry, as she will be expected to be a virgin. I don't know what I can do now, my daughter. There are many suitors, and I will have to turn them all away, which will create scandalous talk of the most..."

Nari stepped boldly over to Ravi and took a knee at his side. She took his hand, and looking him right in the eyes, said, "Will you do me the honor of becoming my bride?"

Ravi put his free hand to his lips. He glanced at the King and Queen. Then, back at Nari. "Oh, I don't..." he was so flustered. "What do you say, your royal highnesses?"

Nari stood. "Father? Mother? Do I have your blessing?"

"Is this what you really want?" The King said.

"I just want you to be happy," The Queen Mother said.

"I do, and we will be."

"Then, let it be so."

"Wait," Ravi said. "I'm not sure..."

"You slept with my daughter, young lady," the Queen Mother said,

"and now you will do the honorable thing and marry her."

"But.."

"You will graciously accept my daughter's proposal and be her bride," Queen Mother repeated, sternly.

"Yes, Queen Mother," Ravi said, once again finding himself incapable of refusing the demands of the regal Elf Queen. He smiled and nodded. "Yes, then, yes. I will marry you."

Nari helped Ravi to his feet, then she put her arms around his tiny little waist and pulled him in for a hug, but as she leaned in to kiss the stunned little man, the King cleared his throat. "None of that until after the wedding."

"Of course." She looked down bemusedly into Ravi's stunned face. "I guess we'll have to save it for the big night."

The King shook Nari's hand, then gave Ravi a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. Then the Queen gave them both hugs, and kisses. The King chuckled. "Things always do seem to get complicated in the world of Allmyth. Well, come on then, and we'll leave the ladies to chatter about gowns and flowers and fetes and whatever girls get on about when they plan these things. We can smoke and drink and talk of manly things."

"Thank God," Ravi said, relieved at the thought of having some time to get back in touch with his masculinity, but as he smoothed the front of his dress and stepped forward, the King pointed at Nari and said, "I was talking to her. She's the man now."

"But I thought I?"

"You are going to make a lovely bride," Queen Mother said. "Even if it kills me."

The King slapped Nari on the back and said, "It will be good to have a son for a little while. We should organized a hunt for all the groomsman..."

The men left. "I don't suppose the bridesmaids will be going hunting?"

"Certainly not," Queen Mother said. "But we will have a garden party."

That night, Ravi looked sat by the window in his room and sighed. His legs were tucked under him, and he wore his pink night dress and soft, silk slippers. He toyed with his long, soft hair. The moon was full and bright, and he could see the castle grounds stretch below him, then the castle wall and beyond that the Fair Wood, land of the Wood Elves, and further beyond that he knew a great big world full of adventure. He wanted so badly to open the window, climb out, run off and get back to Germaine, beg the

High Priestess to send him back to his world. But he owed it to Beard, to Nari, even, he felt, to the King and Queen, to keep his word.

He sighed and began pacing. Maybe he could figure a way out of this? Convince them to let Nari go and rescue Beard first, to wait a year until they could return to their own bodies? Maybe he could-- he caught a glimpse of himself in his full-length mirror-- his long, flowing hair, full breasts, and he remembered-- no. Since he'd become a woman, no one listened to him. He had no voice. Was just a girl to be cared for and protected. And he'd agreed to the wedding, had accepted their plans for him. He walked up to the mirror, cupped his heavy breasts and lifted them. "Why did this have to happen to me?" He said. But there was no answer. Random chance.

Sighing, he walked over to the princess' bookshelf-- there seem to be books everywhere in this world, Ravi thought, perusing the thick, leather bound tomes. There were books on Pare, spiritualism, the Multiverse, spell-casting. Books of history and collections of great poems and epic verse. The Princess was no dummy. He spotted one book with no title at all, and pulling it from the shelf, he opened to see blank pages. He ran his fingers over the smooth vellum, and excitedly gathering a quill and a jar of ink from the princess' desk, he curled up with the book at the window and began to write:

I am a dude, and I will always be a dude. I may have a woman's

body and bigger boobs than any girl I ever dated now-- I may be hotter than any chick I ever dated-- but inside at the core of who I am is a man, and nothing will ever change that. Today, I had a corset put on me for the first time, and I had make-up done and a tiara-- my sister would have laughed until she shit herself if she'd seen me. And, yeah, dressed like that, out in the world, I will admit I felt like a girl, and I even acted like one, but I think that would happen to any guy in my situation, and it was just an act. I am guy, and I will get my body back and be a man again. Maybe I'll have to go through with the wedding, and it will suck, but I am doing it so we can save Beard and get the hell out of here, and that's courage and I am proud that I am willing to do anything-- even put on a wedding dress and marry Nari-- to save my friend.

Due to the threat of Gallathea, the wedding plans were rushed, with only a month set between the time of the engagement and the big day. Invitations went out far and wide, and Kent, Esther and Olaf, who'd been planning to sneak into the castle and break their friends out instead became honored guests. Ravi's found himself immersed in a young woman's world, his days filled with fittings and fetes, tea parties and garden parties and recitals and, because he had to pass as the princess, frantic lessons in dancing and grace and manners. He spent all his hours with girls and women, dressed in the prettiest clothes, learning to walk and talk as a proper princess, and

fighting with his feelings of jealousy as Nari spent her days drinking and hunting, smoking and sporting with the men.

He kept writing in his diary:

Deportment class was ever so-- I mean-- gosh!-- deportment class was a bummer. LOL! Madame Orlando yelled at me in front of all the other-- in front of all the girls, and then she made me stand in the corner on one leg! I was fit to be tied! After, I showed her who wasn't ladylike-- (I know how that sounds)-- I walked all the way around the room with a book on my head and then, just to show her, I danced around the room, and the book didn't even wobble! She kissed me on the cheek and the whole class clapped! As I write this, I know it may sound like I am accepting this body and this life, but I am no princess! Heavens no! I am a gentleman, and a man of her word, and when I do something I go all out! So, instead of kicking and screaming and pouting like a little girl, I am making a game of all this-- dance class and deportment and my fittings and sitting for my bridal portrait-- these are all just opportunities for me to show my poise. I have met so many sweet girls and made so many friends, and everyone is so excited for me! They all say "Sir Ankar" is so handsome and such a fine man, and I am such a lucky girl to be engaged to him. If only they knew I am actually a man! Oh, I must admit, some days I wish I were the one out hunting with the groomsmen and taking target practice and doing all the things boys get to

do. It isn't fair! But, Shakespeare once wrote that nothing is good or bad but that we think it makes it so-- and I have decided that as long as I am a princess I simply must find ways to make it for the good!

Kent, Esther and Olaf took the time to explore the many wonders of the Wood Elves' kingdom, and when they all did gather Ravi sat smiling and nodded pleasantly as Nari boasted of her hunting trophies, or of besting all the men in a game of barrel tossing, and the others spoke of the crystal caverns, or the petrified forest, or Nariant Mountain, which was actually the fossilized remains of Nariant, the Sky Giant.

"And how about you?" Nari asked, a half eaten turkey leg in her hand. "How was your day?"

"Oh, nothing that would be of interest to men, I am sure," Ravi said, and they also noticed he spoke now in the singsong cadences of a cheery young miss.

"Tell us," Esther demanded. "Don't be so shy."

"We had a delightful time visiting the butterfly garden with the Baroness Volpone and her sisters, nieces and daughters," Queen Mother said. "Princess Ilanthe," -- they had all taken to referring to him as Princess Ilanthe in order to keep up appearances-- "was quite the delightful and

refined hostess."

"Thank you, Queen Mother," Ravi said, though inwardly he was shrinking with shame.

"And, then, what was it? Oh yes. We spent some time doing needlepoint, and then dance lessons. The Princess is becoming quite the graceful dancer. She will make you proud, Sir Ankar, when you dance at your reception."

"I am certain she will," Nari said, and then she bit off a huge mouthful of turkey and gulped back a mug of beer.

"Queen Mother," Ravi said, as he had been trained to do. "You mustn't bore the men with my silly activities."

"Nonsense," Nari said. "I want to hear all about your days, and I can't say enough how proud I am of you for working so hard to do your duty."

"Oh, you praise me too much," Ravi said.

"So modest," Esther said. "Just like a *girl* should be."

Ravi managed to keep the smile plastered on his face.

"Yes," Queen Mother said. "She is shaping up to be the perfect princess and a wonderful role model for all the young ladies in the kingdom."

"A toast to Princes Ilanthe!" Nari said. "The most wonderful fiancé a man could ever hope for!"

They all drank and cheered. Ravi was both pleased and deeply humiliated.

How did I ever come to this? Ravi thought, demurely picking at his tiny portion of food. *How did I ever let them turn me into a princess?*

That night, Ravi lay in his pink canopy bed, lace handkerchief in hand as he wept, writing in his diary:

Can I claim that I am still a dude? My whole identity now consists of being pretty and graceful, modest and sweet. I have no freedom.. My days are planned by my mother. My clothes, chosen for me. I am dressed in the loveliest-- there! When did I ever call anything lovely? And yet that is the word-- the only word that seems fitting for my dresses. I spend all my days with gossipy girls, and I no longer feel any lust for women at all. My mind is now concerned only with being the prettiest of them-- which I am-- and I am consumed with jealousy for Nari and the freedom she enjoys now as the man, and the time she gets to spend doing such manly things. I must do my duty for now, step into this pretty life and be the princess the world thinks me to be! Oh! Each morning it is torture as I am trapped in another corset! Has anything ever been so pretty and so painful? I am painted and adorned in

jewels, placed on display like a trifle. I am pretty and a princess and nothing more is asked or wanted from me. It is a Girl's life! A Girl's! But I was a man! In this world, a warrior! Even now in this prison of soft skin, I have more to offer than just my pretty face! But to the world, I am just a pretty thing, and my hopes and dreams are smothered and dying in a sea of silk and lace.

In just a few days I am to be a bride, and then a wife, and that very night my mother now tells me I must go with my husband to our marital bed and we must consummate our marriage! It is our royal duty! I must surrender myself to a man! Oh, that we had never come to this world! I fear that even if we do get back to our world, Nari will never respect me again, not once she has taken me and made me HER WOMAN!

Oh, as I read back over this I am ashamed. I sound like a hysterical girl, and I can't stop crying and all I want to do is crawl under these covers and hide until this is over! I wish I could just go home-- click my ruby slippers together like Dorothy and go home-- but this is not a fairy tale, and I fear it is my fate to become Nari's wife and-- dare I think it? The mother of her children?

And then it arrived. The day of the wedding. After his bath, Newberry led him to his dressing room, where Queen Mother waited. And

there, on a wooden dummy, was Ravi's wedding dress-- a confection of white lace and silk, pearls and ribbons. His wedding dress. The end of his old life. The beginning of the new one. He was about to become Mrs. Nari May. Ravi stared at the dress and the future it represented, and began to cry. "I don't want to get married," he said

"Now, now," Queen Mother said. "It will all be fine."

"But I'm not a woman. This isn't right. I'm supposed to be the groom, not *this*."

"Let's just get you dressed, and you'll feel better."

"Oh, Queen Mother, please? Isn't there some way you can help me? Postpone the wedding? Tell them I'm sick."

"No, sweetie. No." She put her hands on Ravi's shoulders and said, "You need to man up."

Ravi sighed and grabbed the pole. "Very well," he said. "Lace me up."

"I won't make it to tight," Queen Mother said, giving him a pat on the back.

"No. Make it tight," Ravi said. "Make my waist as small as possible. If I am going to do this, I am going to do it right. I want to look my

best for my husband."

"Ilanthe," Queen Mother said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you, mother."

The guests gathered beneath the huge, ancient limbs of the Pare trees which created a vaulted space in the forest, like a cathedral made of trees and leaves. Kings and queens, dukes and Barons, Czars and Prelates-- all of the friends and allies of the Royal House of Truewood. Esther and Olaf stood with Nari and the rest of the groomsmen, and Kent and Bauble stood with the bridesmaids, flowers in their hair, looking prettier than ever. Beard had not put much thought into weddings in the world of Allmyth, and so it defaulted to one much like on modern Earth. The elven orchestra began to play, and Ravi walked out from the back of the shrine radiant in his white dress, four little girls in pink carrying his long train. He clutched a bouquet of white roses, and wore a veil than came down just over his nose. He felt all the eyes turn to him, and he had never felt more special and more pretty than he did as he joined arms with the king and walked down the aisle, making eye contact with Nari, who shook her head and mouthed, "Stunning." Ravi heard whispers all along-- gorgeous, divine, so pretty, regal, graceful, and his heart fluttered with excitement, and then he was standing in front of everyone, looking up into the eyes of the woman who was about to become

his husband. He barely heard a word until it came time for their vows:

I, Sir Ankar of the House of Indra, do take Princess Ilanthe to be my
bride.

I promise to protect her and defend her from all threats
To care for her and love her as a manifestation of the goddesses
To always and forever remain true to her
Lest I prove unworthy of her love."

Ravi smiled. His attempts to get them to let him write his own vows
had been futile, so he had learned and would now express the traditional
vows with all his heart:

"I, Princess Ilanthe Truewood, do accept Ankar as my husband
I promise to obey him and serve him
To perform my wifely duties with love and compassion
To be loyal and true and honor him
for choosing to protect me and make me his wife

"I now pronounce you man," the priestess said, looking at Nari, "and
wife," she said, looking at Ravi. Then, back to Nari: "You may kiss the
bride."

Nari reached out and lifted the veil from Ravi's face. They looked
into each other's eyes, and then Nari put her strong hands on Ravi's smooth

cheeks, and leaned in and kissed him. Ravi closed his eyes, unconsciously lifting his leg as he leaned in for the kiss, and the audience cheered as the young couple.

Beard, meanwhile, was losing his mind. Gallathea driven to the brink of murder by his prattling and singing, had moved his cage to a storage room. He'd begun to fly in circles around the cage, and fly and fly and fly until he collapsed in exhaustion, but as soon as he was rested enough to move, he would leap into the air and start flying again. His singing had turned to babble:

All work and no play makes a pixie pretty pronky!

No beer and no TV makes a pixie pretty ronky!

Stephen King stole the sun and I think I am a donkey!

Then he giggled madly, slamming his tiny fists impotently against the bars of the cage, then fly in circles, singing some more.

"I'm going to die of madness!" He said out loud.

"You can't die of madness," he answered himself. "Because you already did."

He frowned. "That makes no sense. You're being silly!"

And then he clapped his hands and said, "You can't call me silly because I don't have a silly bone!"

Then he gasped and said, "I see a light at the keyhole!"

He flew over to the side of the cage nearest the door. "I see it, too."

And then Logo squeezed through the keyhole, holding a tiny little lantern.

"You!" Beard said. "I should punch you in the face!"

Logo flew up to the cave, but kept his distance from the furious little pixie girl. "I'm sorry!" He said. "The witch made me do it!"

"Oh, right," Beard said. "You're just a liar!" He flew away and curled up in the corner, refusing to look at Logo.

Logo flew down and sat down outside the cage, but next to Beard. "Please forgive me. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the day we met."

Beard ignored him.

"I brought you a present."

Beard looked up through his hair at the smiling boy. "A present?"

"Yes." He opened his hand, and inside it was a tiny necklace that

glowed with the warm light of the sun.

Beard gasped. "It's so pretty!"

"They are sun stones," Logo said. "I thought you might like a little sunlight in this cold, dark room."

"That's so... thoughtful..." Beard said, touched. Then, he gave Logo a mean look, which on his sweet little face just looked comical. "But you're still a liar."

"Do you want the necklace or not?"

"Fine," Beard said, reaching out.

"Let me put it on you," Logo said.

"Ugh," Beard said, but he lifted his hair and turned his back, letting Logo reach around and fix the necklace. Beard touched the warm soft jewels with his finger tips and then turned and gave Logo a smile. "Thanks!"

"Thanks? I was hoping for a kiss."

Beard lifted a shoulder, gave Logo some hip. "I'll kiss you if you unlock my cage door."

Logo's mouth fell open. "Really?"

Beard bit his lip and nodded.

"A kiss on the lips?"

"Where else, you silly boy?" Beard said, letting his voice to an even higher pitch.

Logo nodded excitedly. "Okay. Okay. Okay." He flew around the room, grabbing objects, until he finally found a spoon, and wedging it under the latch to the cage as a lever, he got ready to pry the delicate little lock open. But then he stopped. "I could get in big trouble for this," he said, glancing darkly at the storage room door.

Beard raised an eyebrow, reached up and slipped the shoulder straps off his shoulders, letting the top of his dress slide down to rest on his breasts just above his nipples. "If you're too afraid..."

Logo, seeing Beard teasingly start to undress, gawking at the promise of his firm, young breasts, pressed down on the makeshift lever with all his might and sprung the lock.

Beard squealed and clapped, and then Logo opened the door and Beard flew out, fluttering right up to the boy and playfully grabbing his suspenders. "Your my hero!" Beard said, moving his body in close.

Logo started nervously back peddling, his eyes wide.

"Don't be scared. Haven't you kissed a girl before?"

"No," Logo said.

Beard pulled him in close, pressing his breasts against his chest, letting one thigh rise along the other pixie's leg. He felt Logo panicking a little, back peddling further, and then he put his soft, full lips against the boys and as the fairy dust poured out of each of them, Beard gave Logo a shove and sent him flying back into the cage. Beard then slammed the door and jammed the spoon across the bars, giggling.

"Sorry, silly boy!"

But Logo was on his butt, staring up with wide eyes, and just whispered, "I love you!"

Beard flew out of the storage room and began to carefully flutter from corner to corner about the witch's lair. He tiptoed along shelves, put his back to walls like in a spy movie, forget what he was doing, remembered, and eventually found the witch sleeping in her conjure room. He looked out the window, and saw the desolate kingdom of Gallathea stretching out before him, including a dragon perched over the front gate, a patch over one eye.

"Fiddlesticks!" He turned and looked at the sleeping witch. He looked around the room at all the bubbling potions and beakers, and nibbled on a finger until an idea struck. *Yes! He decided. Yes. I will mix all the potions together, and then pour them down her throat!*

The guests were all gathered beneath the huge, ancient limbs of the Pare trees which created a vaulted space in the forest, like a cathedral made of trees and leaves. Kings and queens, dukes and Barons, Czars and Prelates- - all of the friends and allies of the Royal House of

Everything after the wedding was a blur --clinging to each other in an open carriage on the ride to the reception, the dancing and laughing, the cutting of the cake. Nari swaggered about like any groom, while Ravi laughed as danced like any newlywed maiden. Kent caught the bouquet, and stood blushing as Esther smiled at him from across the room. They danced and drank and laughed and the day couldn't have been more perfect.

At last, they found themselves back in their new quarters in the royal palace, and Ravi stood nervously in front of a mirror while Newberry fussed with his hair. He wore a transparent silk negligee. Diamond studs in his ears. A couple thin chains around his neck, bangle-style bracelets of silver and gold, and nothing else. He was a very beautiful woman. He knew that, and as he looked at himself, he had to believe that Nari would be very pleased to see him. "Do I look a little slutty" He asked, turning to the side to examine his Go-GO dancer profile-- all tits and ass.

"It's your wedding night, Milady," Newberry said. "You're going to get-- slutty."

"But my make-up?" His had smokey eye shadow and wet, red lips. His lashes had never looked so full, and, "maybe too much blush? I am a princess."

Newberry slapped him on the ass. "Get in there and let your husband tell you if you look too slutty." And then she practically shoved Ravi into the next room.

Nari was laying on the bed. She had the covers pulled over her midsection, but her chest was bare, and Ravi gave an appreciative once over to her broad shoulders and ripped arms. He stood, one foot slightly raised, arms raised at his sides, hands bent upwards at the wrists, and he let Nari look over him, felt her eyes caressing his breasts and hips, the patch between his legs.

And then, they both started laughing. "This is so awkward," Nari said.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one feeling that way," Ravi said, putting one arm across his breasts and padding over to the bed to sit next to Nari.

"How are we supposed to do this?" Ravi said.

Nari put a comforting hand on his back, under his hair. "We'll figure it out somehow. You are so beautiful. And so brave."

"Thanks."

"I know this hasn't been easy for you."

"I think the hardest part is still to come."

"Yeah. I know. It's in my pants."

Ravi shook his head. "I walked right into that one."

"Yeah, you did."

They laughed some more, and it helped break the tension.

"Hey, remember that night? Our first night together after we came into this world?"

"Yeah," Ravi said, looking back at Nari, and then seeing where she was going, he said, "yeah! Let's get to know each other, again, as we are now."

They sat cross-legged on the bed holding hands and talking, getting to know each other, and then they kissed, and held each other, and Ravi sighed and said, "I'm ready."

Nari kissed him, then grabbed the top of his negligee and tore it right off him, putting her hands on Ravi's shoulders and shoving him onto his back. Ravi gasped, thrilled at being manhandled, and when Nari pinned his wrists and leaned in for a kiss, her muscled chest brushed against his hard

nipples and he moaned softly with pleasure. She kissed him until he saw stars, then Nari put her mouth over one of Ravi's nipples and started sucking, while she squeezed his other breast and then let her hand slip down between his legs, where she found his clit and started to toy with it.

Ravi let out a scream as his body lit up. He'd never had so many erogenous zones, and he buried his fingers in Nari's hair and cried, "Don't stop! Don't stop!" Nari slid down, kissing his belly, now both of her hands on his full, firm, soft breasts, and as she put her head between his legs Ravi instinctively spread his legs and lifted his knees, and when Nari plunged her tongue into his vagina he gasped and said, "Oh my God!" He was so hot and wet down there, and as Nari went down on him she put her hands on the insides of his thighs, so he put his own soft little hands on his breasts and squeezed, arching his back and crying out in ecstasy as his girlfriend brought him to his first female orgasm.

Their bodies were slick with sweat, and both panted, catching their breath. Nari wiped her mouth with the sheet, and then she climbed back on top of Ravi, kissing him again, her hairy chest against his soft breasts. "That was so fucking amazing," Ravi said. "Omigod is that what it's like for girls? I'm so hot and wet!"

"We've only just started," Nari said, and then she pinched his

nipples. Hard. Ravi's mouth dropped open as impossible pleasure and pain shot through him, and then he slapped Nari across the face. Nari laughed and pinched his nipples again, and this time when Ravi tried to slap her she grabbed his little wrists and pinned his arms over his head again. He could feel her hard member pressing into his soft thigh, and the feeling was driving Ravi mad. *He wanted it so bad. Wanted it inside him.* "I want you inside me," he whispered.

"You're a dirty girl," Nari whispered in Ravi's ear, and then she licked his ear, with her hot, wet tongue.

Ravi laughed, struggling against Nari, loving how powerless he felt, thrilled with the feeling of being completely and totally under her power. "I am a dirty girl," he whispered back.

He started sucking on Nari's neck, kissing her.

"You're a nasty little slut," Nari said. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you inside me," Ravi said.

Nari stopped licking his ear, and shifted so their faces were so close together their noses almost touched. He stared down into Ravi's pretty eyes. They could feel each other's breath on their faces, and their chests moved together. Ravi struggled some more, and Nari held him down, effortlessly. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you inside me," Ravi whispered in a small voice.

"No. Tell me what you really want," Nari said, and now she started rocking her hips, letting her erection rub back and forth against the soft inside of Ravi's thing.

Ravi's eyes rolled back into his head. "Omigod," he said, and then he screamed, "I want you to fuck me" like the words had been building up in him for days, weeks, and they were finally just bursting out of him. "I want you to fuck the hell out of me!"

Nari laughed and let go of Ravi's arms. Ravi tilted his hips back, spread his legs, his long hair spread out around his face. Nari sat back on him, looking down at his full brown breasts, the nipples hard, his small arms and round shoulders. He was a vision of womanhood, ripe and soft and radiant with feminine perfection.

Ravi reached down and found Nari's rock hard penis, biting his lip with pleasure even at the feel of it in his small hands, and he guided it into his slit, then grabbed Nari's ribs, wrapping his legs around her as she started rocking, and they both worked together to get her deeper inside Ravi's hot, wet body. Nari was making deep, guttural grunting sounds, and Ravi felt a thrill at each and everyone, answering them with his own pretty chirping.

"Deeper," Ravi begged. "Harder." He sat up now, and Nari put her

arms around his shoulders and pulled him to her. Ravi's long hair was sticking to his slick back and shoulders, and he gasped and sighed as they worked, and then Nari started to pump faster, and push deeper, and he started making little noises, like a bird, and he dug his long fingernails into Nari's back and she grunted with pleasure, and now they were moving as one, grinding together and finally Nari seemed to find a wet, dark secret place inside Ravi, and he saw stars as Nari exploded inside him and they orgasmed together before collapsing into each other's arms.

Ravi lay on his back in a stunned, fugue state, his heady buzzing with hormones and strange new emotions, his mind adjusting and adapting to new needs and likes and fears. His nipples were still hard, still begged for attention, and he put his palms on his breasts and moved them around in gentle circles, while Nari, gasping for breath, rubbed his belly.

"Well done, Mrs. May," Nari said, her voice gruff.

"You're not too bad yourself," Mr. May, Ravi said. 'Oh my God. I can't even."

"I can," Nari said.

"Really?" Ravi said, still fondling his breasts.

"Oh, yeah."

"Okay."

"I want something special though. How do you feel about doggy-style?"

Ravi bit his lip. He didn't like the idea at all. It seemed gross to him -- from the woman's position. But he remembered the spell he'd cast to make Nari want it, and the guilt quickly sapped his resistance, and Nari had gone down on him and didn't he maybe owe it to her a little? "You really want to?"

"More than anything."

"Okay," Ravi whispered.

Nari kissed him. Cupped his soft cheek. "You sure."

"Yeah," Ravi said. "I'm sure." He didn't day-- I think I owe it to you. But that's the way he felt.

He got on his hands and knees, his heavy breasts swaying, and then he tilted his hips back, raising his butt, and his girlfriend put her hands on his butt cheeks. "Your ass is so fucking hot," Nari said, and she slipped one hand between Ravi's legs and slipped it into his vagina. Ravi wiggled his hot little ass and made a soft noise, and then Nari pulled her hand out of him, grabbed him by the hips and mounted him from behind. Ravi felt Nari's body

against him, felt her slide into his vagina, and he pushed back, wanting her deeper, always deeper, and his breasts were swaying and hurt as she started pounding into him, so he went down on his elbows, pressing his face and breasts into the bed, lifting his ass higher into the air, and his girlfriend grunted and slammed into him, and he made pretty little chirping noises as he let her take him from behind.

Beard, straining with all his might, set the potion he'd created down on a shelf above the chair where Gallathea slept. Then, he got a length of rubber tubing, and placing own end in the potion, he brought the other down and, sucking on it to get things started, let gravity take over, sticking the tube between Gallathea's lips and then flying to a far corner to watch. Logo, finally having freed himself, flew in and assessed the situation before flying up to Beard. "What did you do?"

"Mixed a bunch of potions together."

"What will happen?"

"I don't know."

Logo smiled and said, "You're so cool."

Gallathea's eyes shot open, and she started to choke, the glowing green potion overflowing out of her mouth. She yanked the tube from her lips, stumbled to her feet and looked around the room, furious with anger. "You little fools!" She said, still choking and spitting. "I'm going to kill you!" She raised her hands and... "Hoofs?" She said, looking at the horse's hooves that had replaced her hands. Then she stumbled as her legs bent, and reshaped themselves into horse legs, and she fell forward onto her hooves, clattering around the room on all fours, looking up at the two pixies, who began to laugh.

"I'll get you for this," Gallathea screamed. "You'll neigh-ver get a-neigh!" She stopped, realizing that she'd just neighed, and then her mouth and nose began to elongate as her head turned into a horse head. Gallathea tossed her mane and neighed and neighed, stomping her hooves on the ground and rearing back, smashing a rack of potions with her hooves, which then splashed all over her, and she felt a sharp pain in her back as two huge wings sprung from back, and her horse's mouth dropped open as she saw her whole body turn bright pink.

"You turned into Mariposa, Barbie's Pink Pegasus!" Beard said, clapping.

"Yeah!" Logo said. Then, turning to Beard. "What is that?"

"Don't worry about it."

The potions had not finished doing their work, and Gallathea found herself shrinking, shrinking and shrinking, until she was the size of a toy. And worse, she had lost all her magic power. "Neigh?" She said as she felt all the magic energy leaving her, and even her neigh was now a silly squeak. Outside, the sky flashes with sheets of pink lightning.

Just as Nari finished, she looked out the window and saw the sky turn pink. "Oh my God," she said, her hands still on Ravi's hips. She pulled out and jumped off the bed. Ravi got up and came to join her at the window. "What does it mean?" He asked, slipping under her arm and putting his hand on her chest.

Nari put her hand on the small of Ravi's back and pulled him tightly to her as they looked at the night sky, now filled with flashes of pink lightning. "I think it's an omen," Nari said. "I think it means our wedding is blessed."

Ravi rested his head against his husband's chest, and sighed.

The next morning, the whole party had gathered for breakfast on a patio outside the castle. Everyone was bleary and tired from too much wine and sex. The girls-- Kent, Bauble and Ravi had gravitated together, while the

men sat a little ways off. They all needed a little space, and they all wanted to whisper to each other a little bit about their nights of wild sex. Bauble heard it first. Her ears twitched, and she raised her head. "What's that?" She said, whiskers twitching.

Everyone else shook their heads. Nothing. But then one by one they heard what at first sounded like the chirping of some demented bird, and then gradually they realized sounded like a pixie singing, and everyone looked at each other thinking-- no way-- and then Beard came flying around the corner on the back of a pink Pegasus, a second pixie riding behind.

"Hi, guys!" Beard said, landing his little steed and hopping off. "I have returned!" And with that he bowed like a prima ballerina. "This is a story I want to here," Ravi said.

"And you shall," Beard answered, giggling. "And you shall."

Final Chapter

The group gathered around the Book of Worlds. No one wanted to leave. Not fully. But they all felt they couldn't just vanish from their home world, leave their parents and loved ones wondering what had happened to them. But the group that was going back was bigger than the one who had arrived-- Bauble and Logo now joined them, holding hands with their loved ones. They'd given Gallathea to the King and Queen as a gift, and she now

pranced and performed for their guests at royal functions.

The group had decided not to wait the whole year, and no one knew what would happen with Nira and Ravi, since they had switched bodies. There was a chance they would end up in each other's bodies back on Earth, but Ravi had grown used to being the wife, and he had agreed to chance it even if it meant he would end up living his life as a woman and wife and-- probably-- a mother. He just regretted that back in the world he would no longer be a princess.

All of them hoped they would be able to find a way back.

"I must sing a song," Bauble said. "As our adventure ends."

They all nodded.

With the passing of days and the setting of suns
change comes so quickly the world soon forgets
the heroes of today grow tired and grey
and their deeds mean nothing to the children at play

All passes, all changes, we are not what we were
and each moment is lost as we find it
it will never return

So take my hand, friend, and shed no tears

For today we have love that will outlive our years

And with that, The Book of Worlds was read, and the party vanished from the World.

The End