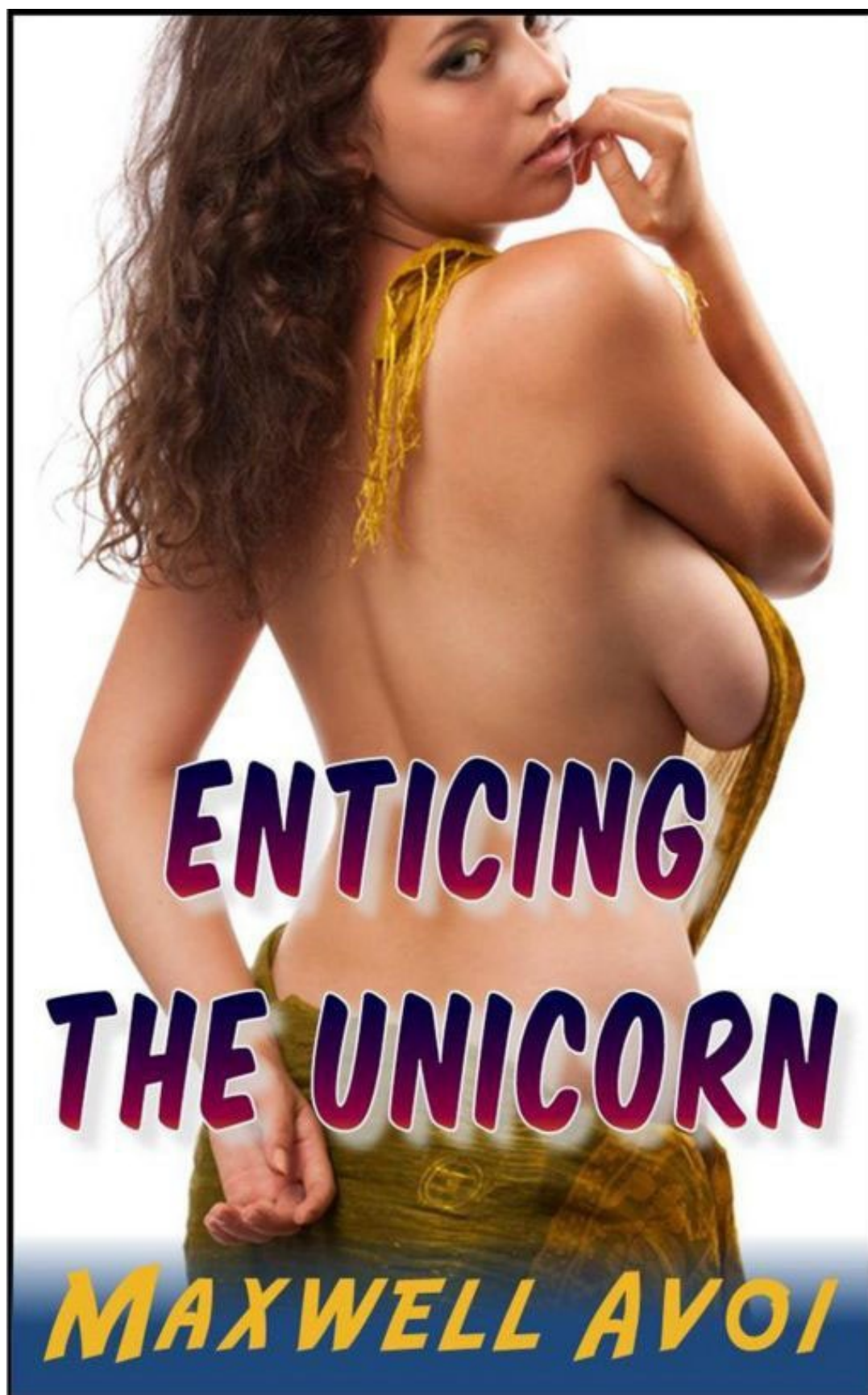


**ENTICING
THE UNICORN**

MAXWELL AVOI



**ENTICING
THE UNICORN**

MAXWELL AVOI

Enticing The Unicorn

By Maxwell Avoi

Smashwords Edition

Copyright 2012 by Maxwell Avoi

This ebook is licensed for personal enjoyment only. It cannot be re-sold or copied for others. If you'd like another copy of this ebook, please buy one to support the hardworking authors. If you're reading this without having paid for it, please go buy a copy.

Thanks for your support and respect.

*Maxwell Avoi writes a lot of sci-fi, fantasy, and occasional bits of realistic erotica. You can find more information about him at his blog:
<http://maxwellavoi.wordpress.com/>*

Or at his Twitter account: <http://twitter.com/AuthorAvoi>

Maxwell can be contacted at author.avoi@gmail.com

Tor stood at the well, staring at the dry bricks and the inch of mud that lay in the bottom of his bucket. The communal well had brimmed with fresh water for generations, acting as a useful alternative to the river a day's walk away. All that had changed the month ago when during the worst drought that the village had seen in living memory they had contracted the services of a rain-caller.

She had delivered; the rains had come and the fields had greened under their gentle attentions. However, the mayor of the village had refused to pay the rain-caller, saying that the woman had simply seen oncoming clouds and had ridden ahead of them to bilk the town, Berkshire, out of its meager cash.

"No one cheats Madge Dark of her rightful due!" the rain-caller had cried. She had been standing in Berkshire's common area at the time and the well had caught her eye. Her bony finger had pointed and black words had rained from her lips. They had not only dried the well but poisoned the air, securing her escape as the villagers had choked on the fumes.

Now though the heat had eased a bit the well smelled only of mud and dust. The reserves had gone stagnant, requiring the Berkshire residents to filter and boil each bucketful before using it, and now even that was gone.

"Woe be unto us! Surely we are cursed!" cried Haystack Sam, a known thief who slept in haystacks with the cows.

"We know! We were all there, weren't we?" said Nellis Short, flapping at him with her apron. "That's why the meetin', isn't it."

The meeting was to take place that very night in the same common area that was the site of the curse. They were to decide whether or not to leave or try to wait out the curse. Judging by the way that some people were already packing their wagons and mounts there wasn't going to be a lot of debate.

Tor dropped the bucket next to the well, shoulders sagging. He was a tall boy of sixteen, starting to fill out with muscle after a disastrous gangly period that had been marked with laughter from boys and girls alike. Now that he was strong enough to thrash some of the boys the laughter had mostly stopped except from Bren and his gang.

In any larger town Bren's crew would have been street rats. In Burkshire they were just loud and dangerous enough to cause problems requiring the tender mercies of the mayor's cudgel to straighten things out. They were as close to a street gang as Burkshire got, changing membership from day to day and generally annoying people rather than posing a threat. They were certainly big enough and well-supported enough to taunt and thrash a boy like Tor.

Tor wouldn't have cared, but the last incident had taken place in front of the focus of his lovesick longings, Sarahbeth Peters. Sarahbeth wasn't exactly slim and had a pronounced overbite but in a village as small as theirs you took what you could get. She made up for any shortcomings with a merry laugh and a pleasant nature. The laugh had become rare in the days since the curse but it was still there often enough to set Tor's heart racing.

Tor knew that she was well above his station; her father ran the inn and Tor was a mere farmer's son. Still, he couldn't help dreaming that things might be different someday.

In the midst of his dreaming, Tor was knocked down by someone colliding with him. He sprawled in the dust, looking about frantically to see where his attacker had gone. He relaxed when he saw Isaac sitting in the dust staring at him with his mouth open.

Isaac was Tor's best friend in spite of being two years older. They'd grown up together, fought each other, teased one another about the girls they preferred (Isaac liked Mary Algnomy, a short girl with a pronounced squint who was part of a well-fed family), and had both started working the fields at the same time. Isaac was shorter than Tor, as well as thinner and weaker, but he had a quick smile and always had an idea for how to get into trouble.

"Tor! Tor! Did you hear about the meeting!" he said.

"Yes, everyone's heard about the meeting. For a week now." Tor stood, dusting himself off, and offered a hand to Isaac.

"But I found out something that will make it so we don't have to have a meeting at all!" said Isaac. Tor withdrew his hand; sometimes Isaac's energy was enough to put him in danger of bursting into flames, and Tor didn't want to lose his eyebrows.

“Settle down.” Tor grabbed Isaac’s arm and pulled him into a narrow alley between two houses. It didn’t smell great but at least it would hide them from curious eyes and from those who felt that two unoccupied boys were in need of something to do. “Okay, now just tell me what you found.”

“I was talking to Sam! You know, Haystack Sam! And he told me that the only way to break a curse was to get a unicorn to come to Burkshire! Don’t you see, all we need is to find a unicorn and we’ll be fine!”

Tor stared at his friend for a moment before whacking the back of Isaac’s head with an open palm. “Where are we going to find a unicorn? Huh? And why were you listening to that useless lump anyway?”

Too caught up in his own excitement to react to the slap, Isaac said, “Because he knows things! He listens to the stars, and the cows, and sees auguries in the cow shit! Everyone knows that!”

Tor nodded; that was true. Sam was known for his cow-pie prophecies. Whether they came true was up for debate, but Tor knew that a lot of the farmers welcomed Sam’s predictions.

“Fine. Did a cow tell him where we could find a unicorn?”

“Well. No. But we could talk to Gerald about that, right?”

Tor nodded again. “Good idea. I’m sure he won’t be doing anything anyway; he has people who can pack for him.”

The two boys headed for the north end of town. Next to the mayor’s house was a slightly smaller one with more decoration. Gerald Prentiss lived there, serving the town as a combination of doctor, herbalist, wise man, priest, and librarian. He was also quite the barber and the only man in town to have more than one or two books; he had a whole wall made of shelves, and many of the shelves were full. Gerald had moved there recently and had quickly established himself in Burkshire.

Gerald didn’t like the company of those who had spent fewer than forty years walking upright but he seemed to be in a good mood when the boys arrived. He only threw one rock at them. “What do you little demons want?” he screeched, looking around for another rock. The boys were lucky; most of them had been

used to drive off a merchant the day before.

“Gerald!” said Isaac, mostly dodging the rock. “Ow. We came to ask you a question, stop throwing things! Only your wisdom can help us!”

Gerald stopped and peered at them, the badly-made lenses on his face making his eyes appear much larger than they really were. “Well, that’s probably true, but when have boys like you ever listened to wisdom? Eh? Eh?”

“We might have a way to save the town!” said Isaac. He attracted a few stares and Tor edged away from him

“Why would you want to raze the town?” Gerald shouted. Tor took the opportunity to move closer to the old man, hoping that they could finish their business and leave without any further incident.

“Save!” Isaac bellowed. “Save th-” Tor put a very effective forearm hold across the throat and the rest of Isaac’s words came out as strangled croaks.

Tor dragged his friend over to Gerald, who watched with amusement and approval. “Sir,” Tor said, “We need your wisdom to help save the town.”

“Oh? Well, come in. Let him go before you kill him.” Gerald turned and stumped back into his house, and Tor let go of Isaac. His friend made some whispery croaks and spit out something that had become lodged in his throat, then grinned. Tor shook his head and followed Gerald inside.

Gerald’s home was large but the inside was cramped and musty. There was the bookshelf, of course, but he could probably have filled up at least half of another with the volumes that were lying around on tables and chairs. There were all sort of other things scattered on those tables as well: beakers, lamps, small burners, a stuffed dove, a dove’s wing, a dove’s foot. Drawings were tacked all over the walls, numbered and carefully labeled diagrams of buildings, machines, and yes, doves. Gerald moved another model out of his way and peered at the bookshelf, muttering to himself. Tor stood silently while Isaac yammered, explaining his idea in several different ways.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Gerald said. “Don’t touch that.” He directed that toward Isaac, who was poking at the stuffed dove. “It’s not a bad idea to find a unicorn. If that woman did curse the well, then a unicorn would be a simple way to fix the

problem.”

“But that’s...that’s great!” said Isaac, forgetting about the dove. “How do we find one?”

Gerald snickered. “That’s the trick, isn’t it. They’re notoriously hard to find, and even if you did find one then you’d need the right bait. Fortunately, I can help with both of those things.”

“What kind of bait are we talking about here?” said Tor. He’d hunted most of his life and he hadn’t heard of any bait that would work reliably on something mythical.

Gerald waved the question away, scowling at them. “Let me worry about that. Come back in an hour, and quit bothering me.”

Tor grabbed Isaac by the shoulder and hauled him out of the room before his friend could get them into more trouble. They walked aimlessly, well out of sight of the village to make sure that no one would discover any work for them. They threw rocks at rabbits and took turns kicking down a haystack that sat moldering in an abandoned farmyard. Isaac chattered and Tor remained almost silent; neither of them talked about what Gerald was up to, though that was the only thing on their minds.

After the sun told them that an hour had passed the boys headed back into Berkshire. They took the long way, careful to avoid the wrathful eyes of adults who hated to see teenagers being idle. Fortunately most of the adults had their own business to attend to; the wagons weren’t going to pack themselves, after all. The boys made it to Gerald’s place without incident.

The old man didn’t answer the door so they let themselves in. They found him hunched over one of the tables, muttering to himself while he inspected a large book that was held open by a clay sculpture of a dove. He had a burner going in front of him and steam drifted out of the liquid that was bubbling inside a beaker. He looked up and scowled when Tor cleared his throat. “I know you’re here. Go sit. It’s not quite done yet.”

He pointed at a couple of chairs that only had short stacks of books on them and then went back to what he was doing. Tor moved the stacks to the floor, reuniting them with their cousins, and the boys sat. Tor was patient, used to

waiting from long hours while hunting. Isaac fidgeted, as he always did.

After a wait that had Isaac nearly to the explosion point, Gerald moved the beaker off the flame and poured the contents into a pair of clay vials. He stoppered them with bits of cork and turned to the boys. “Now, this is your bait. If you’re serious about this, you need to use it exactly the way I tell you.”

Tor took one and Isaac took the other. The containers were almost too hot to touch. Isaac made a small noise of distress and tossed his from hand to hand but Tor was able to stand the heat. “Here’s how it works,” Gerald continued. “You go to the forest. You take the bait and drink it. If there’s a unicorn anywhere nearby, the bait will call to it and bring it to you. Before you go, I have to ask if either of you have ever lain with a woman.”

They blushed and shuffled their feet, finally allowing that neither of them had. Tor knew it was a damn lie on Isaac’s part but he didn’t say anything. Who cared? It couldn’t make much of a difference. Adults were always preaching about purity before marriage.

“Well, all right,” said the old man. “Now remember. The meeting is tonight so you’d best get that unicorn here by that time if it’s coming. Go, go!”

He flapped his gnarled hands at them and they quickly vacated the room. Gerald shook his head and snickered before putting the book back among its colleagues.

Tor and Isaac ran toward the forest. It was normally an hour’s walk to the start of the route that led to the river but they made it in half that time. They slowed to a walk once past the actual boundary; something about the old forest commanded respect even from Isaac.

“Why’d you tell Gerald that you hadn’t been with a girl?” said Tor. “I thought that you and Mary...”

Isaac threw a rock at a squirrel. “Yeah, well. It didn’t take very long, did it? And it was only the once, so I don’t see how it counts.”

“You told me three times.”

“I did? Huh. Must have been less memorable than I thought. Anyway, it can’t be that big a deal. I’m sure it didn’t have anything to do with this; Gerald’s just old.

Old people worry about young people, it's practically their job."

He had a point. Tor shrugged and let it go. They wandered confidently; both of them had spent a lot of time in these woods and they could find their way back if they got off the trail.

They settled on a clearing that was well out of sight of the main path. Tor pulled his vial out of his pocket and stared at it. "You don't think he wants to poison us, do you?"

Isaac snorted. "Of course he does. But he won't. There'd be too many problems for him if a hunter found us dead out here with Gerald's vials in our hands."

"Well, that's...really not reassuring at all."

"He's not going to poison us, Tor. He doesn't want to leave Burkshire any more than anyone else, and he said himself that a unicorn was a good way to break the curse. Right?"

Tor nodded. "So, down the hatch?"

Isaac pulled the stopper out. Tor did the same. They clinked the vials together and both drank. The contents of the vial tasted like rainwater.

Nothing happened.

Nothing continued to happen for several minutes. Isaac stood and walked around the edge of the clearing, squinting into the forest. "You know," said Tor, "it's also possible that he gave us some boiled water to get us out of his hair for a while."

"Oh come on, why would he do that?" said Isaac, still looking through the trees for a unicorn. If there was one out there, it remained stubbornly invisible. Tor scratched at his belly. A moment later he noticed that Isaac was doing the same thing.

He became concerned when the itch changed into an ache. The pain grew, spreading outward from his belly in slow waves. "Isaac, do you feel okay?"

"Um, well, now that you mention it, I do have kind of a bellyache."

“Are you sure he wouldn’t poison us?”

Isaac was wordless for once. They took off toward the trail. Running aggravated whatever was going on inside and the ache turned to burning pain. Soon they were staggering, gasping and trying to throw up. Isaac was bent double by the cramps in his belly and Tor wasn’t far behind. Tor hit the ground first, still dragging himself toward the trail. Isaac’s lighter body was easier to move and he was still clawing his way over the ground when Tor lost sight of him.

He lay there waiting to die, the pain twisting and roaring through him. It should have faded or reached an upper limit but this pain had serious business with him; it just kept growing, a burning agony that soon robbed him of the ability to understand anything that was happening around him. He writhed on the forest floor trying to scream, but that was denied as well. He could only make small groans and whimpers, wordless prayers for death.

It felt like years later when the pain in his belly eased. It didn’t go away all at once but the contrast was so great that it felt like cool water being poured directly into his center. The cool sensation washed the pain away bit by bit and after another few centuries he didn’t feel anything but the coolness and the forest floor beneath him. He lay there breathing deeply, trying to figure out what to do next. Obviously, Gerald had attempted to kill the two of them but something in the mix hadn’t worked.

He was just about to sit up when he heard something snort. He tilted his head backward and looked up. The unicorn was a giant creature, tall even when Tor adjusted for his current position. He sat up and turned, staring at it.

It was so white that it glowed, reflecting the light around it in a soft aura that looked like starlit fog. Its horn was magnificent, curling nearly two feet from the center of its forehead. Despite the glowing light and delicacy of its horn the creature gave the strong impression of a fighting animal; this was no peaceful, retiring beast but a fighter, terrible in battle. It took another step closer and snorted again and Tor reached out with a tiny hand to touch its leg.

The unicorn was so beautiful that it nearly distracted him from the changes to his hand. He looked at it, shocked at how small it had become. His arm was shorter and slimmer as well, swimming in the shirt that had fit him perfectly that morning. He looked down at himself, just now realizing that everything felt

different. The shock of seeing an actual unicorn had distracted him from the changes that he had undergone.

His shirt was still tied but now it was filled differently than before. His shoulders were no longer as broad, meaning that the shirt tented loosely over a pair of breasts that weren't large enough to fill it to its former tightness. They were trying valiantly, though. They were large and loose on his chest, jostling with his movements. His pants were loose on his legs, his dainty feet barely visible beneath the hems. The rope that he used for a belt was loose, resting comfortably on hips that were now wide enough to keep the pants up on their own. The pants were tight, in fact, stretched to the bursting point over his hips and around his behind. He clapped his hands to his crotch, moving the material around until he could confirm his worst fears; nothing was there.

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He tried a few more times, finally achieving a croak in a voice much higher than the one he'd possessed before drinking the terrible potion. He inhaled again, feeling his new breasts slide against the material of the shirt, and just before he screamed he was interrupted by a voice speaking inside his head.

"Are you well?" it said. The voice was warm and masculine, sounding concerned.

Tor whipped his head back and forth, looking for the source of the voice. "Who...who's there?" he managed, almost wilting in horror at the soft voice that issued from his lips.

"'Tis I. Nimbus."

"I...I don't know a Nimbus."

The unicorn snorted, blowing out his lips in a very human expression of disgust. "I stand before you, fair maiden. I was drawn here by your purity, to do as you desire. It has ever been thus."

Tor blinked up at the creature. "I'm going to kill Gerald Prentiss," he said, still shocked at his own voice. The twin surprises of the unicorn and his transformation combined to drive Tor past the ability to react to either one.

The unicorn stared at him, giving the impression of waiting for an order. "If that

is your desire, mistress, then we shall do so.”

Tor glared back. “I’m not a mistress. I’m not a woman.” He rolled to the side to free his legs and then stood. It was different than he was used to, his balance thrown off by longer legs and wider hips, and the heavy weight of his new breasts shifting around his chest didn’t help. The way that his clothing tangled on his new frame was a further hindrance and he finally had to settle for using a tree to help stand.

His breasts bobbed cheerfully with each movement, soft but emphatic. He tried not to think about them. He was determined to get back to Berkshire so that Gerald could fix this. “I can’t kill him until he changes me back,” he muttered to himself.

The unicorn sounded concerned when he spoke again. “Are you under a spell, mistress?”

Tor nodded, realizing how heavy his head felt. He reached back and felt a huge mass of hair attached to his scalp that hadn’t been there before. He brought a handful of strands forward. They were blonde, rich and golden and glittering in the afternoon sunlight. “I’m not...I’m not a mistress, Nimbus, I-“

“Silence!” came the unicorn’s voice in Tor’s head. Tor shut up, looking around. Nimbus stared at a patch of bushes surrounding the clearing and Tor realized that something was moving inside them. He sidled behind the unicorn, uncertain of his own ability to protect himself in his current state.

Nimbus snorted and pawed the ground, lowering his mighty horn to point at the bushes. Tor looked around the unicorn’s lowered head and squeaked, “Whatever you are, come out!”

Another female voice, rich and smoky, came from the bushes. “I’m afraid you’ll kill me.”

“Nimbus won’t hurt you if you don’t try to hurt us,” said Tor, fervently hoping that his statement was true. Nimbus pawed the ground again but didn’t offer any support to the theory.

“O...okay. I’m looking for my friend Tor. I’m coming out, don’t hurt me.”

The bushes opened and a woman worked her way out of them. She was tall for a woman and she wore the same kind of clothing that Tor himself did. It was just as ill-fitting as his own currently was, though in the other direction. Where Tor's clothing had once housed a man much larger than his current form, this woman's clothes had come from a smaller person. Her pants were stretched tight over shapely legs, and the ample charms of her behind and hips had worked together to tear the seat of her pants open. Her graceful hands and delicate wrists stuck out of the sleeves of her tight sleeves, and her breasts were squeezed into a shirt that was so tight that they bulged from the open top. Her face was full of lip and heavy of eyelid, sensual and beautiful even though it was set in an expression of fear. A thick curtain of hair rippled behind her, appearing black but showing red highlights in the sunlight. All of her attention was fixed on the needle point that was directed at her heart from a distance of three feet.

Tor said, "Who are you? How do you know me?"

The woman blinked and risked a glance in Tor's direction. Nimbus never moved, appearing as a statue of a unicorn. "Uh, I'm not looking for you, pretty as you are. I'm looking for my friend Tor. I'm afraid he might be sick, but...oh, uh, my name is...Issa. Yes."

"She lies," said Nimbus in Tor's head.

Tor had already guessed this. "Issa? You mean Isaac, don't you?"

Issa/Isaac shifted her stare to Tor. Tor went on. "It's me. Tor."

Isaac gaped, staring at the breathtaking woman that had taken the place of his best friend. "I'm going to kill Gerald Prentiss."

Tor nodded and something shifted inside. Suddenly he felt like crying with relief that his friend was all right and that they were together. He fought off the urge, only hiccupping a little while one tear ran down his cheek. He moved forward and embraced Isaac, who hugged back just as strongly. Tor was still taller than Isaac so Isaac's head ended up pillowed on Tor's loose breasts, but neither of them wanted to think too hard about that.

Nimbus broke their hug, sliding his horn between them. "Mistress Tor," he said, "I don't trust this woman. She carries the taint of impurity within her, and she's already lied to you once this morning."

Tor pushed Nimbus's horn away, noticing that it felt warm. "No, it's okay, Nimbus. This is my friend Isaac. He's under a spell a lot like mine."

Nimbus snorted and pawed the ground again but he didn't raise his horn. Isaac went back to gaping at the beast. "We did it," he whispered in his new voice. "We really found one. We can break Burkshire's curse!"

"Just so long as we can break this curse first," said Tor, hefting a breast to underline his irritation. It was soft and warm and so sensitive that he dropped it in surprise. The breast bounced cheerfully, setting its twin to doing the same for a moment.

Isaac glanced at the unicorn and then took hold of Tor's arm to pull him to the side. "Tor. Didn't you listen to any of the stories about unicorns?"

"No. I was working. In the fields. You know, on the farm?"

Isaac ignored the implied rebuke in his friend's words and nodded. "Right, well, while you were doing that I was picking up information that might come in handy for us at the moment. The stories talk about capturing unicorns, and they all have one thing in common. A virtuous maiden must be the one to draw the unicorn to her side. They're drawn to her purity, and that's the way to get their attention."

Tor thought about this. "So, you're saying that if I let Nimbus break the transformation then he's not going to stay around?"

Isaac nodded. It was hard for Tor to think of his friend while seeing the woman before him but he supposed it was just as hard for Isaac. "You mean that I have to stay like this?"

"Just until the curse is broken! Then we can change you back and we can all go on our way."

It sounded like one of Isaac's plans, and Tor suddenly found it a lot easier to see the woman as his friend. He glared at Isaac, who smiled apologetically. On his new face it looked seductive rather than apologetic but Tor tried to ignore that. They turned back to the unicorn, who was watching them patiently.

Tor took a deep breath and said, "Nimbus. Our village is under a terrible curse.

We, um, we sought you out because we heard that the touch of a unicorn is the only sure way to break a curse.”

Nimbus nodded his noble head. “Of course, mistress. We should get started straight away.” He knelt, ending up on his belly in the grass. It was a beautiful scene. “Please,” said the unicorn, “feel free to ride. There is no time to waste.”

Tor exchanged delighted glances with Isaac. Even as boys they’d only ridden a few times and they both liked the chance to ride a unicorn. How many could say that they’d done so?

They headed for the unicorn but Nimbus whipped his horn in an arc that ended up pointing at Isaac’s heart again. Isaac’s dusky skin paled and Tor said, “Nimbus! This is my friend!”

“That may be, mistress, but I cannot abide the weight the impure. You are welcome to ride. Your friend is not.”

Tor passed the information along to Isaac, who glared. “You really think I can walk all the way back like this?” He gestured at his new body, bursting from his clothes.

Tor said, “I don’t know what else to do. We have to get back before the meeting.”

Isaac kept glaring for a while and then turned aside with an irritated noise. “Fine. Go on without me. I’ll meet you there as soon as I can.”

Tor nodded and gripped his friend’s forearm before turning to mount the unicorn. He’d ridden bareback before but this time was different. This creature was in its prime, well-muscled, and its backbone didn’t to saw Tor in half like those of the withered old pack horses he’d ridden in the past. Nimbus stood and the power of the motion made Tor gasp.

“Where is your village, mistress?” said Nimbus.

Tor pointed and said, “Follow the path that heads west.”

Nimbus snorted and tensed. Tor barely had time to wave back at the disgruntled Isaac before they were moving through the trees. Nimbus moved like a ghost,

drifting between the trunks with hardly a sound. For such a large creature he moved incredibly smoothly.

They were out of the forest before Tor realized how quickly they were moving, and then Nimbus started to pick up speed. Tor leaned closer, to his neck, gripping the unicorn's silky mane in both delicate hands. Nimbus whinnied, sending back a fleeting impression of happy freedom before getting down to serious speed. The world flashed by, dead farms and fences flickering to either side.

The journey that had taken the boys half an hour at top speed took a third of that on the back of Nimbus. He slowed as they drew closer to Burkshire and by the time they were at the city limits they were cantering. Tor sat up again but he wanted to hide himself when he saw people staring at him. These were people he'd known all his life; how could he face them like this?

He soon found that their stares held only wonder at the sight of the maiden riding the unicorn, not recognition and disgust. Granted, some of the men stared with lust, but that was still better than anyone recognizing him as a woman. The potion must have changed him as thoroughly as it had Isaac.

Nimbus bore Tor to the center of Burkshire, to the dry well that had caused all the trouble. By that time they were surrounded by the entirety of the population of Burkshire, all staring and unwilling to approach the mythical beast and its mistress. Nimbus strode proudly through the crowd, heading straight for the well. He stopped at the well and said to Tor, "Mistress. You might want to say a few words."

"What? Oh. Yes! Hello, people of Burkshire. I am...I have come with this fair creature, Nimbus, because I knew...I heard about the curse on this well. As some of you know, the touch of a unicorn is sovereign against curses. We've come to break this one." Tor gestured awkwardly, acutely aware that he wasn't cut out to be a public speaker.

"Hang onto my mane, mistress."

Tor wound his hands into Nimbus's mane again. He almost cried out when the unicorn reared back on two legs, slashing at the air with his mighty front hooves as if fighting something. He did the same thing twice more and then he stepped forward and touched the well with his horn three times. Something rippled

through the crowd, some faint tension released, and the assembly sighed as one.

“It is done,” said Nimbus.

“It is done!” said Tor, his new, higher voice carrying clearly over the silent crowd. A murmur spread through them and finally the mayor stepped forward. He looked nervous but he didn’t let it stop him from lowering the bucket into the well. The crowd was so quiet that it seemed to draw sound into itself. Tor heard no birds or other animals, but everyone heard the splash when the bucket landed in the water at the bottom of the well.

A cheer rose from the crowd, and suddenly Nimbus and Tor were surrounded. The villagers all wanted to touch the great beast and its mistress, and all wanted to have a drink from the revitalized well. Those who drank of its water agreed that the liquid was sweeter and colder than before, altogether agreeable.

Tor was glad to join in the celebration and even took a drink of the well’s water. It was indeed cold and tasty, he said, and he was glad that he and Nimbus were able to break the curse. He found himself being called to from all sides by people wanting to reward him with dinner, and even a great feast. The plans got wilder when someone realized that they were all planning to meet that evening anyway. Why not, went the crowd’s thought process, turn the meeting into a party?

Tor finally got the crowd quiet enough that he could address them, though people started drifting away at the edges to make preparations for the feast. “I’m glad that your well runs now, and that the curse is broken, but I can’t stay.” There was a general rumble of sadness and disapproval. “There are others in this land that need the touch of a unicorn. I cannot, um, linger. So. I’m going to go. We must go. Yes. Thank you so much for your kind words, and the best of luck to the village of Burkshire!”

“She must be going to see the princess!” a voice called from the crowd. The murmurs started up again, this time approving. Tor blinked and looked around.

“Yes,” he said. “Of course. That is where we go, to help the princess!” He had no idea what was wrong with the princess or why she needed a unicorn but he was willing to go along with nearly anything to get away. A path opened before Nimbus as the great beast majestically walked back to the edge of town. The crowd trailed behind. A voice from the back of the mob said, “But the princess is the other way!”

Tor blinked. “Um. Don’t question the magic and methods of a unicorn! We have to, I don’t know, follow the trail of the setting sun!”

It was confusing enough that Tor and Nimbus were able to leave without anyone following. The knot of villagers closed in on itself, trying to figure out what the hell the last statement had meant and where the party was going to be held.

Nimbus shifted back into high speed immediately after leaving Burkshire and a few minutes later he began to slow again. Tor looked around and saw Isaac trudging along beside the road, looking faintly ridiculous in his too-small clothing. Tor asked Nimbus to stop and then slid off the unicorn’s back.

They caught up on the events at town, Isaac disgusted because he’d missed the whole thing. “Well,” said Tor, “at least now you get to see it in person.”

He turned to the unicorn. “Nimbus, I need you to do something else for me.”

Nimbus bowed his noble head, the horn dipping closer than either of the altered boys preferred. “Of course, mistress.”

“Um. Right. About that. You see, Isaac and I are both under a curse. And we need you to break it for us.”

Nimbus snorted and regarded first Tor and then Isaac. He used both eyes, tilting his head back and forth to get a good view of both of them. Finally he said, “I’m not sure what curse you mean, mistress.”

“The curse. The one that turned us into women. I need you to break that curse.”

The unicorn looked at them again and said, “I...see the remnants of a spell, perhaps, but no curse. Did you take on this spell willingly?”

“Well, yeah, we drank the potions, but we didn’t know what it would do to us.”

Nimbus nodded in understanding. “Then it was not a curse. It is more along the lines of a contract. I cannot restore you to your previous forms.”

Tor stared at him for a while. “Are you serious?”

Nimbus snorted. “Unicorns are always serious, mistress.”

“Stop calling me that. I’m not really a woman!”

“Your appearance emphatically suggests otherwise.”

Rather than responding to that Tor turned to Isaac and explained the situation to him. Isaac spent several minutes swearing at Gerald, the world, Tor, and Nimbus with enough creativity that he didn’t use the same insult twice. When he finally started repeating himself Tor shook his shoulder and said, “Look, we have to go see Gerald. He’s the only one who would know what to do about this.”

“And then we’re going to kill him! With a stick!” said Isaac, screeching a little. Tor backed away nervously, almost glad when Nimbus put his horn between them in a gesture of protection.

They finally got Isaac calmed down enough to talk about a coherent plan. They decided to hide in a haystack near Burkshire until the sun set and then sneak in and find Gerald while everyone was distracted by the celebration. Tor didn’t get on Nimbus again, instead having the unicorn walk along beside them. Isaac regarded the beast nervously.

“Why is he still here? I mean, the curse is broken, and that’s what we needed him for, right?”

Tor reluctantly put the question to Nimbus, who tossed his beautiful mane. “Bespelled or not, you are my mistress until you decide otherwise. You called for a unicorn, and I answered. A maiden such as yourself faces countless dangers, and I stand ready to protect your life and your virtue.”

Isaac burst into laughter when Tor relayed the answer. “Maybe we shouldn’t have Gerald break this spell after all! You can keep your unicorn! At least until you lose your virtue, fair maiden.”

Tor glared at him and Isaac spent the rest of the walk snickering to himself. They found an appropriate haystack and settled down to wait. Tor had Nimbus kneel so they could hide his glow as much as possible. Tor’s belly rumbled after a while and to distract himself he said, “What is it that unicorns eat, anyway? Do they graze like horses, or what?”

Nimbus gave him a withering glare. “Unicorns survive on moonlight and the morning dew, naturally,” he said.

Isaac blinked when Tor repeated the answer. “Dew and moonlight? That’s really enough to keep something that size going?”

Nimbus didn’t bother to answer, just closed his eyes and appeared to fall asleep. Tor and Isaac sat there trying not to stare at each other or themselves, idly stripping seeds off of dry hay and chewing it.

It was the first time that Tor had been alone with his altered form and he kept sneaking glances down at himself. Even loose as the shirt was, the breasts blocked a lot of the view. He found himself wondering what they looked like; at his age he hadn’t seen any on a real woman that weren’t covered by heavy cloth.

He tried to put the thought out of his mind, concentrating on watching the blue sky turn dark. It almost worked, too, but then he heard Isaac say, “Hey. Tor.”

“What?”

“Why not, um...why not take off your shirt?”

“What? No!”

“Oh come on! I know you want to look at them!”

“Why not take off yours?”

Isaac gestured to his overstuffed shirt. “If I take this off I’ll never get it back on again. I would do it, though. Come on, Tor, please? I just want to see them, and you do too!”

Isaac kept at it, mostly because he saw that he was right; Tor did want to see them. This was a golden opportunity to see and touch breasts of a size and quality that might never come again. Finally Tor rolled his eyes and pulled the bottom of his loose shirt up. He stopped and said, “Just to look. Not to touch.”

Isaac nodded cheerfully and watched with wide eyes. Tor pulled the shirt up and let his breasts free for the first time. They were well oversized compared to any of the girls in Berkshire, round and proud. They supported nipples that had tripled in size, marking the peaks of the rondure. He shivered in the cool air as his nipples puckered. Tor glanced at Isaac, who was transfixed. Tor snickered and swayed his shoulders back and forth, letting the breasts bounce and shake.

They were large and heavy enough that the motion quickly turned uncomfortable, so he put one arm over them.

“They’re amazing,” Isaac whispered. His hand rose and crept toward Tor’s chest but was suddenly stopped by a length of sharp horn that interposed itself faster than either of the transformed boys could see.

“The purity of mistress Tor is beyond question, and it will remain that way,” said Nimbus. Isaac couldn’t hear the unicorn but the creature’s expression was unmistakable. Isaac tried a sickly grin and slowly moved his hand back, leaning even further away from Tor to underline the movement. Tor was just as slow while recovering his chest, unwilling to attract Nimbus’s attention with quick movements.

The unicorn snorted at them and resumed his previous position. The transformed boys sat well apart from each other as the evening shifted into night.

Once it was dark enough they stood and brushed the hay off of their clothing. Nimbus stood as well, the light clinging to him. He glowed like the moon itself.

“Nimbus!” said Tor. “Can’t you turn off the glow for now?”

Nimbus snorted, offended. “Certainly not. My glow is a reflection of the purity of my mistress. I could no more turn it off than you could stop your virtuous heart from beating.”

For a black instant, Tor hated his life. “Then we’re going to have to hide you. Can you at least stay hidden out here for now?”

“I...suppose so. I hate to leave you undefended, mistress.”

“I’ve been over these fields all my life with no problems, Nimbus. We’re just going to sneak into Gerald’s house and find out how to break the spell.”

Nimbus let out a deep breath and pawed the ground. “Very well, mistress. Be very careful. Should something happen to you, it would kill me as well.”

Tor blinked. “What, seriously?”

Nimbus nodded. “Our lives are linked now, mistress, until something happens to

break the bond.”

“Oh. Well. Okay. I’ll try to be careful.”

Nimbus sighed again and knelt, arranging himself comfortably on the ground once more. Tor stepped forward and stroked the beast’s mane. “Thanks so much for your help, Nimbus. You saved Burkshire.”

Tor and Isaac turned and headed for town, sneaking as well as they could. Tor was better at it than Isaac, though not by much; his altered body was still unfamiliar and threw him off. He stepped on almost as many twigs and made as much noise as Isaac did. Fortunately the town was in the middle of a celebration. The two of them could probably have walked through the center of town on fire without attracting attention.

They snuck to Gerald’s house and opened one of the windows on the side of the building that faced away from the center of town. They helped each other up with much muffled swearing and a little tearing of cloth. By the time they got inside, Isaac’s tightly-stuffed breasts had finally started to tear the front of his shirt down the middle; he held it closed with one hand, which didn’t help the bulging problem. They tried not to think about it, or at least not stare.

The two of them were glad to see that Gerald had either decided to skip the party or had only stayed a short time. The old man was asleep in his bed, snoring at a volume that would have scared wolves away had there been any about.

Tor stood by while Isaac shook the old man’s shoulder. Gerald came awake sputtering and coughing. He had a hard time focusing on the two beautiful women who stood at his bedside, but once he did he leered. “I yet dream,” he said, “and what a lovely dream it is.”

“You’re not dreaming, unless you want this to turn into a nightmare real fast,” said Isaac, hands on his wide hips.

“It’s us,” said Tor. “It’s Tor and Isaac. We took your potion and look what it did to us.”

Gerald blinked a few more times, taking in not only their delightful forms but also the clothing they were wearing, and he started to snicker. The snickering turned into guffaws of hysterical laughter, complete with streaming eyes and a

wide-open mouth that displayed his tooth. Tor and Isaac stood there rolling their eyes. Tor kept his tiny hands fisted on his hips and Isaac crossed his arms with difficulty.

Gerald trailed off into hiccups and giggles. “Oh...oh boys...you have no idea how much I needed that! I knew that it might change you, but I’ve never tested it before, and...hehehe, it worked so well!” The transformed boys sighed when Gerald went off into more laughter.

“Yes. Okay! Fine!” said Tor, wishing that his new voice was more authoritative than attractive. “Gerald! We caught the unicorn and broke the curse! Now change us back and let us never speak of this again!”

Gerald trailed off again, wiping his eyes. “Oh, well. The unicorn should be able to break the spell that changed you. Why don’t you go ask him?” Occasional chuckles still sputtered from the old man but he appeared to be trying to keep the laughter under control for now. He also appeared to be leering at Isaac’s torn shirt, which was revealing a lot of his oversized bosom.

“We did speak to the unicorn about it,” said Tor. “Nimbus said that he couldn’t do anything to help us. He said the spell had come and gone, and that there was no magic to break.”

Gerald finally sobered at this news. “But...but how is that possible?” said the old man, swinging skinny legs out of his bed. He was still interested in Isaac’s altered chest but his attention was now split with the new problem. He stood and headed for his bookshelf, muttering as he looked at the spines. “Light a few candles, girls, don’t stand around in the dark.”

Tor decided not to say anything about Gerald’s choice of words, instead lighting a sliver to use to bring fire to the candles. Gradually the dark room grew dim.

Gerald pulled a large book from the shelf and brought it to a clear spot on a table, huffing with the weight of it. The boys watched unsympathetically.

The old man thumped the book down and started to page through it. He found the information he wanted toward the back. Gerald stood there and stared, reading the page. Tor, illiterate, didn’t understand anything but a few drawings of some common herbs. Isaac could read a little but the words weren’t familiar.

“Blast,” said the old man when he followed the words to the next page. “I missed this part.”

“You missed a part?” said Isaac, arms crossed again. The position pushed his breasts up even more but it was the best way that he could figure to keep his torn shirt closed.

“Yes, yes, I’m not perfect, you know.” Gerald flapped his hand at them irritably.

“Well...why not mix up some more, and change us back to our real forms?” said Isaac.

Gerald turned and glared at him. “If it was that easy you’d already have your tackle back,” he growled. “This potion wasn’t meant to change you like it did. It was meant to bring out the virtue inside someone, to make them attractive to a unicorn.”

Isaac blinked. “But Nimbus kept saying that I wasn’t virtuous enough to ride him, and that...” he trailed off in the face of Gerald’s steady stare. “Fine. I’m not perfect, but neither is Tor!”

Gerald nodded. “Agreed. However, he must have been closer than you are.”

Isaac muttered something about a stupid unicorn and Tor stepped in to take over. “Well, fine, Gerald, but how about changing us back?”

Gerald shook his head and slammed the book shut. “I can’t.”

It was Tor’s turn to stare. “You what?”

Gerald shrugged, leaning against the table with a small groan. “I can’t. It’s beyond my power.”

“Then what do we do?” Tor whispered.

“You could always find yourself a nice young man around here and settle down,” said the old man with a grin. The glares from the transformed boys quickly drove the grin away. “No. Well. The only thing that I can think of is to head to the king’s court. He keeps skilled magicians there, ones that would certainly be able to change you back to your normal forms.”

The transformed boys kept staring, victim of too many shocks in one day. Gerald stumped around them and disappeared into the depths of his house again, returning a while later with a small purse and a loaded backpack. "Here. I feel terrible about this, really." His words were slightly leavened by the lusty stares that he was directing at Isaac but his tone was sincere enough. Tor took the purse and the pack.

"You need to find clothes," said Gerald. "I suspect that you'll be able to find what you need on the washlines, and no one's going to be guarding them tonight. You probably shouldn't call each other Tor and Isaac, either."

Tor nodded, staring at his new possessions and body. "What do we do when we get to the court? Do we tell them that you sent us?"

Gerald's eyes widened and he flapped his hands in panic. "No no! Don't do that! They'll never give you an audience if my name comes up."

"Why?" said Isaac, his curiosity roused. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. But trust me, you don't want to do that."

Tor shook his head. "I'm not sure that I believe you about anything right now, Gerald. We won't bring you up. Now let me have that book." He held his delicate hands out.

Gerald cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "Why. You can't read."

"No, but Isaac can, and I have a plan. Just trust me on this one." He left his hands hanging in the air until Gerald reluctantly passed the heavy tome to him. Tor turned to Isaac and said, "Hold him back."

Tor crossed the room and threw the book into the fire that crackled in the fireplace. Gerald squalled and tried to charge but he was old and weak enough that Isaac was able to hold him back. As an added distraction Isaac was unable to keep his shirt closed and one of his giant breasts bounced free.

Tor went to help his friend and between the two of them and the loose breast they were able to keep Gerald from saving his book. When it was burning merrily Tor released the old man and said, "There. Now we're square. Thank you for the purse. Please let our parents know that we'll be back as soon as we

can.”

Tor and Isaac left by the same window, leaving Gerald sitting on the floor, shouting curses at them.

“Okay,” said Isaac as they headed for the washlines, “That was...well, that was interesting.”

“I wanted to be sure that he wouldn’t do this to anyone else.”

“No, I get it, just...I’m not sure it was the best idea, is all. But it’s done. So what do I call you, anyway?”

Tor shook his head. “I have no idea. Tora?”

Isaac made a face. “Boring. I think we should take interesting names, since we’re stuck like this. I was thinking Margarit.”

“For you or for me?”

“For me. It sounds like a mysterious dark-haired woman, right?”

Tor stopped and stared at his friend. “Why on earth would you care? We’re not going to be like this for long.”

“Tor...I’m standing here trying to keep my shirt closed over the biggest bosom I’ve seen! We’re women, you idiot, and there’s nothing we can do about it right now. We’re going to be like this for at least a few days, so why not have a little fun with it?”

Tor flipped his hand at Isaac. “Fine. You do what you like. You know what, Margarit, you go ahead and name me.” He turned and kept walking, concentrating on maneuvering his new flesh around the broken field in the moonlight.

He heard Isaac trying and discarding different names behind him, muttering in his smoky voice. It gave Tor enough time to think a little about what his friend had said. Isaac was probably right; there wasn’t much they could do about their situation besides what they were already doing, and their current course would take them at least a week of travel. Why not have fun with the names and forms?

He stopped suddenly and Isaac almost ran into his back. “What about Nimbus?” said Tor.

“What about him?”

“We can’t travel with a unicorn! We’ll be mobbed!”

Isaac (Margarit, Tor reminded himself) shrugged. “So we travel at night or something. We’ll have to convince him to let me ride or it’s going to take longer. Or find a way to get a horse for me.”

Those were problems for later. They arrived at the washlines and found them as unguarded as Gerald had mentioned. Tor felt the occasional flash of irritation at those who were enjoying a party without them but there wasn’t much to do besides find some appropriate clothing.

The women in the village had taken to using the same wash area since it offered them a chance to share scarce water while doing an unpleasant chore together. The clothing was simple and tough; Berkshire folk chose clothing for durability rather than style. Tor went right for the lines where the work-clothes hung but Isaac stopped him. “We can’t wear those!” he said.

Tor closed his eyes and muttered a little but he knew that Isaac was right. Women of the kingdom didn’t wear men’s clothing. Tor turned and headed for the divider that separated the men’s clothes from the women’s. He winced at the sight of them but then he realized another problem. “I have no idea how to wear this stuff,” he said.

Isaac shrugged. “I’ve seen my sisters put some of it on. How hard can it be?”

It turned out that it was harder than he expected, though the majority of their time was spent finding clothing that would fit. Their proportions were much more...womanly than other girls their age, and they found that most of the dresses that would accommodate their large breasts and wide hips hung awkwardly on them in other places. Finally Isaac used a discarded knife to cut one of the vacant lines and they used lengths of the clothesline to bind up their new dresses so they were more comfortable. It had taken Tor a while to work up the courage to take off his shirt and trousers but Isaac stripped out of his immediately, revealing a body fit for the wettest and hottest of adolescent dreams. The way that she stretched and twisted to look at as much of herself as

possible made things even more distracting. Tor noticed that Isaac's eyes were on him as well when he finally got his shirt off, but he bore the look. He had stared at Isaac, after all. It was the first time that he'd seen a naked woman though somehow it wasn't as exciting as he'd assumed it would be.

Tor had to admit that the underwear holding his new breasts tight to his chest made him a lot more comfortable, though he was sure that he would never get used to the sensation of air blowing up his skirt. They went barefoot, of course, as they had since they were old enough to walk upright; shoes were for winter and that was months away yet. They planned to have their normal forms back and be back in Burkshire by that time.

While they were gathering some backup clothing and tying it into a large skirt for easy carrying, Isaac suddenly laughed and turned to Tor. "I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"The way the moonlight makes your hair shine made me think of a story that Haystack Sam used to tell me, about a maiden with hair that glowed like the sun and stars. So I realized what your name should be."

"What?"

"Celeste. That was the name of the woman in the story. Sam says it has something to do with the sky at night."

Tor sighed and waved his hand. "Fine. Celeste is fine. Margarit."

Isaac/Margarit giggled, a very feminine version of his usual laugh. Tor thought that his friend looked amazing in his makeshift dress but he wasn't about to say that. They headed for Nimbus, each of them carrying a small bundle of clothing. They had left their old things at the washlines; Tor's were useless to them and they'd been forced to cut Isaac out of his pants.

Nimbus was waiting right where they'd left him. He had his head thrown back and appeared to be bathing in the bright moonlight. His glow was strong. Tor was again struck by the magnificence of the creature. Tor's experience with hoofed animals up until then had been confined to goats, cows, and old farm horses, none of which were particularly magnificent. As with their clothing, Burkshire residents preferred animals that were functional rather than beautiful

so this was Tor's first encounter with something that was both. It was almost worth the embarrassing physical changes to get the chance to not only see the unicorn but ride him as well.

Nimbus opened his eyes and looked at them as they approached. "Greetings, noble mistress and reprehensible companion."

Isaac fisted his small hands and put them on his hips. "Who are you calling rep...whatever that was? And why can I hear you now?"

Nimbus snorted, standing quickly. "Since we will be traveling together, I would be of more use to my mistress if I communicated with you as well."

Isaac put a hand over his mouth and looked away from Tor, trying not to laugh. It did interesting things to his shoulders and bosom, and Tor looked away as well. "Um, about that, Nimbus," he said. "We need to travel further. I told you that we were under a spell, but the man who did this to us was unable to break it. We need to head to the king's court instead and ask his magicians to help us."

Nimbus nodded. "Very well, mistress. Mount me, and we will be there before the end of the night."

Isaac's muffled laughter increased at the unicorn's choice of words, and Tor sighed. "I need to bring Isaac along as well. Are you sure that you won't allow him to ride?"

Nimbus said, "If you mean your companion, I regret that I cannot. It is not a matter of preference; I simply cannot abide the touch of any but the purest, such as you."

"Okay."

"Your purity and innocence shine like the sun, dearest mistress. Truly, it is a beacon to one such as I, your lack of corruption, and--"

"Yes, okay, thank you. Well, then, we shall have to walk." Isaac's laughter was turning into something that sounded like a series of hiccups.

"I stand ready to protect your virtue, mistress Tor."

“Right. Oh, we’ve decided that we need to travel under new names. More...more female names.”

“I had wondered at a culture that had named its fairest such commonplace boy’s names. Very well.”

Tor blinked at the unicorn, not sure whether Nimbus was toying with them or not. “Right. Um. Isaac here is going to be Margarit, for some reason, and I will be Celeste.”

The unicorn pawed at the ground. “Celeste! The very sound of it fills me with wonder! Truly, your beauty is like the stars that fill the celestial vaults, and your unsullied innocence like the moon that paints the ground in shades of purest silver!”

“Could we please not go on about my purity or virtue or anything like that?”

Nimbus bowed his noble head. “Of course, mistress. Innocence such as yours includes seemly humility. I should have known. Where do we travel?”

Tor closed his eyes and muttered some curses that would have driven away whatever wolves that were left after Gerald’s snores. “We’re heading north. Would you be able to carry our packs, at least?”

Nimbus inclined his head again. “Normally asking a unicorn to act as a beast of burden would be a grave insult, but I know that there is no malice in your heart, pure one. Of course I would be happy to carry your belongings.”

Isaac finally recovered from his strangled laughter and passed his pack to Tor, who tied them together and slung them over the unicorn’s neck. They stood and looked back at Burkshire, side by side.

“I’ve never been further than the river,” said Isaac.

Tor nodded. He’d hardly been farther, perhaps another hour’s walk in search of game. “We’ll be back soon,” he said.

Isaac nodded and they turned to face the forest. It was a dark line from this distance and they knew that it would be darker still inside. “At least we have a unicorn to give us light,” said Isaac.

He grinned suddenly. “And if all else fails, there’s your unparalleled purity to protect us.” Still snickering, he started north. Tor and Nimbus caught up a moment later.

Isaac looked at the two of them and noticed Tor walking along beside the unicorn’s strong shoulder. “Why aren’t you riding?”

Nimbus answered, “My mistress felt that it would be unfair since I could not carry you as well. All hail the virtuous judgment of mistress Celeste!”

Tor stood and stared at the unicorn, stunned at the beast’s words. Isaac started laughing again, half-strangled noises that he tried to hide without any success.

They walked quietly, the moon bold and bright enough to provide light. Nimbus seemed content with the silence and the transformed boys weren’t willing to break it. When they got to the forest their steps slowed. Neither of them wanted to admit it but the dark woods were a different prospect at night. They drew closer to Nimbus, who seemed unconcerned.

“Nimbus,” said Tor, finally unable to stand the silence that pressed around them with the shadows, “Tell me, since unicorns are real, are the other creatures in the stories real as well?”

“Generally,” said Nimbus into their minds. “Most of them exist in one form or another. Some do not.”

“Um. Monsters, and the like?” said Isaac.

“Oh, yes,” said Nimbus. “And now that you have met a unicorn you’re much more likely to meet such creatures.”

“What? Why?” said Isaac.

“You’ve touched the true world. If your words are correct, and I see no reason to doubt my innocent and true mistress, you are both under a spell. Not only that, but you are in the company of a unicorn, a creature that seems to have been made part of your stories rather than known for the truth that we are. You are both standing with one foot in the true world and one in the world of your birth.”

Tor considered this. Isaac opened flawless lips to ask questions a few times, but

nothing came out. Finally Tor said, “But you’re here to protect us, right?”

Nimbus blew air through his lips. “Of course, mistress Celeste.”

Tor sighed. “I suppose we’ll have to get used to those names for now.”

Isaac smiled. “Yes, mistress Celeste. Margarit lives but to serve.”

Tor let it slide. He looked down at himself, his new body visible in the glow from Nimbus’s flanks. He supposed that it was silly to think of himself as a boy for now. The way that his steps had changed, the way that the flesh on his chest moved, the shift in his center of gravity and the weight of the hair on his head: all these things continually reminded him of the change. They were becoming less and less emphatic as time went by and he became used to the changes. He was amazed that he could get used to them, but he decided that a person could get used to nearly anything. It wasn’t like he was in pain, after all. And he could have been made ugly. All in all, there were far worse situations to be in.

“Celeste,” he said, rolling the name around. Even the inside of his mouth felt different, his teeth smaller and more even against his tongue.

Isaac snickered. “What, you have a comment, Margarit?” said Tor.

“No, no, most virtuous of pure maidens,” said Isaac. Nimbus made a snort of agreement. “Though I would like to point out that I’ve been going for quite a while, without the respite of a unicorn ride that my mistress achieved at one point. I’m tired and hungry. What do we do?”

Tor was becoming tired as well. He was used to rising early and going to bed shortly after sunset, and this was much later than he’s stayed up before. “Well, we could probably gather some berries or something once we get closer to the river. Nimbus, can you keep watch for us?”

The unicorn nodded. “Of course. I rested while waiting for you to find clothing earlier.”

Tor realized that Nimbus was referring to their trip into town, and didn’t bother correcting him on their activities. The transformed boy wasn’t sure what if anything would drive the unicorn away and he didn’t want to test it in the dark woods. “Excellent. We’ve decided to travel at night when we can, or at least well

off the main paths during the day. It would be difficult to explain your presence.”

Nimbus narrowed his eyes. “Why would you want to hide me?”

“Well, we wouldn’t want people to gather, crowds and like. We want to get to the court as soon as we can, and...” Tor trailed off. Nimbus had stopped and was staring at him.

“Have you heard nothing of what I’ve said, mistress? I beg your pardon if I was unclear about the twinned world.”

“What do you mean?” said Tor.

“No one who sees me is going to see any more than they expect. To a maiden such as yourself, I will no doubt appear to be some dashing warhorse.”

“But...but the people in Burkshire saw you,” said Isaac.

Nimbus nodded. “They had been touched by magic, in the form of the curse. There was some part of them that expected to see a unicorn to break the curse, and so they saw me true. Most of your kind hardly see anything at all, and I will slip by their gaze.”

“Oh,” said Tor. “Well, that will make traveling easier. Especially if you could find a way to carry Isaac...Margarit as well as me?”

Nimbus snorted and shook his head as if shooing off flies. “My apologies, mistress. I can carry you, thanks to your unsullied perfection, but I cannot carry your companion.”

“Right. Well, I thought I would ask again.” Tor looked Nimbus over, marveling at his mighty form. “It’s unfortunate that the other people won’t see the true you. You are a magnificent creature.”

Nimbus nodded. “Indeed. Still, I am glad that you will not be inconvenienced by my true shape.”

Isaac giggled. “Would that we could return to our true forms as easily. I don’t suppose that people will see us as boys, will they?”

Nimbus shook his head. “The magic that you say changed you has dissipated. There is nothing to hide your marvelous beauty.”

Tor sighed very quietly while Isaac snickered. Isaac looked around the clearing where they stood. It was a small one, surrounded by thick shrubs, and it felt quiet cozy in the unicorn’s light. She sat down in her tracks. “I think we ought to stay here for the night.”

Tor looked around and shrugged. “Looks fine to me. Nimbus, would you mind stopping here?”

Nimbus pawed the ground. “Of course, noble mistress.” He lowered himself to the ground, resting himself on folded legs. Tor sat next to Isaac and the two transformed boys leaned against the unicorn’s flank for warmth. The night was pleasant, so they didn’t need anything beyond their clothing and Nimbus’s heat. It was a hungry night but they were tired enough that it didn’t matter much. Hunger was something that they could deal with in the morning.

Tor’s dreams were strange that night, dreams of soft moonlight and tiny, delicate crowns. There was someone hunting her through the woods, wanting something terrible of her, and if she could just find Nimbus then she would be saved. She kept searching, but the only clearing that she found was one that was empty save for a small white dais in the middle, carved from marble. The dais held a tiny crown, made for a princess. Each time Tor felt herself come closer to the crown, and she woke just as she realized that she was reaching for it.

She woke up with a tiny squeak of horror. Something about the crown made her deeply uneasy. Tor looked down, checking to make sure that the nightmare had stayed in her dreams. It had not, of course; she was still extremely female. She was still leaning against the flank of the unicorn that had been the cause of all this, and Isaac was still a beautiful woman as well, though she was snoring lightly and had a tiny trail of spit down one cheek.

Tor sighed and struggled to her feet, trying not to think about what the motions were doing to her soft flesh. A certain pressure made her adjourn to the bushes, where she spent some time learning how to remove her underclothing before she soiled them. It was a process, and the relief was sweet when she finished. Tor re-clothed herself and buried the results with a stick. She returned to the clearing and saw only Nimbus, who managed to seem amused. Distressed noises told Tor

that Isaac was having the same problems she'd just conquered. Nimbus stood and shook himself off, and Tor was struck again by the unicorn's beauty,

They set off again, keeping their eyes open for anything edible. Nimbus proved his usefulness again, sniffing out berries and stunted fruit trees. The results weren't as impressive as the trees and bushes on the farms but they were more than enough for a pair of starving girls.

The three of them walked steadily until about an hour past noon. The forest seemed unchanging around them and the monotony of the walk caused Isaac to start chattering again. It was hard for Tor to reconcile Isaac's chatter with this spectacular woman's low voice, but Isaac seemed unbothered. Complaints started to seep into her words after a while and finally they built up enough for Tor to call a halt. Nimbus made no comment of any kind, and still seemed just as cool and composed as he had just after waking up. They sat and rested their sore feet; the feet were small and delicate, not nearly as tough as they had once been.

"How far are we from the capital, anyway?" she said.

Tor shook her head, conscious of the way her hair rippled over her neck as she did so. "I heard that it was one week north but I don't know if that was by foot or horse."

Isaac nodded. "We'll have to find a horse for me. Since this great lummoX won't let me ride." She thumped Nimbus in the ribs and the unicorn looked at her reproachfully.

"It is not that I will not, simply that I cannot," he protested. Before Isaac could answer, Nimbus snapped his head and ears forward. "Silence."

The girls looked into the forest, seeing nothing. Tor thought that she heard a crashing noise but she wasn't sure. "A bear approaches," said Nimbus, sounding remarkably calm.

Isaac stood instantly. Tor knew that her friend had a fear of bears thanks to a childhood encounter with an angry mother protecting her cub, and she stood to walk up next to Isaac. "It's okay," she whispered, wishing that her new voice sounded more reassuring than hopeful. "Nimbus can protect us, remember?"

Nimbus nosed between them, his horn casting its long shadow over Tor's

delicious form. She started; she hadn't heard the unicorn stand, much less approach. "Of course I shall, dearest mistress. I urge you both to stand behind me, though."

He crowded the girls to the eastern side of the clearing, leaving a wide area empty with the crashing bear on the other side. The sounds got louder and louder until Tor wondered how large the monster was going to be.

Finally they saw movement, and rather than the black bear that the girls had expected, a large brown bear lumbered out of the forest. It was young and for a bear it was slim, not having spent much time putting on its winter weight. But it was that time of year, as the heat of summer slides into winter, and the bear was looking for as many easy meals as it could find.

It snorted at the sight of Nimbus. The bear wasn't as tall at the shoulder as the unicorn but it was built much more solidly and enjoyed heavier armaments in the form of claws and teeth. It roared a challenge at the group. The two girls huddled behind Nimbus. When the bear stood up on its hind legs Isaac uttered a small shriek of terror at the sight. The bear spread its paws and roared again.

Nimbus stepped forward, approaching the bear as a courtier would approach a lady for a dance. He studied his opponent carefully, his eyes never settling in one place for long. Nimbus turned slightly sideways as he approached, as a cat does, trying to make himself appear larger.

The bear was uncertain; no hoofed creature had ever done this before. Normally they tried to run or sometimes charge. Not this careful, measured approach. Its confusion made it angry and it took a swipe at the unicorn.

Nimbus darted to the side, incredibly nimble in spite of all his weight, and he lashed out with a delicate-seeming hoof. The hoof caught the bear's paw, knocking it aside and causing the bear to roar in mingled pain and rage.

The bear came for the unicorn, slashing and biting at him. Nimbus jumped from side to side, lashing out with his front hooves every time the bear took a swipe at him. Rather than wearing the creature down, however, the unicorn's approach only seemed to anger it. It roared again, becoming more reckless in its swipes and adding snaps of its jaws into the mix. Nimbus dodged those as well and for the first time Tor saw a sheen of sweat on the unicorn's flanks.

Nimbus guided the bear further from the girls with each movement. The bear didn't seem to notice; in its painful, rage-filled world there was only room for one opponent.

The bear finally began to show signs of weariness: blood leaked from its front paws and it panted heavily. Nimbus was sweating but looked otherwise fit. Every time he glanced to where the girls cowered, he seemed to regain strength. The bear, enjoying no such bolstering effect in its favor, stood up on its hind legs to roar another challenge at its elusive foe.

Nimbus darted in and scored a deep puncture in the bear's shoulder. It roared again and swiped at the unicorn with its other paw. Nimbus was quick but not fast enough to fully avoid the strike. The bear's great claws dug through the unicorn's coat, scoring several large gashes that bled a substance that glowed and sparkled in the sunlight. Nimbus cried out, both in the outside world and in Tor's head, sounding just like an injured horse.

Then he bellowed something that could never have come from a horse's mouth. He straightened and darting in again, scoring a strike on the bear's other shoulder. The bear attempted to strike back but the new wounds made it difficult for him to move. He was slow enough for Nimbus to dodge and he did so, worrying at the larger foe. Nimbus scored several more strikes, each one slowing the bear further, until the creature could do little more than stand there huffing, its eyes wild with pain and confusion. Nimbus was not one to gloat; he administered the deep killing blow as quickly as he could, dropping the bear between one breath and the next. The bear's carcass steamed in the sunlight, settling in on itself until it appeared much smaller than it had in life. Tor felt sorry for it for an instant, until Nimbus took a step toward her and stumbled.

The girls gasped and came toward him, running to his side as if to hold him up, but he outweighed them both by hundreds of pounds. He stood quietly instead, not flinching when they touched the seeping wound. "Isaac," said Tor, her soft voice strong with authority in the midst of the crisis, "go out and find some of the herbs your mother collects for childbirthing. Anything you can find. Go, now!" She clapped her hands and Isaac fled into the trees.

Tor turned back to Nimbus. "Is there anything else we can do? Anything that will help you?"

Nimbus winced, his teeth gritted together. “Mistress, I told you, our lives are linked. It is possible...but I hardly dare ask it of one as perfect as you.”

“Oh for...tell me! You silly horse! What can I do?”

Nimbus snorted, looking irritated. “Hardly a horse, mistress, but never mind. Yes. You can take some of the pain on yourself, along with the wound, if you so desire. I could never ask you to do something like that, but it is an option.”

“How do I do that?”

“Put your perfect hand on the wound and simply wish it to be so.”

Tor put her hand out and touched the gashes in Nimbus’s shoulder, spreading her fingers out over them. Nimbus shuddered but didn’t shy away. Tor said, “I wish to share in Nimbus’s pain. Please.”

Something snaked down her arm, moving from Nimbus’s side and into her so quickly that she gasped. It was hot, and angry. It snaked through her body and ended up settling in her left shoulder. There it bit into her soft skin.

Tor cried out and let go, wrapped up in the pain. The tearing stopped soon enough but the damage was done; she could feel the blood leaking down her back. The extra layers helped soak it up but she would be in danger soon if it wasn’t dealt with. She sat on the ground next to Nimbus, hoping that Isaac wasn’t going to be long with her herbs.

Nimbus leaned down to nuzzle at her neck and she patted at his nose with her right hand. Her left arm worked, but not well. She looked up at his wound and saw that it was half-healed, no longer weeping what passed from blood in a unicorn. “Thank you, mistress,” said Nimbus, quietly.

“Hey, feel free to save us from bear attacks from now on,” said Tor with a pained smile. She was even prepared to let the mistress thing pass this time.

“It would be my honor, though death take me from this land again.”

Tor nodded and kept petting Nimbus’s nose, trying to keep from moving around much. She kept her arm held close to her ribs, pulling the clothing on her shoulder and back as tightly against the wound as she could manage. Nimbus

remained where he was, offering what comfort and support that he could until Isaac came back with the herbs.

After the shock and explanations were done Tor said, “Isaac...you’ll have to lead us. Help me up onto Nimbus?” Nimbus was in much better shape, able to kneel to let Isaac load Tor onto his back. Finally the unicorn stood and Tor was able to hold on well enough to keep from falling off. Isaac looked around; she’d long lost her place in the woods and had just been following the others under the assumption that they knew where they were going.

“Nimbus, I know you don’t like me for some reason,” she said, “but it would be very helpful if you could point me in the right direction. Where is the path from here?”

The unicorn sighed as if being asked to perform a great labor. Then he turned his head and pointed with his horn at a slight angle to the one they’d been following. “I think that would be the best way to go,” he said.

“You’re not sure?” said Isaac. She subsided when Nimbus gave her a baleful glare. She led the unicorn and his half-conscious cargo around the bear’s cooling corpse.

Isaac had woken up feeling more at home in her new body as well, more willing to think of herself as a girl than a boy. The evidence was right there in front of her, bouncing cheerfully with each step. Her breasts were an endless source of fascination to her; she often found herself stroking or hefting them as she walked. The sensitivity of her new nipples was a pure joy. She’d caught herself wondering if they could stay in these bodies a little while longer; certainly they were more fun than the old ones.

She also wished that she could have a unicorn of her own, but such was life. She supposed she’d be tired of her new form by the time they got to the king’s court anyway.

After about an hour they stumbled across the main path. Tor was still holding on to the unicorn’s mane and Nimbus was moving as smoothly as he could, but blood continued seeping from the wound on Tor’s shoulder. Isaac couldn’t fool herself; they had to find help soon or Tor wasn’t going to make it.

They were able to pick up their pace once on the path. Within the hour Nimbus

reported that he could smell water. Isaac couldn't but she was willing to take the unicorn's word for it.

Nimbus was right; soon they could see the river. It was wide and shallow, a natural ford point, and Isaac was glad to see that there was an inn on the other bank. Nimbus allowed that he could probably get across without too much trouble, apologized for not being able to carry Isaac once more, and started across. Isaac followed, wading through water that was hip-deep on her new body. Tor swayed in her seat but held on.

A small audience had gathered by the time the fording was completed. They were rough-looking men, the same kind that Isaac had grown up around in Berkshire all her life. They were directing gazes at her that she'd never encountered from the villagers, however, and she wasn't sure if she liked it.

The weirdest part was that part of her did like it. There was a part of Isaac that flounced and ran her hands through her hair, relishing the attention. It was disconcerting but she liked how it felt. She consoled herself with the knowledge that at least they weren't staring at Nimbus; the unicorn passed unnoticed even when the men glanced at him.

Isaac left Nimbus standing by the hitching rail with strict orders not to leave. She helped Tor off the unicorn and into the inn. The knot of men kept watching, some of them grinning when she threw a glare at them. She was so busy with Tor and her glare that she failed to see the young man standing in the doorway before she ran into him.

Fortunately he caught them before they fell. Tor moaned in pain when his hand caught her near her wound, and he looked stricken. Isaac pulled Tor away and said, "Are you trying to kill us? She's injured, you lout!"

Normally a sentence like that would have led to some light bullying if not an outright beating but this time the object of Isaac's irritation blushed and looked at his feet, stammering something that didn't make any sense. Isaac impatiently pushed him aside and helped Tor into the inn, leading her to a bench next to a rough table. Tor half-collapsed onto the table, breathing too quickly for Isaac's liking.

Isaac pointed at the man in the doorway and said, "You! Stay with her!" The others in the inn watched with amusement while he came forward and sat at the

other end of the bench, looking scared.

Isaac maneuvered her broad hips through the low, smoky room to the counter where the barman stood. He directed an appreciative stare at her well-rounded chest and said, "Hello, luv. How c'n I help?"

"Do you have a doctor or a barber nearby? A healer? My friend was, well, hurt by a bear, and she needs help. Maybe we can get a room, and someone could find the healer?"

The barman put down the mug he'd been polishing and held up his hands in a gesture of placation. "Softly, miss, softly. We'll get your friend set right soon enough." Once the room was arranged Isaac led Tor up the stairs while a boy was sent around to take Nimbus into the stables. Isaac sent notice to the unicorn, thinking as loudly as she could, and a disgruntled reply told her that he would suffer himself to be stabled. The young man Isaac had run into trailed behind them, uncertain as to what to do next but unwilling to desert them in what was obviously a difficult time.

Finally Isaac got them to their room and put Tor on the bed. She turned to the young man. "Thank you for your help, my name is Margarit, do you know of any healers or wise women who might help with my friend's wound?"

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, and said, "My...my name is, um, Elder. Yes. And I'm just passing through, but I could go ask."

Isaac raised an eyebrow. "Elder? Fine. And go tell the barman that we could use a bath as well, if there's hot water. We've been traveling hard."

Once Elder was gone Isaac shut the door and sat down next to Tor. Tor was already asleep. She shivered slightly and Isaac found that her head was rather warm. She risked lifting her friend and pulling the back of her dress down, finding that the scratches were red and puffy. They weren't poisoning her yet but it wouldn't be long. Isaac resolved to wait until after midday to go downstairs if the healer had not arrived by that time.

It occurred to her that the healer would want some sort of payment. She picked up the purse and went through it, unenthusiastically. The room and stabling had cost, as has the meal that was so be sent up. She was sure that the innkeeper had added to the bill but there was nothing that she could do about it. The healer

wouldn't have to charge much to wipe out the last of the money they'd acquired from Gerald and Isaac had no idea how to get more.

She opened the door at the sound of a knock and let in a small, plain pot girl who carried a tray full of soup and bread for them. She assured Isaac that the healer had been sent for and that Nimbus was well stabled. Isaac tipped the girl with a penny from their dwindling savings and sent her on her way, satisfied. She fed Tor as much of the soup as the wounded girl could handle before devouring the rest of it herself. Tor slipped back into her fitful rest and Isaac wondered what to do next. She finally decided to loosen her clothes and try to nap a little herself.

She'd hardly closed her eyes before being woken by another knock. She sat up and stretched and opened the door to find Elder standing there. "The, ah...the healer, she's...she's downstairs, and, she, uh, she--"

"Thank you, Elder," said Isaac. "Can you send her up, please?"

Elder turned and fled down the stairs, leaving Isaac shaking her head and wondering what was wrong with him. A few moments later he reappeared, leading a gnarled old woman dressed in what appeared to be a potato sack. She didn't smell very clean but Isaac was prepared to take help from a swineherd at that point.

She was introduced as Flytrap Rose, another detail that Isaac didn't particularly care about, and she was led to Tor's bedside. She turned and glared at Isaac and Elder. "You lot get out. I'll have her right as rain in a little while, but I don't want you underfoot. Have the girl send up some hot water and some beer. Water's for her and the beer's for me." She grinned, showing one gnarled tooth, and then shooed them out of the room.

Isaac followed Elder downstairs and relayed the healer's order to the barman. Then she went to an empty table. Elder followed, still silent, and sat down on the bench across from her. This time he seemed to have trouble keeping his eyes on hers. Isaac looked down and realized that her dress was still loosened from her nap, revealing an impressive expanse of breast and cleavage. She blushed and redid the ties, making herself slightly more presentable. She knew that she looked a bit like a scarecrow in borrowed, poorly-tailored clothing but there wasn't anything she could do about it. The healer would probably take the rest of their money, leaving them without enough to get suitable clothing or another

horse for her.

Still flustered, Isaac said, “Thank you, Elder, for your help. Sorry if I was short with you. I was worried about T...about Celeste.”

He tried to speak for a moment before managing, “Of course. Don’t think anything of it.”

She arranged her skirts and sighed. Elder took her in and said, “Milady, you seem troubled. Is there anything I can do?”

“Oh. Um. Well, I worry about money. I’m afraid that we don’t have much left, and that the healer will take the majority.”

Elder nodded. “I wouldn’t be much good, then. I’ve not had much to do with money in my life.”

“Neither have I. Well, maybe something will come up. Something usually does.”

“Where are you and Lady Celeste bound? If I may?”

Isaac shrugged. No harm in telling him, she supposed. And he did have a nice smile. “We’re heading to the king’s court. We have business of a, um, personal nature there.”

A shadow passed across Elder’s face for a moment, some emotion that Isaac didn’t see clearly before it was gone. “Ah, King Leo the Eighth, yes. A noble ruler. Surely he’ll be willing to help you out however he can.”

“I sure hope so. It doesn’t look like we’ll be able to pay much.”

Flytrap Rose clumped downstairs again. She inspected the room as though it had insulted her personally and headed for Isaac. She stuck her chin out and said, “Your friend will live. She’ll be weak for a day or two, but she’ll be all right. What happened, anyway?”

“Well, there was...there was a bear,” said Isaac, weakly.

The old woman shook her head and waved her hand. “I don’t care why you bothered a bear. A pretty scar for a pretty lady, and may it be a lesson to you both. Now, for the payment.”

Isaac was intimidated by Flytrap Rose and she wasn’t very good at hiding it. The negotiation of the price didn’t go in her favor, leaving the two girls with very little in the purse. Certainly there wasn’t enough for another night at the inn.

Rather than sit and worry, Isaac stood up. “Elder,” she said, “Would you accompany me outside for a walk? I feel the need to take some air.” Given his obvious nervousness around anyone even sort of female, she felt that Elder would be no danger.

Elder nearly tripped getting up and Isaac tried not to smile. He seemed quite competent otherwise. He didn’t have any trouble walking when they stepped outside.

They chatted idly as they walked and watched the sun set over the river. It was a pleasant night, cool enough to remind everyone that the seasons were shifting. Elder said that he was a hunter though he never specified what his favored game was. Isaac made up a story about herself involving a minor lord’s house. It had fallen to bad money decisions and had left two of its daughters with little more than the clothes they’d managed to scavenge and a horse that was willful and dangerous.

By the time they’d gotten back to the inn the sun had dipped below the horizon and torches were lit out in front of the building. Two men sat on a bench in front of the inn, one with a flute and one with a drum, trilling a lively song.

Isaac was surprised to find that she wanted to dance. She’d never been much for dancing before, though she liked to watch girls do it. Now she wanted to move to the song. She stepped closer, tapping her foot, and was delighted to find that her new body seemed to know just what to do with the music.

She started by clapping along with the beat and then started walking forward and backward in a line, twisting her hips to the song. Before long she was jumping and twirling, laughing wildly as she allowed the song to take her away to a place that she’d never seen before, a place full of music and wonder and joy.

She was hardly aware of a growing crowd. The musicians were serviceable but Isaac was spectacular even when standing still. When in motion, laughing and carefree, she approached the divine.

Coins began to ping on the ground at her flashing feet, first a few and then many. She didn't notice, swept away in the music as she was. Elder watched with his mouth open, not sure where to keep his eyes. Even in the makeshift clothing her heaving breasts and breathtaking hips moved with the beat in such a way that made her appear suited for a queen's ball.

Isaac lost track of the time, wrapped in the breathless joy of her newfound passion, but she was forced to stop when the musicians halted for a break. She gradually became aware of her surroundings, especially the coins at her pretty feet. With Elder's help she gathered them and they were split three ways between her and the two musicians. They did not begrudge her the coin; they had made far more than they would have otherwise. Most of them were pennies but there were a few larger coins, and between them they were more than enough to pay for another day and night at the inn complete with baths and food. Isaac was so happy that she hugged Elder, who blushed and stammered again.

She went inside and up the stairs to find Tor resting comfortably. Her color was much better and she no longer felt feverish. The gashes on her shoulder and back were wrapped in some sort of poultice. Isaac knew better than to peek beneath. Healers used all sorts of things in their remedies and she didn't want the good spirits to leak out from beneath the bandages.

She snuck back down the stairs and into the common room, looking for Elder. He wasn't much on conversation but she had grown to like having him around. If nothing else, it was fun to make him stammer with nothing more than a deep breath.

The musicians were there and they greeted her appearance with a roar of goodwill. They made a space for her at their table, insisting on buying her some wine and some more of the same soup that she'd had earlier. She didn't object to either, and launched into her story of her origins with gusto.

When she reached the point of mentioning that they had little money to go on she had already had three glasses of wine and was feeling the effects. She hugged the musicians and said, "If it wasn't for these men, then my lady and I

might have starved!”

Another man at the table snorted a little. Isaac had noticed him a few times; he was tall and square, but with a rough-hewn handsomeness that drew her eye more often as the wine flowed freely. “I reckon I can think of a few other ways,” he said, grinning. There was raucous laughter from a few of his friends, though the musicians looked uneasy.

Isaac blinked. “Truly? Do share!”

The square man snorted another laugh as if Isaac were being silly. “Mistress Margarit,” he said, “Surely you know that a man might pay a king’s ransom to spend the night in your arms.”

Isaac blushed, which sent the men into a chorus of laughter and hoots. She laughed along with them after a moment, suddenly feeling the need to be part of the joke rather than the butt of it. “Aye, but for you a girl might charge a little extra!”

He grinned and slammed down his mug. “I think we should negotiate, I do!”

“Ah, mayhap, but not in front of you friends! Why, they might become envious of your negotiating powers!” said Isaac. She laughed, still having a wonderful time. The rush of the dance had not left her, and the wine combined with it to make her more daring than she normally would have been.

“By God, I will,” said the square man. He waved to the barman and called for another bottle of wine to be sent up to his room. Isaac heard the words with a growing sense of unease. Certainly she was having a wonderful time, and there were parts of her that wanted to see what the negotiations would turn into, but she had only recently become a woman at all.

She looked around. The musicians were in their cups again, and there was no sign of Elder. Tor was asleep upstairs. The party at the table was breaking up and she didn’t want to stop feeling this way yet. She felt reckless and daring, as she had when showing off her body and her dance earlier. Ultimately, it was that feeling that she listened to, rather than her caution.

So when the square man stood and put his arm around her slim waist, she only protested playfully. He lifted her up over his shoulder. He swatted her behind and

carried her up the stairs, and Isaac waved at the laughing men who were still at the table.

He wasn't able to carry her far; the stairs had low ceilings and he already had to duck beneath some of the rafters. He set her down and took her hand, bowing to her and then heading up the stairs. She went right by her room, thankful that Tor didn't have the door open. Isaac still wasn't sure about any of this but a growing warmth down below was starting to complement the heat that the wine had awakened in her cheeks and belly. She caught herself glancing at his tight trousers, tight both behind and in front now, and she shivered when her nipples hardened at the sight.

His room was much the same as theirs, though it was smaller and only contained one bed. He closed the door behind her and said, "I am Callas. Would you care for some more wine, miss Margarit?"

Isaac nodded, suddenly very interested in having more wine. She sat on the end of the bed, so lightly that she was nearly hovering, and her hands twisted against one another. She couldn't deny the attraction that she felt toward him but it warred with her male sensibilities and habits.

Callas joined her on the bed, handing her a cup of wine. He grinned at her when she drank, and was quick to refresh her drink. He drank as well and then leaned over and kissed her.

It was a shock, and she barely kept herself from jumping off the bed. As a result, the kiss was an awkward, tooth-clashing affair that left her giggling and him grinning again. Callas took the giggle as a sign of encouragement and kissed once more. This time it was stronger, more insistent, and Isaac found herself softening toward him. It was strange to feel his sparse beard rub across her cheek but she rather enjoyed the new sensation. When he chuckled and put his hand on her breast while he kissed, her eyes snapped open and she gasped, drawing his breath into her lungs. The gasp pushed the breast into his hand and he took the opportunity to squeeze. His thumb stroked across her nipple at the same time. Isaac squeaked at the utterly new sensation.

Callas chuckled again and drew away from her. "Where I am from, paid or not, a man's partner takes her pleasure as well. Do I have you for the night, lady Margarit?"

Isaac took a deep breath, slightly straining the ties bound across the upper part of her chest, and nodded. It was getting easier to listen to the excited, hot part of her. This was a wonderful opportunity to find out what it felt like from the other side, and who could say that they'd done that? "Aye, master Callas. That you do."

Callas's grin grew wider. Isaac said, "But have a care, milord...I've not done this before."

"Ah, lovely," said Callas. "Then allow me to teach you the ways of pleasure. Ha!"

Callas sat on the bed again, reaching out for her. He drew her closer, crushing her body against his as he kissed her again. Isaac felt as if she was a toy in the hands of a giant and she struggled for a moment before relaxing into it. It was quite pleasant once she got over the shock. He continued to kiss, his tongue pushing roughly at her soft lips until he stormed her mouth, as if consuming her. She responded after a moment, moving her own tongue against his, and he chuckled. "There," he whispered.

He went back to it, this time letting one large hand slide down her back to cup her behind. He pulled her hips closer to him, lifting her and depositing her on his lap. At no time did he break the kiss and he chuckled again when she gripped the front of his shirt to keep from sliding off.

The heat inside her, the new heat, was growing with each touch, each time their tongues warred with each other, each time he cupped her behind and pulled her closer. He was using both hands now, massaging, and Isaac was surprised to hear herself moan at the delightful sensations.

Callas said, "Just with the clothing on, she moans! Oh, lady Margarit. This is going to be a night to remember." He reached up and tugged at the knots that held the strings closed around her. Under his thick fingers the knots unraveled quickly. At the same time, nervous and uncertain, Isaac tugged softly at the tie that held his shirt closed at the top, her slim fingers clumsy compared to his.

Callas didn't remove her clothing, just undid the knots. He waited for her to finish with his own knots and then said, "Hold on to my belt, milady." Isaac did so, gripping his belt tightly while he worked his shirt off. She couldn't remember what it was that he did for a living but it was obviously something that required

hard labor outside.

He grinned at her expression, caught somewhere between fear and lust. Isaac had never felt this way about another man but she remembered the feeling from her night with Mary. She reached out with a tentative hand, touching his hard chest and tracing a finger through the coarse hair. He chuckled and kissed her again. Then his mouth moved downward, kissing her delicate throat and neck. Isaac surprised herself with another moan and ran her fingers through the curly hair on his head while he chuckled. She could trace his progress by the trail of fire that his lips seemed to ignite on her skin. The warmth grew inside her in response.

Callas went back to work on the strings that held her dress closed. The growing heat made Isaac touch his chest, kneading at the hard, flat muscle there. Out of curiosity, she leaned in and kissed his nipple, sucking at it. He barked a sudden laugh and said, “Yes, milady, yes, they feel good for me, as well! Shall we see what I can do with yours?”

She giggled nervously but didn’t stop him when he started to roll the top of her dress down. Isaac worked her arms out of her sleeves, leaving the dress bunched up across her chest, above the bulge of her bosom. Callas smiled and said, “Gently, milady, gently! We have all night, after all.”

With that he rolled the dress down to her waist, very slowly. Isaac closed her eyes, feeling the band of material roll over and press into her soft breasts, finally rolling past and letting them spring free. Callas rolled the dress down to her waist before anything else, and then he held her slim shoulders and just gazed at her for a while, drinking her in. “Ah,” he said quietly, “such a treasure for one such as me, eh?”

He flexed his strong arms and rolled her off his lap and onto the bed again. Isaac rolled onto her back, her breasts sliding around her chest in a distracting manner. Callas went to work on them with his mouth and fingers, never rough or fast. He stroked and kneaded, tracing their soft contours while his tongue swept flames up and down their sides to their peaks. Isaac moaned and gasped as her nipples clenched tighter and tighter with each caress. She felt her hips move, pushing upward slightly, and Callas chuckled again. “Ah, milady,” he said, “such a good sign for me.”

He kissed her again and began working on the strings that kept her dress tied

around her tiny waist. Once those were done it took some effort to slide the material over her spectacular hips, but he had plenty of time. He emphasized each movement with a touch or tweak that made the fire inside her burn even brighter. She was panting by the time he pulled her dress completely off of her, sliding her stockings off her long legs so she was entirely nude. His warmth ensured that she didn't feel a chill and the heat inside banished the idea that she might ever be cold again. Isaac was completely lost to the feminine sensations welling up from below her belly, writhing under his touch and wanting nothing but more.

He stood and pulled off his own pants and shoes, leaving himself wearing nothing but his underthings. They were stressed across his thick legs and mighty groin, tented by what lay behind the cloth. Isaac's eyes were drawn to the area but Callas just chuckled and went back to work on her.

His tongue and hands found every corner of her that night, slowly rubbing and sliding across her sensitive skin until she was moaning and her hips were pumping against the air. He kept chuckling, sending the vibrations of his laughter into her as he went, driving her higher and higher. Eventually it felt as though her entire body was as sensitive as her nipples. Every stroke, every gentle touch, sent lightning through her. Callas smiled after bringing her to that point. "Now, now, milady, now." He took her hands and placed them on her breasts, and she started playing with them enthusiastically while he stood and removed his final bit of clothing. The heat and hardness that had been burning her every time his groin had brushed against her skin was revealed. Isaac's eyes widened and she wondered how she was ever going to accommodate him. It wasn't until much later that she realized that she hadn't considered whether she should.

He got onto the bed and maneuvered himself between her legs, still stroking her body. His touch on the inside of her thighs made her sigh and she stopped wondering if and started wondering when. She ached to be filled, a new sensation but not an unwelcome one, given her level of arousal. "Yes," she whispered, "Yes. Please."

She smiled at him and closed her eyes, moaning when he brought himself closer. He was so very hot, and so hard. Isaac couldn't believe that she was going through with this, but it had turned from a strange chore to something that she welcomed.

His touch remained gentle but still her eyes snapped open wide when he pushed inside, his way made easy by her slick heat. Callas moaned while he slid in, his eyes closed and a smile on his face. He didn't get far before encountering resistance, and Isaac cried out when he pushed through, tearing something inside her. The pain was a terrible intrusion on her arousal, but she held on as he kept sinking deeper into her. Soon Isaac was lost in the welter of sensations. The pain stayed but it soon became insignificant when Callas reached down and started brushing his finger across the top of their juncture, sliding softly back and forth against a hard spot that made her want to scream. He started pumping in and out as well, supporting himself over her with one strong arm while the other played with whatever it was summoned the lightning.

Soon Isaac's helpless moans turned to yelps and then she felt the pleasure and arousal reach a new level inside her. It started at her toes, a rigid burn that soon caused her to arch her entire body against him. She tried to scream when the pleasure burst in her but it was so intense that it robbed her of her voice and her sight. She scrabbled at the bedclothes, trying to inhale through the sheer rapture that held her spectacular body in its grip. Callas kept moving slowly within her and his gentle, steady movements made Isaac's climax last even longer. When she finally unclenched and was able to move her body again, Callas laughed and picked up his pace. Isaac was able to give voice to the cries that had eluded her in the grip of her pleasure and she saw her yelps exciting him further. He started to push deeper, his breaths coming faster, and Isaac gladly pumped her hips to get him as far as she could. Finally he gripped her hips in both hands and roared as he started pulsing inside her, heat blossoming as he did so. Isaac cried out as well, joyful in her lover's release.

Callas pumped inside her for a while, groaning. When he subsided he withdrew carefully and then rolled to lie beside her. Isaac propped herself up on her elbow, pressing her body against him. It was different than she'd had before and it wasn't what she had been expecting, but sex as a woman was fun and felt amazing. Isaac kissed him, slow and hot, and they chuckled together.

"So, milady, it seems you have talent for this work."

Isaac giggled, barely conscious of her altered laugh. "Hardly work, milord. And you made the first time so very nice. Did you, um, did yours...was it good?"

Callas snorted, then kissed her again, drawing her up to lie on top of him. "It was

wonderful. A man would have to be insane to not enjoy a night in your arms, Margarit.”

She smiled and kissed him again, reveling in the sore heat that baked inside her. The pleasure had been tremendous, so much so that it had left part of itself inside. She felt warm and relaxed instead of awkward, and she actually directed some pleasant thoughts toward Gerald.

Isaac rubbed her body against him, writhing slowly. She loved the feel of his hair against her sensitive skin, and the feel of her incredible body was getting him into the mood again. “Milord Callas,” she whispered, her voice low and rough, “is there aught else that you can teach me this night?”

Tor awoke the next morning as the sun was starting to turn the sky from black to early gray. She felt weak and sore, but no longer hot. Her dreams had been strange and for a moment she thought that the sound of the door unlocking was the bear coming to claim her. She sat up in bed, looking for a weapon even as the room swooped around her. Fortunately, it was just Isaac. Her dress was untied and her hair was disheveled, but at least she wasn’t dangerous. Tor lay back on her elbows, just then realizing that she her own dress was untied.

“Are you all right?” she asked Isaac.

Her friend froze, eyes darting about, and finally she said, “Yes. Just fine. I’ve been...out. Um. Did I mention that I found a way to make some money? I danced. This woman that you turned me into knows how to dance quite well, and I did, and people paid to watch.” She held up Gerald’s purse, now heavy with its contents.

Tor smiled. “That’s wonderful. Do you mind doing it?”

A series of expressions crossed Isaac’s face too quickly for Tor to follow. “Um. No. No, actually, it was quite fun.”

Tor nodded, lying back again. Even the short conversation had tired her, and she knew that she had a way to go toward recovery. “Did you hear anything in the night, Isaac?”

“Hear...what do you mean? Was there something?”

“Oh, I thought that was why you were up. Sort of thumping and screaming a while ago.”

Isaac let her hair fall down across her face to hide her blush. “Oh, um, nothing like that. Must have been part of your dream.”

“Of course.”

“I’m going to bed. Um. Back to bed. That is.”

Tor nodded, eyelids already heavy. “I don’t think I’ll be ready to travel today, but you never...never know.”

“Okay, Tor. Get some rest.” Isaac rolled into her own bed, exhausted from the dancing and then the night of hard effort she’d put in. Her body still glowed with the aftermath of her pleasure, and she made a mental note to try to keep from being quite as vocal about it next time.

She stopped and examined the thought, lying there while Tor’s breathing deepened. Next time? Was there going to be a next time?

She thought of Callas’s gentle strength, his hands and lips and shaft teaching her about her new body. She thought of his kind smile and rough hair, and how he had teased so much ecstasy from her, over and over. She also thought of the way that his coin had fattened her purse, though that was something that she would gladly have skipped. It seemed a terrible thing to be paid for such a wonderful night, but he had insisted.

This body was made for pleasure, she told herself. It was fun, and people were willing to pay her for it. Yes, there would be a next time. And a time after that. At least until they were able to get to the king’s court and have the spell removed.

She nodded sleepily to herself, snuggling down into the warm blankets and drifting off to dream of rough hair and gentle hands.

Another hour went by before someone knocked at their door. The tapping sounded tentative, but it was constant, and it eventually woke Isaac up. She barely bothered to pull her hair back before opening the door, giving Elder a fine view of her bottomless cleavage. “What, Elder?” she said.

He stood there with his mouth opening and closing, holding a covered tray that was giving off interesting smells. Isaac lost some of her irritation at the sight. Elder held it up as if offering and said, “Uh.”

“Oh, for us? Thank you!” Isaac took the tray and put it on the table just inside the door. “I’m afraid that To...uh, that Margarit is still asleep. She’s been through a lot, but she’s on the mend thanks to you!” She offered him a sunny smile.

Confusion burned through Elder’s awe. “I thought you were Margarit.”

Isaac’s smile froze. “I am. I mean, I am. But sometimes we call each other by our own names. It’s a fun joke to play in new places!”

Elder frowned, working at the idea, and Isaac said, “Won’t you join us for breakfast?” At the same time she tugged on her dress a little so that her huge bosom was nearly spilling out of her dress. Elder’s eyes snapped to her chest and then to her face.

“No! Uh. I couldn’t possibly disturb lady Celeste! Um. I’ll...be downstairs. Or hunting. Yes! Hunting, because I’m a hunter.”

He backed away from the bosom, nearly tripping over the doorframe in his haste to get away. Isaac grinned slightly and closed the door before going to wake up Tor.

Elder had brought sturdy, plain fare. Isaac had doubts that the inn served anything else, but she wasn’t going to complain about toasted bread and porridge with honey. There was a pitcher of water from a deep well also, and though Tor didn’t eat much in her weakened state the tray was empty by the time that Isaac was done with it.

She went back to sleep for a while, but she’d never been good at sleeping during the daytime. Well before noon she was up and checking on Nimbus in the stables. He reported that he was being treated well and that his wounds were healing quickly. Indeed, she thought that they looked like gashes received two weeks ago instead of the day before. The unicorn was full of questions about Tor’s condition and Isaac was able to answer the most important ones to his satisfaction.

Then there was nothing to do but wait. Callas and his band of men had moved on to whatever job they were performing next and the musicians were still asleep. Isaac went back up to their room and counted her money, finding that dancing and other activities paid quite well. She went downstairs and paid for another night with all the luxuries offered (not many) before asking if there was anyone nearby who had a horse for sale.

The inn wasn't the only place on the side of the road. A low ford at a clear river was a good place for businesses that thrived on passerby, and this was no exception. Isaac was able to find a farrier and he was able to show her a small selection of horses for sale. Her nighttime endeavors hadn't provided her with enough to buy one yet but she was encouraged that she was making progress.

Isaac noticed the man's eyes being drawn to her body during the discussion, and she said, "I was forced to take a dress that doesn't fit, sir. Is there anyone around here who might be able to alter it for me, and lady Celeste's for her?"

The farrier thought about it and allowed that the innkeeper's wife was a handy woman with a needle. Isaac thanked him for all his help and headed back to her room. The innkeeper's wife was glad to have the chance to pick up some extra money and soon they were back in Isaac and Tor's room, chatting while she took Isaac's measurements.

"Whoo. The Lord was kind to you, wasn't he?" said the seamstress. She winked at Isaac, a bawdy gesture that said that she knew all about Isaac's activities the night before. Isaac, standing there in her poorly-fitted underwear, blushed and hid her face beneath her thick hair. The woman cackled and went to work.

"Nothing to me, dearie. Heaven knows I've been a sporting woman in the past."

Tor blinked at the two of them, coming awake again. "A sporting woman? What's going on, Isaac?"

"A hah!" said Isaac loudly. "Bad dreams again, no doubt from the sickness, correct, mistress Celeste?"

Tor looked at the innkeeper's wife, who regarded them with amusement and a bit of concern for the hurt girl. "Yes. Of course, Margarit. Just a bad dream. What did you mean by a sporting woman, anyway?"

The seamstress opened her mouth and Isaac talked right over her. “Nothing that needs to worry a lady of your standing, Celeste. Jus some talk between the commoners.”

Tor blinked again, confused by what was going on. “Oh. Well. All right, then, I suppose. What’s she doing there?”

“Altering my dress so that it fits. When you feel well enough to stand and have her take your measurements, she can do the same for yours.”

“Oh, good. That may not be for a while, but may I watch?”

They allowed that she could, and the three of them chatted while the alterations were made. Tor let Isaac do most of the talking, since she had obviously created a story for them. Isaac enjoyed the opportunity to embellish the existing story. Soon there was a rapacious uncle who’d tried to seduce Celeste before the fire had burned down his manor and they’d escaped in the blaze.

The innkeeper’s wife listened and shook her head and clucked her tongue in all the right places, but Tor could tell that she believed none of it. Tor started asking questions, steering the conversation away from Isaac’s wild stories. She asked if there was any news and the seamstress was more than happy to gossip.

The talking did Tor some good, and she felt her strength returning as the day went on. They stopped for a hearty lunch of the same fare that they’d had for breakfast, and after that she felt well enough to stand and have her measurements taken for her own dress. Isaac was thrilled with her finished product, glad to not have to worry about all the awkward bits of clothesline that had shaped the dress before.

Her remade outfit was tailored closer to her skin, showing her hourglass shape much more effectively than before. The innkeeper’s wife had patted her shoulder and whispered, “That should help ya get a little attention from the boys out there,” before sending her on her way as work on Tor’s dress began. Isaac was so impressed with her skill that she paid for the price of three dresses instead of two.

Travelers were starting to arrive by the time Isaac descended the steps. She was glad to see that Elder was one of them, and she waved him over to a table. He resumed his look of guarded interest and sat down across from her. “Uh. Your

dress looks nice.”

“Why thank you. And Celeste wanted me to pass her thanks for the meal that you brought us this morning. She’s feeling much better and might join us for breakfast in the morning.”

He nodded, and she was sure that she caught a hint of a blush on his face as he did so. “Elder,” she said, “What did you say that you did for a living?”

He narrowed his eyes slightly, looking more focused than before. Isaac felt that he wasn’t keeping himself from looking at her dress anymore. He appeared to have his mind on other things, and she wondered what was so important.

“Right now I am a hunter, as I said.”

She tilted her head. “Are you. What are you hunting, might I ask?”

“You may ask, but I’m afraid that it is for me to know. Will you be dancing tonight?”

“Possibly. Since you are hunting something so mysterious that you can’t tell me what it is, I thought I would ask if you would be interested in helping me. And the Lady Celeste, of course.”

His eyes widened slightly at the mention of Celeste and an indelicate part of Isaac’s mind snickered. The boy was obviously taken with Tor, which was one of the funnier things she’d run across since this madness had consumed their lives. There would be no re-enactment of her night with Callas from Elder, even if she felt up to it.

“Lady Celeste needs my help?” he said, hope practically visible in his voice.

“Oh, heavens yes. She and her horse are still weak, you see, and I’ve not acquired enough for a horse yet myself. We need a guide and possibly a guard as we travel to the king’s court. You seem like a nice enough fellow, and as a hunter you must be good with a bow. Will you help us two fair maid...fair ladies?”

Elder didn’t answer immediately, which surprised Isaac. She’d assumed from the look in his eye that Elder would jump on any opportunity to be near Celeste. After consideration, Elder said, “How long do you need my assistance?”

“Just until we get to the court,” said Isaac.

“What are you planning to do there?”

Isaac looked around to make sure that no one was listening in. The common room was filling but they were far enough away from anyone else that she felt comfortable whispering. “Lady Celeste and I both are under a spell. It’s not something I can explain, but we think that the magicians at the king’s court will be powerful enough to help us.”

He nodded, still thinking. “Very well. It may be that the very thing that I seek is on the road you travel. It’s not like I’m getting any closer to it on my own. I will accompany you and Lady Celeste.”

“Well. Great! We’re going to leave tomorrow, probably after breakfast should Celeste feel well enough. What is it that you are hunting, again?”

He smiled slightly. “I never said what I was hunting, milady.”

She shrugged and sat back, aware that her dress pulled tight against her bosom when she did so. His eyes flickered down and back, and she smiled. “Well. You can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“Of course. May I see Celeste tonight?”

She shrugged. “Go ahead. The innkeeper’s wife is there to play chaperone.”

His eyes widened. “Oh, I could never...there...she doesn’t need to...”

Isaac chuckled. “She’s there altering Celeste’s dress, Elder. Like mine, though probably a little more discreet. Celeste, after all, is a lady.”

“Um. Of course. Yes.”

He stood and left, his ears bright red. Isaac chuckled to herself and looked around the common room. A team of farriers had just entered and they looked thirsty and well-paid. Perhaps she didn’t feel too sore to make a little extra money after all. She stood and joined them at their table, delighted to see that one of them had a small flute and another was ordering wine.

Elder knocked on the door and waited respectfully for the innkeeper's wife to answer. He bowed slightly and said, "Good evening, madam, I was hoping to pass the time with Lady Celeste. I hear that she is not well and I hoped that some talk would do her good."

She glared at him as she did at everyone, taking his measure. After a moment of this she said, "All right, come in. She's in her delicates, but I reckon that won't hurt much."

Elder stepped inside and saw Celeste sitting on her bed, wearing little beyond a nightshirt. It was heavy cloth but there wasn't much that it could do to hide the magnificent figure beneath it. Elder coughed and turned red, looking away. "My Lady Celeste," said the innkeeper's wife, "some ragged hunter to see you." She cackled and went back to her sewing.

Tor smiled at Elder, trying to show that she was just as embarrassed. She pulled her blanket up to her chin and lay back, propped up by pillows she'd stolen from Isaac's bed. "How, um...how nice to see you, Elder," she said, wondering why she was blushing at the sight of him.

He was doing the same, though her modesty with her blanket appeared to be helping. "And you! My lady!" he said, a little too loudly. There was another snort from the sewing corner and he felt his ears start to heat up again.

"Please sit, and excuse my...well, my undress," said Tor. "I'm sure that Margarit filled you in on our situation?"

"Yes! Yes she did, and it's terrible. A terrible thing. She also wanted to know if I would accompany the pair of you to the king's court, which is your destination!" Elder appeared to be trying to stop the words from flooding out of his mouth but they were greased by nervousness, unstoppable.

Tor blinked. "Yes. Well. Anyway. Yes, actually, that is a fine idea that she had, if you're free to help us on our way."

Elder's eyes crept down to the top of the blanket, and he blushed and locked his eyes on the floor. Tor found herself amused rather than irritated, and she allowed herself a small smile. It was interesting to be an object of interest. "I would be honored to assist you, milady," said Elder. "My own hunt isn't going well, and maybe I can find what I seek on your road instead of my own."

Tor looked him over. He wasn't really that ragged, she decided, and he seemed nice enough that she wasn't worried that he might try something. Also she had a huge unicorn to protect her, so that was encouraging. "I think it would be a good idea, Elder."

The innkeeper's wife stood and said, "Time to try your dress on, Celeste. Elder, be a love and give us some privacy, hmm?"

Elder nearly tripped over his own feet fleeing through the doorway. Tor idly wondered how such a clumsy man could make it as a hunter.

She got out of bed and stood while the seamstress fussed over her. The world didn't spin nearly as much this time, and she felt much better. She sighed as she inspected herself once the dress was on.

"Something wrong, milady?" said the innkeeper's wife.

"Well, it...it's awfully...forward. Isn't it?" Tor made a gesture that was meant to subtly indicate her prominent chest.

The older woman snorted again. "There's nothing in the world going to hide that, milady. I thought maybe you'd rather try for shaping it."

Tor regarded the bosom in question. She was right, of course; Tor's breasts were large and firm, and probably couldn't be hidden by anything short of a steel breastplate. The older woman's needle had shaped her dress to support them, pulling them into a pleasing shape. She was glad to see that the neckline stopped well above her cleavage, and she said so.

"Yes, well, I thought that one of you might want to keep some secrets. Your friend asked for something cut low. No better than I expected, really, from someone like her. Begging your pardon, of course."

"She asked for...really?"

"Oh, yes. I'll wager it works out well for her tonight as well."

Tor started to ask what she meant by that but decided that she didn't want to know. Isaac would have told her if she'd wanted Tor to know. Best not to pry.

She didn't feel up to venturing down to the common room that night, taking her meal in her room. During the night she was awoken several times by thumps and breathless cries of passion from several others rooms but she quickly went back to sleep again, not waking when Isaac finally entered well past midnight. Isaac was flushed and smiling quietly, and her purse was rather fuller than the night before.

Tor woke refreshed the next morning, feeling better than she had in a while. She got dressed and carefully made her way to the common room. It was late in the morning and most of the boarders had gone their way, but there was no problem in getting a late breakfast. While she was eating, Tor became aware that even the quiet talking in the common room had died down. She looked up and found that most of the people there were staring at her. Some of them went back to their meals or games when she looked but some simply carried on staring. Tor felt her face heat up and she went back to eating, not looking up again.

When she was done she left, her steps quickened by the stares that she could still feel behind her. She headed for the stables, finding Nimbus waiting. He started to complain as soon as he saw her.

"They think to keep me in here, with the common horses and mules?" he said while she petted his soft nose. "I can't believe that so many here would be unable to recognize a fighting unicorn. I bet if I ran a few of them through that they would open their eyes quickly enough. Hah. Mistress Celeste, are you feeling better?"

She nodded. "Just fine, thank you. How are you? Does your wound still pain you?"

He snorted. "Hardly worth mentioning. Unicorns heal more quickly than normal creatures." When he showed her the gashes, she saw that they were nearly healed. She was sure that hers didn't look nearly that well-knit. The unicorn grew serious. "Thank you, mistress, for your sacrifice. Know that whenever your name is mentioned, there will be a song of your beauty and charity sung in my heart."

Tor stared at Nimbus, trying to decide if the unicorn was making fun of her or not. "Well. Thank you for saving our lives from the bear, of course. I think we're even."

He nodded. "I was quite brave. It had been a while since my last true combat."

"True. Well, I hope you are well-rested, because I think we're leaving today."

"Yes, of course. Still heading for the king's court, then? Going to get your spell broken, if there is such a thing?"

"Well, yes, that's the plan."

"Going to see to it that you aren't bothered by my presence anymore. Fair enough, fair enough. Don't mind me, of course."

"Nimbus. You don't think that this is about you, do you?"

"Of course not, mistress. I just know that you're eager to return to what you claim is your true form. For what reason I can't imagine, but there you are."

"This isn't my true form, that's all. I was born a man, and I want to go back to being one."

Nimbus tossed his mane. "If you say so. Just think about whether that existence is preferable to this one."

Tor petted Nimbus on the nose and headed back into the inn again. Elder was standing on the porch when she turned the corner, and he jumped slightly when he saw her. He turned his eyes to the ground and said, "Milady Celeste."

His blush was charming and it did things to Tor that she didn't want to admit. She still clung stubbornly to the vestiges of her male mindset, and finding a man attractive didn't fit into that.

"Hello, Elder," she said. "I was just visiting Nimbus, my...my horse."

He nodded. "Are you feeling well enough to proceed, then?"

"I think so. I'm going to let Margarit sleep while I pack our things, and then we should be ready to go. We will be walking, I'm afraid, at least for now."

He cocked his head, puzzled. "Why is that? Is your horse not broken to the saddle?"

“Oh, well, not exactly. He is quite particular about who he lets ride, and I’m afraid that he and Margarit don’t get along. For the moment, we’re walking.”

Elder nodded. “I don’t know horses well, or I’d help with that. I’ll go pack, though. My things, not yours. Of course.” Tor was slightly charmed to see that Elder’s blush deepened during his stammering, and she nodded to him.

“That’s a good plan, Elder. We should be ready in an hour.”

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and headed inside to get his things. Tor followed, trying not to think about the men staring at her. She kept her head high and her shoulders straight, and soon enough she was out of their lines of sight. She tried to be quiet while packing their things but it wouldn’t have mattered if she’d brought in a rooster in full crow. Isaac was snoring slightly, in the same position that she’d been in when Tor had left. She didn’t know what her friend had been up to but it was obviously taxing.

When she had everything packed and tidied, Tor spent another ten minutes working to get Isaac out of bed. She wouldn’t wake up at first and then there was a long process of whining to get through. Tor kept moving as if Isaac wasn’t saying anything, getting her friend’s dress situated and shoes back on her delicate feet. She picked up their purse and paused, surprised at the weight of the coin inside.

“What have you been doing, anyway?” she said, jingling it.

Isaac suddenly turned red and gained more interest in the departure process. “Um, nothing special. Just dancing. I told you about how different it is now, right? Say, do you think that you might have hidden talents like that now? What do you think they might be? It would be wonderful if you were able to play music for me to dance to, and then the two of us could earn money together. And if you’re as good playing music as I am at dancing we could get rich!” She went on in that vein for a while, talking quickly. Tor recognized Isaac’s tactic as one that she’d used in the past to deflect questions that she didn’t want to answer.

Tor sighed impressively and dropped the subject. It wasn’t important, and it was good that Isaac had earned them enough money for clothes and lodging, not to mention the healer. Tor’s wound still pained her when she moved too quickly but the damage was healing faster than she expected. It was just one more strange thing piled on many others, and for once not a dangerously strange thing. She’d

worry about the minor mysteries when she was in her true form again.

Isaac regained control of the purse and went downstairs to negotiate with the innkeeper for some supplies. The men of the common room looked rather happier to see her than they had Celeste, and she returned coarse greetings with a lighthearted wave or comment that had everyone laughing. Tor shook her head; it was a talent that her friend had always had, to get people laughing along with her, and Tor wished that she had a piece of the same skill. Still, she could console herself with the servitude of a genuine unicorn, which was more than Isaac could currently boast.

Elder met the two of them on the porch. He carried a heavy pack that had an unstrung bow laced through it. A quiver of businesslike arrows was tied next to it; they looked like the type of arrows that the serious hunters used and Tor was suddenly glad that they were taking the boy with them. It felt odd to think of Elder as a boy; he was most likely two or three years older than she was but he had an air of boyish uncertainty about him that made him seem younger. He gave the two of them a nervous smile.

Tor stood by while Isaac greeted Elder cheerfully. It was obvious who the diplomat was. They carried their packs to the stables and went in to get Nimbus.

Tor unlocked the door to Nimbus's stall and the unicorn stepped out with the air of a champion having vanquished a deadly foe. Tor chuckled and scratched Nimbus's ear and the unicorn grandly deigned to accept the attention. A strangled noise made Tor look around.

Elder stood there next to his pack, which had fallen to the floor. He stared at the unicorn, one hand half-raised as if to point, making that strange noise. Tor and Isaac looked from him to Nimbus and back.

"Crap," said Isaac in her sensual voice. "He sees him true."

"A guh," said Elder.

Tor stepped forward and grasped the half-raised hand, a part of her brain noting in passing that it was strong and smooth with callus. "Elder," she said. "Don't scream."

He looked at her, affront vanishing back into shock when he looked back at

Nimbus. “I’m not going to scream. What...is that really...”

“Nimbus!” said Isaac, sounding irritated, “I thought you told me that no one would be able to see you as a unicorn!”

Nimbus snorted and rolled his eyes. “I told you that no one would be able to see me as I truly am unless they had been touched by magic. There are plenty of ways that might have happened. Should I kill him?”

“What? No!” said Tor. “Elder is coming with us to guide us to the king’s court. He’s part of my team, just like Isaac is. In fact, it would be very helpful if you could talk to him like you do with us. Can you do that for me?”

Nimbus’s voice sounded the same in her head, though heavy with resignation. “Of course, mistress. Following your wishes is all that I live to do.”

Elder looked around, confused. “Who said that? Who calls me mistress?”

“It’s complicated, but the unicorn can speak in your head. Well, I guess it wasn’t that complicated. Anyway, his name’s Nimbus,” said Isaac.

Tor sighed and busied herself with strapping her pack to Nimbus. He stood quietly while she did so, though he bared his teeth and lowered his horn a quiet inch when Elder came closer. Tor took Elder’s pack as well, and Isaac’s, and soon the unicorn was doing a credible if irritated impression of a pack mule. He followed Tor out into the sunlight, giving Elder and Isaac looks more suited to an irritated tiger than a unicorn.

They walked quietly. Tor didn’t have anything to say and Elder seemed too nervous in her presence to speak. Isaac jabbered about the scenery for a while but it was the same thing for hours and eventually she subsided. Nimbus kept his own council, watching out for any threats from the forest as well as any potential problems that Elder or Isaac might represent.

“Why is it that you don’t trust Elder?” Tor asked the unicorn, sending the message in her mind rather than speaking it.

“Men and unicorns are naturally suspicious of each other,” said Nimbus. “We are both herd leaders, and we tend to come into conflict more than we cooperate with each other. Also they tend to be the source of a maiden’s fall from purity,

which a unicorn cannot abide.”

He glanced at Elder and continued with his thoughts. “This one seems different than most of them, however. I sense no impurity about him as I do your servant Margarit. Still, he is a man and must be watched.”

“You unicorns aren’t very forgiving creatures.”

Nimbus managed to imply a shrug. “Perhaps not. These lessons were taught to us by long experience. Of course, these days, they aren’t as important, but occasionally one like you comes along who needs help.”

Tor glanced at Elder, who was watching the trees. He’d kept his bow and quiver, though he’d lost the awkwardness now that they were out in the woods. “I wonder why he can see you,” she thought idly.

“Touched by some sort of magic, mistress, that is all I know for certain. It could be nearly anything, as long as it is true magic that has opened his eyes.”

They stopped while there was still light in the sky, though the sun had gone down. Elder insisted that there was another inn soon but Tor was very tired. She was weaker from her wounds than she’d thought and no one wanted to do her or Nimbus any harm by pushing on. After all, they had no particular schedule. It was still at least two weeks to the castle so they could afford to lose another hour or two of foot travel.

Isaac gathered wood while Elder went hunting and Tor started building a campfire. Her tiny hands were still quick and sure when it came to laying the sticks out, she was glad to see, and a few sparks from Elder’s flint and steel soon had smoke curling through the pile. Isaac kept looking for more fallen sticks and Tor took the packs off of Nimbus.

It was a fine, breezy night, clear and pleasant. They roasted a pair of squirrels to supplement the bread that Isaac had bought at the inn, and all four of them were in good spirits when they finally bedded down under the stars that night.

It was a shock when thunder rolled over them like an angry earthquake much later that night. Tor snapped awake at the sound and was immediately aware that the only light was coming from Nimbus. The unicorn stood in the middle of the campsite, near where the fire had burned out, and he stared at the sky. There

were no stars visible but it was easy to see lightning flickering amongst the clouds that hung heavy above them.

The three humans shrugged out of their bedrolls as quickly as they could, Isaac and Tor lacing up their dresses so that they wouldn't fall off. During that process, Elder started looking for a useful tree.

The rain started as a slight hiss in the distance, as if a swarm of snakes had learned to fly. The only thing in their packs that was waterproof was Elder's tent. It was designed for one person, so the three of them were just barely able to hold it spread above themselves. Tor sat in the middle with Isaac's elbow digging into her on one side and Elder's arm and knee pressed as politely as possible against her on the other. Rain and wind lashed against their sorry little shelter, though they huddled against a tree on one side and Nimbus stood close to them on the other. He insisted that he was fine, that unicorns had a long truce with storms and he stood no chance of being struck by lightning, but Tor still felt bad.

She was also nervous about the warm male presence beside her. Being that close to Elder brought about thoughts that were unsuitable for either a maiden or a man. Elder's blush about being so close to her wore off after a while, since such things eventually burn themselves out. After that they were just determined to survive the miserable night. The storm didn't seem interested in throwing much lightning, investing all its strength in gusts of wind and a truly impressive downpour. The occasional deep blasts of thunder seemed half-hearted by comparison.

Isaac figured out a way to tuck her end of the tent under her butt, letting her newly expanded flesh do the work for her. It pressed her more tightly against Tor's side but she just tried to keep her mind on the shared warmth rather than the awkward closeness. She and Tor even managed to nap a little bit, pressed against one another.

Elder stared resolutely out into the angry darkness for most of the night. He told himself that he was watching for threats, though he knew that the unicorn had better senses and was probably more alert. He was really trying not to think about the delightful softness of Celeste's body which was pressed tight against him. Every time his mind wandered to the point where he started thinking about the softness of her breasts or the rondure of her hips, he shook his head and shifted the tent so that a little more was over the girls and a little less was over

him. By the time the storm cleared his guilt had turned him into little more than a tent peg holding down the canvas over the relatively dry girls. Whenever Elder lifted the canvas to look at them, thinking about joining them in the dry, Nimbus would snuffle and give him a look that made him put the flap back down. He eventually wrapped the damp bedroll around himself and tried to sleep as best he could.

The next morning dawned bright and clear, the sparkling sun almost a mockery of the three bedraggled campers and the wet unicorn. They spread the bedrolls out to dry as much as possible along with their clothes and their packs. Elder frowned at the delay but didn't say anything. Nimbus seemed amused.

Tor decided that she had time for a bath in the stream. She told the others what was going on and then followed the nearby stream for a while until she was sure that no one could see her. She was just unlacing her dress when she heard movement in the bushes.

Tor gasped, moving closer to a nearby tree and trying to duck down to make herself harder to see. It was going to be difficult while wearing a dress, but at least it was in the serviceable brown of the village and not something that would be out of place in the woods.

She breathed quiet relief when she saw that it was Nimbus. "Hello, mistress," he said. "I'll stand guard and make sure that no prying eyes catch a glimpse of your unsullied perfection."

Tor closed her eyes for just a moment and then said, "You're not going to watch me, are you?"

Nimbus managed to look confused. "Mistress, I care not about the state of your dress, but I won't look if you would prefer. I'm only here to ensure your safety."

With that, Nimbus turned and stared out into the forest, his rump pointed toward the stream. Tor watched the unicorn for a few moments to make sure that he wasn't going to peek and then went to sit by the edge of the water. She unlaced the front of her dress and slipped out of it, wincing when the motions pulled on the dressing wrapped around her shoulder. A night-long soak and a lack of sleep hadn't done the wound any good and the muscles were stiff around the injury.

She kept at the clothing, determined, and finally stepped naked out of the

sensible shoes. She stepped into the stream. The water was warm; it had been a long summer. The heat was welcome when she found a deeper place to sit down; it started to penetrate her muscles and loosen them a bit.

It was the first time that she'd been alone with herself while unclothed. Before it had been around the seamstress, and the night with Isaac when the two of them had stolen the dresses hardly counted; she hadn't had time to really think about her body at that point and the darkness had made it difficult to see anything anyway.

But now here she was, buoyed by water that was so clear that she could see her feet as clearly as her hands. Tor inspected her bosom, bobbing delightfully in the water before her. She'd known that her breasts were large, but floating in the water made them look even larger. They were milky white, with faint veins running from the nipples, and they were very soft when she finally mustered the courage to touch one. Soft and responsive, she found, her touch sending delicious ripples down her spine. It was certainly something that she'd never felt as a man.

Tor heard Nimbus snort at something and she jerked her hands away from herself. She felt guilty for a moment but wasn't sure why. She shrugged it off and went back to examining herself. Her breasts were obviously going to be of interest, but there were other things to feel as well.

She ran her hands down her belly, frowning at the thin layer of fat that had taken the definition from her muscles. Tor had never been the strongest in the village but she had prided herself on at least looking strong. Now that was gone, replaced with smooth white limbs and soft skin. She wasn't fat by any means but there was a softness that hadn't been there before. It wasn't unpleasant, though; her skin still reacted strongly to her touch and the eye was drawn to the way that her body looked and moved. She was sure that she'd caught Elder looking a few times and for some reason the thought made her feel warm in a way that the stream couldn't match. Tor hadn't gone through the same epiphany that Isaac had but she was curious about what the glances and that heat might mean.

The water was clear enough that she was able to look down and see the wispy gold thatch between her legs. It drifted in the water, hiding the treasure there, and she looked back to see if Nimbus was peeking. She felt silly checking on a unicorn but he didn't seem to be paying any attention to what she was doing. She

slid one hand from her belly down to that spot and then cupped it with her palm. It felt soft and warm down there, flat against her hand except for two lips that obviously hid something wonderful. She pressed her middle finger deeper, letting it slide in.

“Mistress,” said Nimbus, his voice exploding through her head. He spoke no more loudly than usual but he startled her so badly that she floundered and almost started to drown. It took her long seconds to get back under control. Finally she sat there looking at him, her face wound up in a glare.

“What?” she said, exasperated.

“I wanted to see if you were all right,” said the unicorn, his voice mild. “You seemed very quiet for someone who is taking a bath.”

His voice and face betrayed nothing but perfect innocence and her glare didn’t seem to make an impact. “I’m fine,” she said.

“Oh, good. Lovely to hear it. I’m going to go back to guarding, then, shall I?” He turned, unhurried, and resumed his attentive stance. Tor’s glare bounced off his silver hide with no effect.

The bath wasn’t very elaborate; they hadn’t thought to bring soap and it turned out that her skin was far too delicate to scrub with handfuls of sand. She had to make do with rubbing herself with her bare hands, which made Nimbus snort and shift again. Tor reflected that if she had been alone she might have done a more thorough job. The feel of her hands sliding about on her spectacular body made all sorts of sensations wash through her body. Tor worked hard to not be distracted; she didn’t want to lose the unicorn’s protection by doing something stupid.

She closed her eyes and ducked her head under the water, intent on at least rinsing her hair, and was surprised to find herself bumped in the face by her own floating breasts. She surfaced and stared at them, shocked that they were that big. They bobbed innocently, a bosom that she would have killed to see just a week ago.

Distracted as she was by her own body and the feelings rising from it, she didn’t even notice that she and Nimbus were surrounded until he cried, “Mistress!”

She looked up and saw a ring of men standing around them. They had approached from both sides of the stream, counting on its babble for stealth, and Tor cursed herself for forgetting such a basic hunting trick. All the men held bows and carried wide, flat knives on their belts. The bows were strung and about half of them were pointed at either her or Nimbus. Tor covered herself, one arm going over her breasts without conscious thought.

The unicorn's teeth were bared and he made menacing noises at the nearest men. "Call off your warhorse," said one of the men.

"Nimbus," she said in her head, "Warn Elder and Isaac! And relax, there are too many to fight right now."

At the same time, Tor said out loud, "Settle!" Nimbus gave her a look but relaxed back into his alert pose.

"Very well, my little water nymph," said the probable-leader, grinning through a full beard. "Now, come up out of the water and put on your clothes. We have a ways to walk, and I would hate to see that pretty skin scratched by a bramble."

Tor stayed where she was in the deep water until she realized that none of them were going to look away. They regarded her with a wide variety of emotions, some with simple lust, some with raw need, others with anger or even disgust. She had never felt so vulnerable as she did under their gazes and drawn bows.

Tor made her way to her clothes, picking her way between the rocks, trying to figure out what to do next.

"There are too many to fight successfully, mistress," said the unicorn, "But I will try. When I attack, run."

"No, Nimbus, that isn't going to work. I need your help; I don't want to lose you."

Nimbus made a disgusted sound, causing the men around him to draw back an uneasy half-step. Tor began dressing, a process that all of the hunters found intensely interesting. She looked at the leader, who was grinning at her. "What are you planning to do with me?" she said.

A few of the men chuckled, low sounds that made Tor's hair stand up and caused

Nimbus to shift uneasily. The leader kept grinning through his black beard. “That depends, my lady, entirely on how much your people are willing to pay for your safe return.”

A chill went through her. She had no people, though there was no way for them to know that. She realized that telling them that would be a bad idea. She said, “Then you are in luck, I suppose. My father will be very appreciative if I am returned untouched.”

The leader’s grin widened. “Splendid. You won’t mind if we send someone to make sure of that, of course. But first, please allow us to escort you to our camp. It’s disheartening to see a fine lady such as yourself without enough guards to protect her honor.”

He laughed and some of his men snickered. Not enough, though; Tor could feel many of them just staring at her incredible body. She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to look defiant while hiding her bosom, and the bandit leader chuckled at the gesture.

Once Tor was dressed the others crossed the stream and stood in a tighter circle around her and Nimbus. The leader looked at the unicorn. “He’s not going to give us any trouble, is he? A beast like him should fetch a nice price, but we’re not above simply eating him.”

“No! No. He is my companion and protector, but he won’t attack unless given the order to do so,” said Tor. Nimbus flattened his ears, not certain that this was the case at all, but he didn’t do anything threatening.

The leader nodded and turned to go. They were forming into a line to follow him with Tor and Nimbus in the middle when Nimbus said, “Elder and Isaac are coming for us.”

Tor closed her eyes briefly in irritation. Nimbus said, “They say that they have a plan.”

“I’m sure they do have a plan to get us all killed,” said Tor. “Tell them that-“

She was cut off when a voice rose out of the woods to their right. “Callas? Is that you?”

The bandits all stopped and the leader looked off into the woods. “Who calls my name?” he said, sounding slightly worried. Some spirits were known to call a man’s name to try to draw him to his doom.

The shrubs rustled nearby and Isaac made her way through them with only a little swearing when her skirts caught on some of the branches. Tor stared in shock, though her reaction was nothing compared to the leader’s.

His grin returned, splitting his beard widely, and he laughed as he spread his arms. “Margarit!” he bellowed, sweeping her into a crushing embrace when she got close enough. The other bandits nodded and grinned, and there was a general relaxing of bows and lowering of knives.

Isaac squeaked a little in the man’s strong grip, the press of his body making hers go warm. When he finally let her go she said, “What are you doing out here with my lady and her warhorse?”

Callas’s surprised face was comical, all gaping mouth and wide eyes. “This is Lady Celeste?” he said. “The one you told me about?”

Isaac put her fists on her hips and gave him a stern look. “Of course it is. Can you imagine someone else fitting her description wandering around these woods? Where are you taking her?”

Callas had the grace to look a little ashamed. “Well, we were going to hold her for ransom, and-“

“Ransom?” said Isaac, as if she’d never heard anything so ridiculous. “Callas. I told you that she and I were on our way to the king’s court, did I not?”

He nodded, looking bewildered. “You did.”

“And the king has lots and lots of soldiers, does he not?”

His face darkened at the memory of some of the run-ins that he and his men had had with those soldiers. “Aye, he does.”

“Then why would you want to antagonize him this way?”

Callas nodded, stroking his beard. “You have a point,” he said.

One of the other bandits spoke up. “No she doesn’t! This Celeste will fetch a fine price! And even if she doesn’t, then we could teach her to be a sporting woman. She’ll probably learn to like it!”

An arrow flew out of the woods on the other side of the stream, burying itself between the speaker’s legs. He stared at it, the front of his pants darkening. Callas snorted and Isaac said, “Surely you don’t think I came here alone.”

Callas bellowed his great laugh again and crushed her in another embrace. “Ah, Margarit! You are the only one for me. Don’t worry, your lady will not be touched. Tell your killer out there to relax, eh?”

Nimbus must have relayed the thought to Elder, because he walked out of the woods toward them. He was at least twenty feet away from the point where he’d fired the arrow, and Tor was struck by his hunting skills as a wave of relief and then excitement passed through her. She frowned internally, wishing that her new feminine nature wouldn’t surprise her with thoughts like that.

Elder didn’t approach the group but stayed in plain sight with his bow drawn and an arrow pointed at Callas’s chest. The larger man laughed once more and put Isaac down. “You have my word, boy, now that you’ve cowed my men. No one will harm you.”

Elder and Nimbus still didn’t seem convinced but eventually Elder lowered his bow and the unicorn raised his horn. Tor realized that Nimbus had been ready to stab the nearest man and that only she had been able to see it. She was glad for the stealthy nature of the unicorn.

Callas said, “Well, if you are anything like use, you passed rather a damp night. Would you like to join us at our camp and dry out? Maybe stay the night?”

Isaac opened her mouth to agree, still thinking of that night in his arms, but Tor spoke quickly to override her. “Your offer is generous, sir, but we have to be away. We’ve been delayed too long as it is.”

Callas nodded and shrugged. “Very well, my bearmarked damsel.”

Tor blinked at him. “What was that you called me?”

“Bearmarked. My men and I spent a while looking at you, milady, and I saw the marks on your shoulder. Those must be the wounds from your fight with the bear that Margarit told me about. I see the same marks on your mount.”

“Oh. Yes. I’m afraid Nimbus was the brave one there. He protected us from the beast.”

Nimbus snorted delicately, and Callas smiled. “A noble stallion, then, though of no breed I’ve seen. Are you sure you won’t stay with us?”

Tor was pretty sure, though Isaac looked regretful. Elder never said a word, just watched them with his burning eyes. Tor felt him looking at her more often than at the others. Her cheeks reddened slightly at the thought.

The bandits didn’t seem to be very happy about the turn of events, but they went along when Callas gave them a long, level stare. His face brightened when he turned back to Isaac. “Ah, my gem. Is there no way to convince you to stay with us?”

Isaac blinked and then rallied. “Uh. I mean, no, I...I have to stay with my lady Celeste, You know how it is.” She felt a moment of deep, real regret in saying the words, which surprised her. Callas had been her first, as a woman, and the memory of their time together warmed her cheeks and her nethers at the same time. There were worse things than staying with this man, she thought. She shook her head, furrowing her brow. She was a man, not a woman. Not really.

Callas gave a gust of a sigh and then kissed her, holding her tight and pouring all of his skill in one final appeal. Isaac was dazed when he let her go, wondering again if staying with this bandit would be all bad. “The memory of our night together will have to do until we meet again, then,” said Callas. Isaac looked over and blushed at the sight of Elder, Nimbus, and Tor staring at her.

The bandits led them back to the trail, where they all decided that their things were dry enough to pack up for the day. Callas gave Isaac another sorrowful look and it actually hurt to say goodbye to him one final time.

The four of them set off down the trail again, picking their way through half-dried mud puddles in silence. They had been walking for perhaps an hour when Elder said, “When we get to the king’s court, I’ll see about getting a group of guards together to come and find those bandits.”

“Oh, please don’t!” said Isaac. “Maybe the king could use them in his guard or something.”

“How do we know that you aren’t working with them?” said Elder, his voice mild but his eyes hard.

“I’m not! That’s ridiculous. I just happen to know the leader from a few nights ago at the inn, is all.”

“Yes, and what was that about?” said Tor. “The night you two spent together?”

Isaac felt her blush turning hot enough to start fires. She turned her head to the ground, being extra careful about picking her way over the mud. Finally she glanced at Elder and then at Tor and said, “It involves the curse, Celeste.”

Tor looked at Elder and sighed. He didn’t know anything about the spell that had changed the two of them, and there was no graceful way to talk about it while tromping through mud. She said, “Is there another inn nearby?”

Elder thought and nodded. “Perhaps three hours down the trail.”

Tor nodded. “We will talk about the curse at that point. Until then, I don’t think that Is...that Margarit is working with the bandits.”

“If I may, most luminous in purity, I can vouch for your companion’s activities,” said Nimbus. He sent the thought into everyone’s mind at once, his face mild.

Isaac blinked in surprise. “You can? I mean, yes, of course. You read thoughts.”

“Only surface thoughts. But lady Margarit is not working with the bandits. She did spend a night in lustful fornication with the leader, but that is all.”

Isaac felt the stares level on her again, and the blush returned. She managed to get out, “Um. Curse,” before Tor held up one tiny hand to forestall her.

The silence held throughout the rest of the day, each thinking their own thoughts. Elder was solicitous to Tor, holding her arm when she needed it and watching for signs of fatigue. This was her first major walk since her injury and he didn’t want her to overwork herself. Sometimes she brushed against him and he would blush.

Tor was thinking about Isaac's words. There was no way that she would have done what she did on her own, of course. It must have been part of the curse, driving her to things that she never would have done otherwise. Shock and anger gave way to pity for her friend, and a new resolve to break the terrible curse that held them in its thrall. She also noticed Elder brushing up against her from time to time, and reflected that there were worse things that could be happening. His good looks were distracting, however little Tor wanted to admit it to herself.

Isaac had no one to brush against and for the first hour or so felt very put-upon. The self-pity gave way to anger as the walk continued. How could Tor judge her like that? It was obvious that the spell had done different things to them, and who was she to judge Isaac for having fun? Isaac probably would have slept with those men for free, because it was so much fun and felt so incredible. Not only that, but she had urges that quite overpowered her. Who was Tor to judge, anyway, the way that she was throwing herself at Elder?

Nimbus kept his thoughts to himself, watching the forest for more threats. The bandits had snuck up on them thanks to the stream and his vigilance in helping Lady Celeste remain pure in the face of her own urges, but that surprise wasn't going to happen twice.

They were further from the inn than Elder had thought and didn't get to it until the early evening. It was on the outskirts of a small town, larger than Burkshire but barely big enough to be more than a village. They were glad to see the building, Tor especially. Her feet ached and she felt weary enough that she had been forced to ride Nimbus for the last hour. Isaac's anger was carrying her along. Not that anyone noticed, she thought. Elder was concerned about Tor's condition and walked as near to the unicorn as Nimbus would let him in case she started to fall.

The inn was larger than the one they'd stayed in two nights ago, as befitted one that sat on the outskirts of a town like this. Isaac looked down the road toward the buildings there, noticing a few shop fronts that promised the possibility of getting shoes that fit and perhaps a tent for herself and Tor as well as Elder. She left Nimbus with Elder and took Tor inside to arrange for a room.

She stood Tor by the inside door to let the patrons gawk at her while she made her way to the innkeeper. That was another thing: she was just as gorgeous as Tor was right now, but everyone stared at her. Was it the same thing that drew

Nimbus to her? Were they gawping at her purity or whatever it was?

Isaac had more fun than Tor did, so they could just sit and whistle. The innkeeper was fine with giving them three rooms. Isaac paid for two of them with the promise that Elder would pay for the third. If he couldn't pay, he could just bed down in the stable.

She led Tor up the stairs and showed her to her room, depositing her unceremoniously on the bed tucked up under the eaves of the roof. Tor had been mostly unresponsive in her exhaustion but now that they weren't moving she was coming around again. She looked around the room and said, "Where's your bed?"

"I got a separate room for myself. Elder's either got another room or he's sleeping with Nimbus, I didn't ask."

Tor furrowed her brow, and Isaac hated how perfect even that expression looked. "Why are you so mad?" said Tor.

"I'm mad about being judged by you two for what I've been doing since we got cursed!"

"But...but you're not a woman, Isaac. It's just wrong."

"Really? Really? I'm not a woman? You could sure fool me right now! And besides, at least I can admit what I'm feeling, unlike you!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tor started to get her strength back as adrenalin entered her blood.

"You know just what that means. I've seen you making cow eyes over Elder this whole time! I admit what I'm feeling and act on it, but what are you doing? Acting like some, some, maiden in distress!"

"You're just envious that he's paying attention to me and not you! Probably because I am a maiden and you're not!" Tor stopped with her mouth open, shocked at the words that had come out of her.

Isaac screeched a laugh and pointed. "I knew it! You want Elder. And by the way, don't you dare get all noble about being a maiden. You might have a

unicorn, but how do you think we paid for a healer and an extra night at the inn? How do you think we paid for tonight? You just think about that when you're having supper tonight, little miss perfect purity."

Then Isaac stormed out, slamming the door behind her. Tor sat with her mouth open. Isaac was right. She'd been right about everything; Tor's belly fluttered every time Elder glanced her way, and he looked at her far more often than he looked at Isaac. There was a part of Tor that liked the thought, and another part that took a catty satisfaction in knowing that he preferred her to Isaac. She wondered how much the curse had their minds.

Isaac wasn't as concerned about it. She knew that her body and her mind were both altered and she was determined to have as much fun as possible before they were changed back to normal and she went back to the life of a farm boy. It seemed very far away as she descended the stairs. The travelers watched her closely, noting the way her round breasts bobbed and how her wide hips swiveled with each step. Isaac walked as if she was making sensuous love, all smooth motions and burning glances through midnight hair. It wasn't something that she planned, or was even really aware of; it was just something that happened when she walked into a roomful of men.

If she had known, she wouldn't have changed a thing. She liked the attention it brought.

Isaac noticed Elder talking to the innkeeper and she made her way over to where they stood. She nodded to the man and said that Elder was the one who had the third room. Elder pulled a purse out of his pack without a word and paid for the night, then took a seat at a table in the corner. He didn't look at Isaac after making sure that Celeste had a room for the night.

Well, that's fine, she thought. She was delighted when one of the travelers pulled a lute from his pack and started to play. The instrument was out of tune but there was a beat and that was all that Isaac needed. The music called to something deep within her and she was no more able to resist it than she was able to resist the desire that had driven her to several different beds in the last inn. She spun and dipped and stomped, laughing merrily the entire time. She'd danced as a man before but it had always felt coarse and awkward. This was like flying and she never wanted it to stop. The coins rained down, some of them landing on her and some on the musician, and she winked and tucked her coins into her

cleavage along the way. Some of the men were handsome and some were not, and in her happy dance-induced haze she could barely tell the difference.

The musician finally had to stop, pleading that he was out of practice and his fingers were sore, and Isaac stopped as well. Then something made her clap her hands. She kept clapping in a strange rhythm, nodding to the watchers until they got the idea and joined in. Then she started her dance, with one hip jutting out into the air and both arms over her head. She flowed through the crowded room, moving as if her bones had turned to water. Her new dance was challenging, with much bucking of hip and shaking of breast, her movements never hurried but communicating exactly what she was capable of. She glanced at her audience from time to time, grinning at the sight of spellbound men and scandalized women. Even Elder watched her, his face welter of confused thoughts as he did so.

Isaac smirked and kept going until something within her told her that the dance was over. She finished with a flourish that took several moments and looked like nothing other than a graceful, strong climax writ large. The observers nearly broke the rafters with the sounds of their applause when she finished, and several groups vied for her attention when she sat. As in the previous inn, she picked the merriest-looking group and sat with them, her spectacular behind placed firmly in the lap of the leader and her jokes and laughter just as loud as any man's. The musician joined them and he and Isaac didn't have to worry about buying their drinks for the rest of the night.

Upstairs, Tor slept. Her wound still pained her but she was tired enough that it didn't matter. She had sat thinking about Isaac's words for a long time, long enough to hear the music and the clapping and wonder if her friend was down there. Friends, she amended, wondering about Elder as well.

Isaac's words came back to her when she thought of him, and she blushed a little. It was true; she had been thinking about him often and not always in the ways that she had thought about other men before. Her thoughts about Elder were confusing and made her feel things that reminded her of her feelings for Sarahbeth Peters. The name surprised her; she hadn't thought of Sarabeth in what felt like years, where once there was a time when the girl crossed Tor's mind every time he breathed. When her eyes met Elder's, either across a campfire or in the daylight, something about his gaze made her feel warm in a way that had never been attached to the thought of a man before. And unlike

Sarabeth, Elder seemed to feel the same way about Tor.

It was wrong, of course. She couldn't be attracted to Elder. He was a man and so was Tor, despite all available evidence. Her condition would change in a few short days when they reached the king and his magicians. Men weren't supposed to feel that way about other men. If nothing else, she reminded herself, she had to remain pure for Nimbus to stay. The unicorn was too valuable to risk just to satisfy a-

Tor had stopped and blinked. She hadn't realized that she'd reached the point of having to come up with excuses to remain pure around Elder. There was no doubt that the man made her feel things, however wrong they were. She felt herself warm beneath the blanket and she had wondered what would have happened if Nimbus and the bandits hadn't interrupted her during her bath earlier that day.

She decided to try to sleep rather than risk losing her protector over a moment of self-exploration. Sleep came easily, stealing over her while her mind drifted to Elder's strong arms.

In her dream, those arms hadn't remained wrapped around her. She was in a bed somewhere, in the way of dreams, wearing nothing but a white silk sheet. She was sure that Elder could see everything and the thought of his gaze was thrilling. She couldn't see him anywhere; the room was totally dark except for a pool of light over her bed, but she knew that Elder was out there, watching with his hunter's eyes. She warmed again, her hands sliding uncertainly over the sheer sheet that molded to her body in her dream.

Downstairs, the drink and the dancing had made Isaac feel wild and free. She laughed and clapped at their jokes, and through one way and another she made it known that she was a sporting woman who was quite available. She could feel the hardness below her, in the lap of the man who held her, and she ground her luscious behind into him just to hear him groan. Moments later he was whispering something into her ear that made her smile, and she nodded at his words. The other men laughed when she stood and took his hand to pull him upstairs. She winked and said, "Plenty of me to go around, boys," and they laughed again. She directed a dazzling smile to the room that faltered when she saw Elder sitting in the corner staring at her. Isaac resteadied herself and took a firmer grasp on the man's hand, pulling him along.

He was happy to go, grinning to the others and reaching out to goose her while they climbed the stairs. His men roared again when she jumped, obviously proud of him, and Isaac giggled. They stumbled by Tor's room, the drink making his legs unsteady, and Isaac didn't hear any noises from the other side of the door. She shrugged and let her partner lead the way to his room. He fumbled at the door with the key for a moment before figuring out how to let them both in, and they were already kissing by the time that she kicked the door shut behind them.

Isaac's body was hot, warmed by dance and drink and the lustful stares of the men downstairs, and she could tell that he was as aroused as she was. He was an older man, his hair starting to turn gray and a few wrinkles showing around his eyes, but he certainly seemed healthy enough where it counted. Isaac loosened the strings holding her dress shut and he grinned at the sight. He took hold of the top of her dress and rolled it down, giving her plenty of room to pull her delicate arms from the sleeves before pulling it the rest of the way off and leaving her wearing nothing besides the thin undergarment that waited beneath. Isaac looked down and saw her deep cleavage and hard nipples clearly visible through the thin material, and when she looked back up she said, "Is that what you were hoping for, milord?"

He grinned, not as loud or effusive as Callas, but the hunger in his eyes matched that of the bandit's. Isaac felt herself reacting to that hunger, shivering when he ran his hands up and down her arms.

Down the hall, Tor was still caught up in her dream. The heat in her body grew, sending wisps of fire licking through her, and she knew that despite the sheet Elder could see everything that he was doing to her. She realized then that the sheet was gone and that she lay naked on the bed, an offering. Now when she looked up she could see his eyes, always staring at her like he did when they walked, drinking her in and making her aware of the way that her body looked when it moved. The thought usually embarrassed her but now she felt amusement and arousal at the idea. Her hands were on the sheet next to her head, but she felt someone's touch on her soft skin. Her unseen lover's hands were everywhere, all over her body at once, and they were made of fire and smelled of the outdoors. They smelled like Elder. She wanted more than just his hands, whether she could see him or not. The room was very warm, matching her, and she moaned quietly while he touched her.

Isaac moaned as well, her partner's hands knowledgeable and eager to teach. He

had them both unclothed by the time he set to work, and he labored with hands and tongue. Her body was breathlessly responsive to him, shivering and gasping from the freezing fires that he spread through her. She laughed with delight, abandoning herself to the sensations as thoroughly as she did to her dancing.

Soon Isaac's hips were making small circles in the air, bucking toward him without her direction. The older man smiled at the sight, only then allowing himself to stroke between her legs. He found the hard nub there, teased it out of its hood, and slid down until he could put his lips on it. Isaac's beautiful eyes shot open in pure shock at the feeling and she cried out for the first time that night. He was very gentle with her, suckling and lapping, but her reactions were anything but discreet. Isaac gripped the sheets in both hands while her inner tension built and it was all she could do to keep herself to quiet moans.

Elder's hands were everywhere on Tor's delectable body, and she realized that was what she had been wanting for the last days of travel. She was breathless, smiling and welcoming him, but she still couldn't see him. It was as if he was everywhere, invisible but present in scent and in touch. Tor felt her body heating while he massaged her heavy breasts and kissed her aching nipples. "Yes," she whispered, the echoes of her voice not dying away but becoming part of the background along with her gasps and squeals. Every touch made her want him more and he seemed to have all the time in the world to drive her out of her mind.

Isaac's partner was calm and forceful, used to being in charge. He performed many minutes of delightful labor between her legs with his mouth before she felt that rising surge that signaled the onset of climax. Isaac heard, "Oh! Oh now! YES!" and was surprised to find that the words were spoken in her voice. She grasped at her own breasts, kneading them and pulling at her nipples, and her partner chuckled at her abandon. Isaac knew that the higher she went the more breathtaking the fall would be, and she labored to go as high as she could.

Tor had never felt so alive, so ready for another's touch. She spread her legs to her invisible lover, moaning when he touched her. This was all this body wanted, all that she wanted, just to have him inside her. She no longer cared about whether she was truly a man or not; she was far too excited to worry about such tiny details. Elder was here, Elder's hands were on her, and she was so aroused that she thought she might drift away into the dark sky above her. Her voice rose with the mounting pleasure, the rising tides pushing her before them.

The tension finally broke over Isaac and she screamed while her body convulsed. Her lover continued to lap at her, and each touch of his tongue made her jump again. The climax went on and on, buoyed by his actions, and Isaac started to wonder if she would ever come down from it. She didn't mind, but so much pleasure would drive her mad if it went on for long.

When the bliss released its grip on her, she relaxed in stages until she was nothing but a gasping puddle on the bed. Her lover crawled back up next to her with a smile. He said, "I heard I did well." Isaac laughed and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him while sliding her delightful breasts up and down his chest. He was erect and very hard by that time and she wanted nothing more than to have him inside her. Deep satisfaction from her climax warred with lust, and they decided to work together. She reached for the ties on his pants.

Tor moaned, Elder's hands and scent driving her higher until she spread her legs and presented herself to him. She was hot and wet, aware that her juices were dripping into the bed sheets and glad that her body was going to speed his entry. She could feel him, the weight of his body pushing down on her and the head of his shaft resting against the entrance. She knew that just one push would send her into pure delight, but he kept waiting for something. Tor's tension and desire built until it was painful. She ached to be filled, to be taken as a woman is taken by a man, and she cried out her need to him. Still he waited, resting at the entrance. Tor turned her head to the side, looking for any hint of what was causing his hesitation, and she saw Nimbus standing there in the darkness. He glowed, his coat luminous in the gloom, and he stared at her with sorrow filling his eyes.

Tor snapped awake, sitting up in her bed. The moonlight shone through a crack in the shutters, giving her enough light to see her small room. Her body felt tight and hot, her breasts and groin aching and the spot between her legs both hot and slick. She could still feel his hands on her, still feel the arousal he'd created in her spectacular body, and part of her wanted nothing more than to let him finish the task. She made a disgusted noise and punched the pillow. It felt good so she did it a few more times, her delicate fists thumping quietly.

Isaac moaned against his mouth, her lips hot on his and his way made easy by the copious juices that she'd generated during her first climax. He positioned himself beneath her and she let herself slide down onto him. Isaac had never been on top as a woman before, and she found that the sensation of her inner

muscles gripping him was just as delicious from this position as any other. Judging by the groan that drifted from his lips and the smile that it left behind, he agreed. Isaac opened her eyes wide when she finally snuggled down against him, his cock touching something inside her that she'd never felt before. It made her roll her hips in surprise, which made him push more firmly against the sweet spot, and she rolled her hips again. He grinned at her obvious wonder and delight, and she started to move more enthusiastically. Isaac was well used to feeling a hard cock pumping in and out of her by that time, and she laughed with pleasure. He reached up and started to play with her breasts, hefting and squeezing, and she laughed again to encourage him. Lady Margarit was as wild and carefree in bed as she was on the dance floor, and she liked it that way.

Tor lay there in her bed, staring at the ceiling. The lust burned in her but she knew that giving in could mean losing Nimbus. Even more important, giving in would mean acknowledging her desire for Elder and her abandonment of the truth. She stared at the ceiling and felt her body start to cool down. The desire in her mind still blazed fiercely. She listened to the sounds of the inn, the common room alive with people talking and laughing. Someone in a room down the hall screamed in pleasure, making her blush.

Isaac collapsed on his chest while he finished pumping her full of his seed. She grinned, flushed and sweating in the afterglow of the second climax of the night. "You, good sir, are really something."

He grinned back. "I know myself, milady. An older man needs to work with what he has."

She laughed out loud. "You certainly did that. You satisfied me doubly." She lifted herself off of him and lay down next to him, still smiling and twisting her fingers through the hair on his chest. Since becoming a woman she'd found that there was a lot to admire about a man's body. The magic was probably pushing her to admire it fully but she wasn't worried. There was nothing that she could do to fight it so she figured she might as well enjoy what she could.

She smiled fondly at him when he reached over to the bed stand and unlaced his money pouch. She sighed and said, "I feel guilty about even asking, since it felt so wonderful."

He snickered. "A woman has to make her way in this world. Besides, I should

pay you for the knowledge that I'm still man enough to please a woman like you."

She laughed again, not bothering to check to see how much money he tucked into the dress that lay on the floor. "You are that and more, sir."

He nodded, his eyes growing heavy, and she kissed him softly as he went to sleep. She stayed with him a while before getting up to dress herself once more. He had been a delightful time, and the money was welcome, but there were others downstairs who were still pining for her embrace. The thought made her nipples tighten slightly and she wondered if the spell had also made her addicted to men. She snickered as she wondered if the same was true for Tor; her purity would be a major burden if that was the case.

Tor was able to relax after a while, once the screams had died down. The unknown woman's cries had gone on for an impressive length of time, each one making Tor think of her dream and keeping her in a semi-aroused state. She groaned quietly and put her pillow over her head, hoping that the cold would shock her into a more sensible frame of mind. It worked but only for a moment.

Tor found herself in a dark room on a silk bed, wearing nothing at all but Elder's stares. A few moments later, she felt his touch again.

Elder himself stayed downstairs for a while, thinking about the women above him. There was no doubt that Margarit was the lively one, quick to anger and quick to laugh. She was less restrained about showing off her substantial assets as well and he had to admit that his eyes had been drawn to her body. Celeste was the one who had his attention, however. She seemed ill at ease with herself, as if only now realizing what effect that her face and form might have on those around her. Where Margarit was proud to flaunt her body, Celeste seemed scared of her own flesh. There was something very appealing about her and she drew more of his gaze and regard than Margarit ever would. The unicorn was a surprise, but he knew what it meant and tried not to think about taking any actions that would make Nimbus leave. The thought made him blush.

The girls were really a distraction for him but they needed help and had no one else. Responding to that need was what he expected of himself, what was expected of his station no matter the circumstance. His personal business would happen in its own time. It was even possible that the girls would help him along.

Stranger things had happened to him.

He looked up when Margarit came back downstairs. Her hair was tousled and she smiled proudly when a cheer went up from the crowd. From then on she was hardly in the common room at all. As the night went on she was up and down the stairs over and over, leaving with a different man each time and coming back alone. Men lined up when she came downstairs. Elder had to admit that it was easy to like her; her smile was beautiful and infectious, and she was slim and rounded in all the right places. A few hours after she'd taken the head merchant upstairs, she collapsed in a seat next to Elder. She looked wrung out though she was glowing happily. He nursed a mug of hard cider.

"Proud of yourself, I suppose," he said.

She waved to the bartender and arranged for a refill for him and a mug for her. Then she said, "Yes, yes I am. Would you mind taking us to a horse trader tomorrow before we leave?"

He looked at her, surprised. She grinned and said, "I think I finally have enough to get myself a decent horse." She lifted her purse, which clinked heavily. Elder grunted his assent and Isaac took her mug up to her room.

In truth, Isaac felt conflicted. Her body had given up strong, sweet climaxes with most of the men she'd bedded that night, and she still glowed with latent pleasure that was unlike anything that she'd ever felt as a man. Her time with them had satisfied something deep within, a need she'd barely been aware of until it was filled. She'd loved every moment of it and that was what worried her. Did the enjoyment come from the magic or did it come from something that she didn't know about herself? Did she actually prefer men?

She sat on the bed, unlacing the ties that held her dress in place again. There'd been no indication of such preferences when she had been a man; Isaac had enjoyed his time with Mary, after all. It was just that as Margarit she'd enjoyed her first time with Callas even more. And she'd kept on. The curse had turned her into some kind of sex demon, complete with a dance that would lure any man to her clutches.

She giggled at the thought, though it wasn't as far-fetched as it had been before she'd met Nimbus. Finally naked again, she stood and started washing herself from the pitcher and bowl that stood by the bed. As the night's collected grime

sluiced off, she felt her nipples harden again and she shook her head. Surely they were tired by now. She knew that her body was much more sensitive but she was sore and glowing from the night's work. She was surprised to find herself getting turned on by her own hands. She rolled her eyes and concentrated on cleaning herself. Isaac had taken quite enough screaming pleasure for one night and she was still conflicted about her desires.

She finished washing and wrapped herself in her sheet after blowing out the candle. It was a warm enough night that she didn't worry about any clothing or the blanket. Instead she stared at the ceiling and finally put words to her inner conflict. Was being a woman really that bad?

Exhausted, she only had a few moments to contemplate the question before she slid into sleep. She slept without dreams. In the room next to hers, Tor stared at the ceiling for most of the night and tried not to think about Elder, while Elder himself nursed hard cider until he was so tired that he could barely find his room. It suited him fine; the drink helped keep his mind off of Celeste.

Nimbus slept the sleep of the righteous, dreaming unicorn dreams in his stall.

The next day Isaac was delighted to find that she had saved up enough money to buy herself a gelding. He wasn't the youngest or the prettiest but he had good form and wind, and there was enough left over to buy a third-hand sidesaddle when she was done. It took her a little while to figure out how to ride that way, but once she did it felt as natural to her as...well, as having breathtaking sex with men. That is, it felt just fine and made her question her desire to become male again all at the same time.

Tor and Elder didn't look at each other much as the morning went on, which seemed to suit Nimbus just fine. Elder didn't protest walking next to the horses, though Isaac finally broke down and offered to let him ride behind her for a while if he wished. He took one look at her lush form and demurred, knowing that he would have to hold on to her waist if he joined her atop the mount.

Progress was made in easy stages. Each night they would stop and camp or stop at an inn. Thanks to Isaac's dancing and other undertakings, they were never short on money for their rooms. Isaac squirreled away what they didn't spend and soon it grew into a respectable amount. She was proud of her results and tried not to flaunt it too often. Isaac did insist that the girls stop for a day to buy a

pair of new dresses, though. She was tired of wearing the secondhand ones.

Margarit ended up with a dark blue dress, and Celeste's was white. They were both made out of tough material for the road, but they looked and felt better than the resewn ones they'd been wearing. When Isaac laced up the back of her dress for the first time, the corset relieved some of the strain that the weight of her breasts had been putting on her back and shoulders. She sighed at the sensation, smiling. It also pushed her bosom up and out, making it appear even larger, and she liked the effect.

Tor's dress was more sedate, though like Isaac she had a body that was impressive no matter what she happened to be wearing. Rather than the burgeoning waves that decorated Isaac's chest, Tor's breasts were quiet swells, appearing smaller than they really were. Her hips were similarly subdued, though Isaac's were eye-catching in her new dress, swiveling with her dance and capturing the focus of most men.

Even though Isaac's charms were emphasized and Tor's were muted, Tor was the one who quieted a room when she entered. Isaac brought riotous life and laughter but Tor brought awestruck contemplation of the way that beauty could make life livable for some of the rough men who populated the inns they visited.

As Tor's frustration and obsession with Elder grew she had the same dream more and more often. She started to envy Isaac's ability for regular relief from the needs that were becoming difficult for her to ignore. At the same time she was glad that she wasn't the one who'd chosen to lose her male identity to the pleasures of the flesh. Nimbus agreed and was a source of comfort when Tor felt particularly stressed.

Isaac wished that she could be more like Tor sometimes, so serene and able to float above the petty needs of coin and sweat. At the same time she was happy with the way things had turned out for her; the potion had opened up an entire new world of sensation, one that was much stronger and easier to sate than the one she'd inhabited as a male. She felt sorry for Tor who wouldn't or couldn't indulge the way she did. Their bodies were made for love, or at least for lust, and Isaac intended to enjoy every last drop.

Elder quietly supported Tor. The men they met along the road loudly supported Isaac. The four of them did their best to travel together and remain friends, and

three or four days after running across the bandits found them able to talk with one another again. Nimbus remained aloof and Elder quiet, but Tor and Isaac had been the best of friends for years and they weren't willing to let such a silly thing stand between them when they needed each other the most.

They traveled a slow road to the king's court, not in any particular hurry. Both girls were used to their bodies by now so the urgency was lessened. It was just something they had to do. Nimbus was glad to be back in the world again, happy to walk instead of trot. Elder didn't seem to mind the road, particularly when Isaac finally took pity on him and bought him a horse of his own. He thanked her solemnly and she had a moment of sorrow that he would be the one man who she wouldn't be able to bed. Isaac was no longer afraid of thoughts like those.

The tension between Nimbus, Tor, and Elder was the only thing that made the journey something other than totally pleasant. Isaac took Tor aside at one point and said, "Look, just talk to him about it. Trust me, it feels better than anything you've ever felt before."

Tor shook her head, golden hair shining in the sunlight. "I can't. I'll lose Nimbus, and I don't want to do that. We need him as a protector, and he hasn't seen the real world in such a long time. I'd hate to take that away from him. Besides, I'm not sure if Elder would be interested. And I'm not sure that I'm ready for that, either."

Isaac threw up her hands and walked away. She was sure that Nimbus was smirking at her when she passed him.

They stopped and camped by the side of the road one last night, on a hill that overlooked the capitol city. Elder had quietly asked that they camp instead of subjecting themselves to the bustle of the city, and Tor had quickly agreed. Isaac had rolled her eyes, reluctant to dismiss the pleasure and profit that waited in that circle of light, but she went along with the others. Her purse was fat enough for now and her needs were still well sated from the night before at a small inn.

That night as they sat around the fire waiting for a stew to cook, Elder started to talk. Isaac was surprised; she'd hardly heard him put five words together before. Tor was delighted; his voice touched something deep inside her that made her shiver. Nimbus stood quietly, only concerned about Tor's safety.

"I told you I am a hunter," said Elder, "and that's true. But I'm not hunting

game. I'm hunting two people, and I think that the two of you might know where one is."

"Why would you think that?" said Tor.

"You've dropped enough hints that I suspect that neither of you is as she appears to be. Neither am I. And one of the people I'm hunting is the man responsible. He's a man by the name of Gerald Prentiss."

Tor's eyes widened, and Isaac's mouth dropped open. "Yes!" said Isaac. "He's the one who did this to us! He lives in Berkshire!"

Elder nodded. He picked up a stick and started to snap small twigs off, throwing them into the fire. "Then I will go back there, possibly, after tomorrow."

Isaac said, "I don't know how much help he's going to be. He couldn't fix what he'd done to us."

Elder turned to stare at Tor. "Is that true?" he whispered.

Tor nodded reluctantly. "He's the one who changed us, but he claimed that he couldn't reverse it. Nimbus can't do anything about it either."

Elder slumped. His breath left him in a deep whoosh and he seemed to shrink where he sat. Finally he said, "Let me tell you a story." The girls stayed silent, listening.

"Once upon a time, there was a princess. She grew up happy and normal, and then one morning she woke up and found that she had become a boy. She convinced her parents of the truth, and they summoned their magicians to find out what had happened. The most powerful magician was a man named Gerald Prentiss, and it was he who had cast the spell that had changed the princess. He vanished, never to be seen again." Elder tossed more twigs into the fire.

"The king sent his men far and wide while his magicians searched for a way to end the curse. Their efforts were all fruitless. Finally an old soothsayer told the king that his daughter, now his son, would have to hunt for the wizard. She said that on that journey, he would either find the magician, or...or something else, and he would come home to the king a changed man."

He stopped talking. He pulled out his knife and went to work on the branch, slicing long curls off of it and tossing them into the fire to blacken and burn.

Tor swallowed and said, “Why did the wizard...why did Gerald change the princess?”

Elder smirked. “He claimed that he’d seen the future, and that his actions would ensure that the nation would endure for a thousand years. No one knew how, and he didn’t say before he vanished.”

“What else would the hunter find?” said Tor after a moment’s silence.

Elder kept staring into the fire and didn’t answer. Finally Nimbus chuffed and said, “Love. It is always love, fair mistress. The hunter would return with the magician or his true love, and that is the story. Is it not, Elder?”

Elder nodded, not looking at anyone.

Isaac looked back and forth between Tor and Elder without saying a word, her eyes getting wider and wider as she did so. She stood suddenly and said, “Wow, time to head to bed. Night, all, gonna...gonna go to bed.” She picked her things up and moved the bedroll to the other side of the unicorn, where she lay down and stared at the stars through Nimbus’s glow while the others talked.

She didn’t know what they said, but she could hear their voices. Tor’s voice first, hesitant, questioning. Elder’s quiet assent. A long silence, and then Tor asked something else. This time her voice was questioning and seemed to beg for reassurance, and Elder’s response was quick and concerned. Each time that Tor spoke her voice was a little more relaxed, and with each response Isaac could hear the hope rising in Elder’s. Finally they were quiet for a long time, and Isaac risked a peek toward the fire. The two of them were sitting on the same log, side by side, their hips nearly touching and their fingers laced together.

The next day moved quickly. The king welcomed Elder home with much fanfare and joy. The two altered boys learned that Elder’s real name, his birth name, had been Esmerelda until Gerald’s spell had changed him. Nimbus was regarded with awe and not a little greed by the magicians of the court until Elder made it clear that the unicorn was under his protection.

The head magician consulted with the changed boys after three days of

celebration. They could not reverse the spell, he said. It was likely that Gerald himself, should he be found, could not reverse the spell. He went on about locks and seals and phases of the moon, and by the end of it the three transformed boys looked as confused as the magician did. This satisfied him, and he went away.

That night, Tor simply sat holding Nimbus's head, stroking his beautiful mane. Isaac went to the tavern district and made rather a lot of money when she happened to catch the eye of one of the leading merchants of the kingdom. Elder stayed in his room, waiting for word from the fast runners who'd been dispatched to Burkshire.

Time passed and Tor eventually moved out of the stables and into a small room in the palace. The queen and her retainers informally adopted the girls, showering them with gifts and taking them on trips to ride horses or observe the knights at practice. Tor sometimes felt that she was surrounded by a cloud of giggling butterflies, and she was glad that she was never far from Elder's gaze. Isaac scandalized the court with her behavior in the evenings, leaving a trail of satisfied men with broken hearts. Soon she started to see where her future was heading and she was quite happy with it.

Elder and Tor spent most of their time together and she started to answer more readily to the name Celeste. Always shadowing them was Nimbus, who had free run of the grounds. Inside the walls of the palace they were surrounded by chaperones at all times. Tor's dreams got more explicit and Elder's face featured heavily.

Two weeks after their dispatch the scouts returned to the court. They had found Gerald, they said, about a week after his death. Something had caught fire in his house and had burned it to the ground with him inside. There were no notes and there were no books. A charred skeleton was all that remained, according to the townsfolk.

The wedding of Prince Elder and Lady Celeste of Burkshire was announced a week later. A week after that, a new tavern called the Lusty Unicorn was opened in the district. The lady of the house danced every night, and she left a trail of broken hearts and satisfied men where she went.

Once the proper documents were signed or altered, the wedding went off

beautifully. Lady Margarit was the bride's matron of honor and she danced with any man who could keep up with her at the reception. Margarit scandalized the court again by capturing the heart of a minor baron. From time to time a laughing rogue walked out of the woods and commanded her attention for several days at a time.

The night of the honeymoon, Celeste rode Nimbus for the last time. They talked quietly, though they never told anyone what they spoke of. Elder met them at the door of the mansion that they were to inhabit, and he led Celeste to the wedding bed with an anxious smile. Nimbus walked away, vanishing into the growing night.

The two of them came nervously to the wedding bed. Neither had known the pleasures of the flesh before, and neither of them had been born into the forms that they inhabited. They had love, though, and Elder's dreams had been much like Celeste's. They also knew certain things about the opposite gender that allowed them to drive each other to heights of ecstasy that neither had expected. They explored each other all night and slept through the morning. When they finally descended the stairs for their late lunch, Celeste was delighted and confused to find Nimbus standing in the rose garden, looking bored.

She ran to him and hugged his neck, and he didn't pull away. Finally she calmed down enough to say, "Nimbus, I thought you were leaving me. How are you still here?"

He nuzzled her hair and said into her mind, "True love between two who have never known impurity? What could be more innocent and true than that?"

And that is why the lovely, curvaceous princesses and queens who descended from the union of Queen Celeste and King Elder have always been attended by such perfect, glowing mounts. If you are ever touched by magic, you could be fortunate enough to see the horns and the glow of the unicorns who attend their perfect queens.